

## The Secular Resurrection of John Donne

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** The paper attempts to examine the evolving interpretations and critical perspectives on the gradual secular resurrection of John Donne's work.

**Methods:** The paper uses reader interpretations receptionist approach to understand how different readers interpret Donne's work. This includes examining the range of response, interpretations, and engagements the readers have shown with the work to get rich insights about the secular resurrection of Donne's work overtime.

**Results:** Through examining Donne's interest in Juvenal's satire and its influence on him, Donne's immediate reception in Walton's *Lives*, a trace of the nineteenth-century reception and editing of Donne's works, and other insights and analyses, the research reveals that there has been a major shift in the reception of Donne's secular themes, depicting the evolving understanding and appreciation of Donne's secular resurrection over time.

**Conclusions:** The examination states the intricate interplay between the religious and the secular in Donne's work, establishing that the secular resurrection of John Donne will persist, providing valuable insights into the enduring power of literature to provoke thought, challenge convention, and shape the ongoing understanding of him.

**Keywords:** Secular, John Donne, religious, Juvenal, Walton's *Lives*

### الاحياء العلماني لجون دون

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#### ملخص

**الأهداف:** تهدف الدراسة الى إلقاء الضوء على التفسيرات المتنامية ووجهات النظر النقدية حول الاحياء العلمانية التدريجية لأعمال جون دون.

**المنهجية:** تستخدم الدراسة منهج استقبال تفسيرات القراء لفهم كيفية تفسير القراء المختلفين لعمل جون دون. يتضمن ذلك تفحص مجموعة الاستجابات والتفسيرات والتفاعلات التي أظهرها القراء مع أعماله الأدبية للحصول على رؤى ثرية حول الاحياء العلمانية لعمل جون دون على مدار الفترة الزمنية. المتنامية

**النتائج:** من خلال دراسة اهتمام دون ع بهجاء جوفنال وتأثره به، وكيفية تناول والتون لجون دون في كتاب السيّر، وتبع كيفية تناول أعمال دون وتحريها في القرن التاسع عشر ورؤى وتحليلات أخرى، فإن البحث يكشف عن حدوث تحول كبير في النظرة لموضوعات دون العلمانية، ويبين الفهم والتدوق المتنامي للبعد العلماني لأعمال جون دون بمرور الوقت.

**الخلاصة:** تشير الدراسة إلى التفاعل الدقيق والمعقد بين المتدينين والعلمانيين في أعمال دون، وتؤكد أنّ الاحياء العلمانية لجون دون ستستمر، مما يوفر رؤى قيمة حول القوة الدائمة للأدب لإثارة الفكر وتحدي التقليد وتكوين الفهم المستمر له. الكلمات الدالة: علماني، جون دون، ديني، جوفنال، حيوات والتون.



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## Introduction

### Why John Donne occupies a liminal space between secular and religious poets

In an article for *Vanity Fair* magazine in November 2011, Christopher Hitchens mourned the loss of a soldier who had gone to Iraq on the basis of reading Hitchens's advocacy for the war. The article ends with the words, "May death be not proud to have taken Mark Daily" (Hitchens, 2007, p. 11), a reference to Donne's *Death be not proud*. But the whole argument of *Death be not proud* is that the reason death should not be proud is because, 'one short sleep past / We wake eternally'. Death should not be proud because of the existence of the afterlife, where 'death shall be no more' (Carey, 1996, p. 202), something which Hitchens, an atheist, had no faith in. Linklater (2008) called this 'perplexing (p. 5)' and points to the brutality of Hitchens's historical method:

Hence what he calls his "Protestant atheism" and his claim that the liturgies of the King James Bible and Cranmer prayer book provided, at once, a poetics to embrace and a system of belief to reject. He plucks a secular vocabulary from the literary canon and rips away the roots of religious mythology from which much of it flowered. (Linklater, 2008, p. 8)

And it is not enough to merely say Hitchens's quotation of Donne was accidental; despite appearances, Hitchens was meticulous when submitting copy and choosing quotations. It is not an isolated drunken slip - Hitchens had many times quoted Donne in public appearances. But it cannot just be relegated to perplexing as Linklater does, it does come across as a careless endeavour to somehow settle the question. While a significant public intellectual felt that he could say something like this is not just a result of Hitchens's personality. The reason why this question remains unsettled is that in order for us to feel comfortable about making any sort of literary appropriation, there have to be some initial conditions in place. A subject cannot simply generate some new conjunction (an atheist mourning a soldier's death and Donne criticizing Death) without any prior literary activities facilitating the generation of that conjunction. And this is no isolated case; the popularity of *No man is an Island*, the use of Donne by Bob Dylan and others in popular culture, all suggest that more and more we too are comfortable with, as Linklater (2008) describes of Hitchens, 'pluck[ing] a secular vocabulary from the literary canon and rip[ping] away the roots of the religious mythology from which much of it flowered' (p. 8).

But first, what do we mean when we say 'secular'? 'Secular' comes from *saeculum*: belonging to this generation, this age, this world - as opposed to belonging to God. But what the adjective has been used to describe has changed immensely. 'Secular' was used in the description of a member of the clergy who did not live in a monastery, but instead in his own private property. Now, the word is used to describe a much wider variety of concepts but primarily to describe something which is non-religious, e.g., the secular French public sector. It is occasionally even used as a pejorative by believers - quite unlike the use of the word when describing a secular clergyman. The expansion of the semiotic field of 'secular' is a reliable way of tracking the afterlife of John Donne, and grasping why he now occupies a liminal space between secular and religious poet.

There are three main reasons why this has happened. First, in Donne's own poetry, there is certainly enough to build up the secular case that has been made, most notably in his *Satires*. Second, the way he was fashioned by editors and literary critics immediately after his death, and how his work was handled especially in the United States in the nineteenth century, went some way towards a secular interpretation. Third, the appropriations and positioning of Donne following Eliot's "*The Metaphysical Poets*" by various critical schools, often using his poetry as paradigmatic of their concerns, has quickly diminished appreciations of him as a religious poet.

## Discussion

### Potential of secular resurrection of Donne's literary and political image.

It would seem crazy to anyone unacquainted with Donne's afterlife that he could be apprehended in a manner divorced from his religious purpose. Most modern editions start with the *Satires*, which appear to pitch religion and the law in a battle which otherwise ought to have played the role of teaching and administering justice. Law appears to come off worst:

Like a wedge in a block, wring to the bar  
Bearing like asses, and more shameless far  
Than carted whores, lie, to the grave judge; for  
Bastardy abounds not in kings' titles, nor  
Simony and sodomy in churchmen's lives,  
As these things do in him; by these he thrives. *Satire II*, ll.70-76  
O sun, in all thy journey, vanity,  
Such as swells the bladder of our Court? I  
Think he which made your waxen garden, and  
Transported it from Italy to stand  
With us, at London, flouts our Presence, for  
Just such gay painted things, which no sap, nor  
Taste have in them, ours are; and natural  
Some of the stocks are, their fruits, bastards all. *Satire IV*, 167-174 (Carey, 1996, pp. 13-14)

That which belongs to this world, and that which belongs to God, is brought out by repeated notion of 'bastardy' - of belonging to the world, but not to the right 'Father'. That the law belongs not to the spiritual world and is not blessed, is evoked by the imagery of Jacobean London using the words; 'asses' and 'carted whores'. The slow movement of l.72, with a long pause for 'lie', suggests that Donne, the poet, takes such lying seriously - or gravely. The 'grave judge' of course cannot help but be taken in, given that he is surrounded only by lying lawyers. The line ends with 'for'; normally maxims merit their own lines. By holding 'for' back, Donne creates an emphasis on the enjambed, plosive, hissing first syllable of 'Bastardy', a loud and sudden hoarse whisper - which strikes the reader as coarse too, given the mild vulgarity of the word. *Satire IV* makes it clear that Donne sees law as a bastardized, secularized version of morality - morality being the property of religion. The Edenic resonances in *Satire IV* ('waxen garden', 'fruits') strengthen the rhetorical attack - law was meant to provide a utopian system and was 'transported from Italy' (referring to Roman law) - but the fruits are bastards and have no taste - so the law is underwhelming, not meeting expectations. The law is seen as encroaching on religion's domain, especially in *Satire IV*, where Donne describes the satirist, the speaker's encounters:

[...] Then, as if he would have sold  
His tongue, he praised it, and such wonders told  
That I was fain to say, 'If you had lived, Sir,  
Time enough to have been interpreter  
To Babel's bricklayers, sure the Tower had stood.'  
(Carey, 1996, p. 11)

The notion of bastard (unrightfully, arbitrarily, claiming the gifts of a parent) is cemented in Donne's twelfth Holy Sonnet: Father, part of his double interest  
Unto thy kingdom, thy Son gives to me,  
His jointure in the knotty Trinity  
He keeps, and gives me his death's conquest.  
This Lamb, whose death with life the world hath blessed,  
Was from the world's beginning slain, and he  
Hath made two wills, which with the legacy  
Of his and thy kingdom, do thy sons invest.  
Yet such are thy laws, that men argue yet  
Whether a man those statutes can fulfil;

None doth, but thy all-healing grace and Spirit  
 Revive again what law and letter kill.  
 Thy law's abridgement, and thy last command  
 Is all but love; oh let that last will stand!

The legal terms ('interest', 'jointure', 'wills', 'legacy', 'statutes', and so on) suggest quite strongly just how pervasive legal vocabularies had become - in effect, interrupting praise of God. Jeremy Maule (2003) has skillfully noted how the structure of the sonnet mimics the way a lawyer would structure his argument (pp. 26-27). But strangely it appears that dual valiancy of 'abridgement' has been missed. It is just one example of how the *Satires* and Donne's other poems do much more than simply act as praise of God and religion. 'Abridgement' carries the sense of being a shortened version of a larger work. Here the comparison between religion and law is obvious; the Ten Commandments, and even the Bible, express morality far more succinctly than the huge statutes of the law. But abridgement, in law, refers to 'the omission of certain parts from a writ, claim, etc., the grievance still holding good for the remainder; the omission of certain items from the damages awarded in a case'. It acts as a curtailment of the rights of an individual to own part of an inheritance, or rights to certain damages. If we look at ll.12-13, with this understanding of 'abridgement', we may detect a hint of satire and secularity. Law and letter 'kill', but Donne demands from God an 'abridgement'. But 'abridgement' here stands as a euphemism for 'kill'. Donne has inverted the main verbs that the reader would expect (surely it should be the law that abridges and God that kills). There is little point in getting overexcited and suggesting that Donne (as is sometimes said of Marlowe) was a closet atheist to fit into the narrative, that all 'brights' were atheists as in Hitchens's 'Protestant atheism'. But these hints of satirical secularism abound in Donne's poetry, creating the potential for multiple interpretations and for a secular resurrection of his literary and political image.

Even when Donne does explicitly criticize secularized morality i.e., the law as a bastard, it is within the context of *satiric* poems. Many of the criticisms of the law ironically double back on religion. As Patterson (2006) puts it, "[a] characteristically Donnean move: to make one flawed institution the mirror image of another by relating them metaphorically" (p. 122). She explains the similarity between Coscus, the target of *Satire II*, and Luther, both of whom, when they did not have to labor over the production of the words themselves (Coscus was given a legal scrivener, and Luther the printing press) expanded what they said - so Luther wrote long treatises and abandoned the short *Pater nosters*, 'thereby increasing the number of propositions imposed on the believer' (p. 122), and in the same way a long will increases the number of obligations on the legatee. Embedded within many of the criticisms of law in the *Satires* are ironic criticisms of religion. Donne's analogy of a preacher and 'the flatterers' - men selling clothes on the streets of London - cements the parallelism between religion and more worldly (as opposed to transcendent) activities:

And then by Durer's rules survey the state  
 Of each his limb, and with strings the odd tries  
 Of his neck to his leg, and waist to thighs.  
 So in immaculate clothes, and symmetry  
 Perfect as circles, with such nicety  
 As a young preacher at his first time goes  
 To preach, he enters, and a lady which owes  
 Him not so much as good will, he arrests,  
 And unto her protests protests protests

'Protests' hisses and whispers like 'bastardy'. 'Arrests' is already aggressive, just in the way it makes the mouth and jaw move, and the three protests have a vehemence to them. They are iambic, so the hard 't' of tests is followed by a rising repetitive hiss, like the oratory of the preacher - a hard intention underlying a mellifluous phrase. The vehemence in the repetition is not just the preacher's desperation to proselytize; the scornful satirist partakes in it, manipulating it for his own

purposes.

But there are subtler ironies that are derived not from a parallelism of actions but of images. In *Elegy 3: Jealousy*, the speaker attempts to persuade a woman to commit adultery:

Now I see many dangers; for that is  
His realm, his castle, and his diocese.  
But if, as envious men, which would revile  
Their prince, or coin his themselves exile  
Into another country, and do it there,  
We play in another house, what should we fear?  
There we will scorn his household policies,  
His silly plots, and pensionary spies,  
As the inhabitants of Thames' right side  
Do London's Mayor; or Germans, the Pope's pride.

Donne's use of religious imagery makes religion less transcendent and more worldly, no more so than in the last line. The semi-colon separates the clauses, but it also hints at a similarity unsuccessfully resisted, as if it is an afterthought that has unintentionally escaped. The unruly inhabitants of Southwark, who disputed the Lord Mayor's jurisdiction over them, are in many ways similar to Lutherans who are just out of the Pope's reach. The conflation of imagery suggests that religion is essentially a vehicle of political and territorial claims, and indeed that the people involved are not so different from the residents of Southwark, who, to take just one example from Shawcross (1967) were 'cutthroats, thieves, etc.' (p. 423). By embedding religion so deeply into the world of Jacobean London, Donne is taking the monk out of the monastery and making him 'belong to this world, generation, age' - secularizing him, and bringing religion down to earth. The idea of just one man having the power to have his own 'realm, castle, diocese' is part of the humanist-to-atheist mythology that Hitchens's appropriation attempts to advance. Here again, Donne's poetry has the potential to be variously interpreted.

Donne also does the inverse - using the vocabularies of religion to describe the secular world of law. Ever since Thomas More's Chancellorship, an ongoing and increasingly complicated dispute had been raging between the multiple courts of law. Thomas More insisted that the judge's moral conscience, rather than legal precedent, should be the most important factor, and he often antagonised other judges by overturning their decisions in appeals cases - as if one Chancellor's conscience could by itself overturn the entire body of common and equity law. It is to this legal issue Donne refers to in *Satire V* when he asks:

If law be in the judge's heart, and he  
Have no heart to resist letter, or fee,  
Where wilt thou appeal? power of courts below  
Flow from the first main head, and these can throw  
Thee, if they suck thee in to misery  
To fetters... (Carey, 1996, pp. 16-17; 43-48)

The irrefutable power of the judge, like a god, is then made explicit, 'Judges are gods', and with it, the notion of bastardy reinforced, as the encroachment and bastardization of religion by the law is compared to, 'the legalized harassment of Catholics' (Patterson, 2006, p. 126) as Donne makes an analogy between a Protestant pursuivant taking the materials of a Catholic and a lawyer doing the same to religion. Through satire, parallelism of action and inversion of imagery, a reasonable case could be made from this evidence for the secular interpretation of John Donne.

#### **John Donne's transition from sacred to secular**

Why was it so easy to interpret Donne secularly? How did Donne the younger and Walton's attempts negotiate it only to facilitate the creation of 'a secular aesthetic domain' (Pask, 1996, p. 140)? And how did Donne's afterlife continue to be secularized?

Part of the reason Donne's poetry lends itself to so many interpretations is the instability of his poetic voice, as Carey notes:

A distinctive feature of his poems is that they are usually addressed to someone or something else. Poems where the poet simply talks to himself, in the 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' mode, are common with other poets, but rare in Donne. He projects himself by talking to a woman, or to the sun, or to death, or to God, or (in 'Mad paper, stay') to the paper he writes on. This means that his poems seem to exist not just as writings but as speech-acts, with all the complications that speech brings - the emphases, the duplicities, the ironies, the persistent shadow of the unsaid.

In Donne, addressing something or someone else is a means both of expressing and of concealing a self. We, the readers, are left to guess what lies behind the voice, as we always are with voices. (Carey, 1996, p. 11)

Donne often employs the technique of addressing someone or something else in his poetry, which adds complexity and layers of meaning to the work. Though the act of addressing allows Donne to express himself while also concealing aspects of the self, leaving readers to interpret and decipher the underlying motives and emotions behind his words: however, Donne was also very aware of the dangers that this technique presented. His concern was that his readers would confuse the voice of the speaker of the poem with Donne - as he admitted to Charles I: "We make *Satyrs*; and we looke that the world should that *wit*; when God knows, that that is in great part, self-guiltinesse, and we do but reprehend those things, which we ourselves have done" (Patterson, 2006, p. 130). Indeed, an occupational hazard of satire is that the poet must delight in that which he is mocking to animate it sufficiently. Donne represents this fear in *Satire IV*: "for hearing him, I found / That as burnt venom'd lechers do grow sound / By giving others their sores, I might grow / Guilty, and he free" (Carey, 1996, p. 13; 132-136). In the world of the satire, Donne worries that the satirist's speech might be illocutionary speech-acts, in effect caging him in a satiric linguistic trap. Donne's fear about how he would be represented is found in *Satire IV*: "I shook like a spied spy" (Carey, 1996, p. 15; p. 234). In effect, I am doing *exactly* what Donne was concerned about - a reader using the words uttered by a voice he adopts, to make comments about Donne himself (though I use corroborating historical evidence). Though the voice leaves readers to 'guess what lies behind', as Carey suggests, Donne's actions suggest that the way he thought about the reception of his texts was not so different to the way the satirist in *Satire IV* thought about the dangers of satire.

Donne the younger shared his father's trepidation, in effect predicting Hitchens's remark: "[T]wo dangers appeared more eminently to hover over this, being then a manuscript: a danger of being utterly lost, and a danger of being utterly found and fathered by some of those *wild atheists*, [*italics mine*] who, as if they came into the world by conquest, own all other men's wits" (Carey, 1996, p. 237)

As is well known now, Donne tried to mitigate these risks by suppressing the print publication of almost everything he wrote. Haskin notes this in relation to the new Variorum edition of Donne's poetry:

So far, its most intriguing contribution to Donne's afterlife may be its demonstration, poem by poem, of what has been vaguely troubling and largely unexplored: that the original holographs have been "lost". Speed Hill... has proposed that the editor's recurring need to invoke the hypothesis of a lost holograph suggests that Donne himself succeeded in destroying many originals. (Haskin, 2006, p. 244)

Colclough and others have argued that rather than wanting to be seen as a poet, he would prefer to have been seen as a divine, and so whatever did get printed, was, as DiPasquale notes, "not to inform, but to engage those who are already informed. The qualified readers Donne seeks will enter into the experience of his poetry already prepared, already catechized in the doctrine that is a prerequisite for active participation" (DiPasquale, 1999, p. 18) - something observed just after his death Marriot, the printer of the 1633 edition, who addressed the edition not to the readers but to 'the understanders' (p. 19).

DiPasquale persuasively analogizes Marriot's epistle to the reader to be like the sacrament of the Eucharist:

The challenge and the burden here, as in the communicant's decision about whether or not to receive the Eucharist, lie upon the receiver; he must prove that he not "unworthy" by "tak[ing]" the broken body of Donne's work as it is offered to him and appreciating it as a true "discerner". (p. 20)

In a modern culture where we understand the risks of putting something in print (and are reliving the phenomena with the internet), modern readers must find such a sacramental offering incredibly naive. Walton knew that a paratext such as this was not a sufficient safeguard for Donne's reputation as a divine. In response, he created a narrative for Donne in his *Lives* based on an Augustinian transformation, epitomized in the last line of his epigram for the 1635 edition, where he explains the book "begins / With Love, but ends with Sighes and Tears for sins" (Haskin, 2006, p. 235). This epigram came under an engraving of a youthful Donne (just before the start of the *Songs and Sonnets*) to dissociate early Donne from later Donne. But this too, was not enough to prevent Donne the younger's fear from materializing.

Modern scholarship has shown how hard it is to date any of the poems - so although Donne commits a sort of blasphemy using the term sacrilege in *The Flea*, "Let not to this, self murder added be / And sacrilege, three sins in killing three" (Carey, 1996, p. 17-18), there is no way of knowing if Walton's narrative is reliable. Not only would Walton's claims be waylaid by modern scholarship - it would have been hard for him to anticipate the secular aesthetic domain. Walton's worry was over the contrast between profane and sacred, not between secular and sacred. Guillory notes that the very meaning of profanity relies on this: "The space of the profane always presumes the space of the sacred, else it is simply meaningless. The secular world, if that world is 'modern' presumes rather the *absence*, or at the least the marginalization of the sacred" (Guillory, 1993, p. 162)

Donne's prestige as a poet was at first directly related to his prestige as a divine, despite his reputation for profanity. Marriot's commendation of the 1633 edition plays strongly to this fact, using a portrait of Donne in a shroud with the lines, "in Paules I looke, / And see his Statue in a sheete of stone... / Those sheetes present him dead, these if you buy / You have him living to Eternity" (Smith, 1971, pp. 85-86). As a way of trying to mitigate some of the shocking profanity of some of Donne's verse, Walton tried to suggest reading it as a practical moral exercise, "Was every sinne, / Character'd in his Satyres? made so foule/ That some have fear'd their shapes, and kept their soule / Freer by reading verse?" (Smith, 1971, p. 92).

None of these strategies: Donne destroying his originals; Marriot's sacramental epistle; Walton's *Lives*; Walton's epigram and Morris's engraving; Marriot and Walton's attempts to negotiate profane verse with their own commendatory verses - worked - instead, they only illustrate to us how difficult it would have been for Walton, Marriot and Donne the younger to reasonably anticipate the secularization of Donne's image. In fact, after the secular traces in Donne's *Satires* and other poems, the next significant step in Donne's secularized image was planted by Marriot himself, in printing Thomas Carew's commendatory verse, *An Elegie upon the death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr. John Donne*. As Pask observes, the moment when Carew moves from talking about Donne's "Grave Homilies, and Lectures" to "a Mine / Of rich and pregnant phansie, drawne a line / Of masculine expression", is the "transition from spiritual to rhetorical interest in the poem" (Pask, 1996, p. 128) -and marks the beginning of the transition from the sacred to the secular. While it was used to diminish Donne later, Carew's description of Donne as "a King, that rul'd as he thought fit / The universall Monarchy of wit" (Smith, 1971, pp. 93-95)- may have marked a point of no return - in that no longer was Donne remembered as a divine, but instead, as the poet at the front of a minor school of English poetry.

Ben Jonson's correspondence with Drummond, from which came the term 'metaphysical' was a hugely significant factor over which Walton, Marriot and Donne the younger had no control: "The cultural capital of Donne's divine wit would soon pale in comparison with Jonson's legacy to the construction of a secular aesthetic domain." (Pask, 1996, p. 128)

This was undoubtedly a crucial factor in the secularization of Donne's image - that when describing his poetry, instead of referring to it as 'divine' or 'religious', the terms 'Metaphysical' and 'wit' were commonly used instead. The technical term 'conceit' similarly took conversations about Donne away from the religious vernacular and into the secular aesthetic domain.

A final factor in Donne's secular resurrection was the influence of American readers and editors. Twelve-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing to his brother, wrote, "This is old fashioned poetry - I should like to see the Poem it was taken from" (Smith, 1971, p. 302) and would go on to be one of the "foremost New England champions of the seventeenth-century English



poets" (p. 302), who "fostered an interest in Donne around greater Boston. Henry David Thoreau... made it [his] own" Haskin (2006) argues that American readers, coming from a fundamentally different situation, approached Donne secularly, "Donne's poetry was gaining a significant readership in the United States, where there was little anxiety about the author's place in the history of his nation's established church" (p. 239)- by contrast, Donne's poetry in the nineteenth century was handled by two young clergymen, Alford and Jessopp, and Victorian moralist Grosart, who were all so preoccupied with reconciling Donne's "licentious character... with the well-known story in which Doctor Donne had been an exemplary Jacobean clergyman" (p. 239) that very little by way of secularization occurred in Britain. The concerns over Donne's profanity meant that Donne was not included in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. But once editor Charles Eliot Norton produced a superior edition to A.B Grosart's, picked up by Herbert Grierson (the influential editor of the 1912 edition), the hundred years of the secularization of Donne in American literary culture were transplanted back to England - for example, the Lowell's New York edition began with the verse letters, suggesting from the start that Donne belonged to the Jacobean and Caroline world (i.e. secular) - a very different image to the shrouded divine image of Donne in the 1633 edition.

### **Contribution of modern literary culture towards the secular interpretation of Donne.**

The most significant stage in Donne's resurrection was upon the publication of T.S Eliot's 1921 essay, *The Metaphysical Poets*. Haskin especially in his *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century* has argued that Eliot's essay did not mark the sudden appearance of Donne. In fact, Eliot was related to Charles Eliot Norton, and would have seen him lecture on Donne at Harvard - but it remains the case that 1921 was when Donne burst back onto the scene in a manner which had been subdued ever since Jonson's influential criticisms.

Eliot situated modernist poetry as a direct progeny of the metaphysical poets. Suggesting that the poets in between, in England, had suffered from a dissociation of sensibility i.e., where intellectual thought and feeling are separated, Eliot attempted to draw a line from the Metaphysicals to LaFogues, suggesting that the ability to "feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose" (Smith, 1971, p. 442). Importantly, Eliot's essay makes no mention of the profanity of Donne's verse - of no interest to him - or of Donne's status as a divine. He is much more concerned with the status and function of the metaphysical conceit, another example of the widening of the secular aesthetic domain, similar to what Carew and Jonson did. Marriot's conception of how Donne was going to be read in 1633 - read by understanders, in a sort of Eucharistic sacrament, has completely vanished owing to Eliot's incorporation of Donne into modern literary culture. Eliot identifies the source of the poetry in secular vernacular too; rather than being divinely inspired, Eliot suggests the special sensibility of the metaphysical poet.

Attempts to portray John Donne's life by Walton's Augustinian depiction of him, have in recent times faltered under the pressure of secularized scholarship. This for example, is from Bruce King's sneering review of William Zunder's *The Poetry of John Donne: Literature and Culture in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Period*:

The narrative concerns a late Elizabethan poet in an age of transition who begins in his satires by railing at new capitalists and who writes love poems ironically satirizing the lustful, since he himself is still close to a "traditional culture" unchanged since the Middle Ages (despite what the first paragraph of the book describes)... [N]ow disillusioned by the collapse of "traditional culture" and the rise of new science, he writes religious poems... The pages are missing which discuss the evidence showing that many of the love poems were written to other women, especially patrons, and that the Holy Sonnets are connected with Donne's decision to pursue a career in religious orders rather than at court. (King 1984 pp. 284-289)

King's scorn for Zunder is suggestive of the New Historicist's concern with a certain *type* of detail. It is similar to Haskin's observation of New Historicism:

[A]n unprecedented intensity of interest in Donne's training in the law and in his work as a minister in the national church suggests the power of the assumption that, more than psychology, sociopolitical contexts now provide the fundamental

explanatory framework within which literature is to be understood. (Haskin, 2006, p. 242).

According to him, New Historicism, a literary theory that emerged in late 20th century, lays emphasis on Donne's sociopolitical contexts suggesting that understanding literature requires analyzing the broader historical and social factors that influenced its creation. Haskin suggests that New Historicism endeavours to surpass the dominant focus on psychology as an explanatory framework. By examining Donne's legal background and his role as a minister, New Historicists aim to uncover the ideological, cultural, and political influences that shaped his writings. They believe that literature is intricately intertwined with the writer's historical and social contexts, and by studying these contexts, a deeper understanding of the text can be achieved. The citation highlights the shift in literary criticism brought by New Historicism, which places a strong emphasis on sociopolitical contexts and argues for their primacy in understanding literature.

Again however, the conception of 'sociopolitical context' does not lend itself to reading John Donne as a divine. The work of Colclough and others consider patronage networks and talks about context through the secularized vocabulary of the law. The New Historicist motivation, "turns our attention away from most forms of biographical criticism... for New Historicist critics, biographical questions are to be raised in social and political terms... there is... a decided tendency... to conceive of writer's selves as culturally produced constructs" (Haskin, 1989, pp. 869-895). However, if sociopolitical context only refers to the King's court and the court of law, the only sort of revival or resurrection of Donne that could occur was a secular one.

Carey (1981), who opts for psychobiography, wishing to explore the "structure of Donne's imagination" (p. 9) made Donne's "apostasy" from Catholicism "the key to understanding his personality and poetry" (Haskin, 2006, p. 242). According to him, Donne's religious conversion serves as a key to understanding both his personality and his poetry. It can provide insights into the inner workings of Donne's mind and the ways in which his imagination was shaped. Carey seeks to uncover the underlying motivations, emotions, and psychological complexities that influenced Donne's poetic works, allowing for a deeper understanding of his literary contributions. Contrary to this, Di Pasquale criticises Carey's 'oversimplified' view of 'Post-Reformation English Catholicism' and the 'Sweeping account of Donne the Apostate' (p.3), examining Donne's poetry and prose in relation to the religious context of his time, seeking how themes of sacraments like baptism intersect with the exploration of secular; love, desire, and the human experience. Di Pasquale provides a fresh perspective by exploring the connection between the sacred and the secular, giving an insight into Donne's complex religious and poetic worldview and granting the reader's a deeper understanding of Donne's work to understand the skilful handling of themes the bridge the spiritual and the worldly aspects of human existence. Though the interpretation provides a new, logical and practical way of understanding Donne's work, yet again, it does not necessarily imply that Donne was only being interpreted religiously.

Apart from sociopolitical and psychological biography, the school of New Criticism also contributed to secularization. New Criticism emerged as a dominant approach to literary criticism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and emphasized close textual analysis and formalistic interpretation of the work. It sought to examine the literary work as an independent entity, detached from the author's intentions or external influences, including religious or moral considerations, focusing on the intrinsic elements of the text, such as language, imagery, structure, and symbolism to derive meaning and evaluate qualities of the work. So, the focus of the analysis according to the New Critics shifts from 'What is Donne trying to say?' to the question, that I.A Richards and others have posed, 'What is the poem saying?' In doing so, Donne's poetry does not only become non-religious - but it also becomes non-*anything*, and each voice represents only itself, despite the fact that Donne often viewed the poems as divine instruments. The influence of a school of thought which disregarded this is clear in Cleanth Brooks's reading of *The Canonisation*. Brooks performed an 'intrinsic' reading or analysis to argue that paradox was the central feature of poetry. Just as paradoxically Donne satirizes both the law and religion, he paradoxically neither dismisses sex nor religion, though they ought to be opposed to each other. As soon as the critical idiom becomes about Donne's attitude 'towards religion' rather than 'Donne's religious attitude' owing to a lack of interest in historical context, the likelihood is that Donne's image will be interpreted secularly.

What would have compounded the misery for Donne the younger, Walton and Marriot is John Guillory's response to Eliot and Brooks. Dismissing New Criticism, Guillory argues that "the claim to judge intrinsically, as though the value of a literary work was not mediated by any other concern, has always been suspect." (Guillory, 1983, p. 174) But he adds that Brooks's argument that the phoenix's ashes in *The Canonization* "ought to rise" (Brooks, 1947, p. 21) can be taken as a useful analogue of

the project of Eliot and Brooks - to overturn secular liberal pluralism in the English canon and in the teaching of literature. In doing so Guillory marked out the potential for Donne to be used, much more subtly through canon-formation, as a poet whose poems could unwind progress towards secularism. In doing so, he has only built up a resistance, spearheaded by himself, 'It would appear that we mean by consensus what Eliot meant by orthodoxy' (p. 198). This sort of secularist resistance from Guillory is brand new. Unlike the unintentional creation of a secular aesthetic domain, Guillory's proactive resistance is uncharacteristic but makes more likely the continuation of secular interpretations of Donne.

### Timeless relevance of Donne's poetry

This article is not meant to be a mirror image of Guillory's, which, Haskin argues has "a whiff of a conspiracy theory" (Haskin, 2006, p. 242) about it. There is a clear reason for this; unlike the believer, the secularist and atheist have no agenda other than that there should be no totalitarian one - there is no secular conspiracy to appropriate Donne. It will help to remind us of just how different the two stances between preacher and secular are:

In his preaching, then, Donne seeks the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in order to write and speak efficaciously, affecting the souls of his audience... hoped that the works he wrote would achieve the status of God's Word... but Donne hoped that the words he wrote - both as a preacher and as a poet - would achieve the status of God's Works, that they would share in the power of God's 'effetual signs of grace' and prove spiritually efficacious for those who received them with faith. (DiPasquale, 1999, p. 15).

The modern attitudes towards literature we have seen are not just different, but paradigmatically different, from this notion. And there is no reason for this to change any time soon. As a result of accident - such as the mistake to print Carew's commendatory verse; positioning - such as that of Guillory; and the initial conditions, Donne's poetry, rich with secular and profane imagery, Donne the younger, Marriot and Walton's efforts could not prevent the secular resurrection of John Donne. (It is fair to ask whether it makes sense to talk of a 'secular resurrection' at all - God, with timeless omniscience and omnipotence could resurrect Jesus in a historically accurate way that we cannot do of Donne).

Secular used to refer to monks coming out of monasteries and living in the world. The huge shift in how the word is used today only begins to *hint* at the force of the dramatic shift in the reception of John Donne's poetry. But as in Hitchens's slightly perplexing use of *Death be not be proud*, the secularist appropriation of Donne is not a very aggressive or proactive one. If there is a secularist appropriation of the literature of the likes of Donne, the sense in which it is intentional and systematic is only that it emerges from the universal human need to make that which is beautiful a part of ourselves.

### Conclusion

Despite the temporal and cultural distance, John Donne's poetry remains relevant in contemporary society. His exploration of universal themes such as love, spirituality, mortality, and the human experience resonates with readers across generations. Donne's introspective examination of the complexities of human relationships, for example, continues to find relevance in an era marked by digital connections and superficial interactions. Furthermore, his nuanced treatment of faith and doubt offers insights into the ongoing dialogue between religion and secularism. Donne's ability to bridge the gap between the physical and the metaphysical realms speaks to contemporary concerns about the nature of existence and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world.

It may be said that the secular resurrection of John Donne is a testament to the enduring power and relevance of his poetry. The decline in popularity and subsequent literary reassessment, along with modern interpretations and adaptations, have brought Donne's works back into the spotlight. His influence on later poets and writers, as well as his continued relevance in contemporary society, reaffirm the timeless quality of his poetry. As readers and scholars continue to engage with Donne's works, his poetic legacy will undoubtedly inspire generations to come, perpetuating his secular resurrection for years to come.

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