

## “Angels affect us oft”: Angelic Imagery in the Poetic Works of John Donne

John Donne is widely considered one of the most important poets of the English Renaissance. Known for both his highly intricate and occasionally sexual romantic poems as well as his religious poems, he was one of the most complex artists of his age. Donne was born in 1572 into a recusant Catholic family. His father was well respected in the community, and was able to escape persecution during his lifetime. He died in 1576 and Donne’s mother remarried, this time to a Catholic doctor. His mother was the great-niece of Sir (and Saint to Catholics) Thomas More, and religious persecution was a constant in his family for most of his formative years. Donne lived in fear of persecution for most of his early life, and as a young man lost many opportunities because of his religion. He was not allowed to complete his degree at Oxford due to his faith and his refusal to take the Oath of Supremacy. His biographer Isaac Walton asserts that he then transferred to Cambridge to complete his degree, but there is no mention of this in the historical record.<sup>1</sup> His younger brother Henry died in prison after being caught harboring a Catholic priest. Donne had cause to question his faith.

Donne converted to Anglicanism by 1615 and was ordained in the Church of England, after much encouragement from James I, eventually becoming Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in 1621. Despite his conversion and the publishing of several anti-Catholic works, Catholic imagery, themes and ideology still dominate many of his religious poems. Saints and sainthood play heavily into many of his love poems, often comparing women to those canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. Donne struggled with his faith for the rest of his life, often consumed by the personal dilemma that he had chosen the wrong faith and would

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<sup>1</sup> RC Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, (United States of America: Oxford University Press, 1970), 46.

be doomed to hell. Donne's seventeen Holy Sonnets reveal a deep struggle with his faith, simultaneously lashing out against and embracing God, not certain which path is correct.

The father of metaphysical poetry and a well-known theologian, Donne's two personas "Jack Donne" and "Doctor Donne" mark two different aspects of Donne's distinctive poetic style: love and religion. The lighthearted love poems and the deeply troubled religious poems could almost be written by two different authors. Despite the stark contrast in subject matter, his poetry contains many recurring themes and images. Donne uses some of the same imagery to describe women and God. Issues of fidelity arise in both secular and religious poems. Images of the sun, hills that must be climbed, spheres and microcosms all feature in dual roles in Donne's secular poetry and his religious works. One image appears constantly in his poems, often in some startling places: angels. Angels appear in over thirty of Donne's poems and even more often in his prose writings and his sermons. Angelic imagery is used for a variety of purposes and makes Donne's writing among the most unique of his time.

While this paper will focus mainly on Donne's poetry, it is important to consider Donne's sermons and other religious writings to contextualize his views of angels and other heavenly beings. In a sermon preached November 19, 1627, Donne defined angels (to the extent that he could) and explained his understanding of their functions. He describes their form as: "Creatures, that have not so much of a body as flesh is, as froth is, as a vapour is, as a sigh is," essentially preaching that angels are formless.<sup>2</sup> Traditional angelology suggests that angels can take a physical form if they choose to, and Donne seems to support that belief. A sigh is not necessarily formless, as air particles are being breathed out, but angels

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<sup>2</sup> John Donne, "From a sermon preached 19 November 1627" in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 383.

essentially have no visible, physical form. Donne also describes angels as extremely physically powerful despite their lack of a solid physical form. “And yet with a touch they shall moulder a rock into less atoms, than the sand that it stands upon; and a millstone into smaller flour, than it grinds.”<sup>3</sup> Angels seem to have powerful minds capable of physical acts despite not having solid physical forms. Donne also defines where the angels lie on the heavenly spectrum, that “they hang between the nature of God, and the nature of man and are of middle condition.”<sup>4</sup> This place in the heavenly hierarchy suggests that angels are more powerful than humans, but not as powerful as God himself. This corresponds to physical form. Angels are not completely formless as God is, but they are not fully corporeal like humans either. Much of Donne’s angelology derives from the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, who wrote a treatise on angels as part of his *Summa Theologia*. Aquinas theorizes that angels are not corporeal creatures compared to God, who is truly incorporeal, but they are incorporeal compared to man. While Aquinas writes that angels do not have bodies, they can assume bodies when they need to appear to man. In his poems and his sermons, Donne follows these and more of Aquinas’ explanations of angelic behavior. Donne was also attracted to the idea of each person having a guardian angel, guiding their actions and looking out for their wellbeing.

Donne’s own definition of a spiritual angel seems to imply that they are exclusively male. Biblically it is also implied that all angels are male. Despite the implication of male exclusivity in the Bible, angelic imagery has long been associated with women in literature. One of the earliest instances of this occurs in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, when

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Donne, ““From a sermon preached 19 November 1627,” 382.

in Act 2, Scene 2 Romeo implores Juliet to “speak again, bright angel.”<sup>5</sup> Donne’s poetry goes farther than simply calling women angels as a compliment. “Angel” in Donne’s works can take on either of two meanings. Probably the most common use is in the traditional religious sense, angels as messengers from God to his people. But in Donne’s lifetime, angels were also currency, gold coins with the image of Archangel Michael on one side. Donne uses these different meanings dually as well as separately in many of his poems, including in some of his most famous works.

The definitions of Christian angels and their functions differ throughout the evolution of Christianity. The original definition from medieval Catholicism changed during the English Reformation, and it also changed for recusant Catholics living in England during that time. How English people worshipped changed drastically after Henry VIII renounced Catholicism and made himself head of the Church of England. After a brief return to Catholicism in Mary Tudor’s short reign, England returned to Protestantism permanently when Queen Elizabeth I ascended to the throne in 1558. In England the church was reformed and most of the uniquely Catholic elements were stripped from religious practices. Shrines were destroyed, the veneration of Virgin Mary was pushed aside, and saints became a nonfactor. Essentially, anything that was not directly mentioned in the Bible was discarded. However, belief in angels survived the English Reformation because of their prominence in the Bible. Despite their association with some very Catholic practices, angels stayed in the forefront of new Anglican theology, but veneration and worship of angels as representatives of God, such as saints had been, was strictly forbidden in the new faith.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars

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<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, “Romeo and Juliet” in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare 7<sup>th</sup> Edition*, ed. David Bevington, (United States of America: Pearson, 2014), 1021.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Sangha, *Angels and Belief in England, 1480-1700*, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), 41.

believe that in the new faith angels took the place of saints and were venerated as a way to communicate with God without seeming to blaspheme.<sup>7</sup>

In the monetary sense, angels were gold coins, first minted during Edward IV's first reign from 1461-70. On the back of the coin, the angel depicts the Archangel Michael shoving a spear into the throat of a monster representing Satan. During Edward's reign this was thought to represent the defeat of the House of Lancaster by the House of York.<sup>8</sup> Michael in his saintly form was venerated for driving Satan out of heaven as well as healing the sick. The coin went through different adaptations over the years as monarchs came and went, and Charles I was the last to mint these coins before the English Civil War. For many years the angel and the half-angel were the only gold coins issued, until Henry VII began to issue the gold sovereign in 1489. These angels were considered good luck, and in later incarnations, holes were made in the coins in order to hang them from a chain for luck. Angels were produced by a hand-hammering method that often resulted in irregular shapes, sizes and thicknesses of coins. Between 1561-1571 machinery was briefly introduced into the coin making process. The machine-milled coins were out of production before Donne was even born, so it is likely that he saw only hand-hammered coins during his lifetime, or at least very few machine-made coins. Coins likely to have been in circulation while Donne lived were coins minted during the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I. Angels and their smaller counterparts, half-angels, were the most used form of gold currency during this period.

Because of the monetary definition of angel, it is important also to consider Donne's stated attitudes toward money and wealth. While some of his ideals can be interpreted

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<sup>7</sup> Sangha, *Angels and Belief in England*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Seaby, *The Story of British Coinage*, (Great Britain: BA Seaby Ltd., 1985), 76.

through his poetry, Donne explicitly states his views on wealth in his sermons and other writings. He considers wealth to be extremely important, especially to Christians. He preached in a sermon on December 19, 1619: “The first commandment that God gave man, was not prohibitive; God in that, forbade man nothing, but enlarged him with that *Crescite, et multiplicamini*, Increase and multiply, which is not only in the multiplication of children, but in the enlargement of possessions too.”<sup>9</sup> By Donne’s interpretation, the Bible encourages Christians to earn money, increase their wealth, and increase their earthly possessions. Donne gives the example of the trees in the Garden of Eden, which he argues were planted with the foremost goal to multiply and increase. Donne argues that by taking care of themselves and their children, Christians are carrying out God’s will. He ends this sermon with a witticism: “And certainly, that man shall not stand so right in God’s eye at the last day, that leaves his children to the parish, as he that leaves the parish to his children.”<sup>10</sup> Being a good Christian entails making money and leaving the next generation with stable financial resources. But the most important aspect of this topic is how the money is acquired. Donne believes that last statement to be true only if “he have made his purchases out of honest gain, in a lawful calling, and not out of oppression.”<sup>11</sup> The money must be moral money, made from Christian hard work and without sinning against anyone else. If those requirements are met, then being wealthy is glorifying God. This special significance Donne gives to wealth in a Christian context gives money and material possessions a dual meaning. Money not only gives one power in society, but it indicates that its possessor has worked hard to “increase and multiply” their wealth for the glory of God. A wealthy person can provide for his or her

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<sup>9</sup> John Donne, “From a sermon preached at The Hague 19 December 1619,” in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 285.

<sup>10</sup> Donne, “From a sermon preached at The Hague,” 286.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

children so they do not rely on the church for charity. Essentially, being wealthy is a sign of being a good Christian.

A casual reading of Donne may suggest that his references to angels appear largely in his secular poems, not his religious works. Especially considering that he does not lightly throw around “angel” or “angelic” as a description of a person, a logical assumption would be that angels would appear more often in his religious works, but this is not the case. Milton Rugoff argues that “Donne’s imagery makes clear that he accepted fully the conception of an image as an illumination of one idea by another not related to it in subject matter.”<sup>12</sup>

Essentially, Donne uses imagery not related to what he is writing about in order to illuminate that subject. Unexpected imagery and metaphors are used to explain a complicated idea in more relatable terms. This partially explains the repeated use of religious imagery in his secular love poems, such as “The Canonization,” “The Funeral,” and “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” Religious imagery is also featured prominently in Donne’s patronage poems to the Countess of Huntingdon, Lady Carey, and Lucy, Countess of Bedford. These patronage poems were part of “an established tradition of patron worship wherein the worshippers propitiated their Gods and Goddesses with wreaths of conceits and an incense of extravagant flattery.”<sup>13</sup> In the case of the patronage poems, it is not remarkable *that* Donne uses this imagery, but *how* he uses it.

With few exceptions, Donne does not describe angels physically in his poems or use visual imagery to describe them. In “To His Mistress Going to Bed” the speaker compares his lover to an angel “in such white robes heaven’s angels used to be,” but otherwise angels are never physically described. In “Air and Angels” angels are specifically described as not

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<sup>12</sup> Milton Allan Rugoff, *Donne’s Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources*, (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1962), 83.

<sup>13</sup> Rugoff, *Donne’s Imagery*, 88.

having any form at all. Theologically, angels do not have any form, but are invisible, though they can take on a physical form by drawing on the elements around them. Since angels actually do not have a physical form, it makes no sense to describe any person's appearance as "angelic." In several poems, light imagery is used in association with mentions of angels, but even then the angels are not explicitly described.

The relation of body to soul is a topic evident in many of Donne's works. He debates the difference between soul and body, their interconnectedness, and their purity. One of the ways he does this is through his references to angels. He seems to care very little about physical appearance, and a lot about soul to soul, spiritual connections. Love to Donne is not solely about the physical, but about the spiritual as well. The two aspects of love are inexorably intertwined, and the physical is often seen as a means to connect spiritually. The way he utilizes angelic imagery to express this is atypical in poetry of his time. Angels in Donne's works are extended metaphors for body and soul, rather than a convenient descriptor to express the beauty of a woman. Wealth is another theme that ties into Donne's use of angelic imagery. While this would be surprising in some theologian's works, as discussed previously, Donne places a high value on money in his sermons and other religious works. Coins are a common metaphor in his sermons, and coins are often mentioned alongside angels, creating an explicit relationship between the two, even when coins are not explicitly described as golden angels.

The secular poems in which angels are mentioned most overtly are "Air and Angels" which utilizes angelic imagery in the religious sense, and "The Bracelet," an elegy which utilizes angels as currency, while simultaneously implying a religious double meaning. Angels also have an abundant presence in some of his most famous funeral elegies and



memorial poems, such as “An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary” and its sequel, “Of the Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary.” He uses angelic imagery in a patronage poem to Lucy, Countess of Bedford to emphasize her spiritual purity. First and foremost however, he uses angelic imagery in the love poems, though almost never in the way a reader would expect from a poet writing during Donne’s lifetime.

Donne’s preferred way of using imagery also helps the reader to interpret his meanings when using religious imagery in secular poems. The conceits and metaphors involving angels largely come in the secular poems, with the simple mentions of facts about angels coming into play in religious poems. Donne almost always uses angelic imagery in elaborate conceits in his love poetry, almost never in straightforward terms. It would take a significant background in theology to interpret Donne’s love poetry accurately and fully. But the religious poems can be used as a guide to Donne’s theological mindset regarding angels, and by extension can be applied to interpret the secular angelic metaphors. When determining Donne’s attitude towards angels his religious poems are most valuable. Those incorporating angels help interpret and explicate his secular poems.

Many of Donne’s religious poems involve him grappling with his own religious beliefs, reflecting his personal opinion. Poems such as “A Litany” especially define the heavenly hierarchy and each heavenly creature’s role in Christianity. A full understanding of popular contemporary theology and what Donne chose to teach his congregation after he was ordained is an essential tool for examining Donne’s extensive secular works. Body (or physical form) and soul, and their relationship are a dominant theme in Donne’s poetry and Donne uses angelic imagery to express this relationship. The duality of the two types of angelic imagery emphasizes the formless attributes of physical beings, including both human

beings and inanimate objects. In Donne's religious works it is possible to further interpret his secular works and delve into the deeper message about non-physical attributes suggested by the secular poems. Wealth, its implication, and the purity of the soul are what Donne considers important, and he uses angelic imagery to convey this. "Air and Angels" and "The Bracelet" are the secular works with the most angelic imagery and they set the tone for the rest of Donne's secular works including the love poems and funeral elegies.

Many of Donne's religious poems involve a struggle and questioning of religion. Half of his life a recusant Catholic, and the other half a questioning Protestant, Donne's religious poetry reflects that internal struggle. "A Litany" was written to question the power structure of the clergy as was "To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders," which will be explored next. "A Litany" is structured in the form of a prayer, first to the different holy beings of the Christian religion, then to God specifically. Donne prays to each heavenly being asking for something different. He asks The Father for Judgement Day to come, The Son to be crucified with him, The Holy Ghost to let him learn to love God better and The Trinity to let him know God better. Donne also includes The Virgin Mary, The Patriarchs, The Prophets, The Apostles and others in his prayers, requesting from each of them a way for him to be a better Christian.

Donne's prayer to The Angels in "A Litany" involves the idea of guardian angels. He minimizes the lives of humans and mentions that they are under the protection of angels. He addresses his prayer to God since He actually dictates the actions of these heavenly beings. He begins: "And since this life our nonage is, / And we in wardship to thine angels be"<sup>14</sup> to set up his prayer of supplication. He asks to be worthy of a guardian angel's protection, "So

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<sup>14</sup> John Donne, "A Litany" in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 162.

let me study, that mine actions be / Worthy their sight, though blind in how they see.”<sup>15</sup>

Angels, as will be further explored in an examination of “To the Countess of Salisbury,” do not have physical eyes, but their own heavenly sight by which they see. Donne hopes to be as good of a Christian as possible in order to gain the sight of these pure beings. This initial mention of angels put them in the heavenly hierarchy below the Holy Trinity and the Virgin Mary, and above The Patriarchs and the other human members of the church hierarchy, confirming the intermediate position of angels between God and men.

Angels are mentioned once more in “A Litany.” The thirteenth stanza of the poem references the power of prayer. Addressing God, Donne writes that “to thee / A sinner is more music, when he prays, / Than spheres, or angels’ praises be.”<sup>16</sup> Since one of the traditional images of angels is of them singing God’s praises, the pleas of sinners must be very powerful to overwhelm the singing of angels. A praying sinner means so much to God that he or she drowns out some of His most holy and powerful servants. This does not diminish the power of the angels, but instead illustrates how much love God has for those who follow him, despite his flock’s great failings as sinners.

“To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders” deals with the importance of physical form in two ways. While Donne never mentions golden angels, he does combine an image of heavenly angels with an image of coins, encouraging a close relationship between money and the holy. This poem also deals with changing forms, specifically that God cares most about the immaterial part of a person rather than the exterior appearance, or worthless formalities. Very little is known about the man this poem is addressed to, Mr. Tilman. In fact, it is likely that Donne never even met the man he used as inspiration for this work. Tilman wrote a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Donne, “A Litany,” 167.

poem in which he expressed his doubts and reservations about taking clerical orders. Donne could have read that work and decided to use it as a platform to express his own doubts about becoming ordained.

Donne seems to have had similar reservations to Tilman's about taking orders. Donne had already been ordained for at least four years when he wrote this poem, but he struggled with his faith all his life, this poem likely being another indicator of that internal battle. In this work he questions the necessity of clerics having to take orders in order to be respected as learned men of God. Donne argues that just adding a title does not actually change anything about the individual's relationship with his or her deity. "To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders" is a blatant criticism of the church and the clergy. Donne's critique is not veiled in metaphor in this poem, but is clear. This is not a question of his personal relationship with God like the Holy Sonnets, but a denunciation of a church practice implemented by the upper echelon of the church hierarchy.

Donne uses the stamps bearing the image of the monarch on British coins to question the change in the relationship between new clerics and God. Kings alter the face on the coins after their coronation, but Donne points out that the value of the coin does not change. "New crowned kings alter the face, / But not the money's substance."<sup>17</sup> He asks if taking orders follows the same pattern, if all Tilman and other new clergymen change is their "stamp," and not their spiritual, holy essence. This question contributes to Donne's dismissal of physical form as unimportant.

Donne essentially repeats his message using an angel metaphor after the coin metaphor. He explains the role of angels as celestial messengers and draws similarities

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<sup>17</sup> John Donne, "To Mr Tilman after he had taken orders," in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 287.

between angels and clerics. This is one of his few poems that physically describes the appearance of angels. “we paint angels with wings, because / They bear God’s message and proclaim his laws”<sup>18</sup> In most Christian art, angels are illustrated as beautiful creatures in white robes, with halos and wings on their backs, an image which Donne uses to create an image of the newly “winged” or ordained, Tilman. Donne compares clerics to angels, preaching the message of God and proclaiming his laws to their congregations. He asks if, now that Tilman has taken orders, “Art thou new feathered with celestial love?”<sup>19</sup> Playing on the idea that angels’ wings are made out of feathers, Donne is asking if Tilman’s ascent into clerical orders now suddenly changes his relationship with God and gives him more favor. Does Tilman suddenly become close to the angelic ranks simply because he is named a cleric?

Donne wrote a series of nineteen “Holy Sonnets” over several years. These sonnets deal with issues which are often extremely close to his heart. They struggle with faith in how Donne worships, his doubts, and whether Catholicism or Protestantism is the true Christian faith. The first six sonnets were most likely completed by 1609, before Donne’s conversion and it is likely that the next ten sonnets were written soon after, but there is no evidence that points to any exact date. “Holy Sonnet 17” was written upon the death of Donne’s wife Ann, most likely in the year she died, 1617. The final two sonnets were written around 1620, but no fixed date is known for those poems either. Donne uses angelic imagery in five of the nineteen sonnets, numbers 4, 11, 15, 16 and 17.

“Holy Sonnet 4,” the first sonnet numerically to involve angelic imagery, centers on Judgement Day in Christianity, when Christ will return to Earth and physical life will end.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Donne references some heretical ideas in this poem, illustrating some of his ideas that were considered divergent from church doctrine. The angels introduce Judgement Day in this poem when Donne calls upon them to “At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels.”<sup>20</sup> This is the signal for the souls of the dead to arise from their graves and return to their bodies resurrected by Christ. This is not the typical theological perspective on death, as most Christians believed that after death the soul immediately ascended to heaven rather than becoming trapped in the grave with the body until Judgement Day. Donne spends the rest of the poem begging for understanding and grace from God from his sins before Judgement Day, because then it will be too late to seek God’s grace. The importance of the angels in this work is their role as heavenly messengers, a fairly traditional role for the angels to take in a poem that also contains ideas so divergent from traditional church doctrine. No matter how traditional their role, the fact that it is the angels’ trumpets that awaken the dead in their graves gives them incredible importance on one of the most important days in Christianity.

The next sonnet in which angelic imagery appears is “Holy Sonnet 11.” Donne adopts the device of speaking to himself, reprimanding himself for not being a good enough Christian. The role of the angels in this poem is another traditional one. Donne begins the poem by describing God, and the angels are included in that description. He tells his own soul to digest the idea “How God the Spirit, by angels waited on / In heaven, doth make his temple in thy breast.”<sup>21</sup> The premise of this poem is Donne’s attempt to understand and be worthy of God’s power. The poem details the fall of humanity from grace and how God sent

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<sup>20</sup> John Donne, “Holy Sonnet 4” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 175.

<sup>21</sup> John Donne, “Holy Sonnet 11,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008,) 178.

his son to rescue his people from Satan. The angels are an illustration of God's power, how he is waited on by these immensely powerful heavenly beings. The angels are just one reason that God deserves the love of humans, after all of the pain humanity has caused him.

“Holy Sonnet 15” exposes some of Donne’s deepest internal conflicts over his faith. This is one of several sonnets which deal with Donne’s inner struggle with sin and his desire to be punished by God. “Holy Sonnet 10” for instance, better known by its first line “Batter my heart three-personed God” expresses Donne’s desire to suffer in religion. Donne takes the angelic imagery in this poem in a different direction than the previous two sonnets. He internalizes the angelic elements and makes them a part of himself, using this notion to discuss his personal sin. The sonnet begins: “I am a little world made cunningly / Of elements, and an angelic sprite.”<sup>22</sup> This statement relies on the traditional notions of the four elements that made up the universe, earth, water, fire, and air. Donne states that he is made up of these natural elements as well as an angel-like spirit. But this spirit is threatened by sin and “both parts must die.”<sup>23</sup> Even the most pure part of Donne’s persona is threatened by sin, as are Satan and the fallen angels.

Angelic knowledge comes into play in “Holy Sonnet 16.” In fact, how angels and souls and heaven gain their knowledge is the core issue of this sonnet, in which Donne frets over whether his true intentions and faith can be seen. As in the previously mentioned Holy Sonnets, Donne begins the poem with an angelic reference. “If faithful souls be alike glorified / As angels, then my father’s soul doth see.”<sup>24</sup> He is questioning the type of knowledge souls in heaven have, wondering whether they have intuitive knowledge like

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<sup>22</sup> John Donne, “Holy Sonnet 11” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> John Donne, “Holy Sonnet 16” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 180.

angels, or inferential, an issue which comes up in other works as well. Intuitive knowledge is defined as “That consists in immediate apprehension, without the intervention of any reasoning process.”<sup>25</sup> Angels understand the actions of humans without having to reason the motivations out themselves. Donne questions whether the souls in heaven also have this talent, and if his father, a “faithful” Catholic, is able to understand his actions as well, or whether his father has to infer his intentions from his actions. He worries that his actions will be interpreted as sinful despite his good intentions. The poem ends with Donne reminding himself that God’s opinion of him is the only opinion that truly matters and “he knows best / Thy true grief, for he put it in thy breast.”<sup>26</sup>

“Holy Sonnet 17” is one of Donne’s most poignant, personal, poems. His wife Ann died in 1617 after sixteen years of marriage and twelve children together. He had married Ann in secret, without securing permission from her father. Donne’s employer at the time, Ann’s uncle, fired him and he was thrown into prison for several months. He was released, but his political career never recovered from the scandal. He and Ann lived in poverty for many years, and Ann was often pregnant. While Donne professed that he was fairly miserable at times, he seemed to genuinely love his wife. In a letter written to Sir Henry Goodyer just after Ann had given birth to one of their children, Francis Donne in 1607, Donne expressed just how fearful he was that his wife would die in labor. He even mentions that should she have died he “should hardly have abstained from recompensing for her company in this world, with accompanying her out of it.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "intuitive, adj. and n.". OED Online. December 2015. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/98801?redirectedFrom=intuitive> (accessed March 07, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Donne, “Holy Sonnet 16,” 180.

<sup>27</sup> John Donne letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, January 1607.



While this sonnet does contain the themes of struggle with faith that many of the other sonnets do, Donne praises his wife for pointing him in the direction of God, writing that “the admiring her my mind did whet / To seek thee God.”<sup>28</sup> Rather than the reference to angels in this poem coming at the beginning as in the other sonnets, the mention of an angel comes at the end of the poem, in a moment of reproach. For most of the poem Donne comes off as unemotional and almost cold towards the subject of his wife’s death. The beginning of the poem even sets up her death as a good thing. “Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt / To nature, and to hers, and my good is dead.”<sup>29</sup> Ann has gone to heaven quite young, and Donne sees that as a good thing, that she gets to be with God. That she has “paid her last debt” sounds as though she has been released from some kind of obligation. It is almost as if he is not grieving at all in the beginning. But the end exposes some of his anger at God for taking away his wife as well as his faith. By 1617 Donne had converted to the Anglican church and was experiencing doubts about leaving the Catholic faith. This poem expresses this, scolding God for his “tender jealousy.”<sup>30</sup> God took away Donne’s wife and his “love to saints and angels, things divine” which took away from Donne’s focus on God himself.<sup>31</sup>

While the Holy Sonnets reference angels in very traditional capacities, the angels play very important roles in the poems. In every case angels are mentioned they are present either in the first few lines or the last few lines of the sonnet. Using angelic imagery to begin or conclude the poems implies a certain level of prominence of the ideas they represent. Though Donne is struggling with his religion in these poems, the angelic theology is sure and steady. The Holy Sonnets establish vital tenants of Donne’s angelology.

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<sup>28</sup> John Donne, “Holy Sonnet 17” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 270.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

If the only resources available to help interpret Donne's secular poems were his religious poems, it would be possible to do so successfully. Drawing on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, Donne lays down a framework for his belief in God, Jesus, and other holy beings, especially angels in his religious works, including his personal struggles with his faith. The angels have many different roles in Donne's religious poems: as messengers, guides, objects of worship, servants to God, and guardians of Christians on earth. Angels are important to Donne and he incorporates them into his theology often, which makes sense considering how long he was a practicing Catholic and how important angels were in the Catholic tradition. Donne's disparagement of the clergy and the church hierarchy also comes across in his religious poetry. He questions the validity of many accepted teachings and the roles of the clergy in the organization of the religion. The religious poetry gives the reader an insight into both Donne's theological perspective and his questioning religious mind.

In his secular poems, Donne also uses angel imagery, sometimes unusually as in "Air and Angels." Calling a woman an angel, such as the instance in *Romeo and Juliet*, is typically a complimentary expression. Calling women angels implies they are holy, heavenly, beautiful creatures, but Donne does not use angelic imagery as a compliment in "Air and Angels." Instead he is using theological ideas to comment on the nature of a relationship between a man and a woman. This is one of the most theologically specific love poems that Donne wrote, referencing several Christian ideas about angels. This is also one of Donne's most complex poems, containing several conceits.

One of the ideas Donne explores in "Air and Angels" is the concept of "love at first sight." Donne attempts to explain how without ever having had a conversation with a person, humans become fixated and fall "in love." He does not consider physical appearance

responsible for this phenomena, rather it is a spiritual feeling that causes a man to fall in love with a woman, or vice versa, at first sight, or in the case of the poem, even before first sight. The poem states in the first three lines: “Twice or thrice had I loved thee, / Before I knew thy face or name; / So in a voice so in a shapeless flame.”<sup>32</sup> This implies that the speaker has gone beyond love at first sight to love before ever laying eyes on the objects of his affections. How is this possible? The next line answers that question. “Angels affect us oft.”<sup>33</sup> Donne lays love at first sight, or love without knowing a person, at the feet of angels.

“Air and Angels” also addresses the concept of physical beauty in a unique way. The speaker of this poem cannot physically love the woman in question, despite already having fallen in love with her “so in a voice, so in a shapeless flame.”<sup>34</sup> According to the speaker, the woman’s beauty is physically too much for him to be able to love. He is completely overcome by how beautiful she is and that pushed her away from him. Even the smallest parts of her body are devastatingly beautiful, down to the smallest individual hairs on her head. “Every thy hair for love to work upon / Is much too much, some fitter must be sought.”<sup>35</sup> The speaker is completely overwhelmed by the woman’s physical beauty and therefore must seek to love something else about her. Instead of the impossible task of loving the woman’s physical beauty, the speaker moves to loving the angelic substance of her spiritual beauty. “For, nor in nothing, nor in things / Extreme, and scatt’ring bright, can love inhere.”<sup>36</sup> These two lines, lines 21 and 22 are arguably the most important lines of the poem when attempting to discern the meaning. The speaker is struggling to determine the substance

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<sup>32</sup> John Donne, “Air and Angels,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

of love. It can neither be immaterial, nor material. This is where the theological idea that angels are somewhere between man and God, material and immaterial, is especially applicable. The soul, the angelic part of this woman, is what the speaker loves, what a person is attracted to when he or she falls in love.

The end of the poem brings about the crux of the argument. The final three lines of the poem read: “Just such disparity / As is ’twixt air and angels’ purity, / ’Twixt women’s love, and men’s will ever be.”<sup>37</sup> This is a commentary on the purity of women’s love and men’s love. While air is considered to be a pure, natural substance, angels are the most pure beings, even more pure than air. Men’s love is more pure than women’s love according to Donne, the difference between the two being like the difference between air and angels. One form of love seems pure, but is not actually the purest form possible. Angels, to take a physical form, had to combine elements, which made them less pure. Thomas Aquinas described this process, explaining that air, though formless and colorless, can be given form and color when condensed, as an angel would condense it to take a form. “The angels assume bodies of air condensing it by Divine power in so far as is needful for forming the assumed body.”<sup>38</sup> Woman’s love embodies men’s love, so even though woman’s love is embodying the pure substance of man’s love, it is still less pure.

The premise of “The Bracelet” is completely different from that in “Air and Angels” but the message is nearly the same. The speaker of the poem has lost his lover’s bracelet, and begins by listing reasons he does not miss it. All are conventional reasons for missing a piece of jewelry, that it is beautiful, worn by a woman the speaker loves, the sentimentality of it having links like the links between the two lovers. The speaker is most upset because he is

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia: Volume One*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benziger Brothers Inc., 1947), 266.

expected to melt down twelve of his own gold coins in order to make a new bracelet for his lover. This change in form is the subject of the poem, and what the speaker rails and preaches against for the rest of the elegy. He does not wish to sacrifice his angels in the form of coins so a new bracelet can be made.

In “The Bracelet,” Donne asks to not melt down his gold angels because they will lose their worth as coins, even though the gold will still be worth money simply as gold. Angels that take a different form are still pure, but they lose part of their value or purity when they change their bodily form. John Carey argues that it is the coins’ duality that interests Donne in this case. If the coins are melted down then they lose their double value as a precious metal and a coin with theoretical, societal value as well.<sup>39</sup> But another, simpler answer is just as likely. When melted down, the coins just lose their immaterial value. It is not duality that Donne craves in his coins, but simply the deeper, almost spiritual meaning that a coin has in society. One can argue that melting gold coins to make a bracelet would be improving upon their form, making the un-uniformly hammered coins into a thing of beauty, an accessory to be worn by a wealthy, probably attractive woman. But there would be no deeper value to the bracelet, no deeper implication of societal prominence. The coins, no matter how distorted, bear the image of the King or Queen of England as well as the Archangel Michael. Coins have commercial value and their engravings are a part of that. With the image of the monarch on one side and the image of God’s messenger on the other, the possessor of the coins can “provide / All things to me, and be my faithful guide, / To gain new friends, to appease great enemies, / To comfort my soul, when I lie or rise”<sup>40</sup> This

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<sup>39</sup> John Carey, “Donne and Coins” in *English Renaissance Studies: Presented to Dame Helen Gardner in Honour of Her Seventieth Birthday*, ed. John Carey (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1980), 154.

<sup>40</sup> John Donne, “The Bracelet,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

reference does seem almost blasphemous in how much power it gives to angels as coins. It should be God and his angels that provide for, guide, comfort, and help in interpersonal relationships, but in this context Donne is claiming the angel coins as the guiding force in his life. This can also be read as a criticism of the power and influence that wealth has in the society in which he lived, but considering his previously mentioned attitudes towards growing a fortune to glorify God, it is more likely a double meaning. Wealth is a driving force in the speaker's secular life, and theoretically a driving force for him as a Christian, considering Donne's stance on the importance of earning money to please God.

The imperfections of an English coin's form do not matter. They still have value because they are coins. Donne in fact values his coins even more given that they have not been repaired and made more attractive. He praises his coins, "which as yet / No leaven of vile solder did admit, / Nor yet by any way have strayed or gone / From the first state of their creation."<sup>41</sup> The coins, beaten and battered as they be, have not been altered from their first state. The "twelve righteous angels" Donne would have to give up have not even been repaired to improve upon their form.<sup>42</sup> The coins are still pure, they still bear their original stamp. In fact, a more attractive form will make them lose value in Donne's eyes.

Despite most contemporary British coins' irregular and uneven appearance, Donne would not trade them for the more polished-looking coins of France or Spain. "And howso'er French kings most Christian be, / Their crowns are circumcised most Jewishly."<sup>43</sup> By referencing how the French coins may be considered more "Jewish" Donne adds a heretical trait to the other coins, as well as bestowing a holy, Christian status onto the British angels. The coins of other countries "Are dirtily and desperately gulled; / I would not spit to quench

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<sup>41</sup> Donne, "The Bracelet," 9.

<sup>42</sup> Donne, "The Bracelet," 9.

<sup>43</sup> Donne, "The Bracelet," 10.

the fire they were in. / For they are guilty of much heinous sin.”<sup>44</sup> The coins that are not angels are sinful, but Donne goes on to call the angels “harmless” and begs that they not suffer the fires of hell as their sinful foreign counterparts do. In the case of “The Bracelet” the form is actually an important component of the coin’s value, but the physical appearance is not. No matter how battered, irregular, or misshapen the coins are, they are still coins. They are used to pay for items and bring power to whoever holds them. They are an indicator that the spender has worked hard for his or her money and wields that much more power in society.

Donne then turns to one of his most used references, the fall of the Satan and the evil angels, to explain just why the form of his coins is so important. He challenges the argument that the gold still has value despite it not being in coin form: “the gold doth still remain, / Though it be changed, and put into a chain.”<sup>45</sup> Donne rejects this idea, asserting that should he melt down his coins, then they would be the equivalent of fallen angels. In good angels and the whole coins, “resteth still / Wisdom and knowledge, but ’tis turned to ill” when they fall or are melted down.<sup>46</sup> Melting down the angels would be taking away their good qualities and instilling bad ones in them. “As these should do good works, and should provide / Necessities, but now must nurse thy pride.”<sup>47</sup> Donne accuses the owner of the necklace of feeding her own pride with her concern about her physical appearance rather than considering the fact she would be desecrating something holy by melting the angels down. This pushes the idea that the coins have a holy or intangible meaning beyond that of just their physical value.

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<sup>44</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 10.

<sup>45</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 11.

<sup>46</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 11.

<sup>47</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 11.

Donne continues with the fallen angels metaphor to drive home how important the form of the coin is to him. He goes as far to reject his own metaphor as faulty. “And they are still bad angels; mine are none, / For form gives being, and their form is gone.”<sup>48</sup> Even fallen angels can still be identified as angels, even though they have been corrupted by sin, but if Donne melts down his golden angels, there will be no way to even tell they were ever coins. The key line, “for form gives being, and their form is gone” is one of the most important lines in the poem that conveys what Donne is trying to say about the importance of a form carrying something deeper. Coins have so much meaning that “their dignities / Pass Virtues, Powers, and Principalities.”<sup>49</sup> Virtues, Powers, and Principalities are all ranks of archangels that rank above normal angels in the heavenly hierarchy. Since angels have the image of Archangel Michael on them, it would be logical to rank coins with his image on them with the archangels, should they actually have that holy power. Without this physical form and this material stamp, the angels lose their high place in the hierarchy.

Donne is persuaded or decides to melt down his coins and the poem turns to lament that fact. He calls the melted down angels “martyrs,” whom he betrays for the sake of his beloved’s vanity.<sup>50</sup> He apologizes to them. Donne plays upon the traditional definition of angels as messengers from God, “Good souls, for you give life to everything, / Good angels for good messages you bring.”<sup>51</sup> Donne is also careful to distinguish that the coins are “good” angels, rather than the fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God. He apologizes for being weak and not willing to suffer to keep the angels in their original form.

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<sup>48</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 11.

<sup>49</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 11.

<sup>50</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 11.

<sup>51</sup> Donne, “The Bracelet,” 11.



“Air and Angels” and “The Bracelet” seemingly have nothing in common but their use of angelic imagery, and even then the two angels discussed are completely different from each other. “The Bracelet” is about money and “Air and Angels” is about the difference between male love and female love. The essence of both these poems, however, is the importance (or unimportance) of bodily form. In both poems a change in form would make both types of angels less valuable in some way. Melting down the golden angels would destroy their societal value, despite keeping their value as gold. The woman’s love, like an angel taking a form, becomes less pure by embodying something else. Ultimately, Donne is making an argument that the physical form of something, whether it be a woman or a coin is not important. It is their value spiritually or societally that is most important. In some case, a beautiful material or physical form is actually a negative trait and can negatively affect the object or person. Donne obsesses over the immaterial aspects of people, such as their spirituality and the societal implications of their wealth. As the dual meaning of “The Bracelet” makes clear, money is one of the few things other than God that has power over men, therefore it is important. Also associated with money is the sense that the money was earned and worked hard for. Working glorifies God and the more wealth a person has, theoretically the closer that person is to God.

Donne’s love poems are typically laden with Biblical and religious imagery. His relationship with God, whether through the church or personally, had a major impact on his life and relationships. More than by just using religious imagery, Donne often elevates his love for women to a love similar to his love for God. These poems, especially the more erotic ones, can be seen as almost blasphemous. “The Relic” is a love poem that is so abundant with religious imagery that it is very nearly profane. The premise of this poem is that the

speaker has died, and his grave is being dug up, only for the gravediggers to discover that the skeleton is wearing a bracelet of blonde hair. The bracelet of hair is meant to reunite the lovers on Judgment Day so they can spend eternity together. This poem is thought by some scholars to be written for Magdalen Herbert, due to the reference to Mary Magdalene, but that has not been proven. It seems unlikely that Donne would use the blasphemous idea that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' lover in a poem dedicated to one of his most respected patronesses. The angelic reference in this poem is more similar to those in the religious poems than to the secular love poems in that it explains something about Donne's belief in angels. It draws on the idea of guardian angels and other theological ideas about the makeup of angels.

“The Relic” stresses the importance of the body and soul relationship, as does the angelic imagery. The reference to sex or gender further implies that physical form is not nearly as important as their non-physical traits. The two lovers souls are meeting once again in heaven, connected by the bracelet of hair, after their physical bodies are dead and circumstances that kept them apart in the physical world no longer apply. In fact, Donne says that their physical bodies barely even touched when they were alive. “Coming and going, we / Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals; / Our hands ne'er touched the seals, / Which nature, injured by late law, sets free.”<sup>52</sup> After Judgement Day their bodies will be gone and physical form will be irrelevant. It is their souls that will be reunited at the end of the world and their bodies will not matter. The bracelet of hair is only a temporary marker to identify the speaker of the poem to his lover before their souls spend eternity together.

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<sup>52</sup> John Donne, “The Relic” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 130.

In “The Dream” Donne compares the subject of the poem to an angel, but eventually rescinds that comparison. “The Dream” begins as the speaker of the poem is dreaming, and then is woken by a woman, the subject of the poem and the subject of the speaker’s dream. The speaker is not angry that the woman has woken him, as her real, physical presence is better to him than any dream could be, no matter how perfect the dream is. The speaker makes a startling claim, that it was his lover’s eyes that woke him up and not the noise that she made. This is the first implication that the woman is something more than just a human being. The speaker compares his lover’s eyes to “lightning or a taper’s light,” with a flashing brilliance able to wake someone from a deep slumber.<sup>53</sup> The poem goes on to make the comparison even stronger, and by telling the woman that “I thought thee / (For thou lov’st truth) an angel, at first sight.”<sup>54</sup> Donne again manages to refer to the sight of angels without explicitly describing what an angel might look like. This woman could look like any variety of things with bright eyes and still look like an angel. This reference also is like that in “Air and Angels” in the vein of love at first sight being linked to angels. These poems share similar imagery, describing their angels in terms of light and the flickering flame on a burning candle.

Where “The Dream” deviates from this comparison is in the next few lines. The speaker tells the woman that he realized that she was not an angel “when I saw thou saw’st my heart, / And knew’st my thoughts, beyond an angels art.”<sup>55</sup> These lines simultaneously limit an angel’s power and create a question about who exactly this woman is. At first sight she is an angel, but can suddenly surpass an angel’s power and read the speaker’s thoughts.

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<sup>53</sup> John Donne, “The Dream,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 112.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

As previously explored, Donne defines some angelic powers as immense strength and growing older without physically ageing, but knowing the thoughts of men is not a power traditionally attributed to angels. Aquinas explicitly states that despite their place in the heavenly hierarchy, angels cannot read minds. “God alone can know the thoughts of hearts and the affections of wills.”<sup>56</sup> This woman is immediately elevated past the level of angel, when Donne calls angels “between the nature of God, and the nature of man.”<sup>57</sup> Donne cements this metaphor in the last lines of the second stanza. “I must confess, it could not choose but be / Profane, to think thee anything but thee.”<sup>58</sup> In this way, Donne is insinuating that the woman in this poem is God. Only God has the power to know a man’s thoughts, and it would be “profane” or desecrating what is holy to deny that such a person is God.

“Love’s Alchemy” upon first sight seems like yet another love poem bound to be full of Donne’s signature extended metaphors, but it takes a drastic turn that upends the traditional notion of love, while still emphasizing Donne’s message of the triviality of a certain physical form. Love, argues Donne in this poem, is simply lust, and does not truly exist between men and women. He argues that there is no perfection in love and there is no secret as to why men love women, as there is no philosopher’s stone in alchemy.<sup>59</sup> The use of angels in this poem is scathing and sarcastic. Donne is dismissive of marriage in this poem and he makes fun of any man who dares to suggest that men who marry women thinking women are more than physical creatures are deluded. He calls a man who would suggest this a “loving wretch.”<sup>60</sup> The man argues “’Tis not the bodies marry, but the minds, which he in

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<sup>56</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, 286.

<sup>57</sup> John Donne, “From a sermon preached 19 November 1627,” 384.

<sup>58</sup> John Donne, “The Dream,” 112.

<sup>59</sup> Achsah Guibbory, “Erotic Poetry” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* ed. Achsah Guibbory, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 137.

<sup>60</sup> John Donne, “Love’s Alchemy,” in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 114.

her angelic finds.”<sup>61</sup> Of course, men cannot find a woman’s physical appearance angelic as angels are matter-less, so the advocacy for an angelic attraction would have to be to the mind. Angelic here could just be a convenient descriptor, but when it comes to Donne, things seldom happen by accident. Ultimately he cautions his reader to “Hope not for mind in women; at their best / Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed.”<sup>62</sup> Donne ends the poem on the misogynistic note that women are but empty shells, dead bodies possessed by a consciousness, rather than living, breathing human beings with minds of their own. This is actually quite a departure from Donne’s usual portrayal of women. While misogyny was common in Elizabethan and Jacobean society, Donne in general gave the women he wrote about value and voice.<sup>63</sup> The language and logic may be typical of Donne, but the message is not.

Donne seems to be contradicting more than just his attitude towards women in this poem. While the “angelic mind” of a woman is certainly mentioned, Donne is dismissing the notion that men are really attracted to the minds and other non-physical parts of a woman, when in his other poems he is stressing exactly that. One of the most interesting things about Donne is that he is able to take on different personas and argue many different points without ever hinting at what his true position is. “Love’s Alchemy” is an example of Donne’s versatility if nothing else. He has such a brilliant artistic ability that he is able to take an image he uses to argue one point in many other poems, and completely turn it around in this work.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ilona Bell, “Gender Matters: The Women in Donne’s Poems” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibory, (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2007), 214.

“Love’s Progress,” an elegy, has a more forgiving attitude toward women than “Love’s Alchemy.” In this poem Donne is actually encouraging men to have a deeper connection with women and to seek a love beyond the physical. The single use of angelic imagery in “Love’s Progress” actually encourages the reader to objectify a woman for what she is not. Donne’s argument is that men often have an ideal version of a woman in their minds and attempt to make the women in their lives fit that ideal. In what may be a surprising turn, Donne argues against this practice, instead encouraging men to choose a single virtue to look for in a woman rather than having a list of qualities that are desirable and “o’erlick / Our love, and force it new strange shapes to take.”<sup>64</sup> Donne argues very hard for not attempting to change one’s partner. He argues that loving a woman for the idea of her rather than her true self is the worst thing a man could do. He asks: “Can men more injure women than to say / They love them for that which they’re not they?”<sup>65</sup> Donne is encouraging men to find something they want in a woman and stay with her instead of jumping from woman to woman trying to find one that fits every standard they have, or even waiting to love any woman until the perfect woman comes along. Donne rejects both of these practices outright, scoffing “May barren angels love so.”<sup>66</sup> “Barren” in this case likely takes the definition of “Bare of intellectual wealth, destitute of attraction or interest, poor, meagre, jejune, arid, dry” rather than the usual notion of infertility.<sup>67</sup> Angels are virtuous and would not seek to love someone unless she were perfect, but Donne does not think that course of action is an intelligent one.

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<sup>64</sup> John Donne, “Love’s Progress” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59.

<sup>65</sup> Donne, “Love’s Progress,” 60.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> “barren, adj. and n.” OED Online. March 2016. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15740?rskey=QpeOvA&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 10, 2016).

Donne further intertwines wealth imagery and angelic imagery in this poem as well, comparing women to coins briefly before making his argument against insincere love. He lists a series of physical qualities he admires in coins, but Donne also reveals what he really values in coins: “if I love it, ’tis because, ’tis made / By our new nature, use, the soul of trade.”<sup>68</sup> Donne may enjoy the great physical qualities of coins, but it is the fact that money has societal value that he really loves it. Once again, the importance of the intangible comes through in Donne’s work.

The attitude expressed towards physical appearance in “Air and Angels” and “The Bracelet” is supported and reiterated in Donne’s elegy “The Anagram.” The subject of this elegy is not traditionally beautiful. She has all the traditional traits of a beautiful woman, but as the title suggests, they are out of order.

For, though her eyes be small, her mouth is great,  
 Though they be ivory, yet her teeth are jet,  
 Though they be dim, yet she is light enough,  
 And though her harsh hair fall, her skin is rough;  
 What though her cheeks be yellow, her hair is red,  
 Give her thine, and she hath a maidenhead.<sup>69</sup>

Still, Donne likens her, and other non-traditionally beautiful women to angels, specifically good angels. In fact, women who have all the “correct” beautiful features are compared to Satan’s fallen angels. Donne begins this comparison with a fairly innocuous statement:

“Women are all like angels.”<sup>70</sup> This, as previously discussed, is fairly typical for the era. But

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<sup>68</sup> Donne, “Love’s Progress,” 60.

<sup>69</sup> John Donne, “The Anagram” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>70</sup> John Donne, “The Anagram,” 18.

in a characteristic twist, Donne turns the tables. “The fair be / Like those which fell to worse; but such as she, / Like to good angels, nothing can impair: / ‘Tis less grief to be foul, than to have been fair.”<sup>71</sup> Donne is devoting an entire poem of 56 lines to a woman who by other standards would be considered physically repulsive. He celebrates her, even though his descriptions are unflattering.

Perhaps Donne’s most famous elegy, “To his Mistress Going to Bed” is a seduction poem that in typical Donne fashion combines sexual innuendos with elaborate conceits as well as political and religious references. In “Going to Bed” Donne combines angelic imagery with the distinct tone of seduction. The speaker compares the woman’s white underclothes to “such white robes heaven’s angels used to be / Received by men” in, elevating his lover’s status to that of a heavenly being.<sup>72</sup> This is a rare description of an angel’s physical appearance and again aligning the image to traditional Christian art. Even identifying this passage as a physical description is tenuous as it does not describe his lover, only her robes. These angelic images are heavily intertwined with the theme of wealth in this poem, even without specifically mentioning angel currency. One distinct feature of this elegy is that unlike most seduction poems, the woman being seduced is not the focus of the poem. There is no mention of the woman’s body, face, or what she looks like in general. Instead, what Donne describes is her clothing and her jewelry, describing them as richly adorned. Her breastplate is “spangled” and her girdle is “glistening.”<sup>73</sup> This elaborate imagery suggests that the speaker’s lover is wealthy, and not only that, but that her wealth is extremely important to the speaker.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> John Donne, “To his Mistress Going to Bed,” in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13.

<sup>73</sup> John Donne, “To his Mistress Going to Bed,” 12.



This poem brings up an important distinguishing marker of Donne's poetry. While many, if not most love poems, especially of this period, are extremely concerned with the subject's physical appearance, Donne's are not. Even Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 130, states "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" and other contradictions to famous clichés.<sup>74</sup> Despite this departure from traditional love poetry, Shakespeare is still focused on his mistress's looks. Even though the description is deceptively negative, it is still the focus of the poem. Donne does not describe the women in his poems, but their attributes. An obvious example of this is "The Indifferent" in which Donne remarks that he can love any kind of woman. "I can love both fair and brown" is the first line of the poem, right off the bat Donne is making it clear that what his mistress looks like is not important to him.<sup>75</sup> The final two lines of the first stanza are "I can love her, and her, and you and you, / I can love any, so she be not true."<sup>76</sup> This final statement, that Donne can love any woman as long as she is not faithful to him, betrays deeper issues within Donne's mind, but it also highlights that Donne is more interested in what is within a woman and what impact she carries in society than her outer appearance.

Donne supports this sentiment in sermons as well. He considers physical beauty unimportant, especially when compared to wealth. Donne's idea is that because work is required to earn gold, and beauty is simply bestowed by God without any work having been put in, beauty is less valuable than wealth. Beauty is "a thing that happened by chance" and compared to money, which needs to be earned, it is worth much less.<sup>77</sup> In Donne's

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<sup>74</sup> William Shakespeare "Sonnet 130," in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition*, ed. David Bevington (United States of America: Pearson, 2014), 1739.

<sup>75</sup> John Donne, "The Indifferent," in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.

<sup>76</sup> John Donne, "The Indifferent," 94.

<sup>77</sup> John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 133-34.

“Paradoxes and Problems” he also writes about the question of why the most beautiful people are often the most false. He compares beauty to gold, and ponders that though gold is also beautiful, it does not prove false as beautiful women often do. Donne concludes that beauty goes to a woman’s head. “They easily believe all addresses, and applications of every man, out of a sense of their own worthiness, to be directed to them, which others less worthy in their own thoughts apprehend not or discredit.”<sup>78</sup> Overall, Donne does not seem to think much of physical appearance in his prose works, and that feeling transfers to his poetic works as well.

The question after examining the imagery in the love poems is if they line up with the usage and the message in “Air and Angels” and “The Bracelet,” the two shining examples of angelic imagery in Donne’s works. For the most part, yes they do. The messages and scenarios presented in each poem differ widely, but they all contain the essential element of the importance of the soul versus the body. With the exception of “Love’s Alchemy,” the love poems place the importance on intangible elements rather than the tangible. This does not mean that the love poems are repeating the message of “Air and Angels” and “The Bracelet” verbatim. For instance, in “Air and Angels” the woman the speaker falls in love with is so overwhelmingly beautiful that the speaker cannot mentally comprehend her appearance, and that is why he is focused on her spiritual beauty. In “The Anagram” the woman the speaker describes is completely repulsive and not traditionally attractive to the speaker. Still, the emphasis is on the spiritual, regardless of whether the woman’s physical appearance is overwhelmingly beautiful or overwhelmingly ugly. “The Relic” is the only of these poems that is overwhelmed with religious imagery, but it very closely aligns with “Air

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<sup>78</sup> John Donne, “Paradoxes and Problems” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142.

and Angels” with its extreme emphasis on non-physical love. In “The Relic” physical love does not even exist, the two lovers only have their spiritual love that their souls will enjoy in the afterlife. In both “Air and Angels” and “The Relic” the couples are incapable of loving each other physically, leaving them only with their spiritual love. Outside of “Love’s Alchemy,” the emphasis in Donne’s love poems that use angelic imagery is emphatically on love that goes deeper than the physical. In some cases, such as in “Love’s Progress,” the wealth imagery in “The Bracelet” is reiterated and the emphasis is once again on the societal value of coins.

Aside from the love poems, descriptions of angels can be found most often in funeral elegies and poems of tribute to the dead. Two of Donne’s longest and most famous works, the First and Second Anniversaries are a subgenre of patronage poem. In 1611 Donne left the service of Lucy, Countess of Bedford and entered the service of Robert Drury. Donne had likely met Drury before, but at this time they developed a more intimate, literary relationship. Drury enlisted Donne to write a series of poems upon the death of his daughter, Elizabeth, who died at age fourteen. Despite never having met the girl, Donne went on to craft two of his most well-known poems, each several hundred lines long. He seemed to have developed a deep friendship with Robert Drury, and Drury even invited Donne to travel abroad with him for an extended time. Isaac Walton suggests that it was this trip with the family that prompted Donne to write one of his most popular poems. “A Valediction: forbidding mourning” for his wife.<sup>79</sup> After spending time abroad with the Drurys, Donne completed his Anniversary poems and returned home. The family provided for him, installing him in a house on Drury Lane.

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<sup>79</sup> Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 242.

“An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary” had been published by November 1611 to commemorate the first anniversary of Elizabeth Drury’s death. The poem has very little to say about the actual person the poem is dedicated to. Instead, it comments on the state of humanity, earth, and the heavens, all of which are falling apart now that Elizabeth Drury has died. Rather than memorializing the young woman as she was, Donne uses her death to comment on all the troubles in the world, reminding the reader every so often that “She, she is dead; she’s dead” to center the poem on the dead girl.<sup>80</sup> The poem is in three sections, each talking about the decay of a part of the universe. Donne’s single use of angelic imagery does not come when he discusses the “Weakness in the want of correspondence of heaven and earth” as the final section is captioned, despite Donne’s definition of angels as messengers between heaven and earth, but in the transition from the first section to the second section, when he discusses the disorder in humanity and then the disorder in the natural world.<sup>81</sup>

According to this poem, Elizabeth Drury was such a force of good in the world that she alone could heal the sickness of sin in mankind and bring order back into the human world. The world is even more sick at her death not only because the one person who could save humanity is gone, but because “none / Offers to tell us who it is that’s gone.”<sup>82</sup> Like a country whose prince is dying with no heirs, no one wishes to express the fear that the country will be without a leader. “The present prince, they’re loth it should be said, / The prince doth languish, or the prince is dead.”<sup>83</sup> Without a leader, chaos will ensue, so the citizens do not wish to speak the truth that leaves them without a leader, a terrifying concept.

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<sup>80</sup> John Donne, “An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary,” in John Donne: The Major Works ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 212.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

No one wishes to acknowledge Elizabeth Drury's death because they are fearful to acknowledge that "The cement which did faithfully compact / And glue all virtues" is now no longer in the world.<sup>84</sup> So the world is doubly sick and humanity is suffering from decay with no antidote.

Donne draws on ideas popular at the time to build his case about the decaying state of man. Children come into the world "not right, nor orderly" so from the moment they are born they are doomed to lead the world to destruction.<sup>85</sup> Donne drew on commonly accepted beliefs in his time such as Pliny's idea that man is only getting smaller in stature and life expectancy is getting shorter. Of course, it is known now that the opposite is true, and humans were growing to be taller and increasing in life expectancy. Donne describes horrible fates befalling men for almost two hundred lines, before the poem turns.

Donne comes to his next point, the decay of the material world. It is in this context that he mentions angels, transitioning from the state of man to the state of the earth. He brings in the fall of Satan, who was one of God's angels. Donne uses Satan and the fallen angels to illustrate just how long the state of man has been in decay. While not stated in the Bible, most theologians agree that the fall of Satan from heaven occurred before the creation of Earth and Donne follows this supposition, writing that "before God had made up all the rest, corruption entered, and depraved the best."<sup>86</sup> Donne uses this concept to illustrate how humanity was doomed from the start. Sin went on to take hold of some of the angels and the world was forever altered by sin before the world that humanity exists in was even created. Sin "seized the angels, and then first of all / The world did in her cradle take a fall."<sup>87</sup> The

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<sup>84</sup> Donne, "An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary," 208.

<sup>85</sup> Donne, "An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary," 209.

<sup>86</sup> Donne, "An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary," 211.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

fall of the angels had such a huge impact on the world that man has only regressed since creation. The poem continues on for several hundred more lines, discussing the material world and the heavenly sphere, without mentioning angels again.

“Of the Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary” was written in France while Donne was travelling with the Drury family and published by May 1612. In some ways it is a continuation of the first poem, but it deals with some very different themes as well. This poem refers to angels more often than the “First Anniversary” did. The “Second Anniversary” deals with the heavenly sphere more than its predecessor. There are three mentions of angels in “Of the Progress of the Soul,” compare to the single mention in “An Anatomy of the World.” While Donne does make references to his previous poem in this series with a similar refrain of “She, she is gone; she’s gone” and other mentions of his elaborately decaying world, the tone is completely contrasting.<sup>88</sup> These references also have an overall more positive tone than the previous poem. Rather than focusing on how the world is grieving over Elizabeth Drury’s death, Donne focuses on how love survives death and continues into the afterlife. There is still an element of grief in the poem, but it is largely a celebration of all the positive things that come from death.

The first reference to angels comes in the section Donne titles “Contemplation of our state in our deathbed.” This section essentially attempts to calm any fears the reader has about dying. Donne argues that if the person dying is a true Christian all of his or her sins will be forgiven in death and his or her experience in the afterlife will be free of the tragedy of the Earth. He writes that the mourners surrounding a deathbed would actually be jealous of

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<sup>88</sup> John Donne, “Of the Progress of the Soul: The Second Anniversary” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 220.

the dying person and “weep but because they go not yet thy way.”<sup>89</sup> Those who die are able to escape the tribulations of living on a corrupted earth “which they from God, and angels cover not.”<sup>90</sup> The angels in this section are largely passive. They seemingly have the power to cover all the sin and corruption in the world, but they do not. Instead, dying is seen as a pleasurable alternative to the unavoidable physical world of sin.

In the section titled “Of essential joy in this life and in the next” there is another reference to angelic influence, specifically the fallen angels. The “essential joy” Donne references in the section title is that no matter how hard people attempt to imagine heaven, or how much they think about God, they will never be able to comprehend heaven. Both God and Christians benefit from this situation, as “neither he / Can suffer diminution, nor we.”<sup>91</sup> Those who go to heaven will never be disappointed by what they experience because feeble human minds are unable to fathom it while they are alive. God will never be diminished by his followers because of inability to comprehend heaven in life. The souls in heaven cannot be disappointed by what they find and cannot be disappointed in God. Donne makes a bold claim, that the angels who fell from grace with Satan would have stayed with God if they had been unable to be disappointed by heaven. Angelic minds are able to comprehend heaven, but if even they could not understand heaven they would have been able to experience the “filling good” of heaven.<sup>92</sup>

The final reference to angels, in the last section of the poem before the conclusion, is another negative reference to the fall of the angels. This section extols the happiness of heaven, and calls attention to the joy in heaven that never abates. Accidental happiness on

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<sup>89</sup> Donne, “Of the Progress of the Soul,” 221.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Donne, “Of the Progress of the Soul,” 229.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

earth never lasts, and actually is likely to kill you or hurt you in the long term. However, in heaven, “Joy of a soul’s arrival ne’er decays; / For that soul ever joys and ever stays.”<sup>93</sup> In this sense, Donne argues that souls in heaven actually have another advantage over angels in that they can never fall. He explains it this way:

Joy that their last great consummation  
Approaches in the resurrection;  
When earthly bodies more celestial  
Shall be, than angels were, for they could fall;  
This kind of joy doth every day admit  
Degrees of growth, but none of losing it.<sup>94</sup>

While angels are capable of falling from grace due to their ability to become angry or disillusioned with God, souls in heaven are not, which makes them superior. This is a major departure from much of Donne’s usual angelic references, which usually stick to the usual Aquinas teaching that angels belong in the heavenly hierarchy below God and firmly above humans. To put even human souls above angels is a fairly revolutionary, divergent idea.

Both the poems drew criticism when they were published. According to poet and playwright Ben Jonson the praises Donne heaped upon Elizabeth Drury were considered blasphemous, and worthy only of a holy figure such as the Virgin Mary.<sup>95</sup> Donne retorted that he was writing about the idea of a woman, not specifically Elizabeth Drury. He defended himself in a letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, explaining that he had very little choice in what he could write about Elizabeth Drury, “I who never saw her... had received so very good

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<sup>93</sup> Donne, “Of the Progress of the Soul,” 230.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Johnathan F.S. Post, “Donne’s Life: A Sketch” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12.



testimony of her worthiness... it became me to say, not what I was sure was just truth, but the best that I could conceive.”<sup>96</sup> Donne does not use much angelic imagery, especially in the “Anatomy of the World” since he has already elevated Elizabeth Drury above the role of an angel. She is more holy than the middle ground between man and God that angels occupy. Traditional praises Donne uses in the patronage poems to the Countess of Bedford do not suffice when he describes young Elizabeth Drury. The “Anniversary” poems are also unique in that they are almost a hybrid between secular and religious poetry. They deal with religious notions such as the Christian idea of life after death as well as secular notions of praising the dead for their virtues. By extension, they also combine the different ways Donne uses angel imagery by both establishing an angelology and by using that angelology in an extended conceit. While the angelic imagery in “An Anatomy of the World” served more as a theological reference, it contributed to the larger metaphor of the decline of man and Elizabeth Drury’s tragic destiny of dying before she had the chance to save it.

Donne’s funeral elegies commemorating Elizabeth Drury and other members of the nobility are other examples of his patronage poems. They often contain angelic imagery as they contain references to life after death and other Christian ideas. Some of the ideas presented in the other funeral tributes are remarkably similar to those in the Anniversaries. Donne’s “Elegy on Prince Henry” commemorated the life of James I’s oldest son and heir to the throne. Prince Henry was a much admired young man and quite popular among both the aristocracy and the common people. Those who did not like King James I, such as Sir Walter Raleigh, put much of their faith for the future of the monarchy in the promise of this young man, who died at age 18. The poem’s imagery is fairly typical of a Donne patronage poem or funeral elegy. Inability to comprehend God, much like in “The Second Anniversary,” is a

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<sup>96</sup> John Donne letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, April 1612.

theme in this work, and there is some imagery that is similar to that in “To the Countess of Bedford (Reason is our soul’s left hand)” which will be discussed later. Donne’s single mention of angels occurs in the final couplet. He contextualizes all of his praise by putting it all in the heavenly sphere. “So much, as you two mutual heavens were here, / I were an angel singing what you were.”<sup>97</sup> Donne glorifies Prince Henry as a heaven to himself, and he glorifies himself as well, as an angel singing his praises. This is one of Donne’s least emotional funeral elegies, despite the public’s love for their prince. Donne had no real personal connection to James I’s son, and in this work he seems to be simply going through the motions. His was one of many poems published on Henry’s death in the third edition of the collection *Lachryme Lachrymarum*.

“Obsequies to the Lord Harrington, brother to the Countess of Bedford” was written for Lucy Harrington Russell’s brother, also a good friend of Prince Henry’s. The young noble died at age twenty-two from smallpox. Donne sent this poem to Lucy after her brother’s death in hopes of her sending him money to pay off his debts. Lucy promised to do so, but only sent him a small sum. Donne was disappointed at this development, writing to Henry Goodyer that “her former fashion towards me had given a better confidence; and this diminution in her makes me see, that I must use more friends than I thought I should have needed.”<sup>98</sup> However, Donne had been close with the young man, and this poem is the longest of Donne’s memorial verses aside from the Anniversaries.

In the first part of the poem, Donne uses angels to illustrate the virtues of the young Lord Harrington. While traditional thought would suggest that because his life was so short, his virtues would be fewer than someone who lived a long time. Donne argues that this is not

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<sup>97</sup> John Donne, “Elegy on Prince Henry,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 236.

<sup>98</sup> John Donne letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, 1614.

the case, that because his life was so short, he packed an entire lifetime's worth of virtues into his twenty-two years. He compares how others understand Lord Harrington's life to the flight of an angel. "As when an angel down from heaven doth fly, / Our quick thought cannot keep him company."<sup>99</sup> Humans do not have the intuitive knowledge that angels have, and they cannot possibly understand how quickly the angel flies "To all 'twixt heaven and earth, sun, moon, and air."<sup>100</sup> As mere humans cannot understand how quickly angels fly between heaven and earth, they must settle for knowing simply that angels simply do fly those distances. So of course, humans cannot fully comprehend the range of all of the qualities of Lord Harrington's short life and how quickly he amassed all that virtue. Still, people can understand his life as a whole. Donne combines his angelic metaphor with a description of how people read. He argues that most people do not read syllable by syllable, or seek to spell out each word letter by letter as they read. Rather, men read each word as a whole. In this way people are able to understand all of Harrington's virtues by looking at the whole, "the compound, good," rather than seeking to understand all of the individual virtues that went into his life.<sup>101</sup> "For, they all virtue's paths in that pace tread, / As angels go, and know, and as men read."<sup>102</sup>

Donne uses classical imagery in the next section of the poem, referencing the ancient Roman tradition of honoring a victorious general with a ceremony called a triumph. While the reader would most likely expect to hear about how Harrington would be deserving of one of these highest honors, Donne goes in the opposite direction by listing the criteria a general would need to fulfill to receive a triumph and stating that Harrington actually fits none of the

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<sup>99</sup> John Donne, "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington, brother to the Countess of Bedford," in *John Donne: The Major Works*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 254.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

list. The second and final angelic reference comes when Donne rejects Harrington for a triumph. A triumph was supposed to be awarded only if the general's actions left Rome safe from outside threats, and Donne asserts that the earth is not safe from sin now that Harrington has died. In fact, without his protection, the earth is actually in more danger than it was before Harrington's death. "He was joined in commission / With tutelary angels, sent to every one."<sup>103</sup> Donne compares Harrington to a sort of guardian angel who has since left earth and left it more vulnerable to sin than before.

"A hymn to the Saints, and to Marquis Hamilton" is the last funeral tribute Donne wrote, and almost certainly the last poem he ever wrote.<sup>104</sup> The Marquis Hamilton died in 1625 after Donne had become Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and was an ordained Protestant minister, but the poem is unapologetically Catholic. Even the title comes across as slightly heretical to Anglicans, saints having been abolished from the heavenly hierarchy according to the Anglican Church. The poem begins with the Marquis' soul ascending to heaven, joining the ranks of the saints and the angels. The work is a hymn to the saints, but angels are mentioned alongside the saints, contributing to the theory of some scholars that angels replaced saints in the Anglican rhetoric. Donne suggests in this tribute that the Marquis will join the ranks of the angels in heaven either creating a new order of angels for himself or filling an empty space. Donne thus introduces a theological debate into this poem as well as controversial Catholic references. Referring to Aquinas' assertion that every angel has an individual rank, Donne asks that if the Marquis took up ranks with the angels would there not

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<sup>103</sup> Donne, "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington," 258.

<sup>104</sup> Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 466.

be one more in the heavenly hierarchy “for may not he / Be so, if every several angel be / A kind alone?”<sup>105</sup>

The rest of the poems follows a semi-traditional path of mourning the dead man and how he affected the world he left, but diverting into religious topics occasionally. This poem is one of the funeral elegies heaviest with religious imagery, which also becomes political at times. When referring to the flight of the soul from the body Donne compares it to the abolition of the monasteries by Henry VIII and other Protestant monarchs, “So fell our monasteries, in one instant grown, / Not to less houses, but, to heaps of stone.”<sup>106</sup> While the overall message of the poem is that what on earth is temporary, but heaven is forever (as argued in the “Second Anniversary”) there are some moments that would make a contemporary reader stop short at how the message comes across, such as the barely disguised political and social critiques.

Angelic imagery in the funeral tributes differs significantly from that in “Air and Angels” and “The Bracelet.” The poems of the funeral genre truly are in a category of their own, and they align more closely with Donne’s religious poems than with his love poems. While they do establish some elaborate conceits, the elegies and obsequies rely on religious imagery and hardly touch the concept of wealth or money. The funerary poems do deal with the soul and the emphasis is never on the physical appearance of the dead person. Donne does not make any mention of how the person looked when alive, except in “A hymn to the Saints and to Marquis Hamilton,” which only dismisses the unattractive form of Hamilton’s dead body as inconsequential in heaven. The Anniversaries both paint more negative portraits than readers of Donne’s religious poems would be used to.

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<sup>105</sup> John Donne, “A hymn to the Saints, and to Marquis Hamilton” in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 358-9.

<sup>106</sup> Donne, “A hymn to the Saints, and to Marquis Hamilton,” 359.

One of Donne's most notable patronesses was Lucy Harrington Russell, Countess of Bedford to whom some of his most famous verse letters are addressed. His first verse letter "To the Countess of Bedford," which begins and is more commonly known as "Reason is our soul's left hand," contains an excellent example of Donne's use of angelic imagery in praise poetry. This poem is not a love poem, in fact it is far from one. It is a very carefully crafted and specific patronage poem, Donne's ultimate goal being a position in Lucy's household or another form of compensation for his work. Lucy and Donne had a long relationship, a friendship that likely formed around 1607, and a literary relationship beginning in 1608, ending in 1611 when he left Lucy's service to travel abroad with Robert Drury. The patronage game was a complicated one. Artists hoping to be favored by the nobility had to strike a delicate balance of flattery and honesty, especially when the noble person presented the writer with verses he or she had written, as Lucy occasionally did. The nobleman or noblewoman could withdraw favor at any moment, such as Lucy's disapproval of Ben Jonson after Jonson wrote a disparaging poem about her friend Cecelia Bulstrode. Donne had met Lucy through his close friend Henry Goodyer, who often acted as messenger and delivered letters from Donne to Lucy. Some of Donne's letters to Goodyer were even meant to be shared with Lucy, written carefully to make it seem as if Donne were praising her with no inkling that she would ever be shown his writing.

"Reason is our soul's left hand" was likely written in 1608, before Lucy and Donne had even met, but this is what likely sparked their literary relationship. Donne uses this poem to tell Lucy all that he admires about her, which he found out about through their mutual friends. The work features a significant amount of religious imagery, praising Lucy's piety and intelligence, ending the poem with a call to action, a plea for patronage. Donne begins

the poem by likening Lucy to the divine, not simply to a saint or angel, though he does that later. “Reason is our soul’s left hand, Faith her right, / By these we reach divinity, that’s you.”<sup>107</sup> Like many poems celebrating monarchy at the time, Donne places Lucy at the head of her own religion, as if those who get to have a relationship with her have a relationship with a deity. Donne calls Lucy’s friends her “Saints... whom your election glorifies” meaning that just by being friends with her, they become better.<sup>108</sup> Already there is a mention of members of a holy order, the saints. Donne was still a Catholic at this point at his life as the poem was likely written in 1608, so it is no surprise that he is making reference to Catholic aspects of religion.

The poem continues to describe Lucy’s many positive attributes. Donne praises her for being loved by all and explains that no one denies that she is good. He also praises Lucy’s beauty and noble birth, which he calls “a balsamum” to keep her “fresh and new.”<sup>109</sup> Further, Lucy’s antidote for “what can be done or said” also contains learning, religion, and virtue, essentially making up the ideal woman.<sup>110</sup> Donne addresses this description to “you,” in line 30, which in this sense means a collective “you” and not singular. Those fitting the description he gives use all their traits as an antidote, but Lucy is different. In the next stanza Donne finally incorporates angelic imagery, and how he chooses to do so is very telling. While to others all these ideal traits are a medicine, they are Lucy’s food, “A diet fit for you.”<sup>111</sup> Because he is describing her as some sort of heavenly being, Lucy feeds off the good and virtuous traits she embodies, as angels do. He calls her: “The first good angel, since the

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<sup>107</sup> John Donne, “To the Countess of Bedford,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 151.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> John Donne, “To the Countess of Bedford,” 152.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

world's frame stood, / That ever did in woman's shape appear."<sup>112</sup> Not only is he referring to the belief that angels are traditionally male, but he insists that Lucy is the first human embodiment of angelic qualities, which would normally be formless.

Plenty of praise poems might use holy imagery such as this to flatter the patrons they are addressed to, but Donne takes his work a step farther, to get something he wants from Lucy. He uses angels' roles in Christian mythology as messengers to call Lucy to action as a female embodiment of an angel. Angels supposedly are able to travel back and forth between heaven and Earth to communicate between God and humans, so Donne tells Lucy to go "home" or back to heaven, and make "one life of two," or to combine her heavenly life with her earthly life.<sup>113</sup> Finally he begs: "For so God help me, I would not miss you there / For all the good which you can do me here."<sup>114</sup> Donne uses this angel metaphor to ask for patronage from Lucy, flattering her by attributing to her all the traits of an angel, but requesting that she live her life on earth. She would do more good for Donne by giving him material benefits on earth than staying by God's side where already he has a whole host of attending angels.

"To the Countess of Salisbury" is Donne's elaborate praise poem in hope to gain patronage from the Countess, Lady Catherine Howard. Written in 1614, this was Donne's final poem to a female patron, and one of his last to an aristocrat. Soon after this was written, Donne converted to Anglicanism and was ordained, relieving the need for him to pander to the aristocracy for money and political favors. In fact, Donne wrote very few poems at all after he was ordained, and all of his later works were religious.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, 277.



The poem begins with some familiar praise, and had Lady Catherine read either of the “Anniversaries” or any of Donne’s verse letters to Lucy, Countess of Bedford she would have recognized many of Donne’s compliments. The beginning and end praise the lady herself. Almost halfway through the poem, the work takes a turn and ends up focusing quite a bit on Donne’s previous patronesses, in order to placate both Lady Catherine and his former poetic subjects. Donne reuses many of the praises he lavished on Elizabeth Drury, albeit in a slightly less theatrical way. Like Elizabeth, the Countess of Salisbury has “come to repair / God’s book of creatures” once again referring to the decaying state of man and how one of the beautiful, good people who can save it.<sup>116</sup> Donne describes man as lacking ambition and having very few good qualities left. He complains that “Integrity, friendship and confidence, / (Cements of greatness) being vapoured hence” has led the world into corruption.<sup>117</sup> This corruption, as discussed in “An Anatomy of the World” has gone undiagnosed, not because the world is grieving too hard for the person being eulogized as the world’s savior, but because “none is fit / So much as to accuse, much less to mend it.”<sup>118</sup> Every man is suffering the same fate, and no one is worthy to fix human flaw. This makes up the first half of this patronage poem, and it is very near to what Donne wrote about Elizabeth Drury. Even in an era in which poems such as this followed a specific tradition, this sounds repetitive and even insincere. Donne nearly replicates one of his own works.

The poem turns at line 37, where Donne seems to rush to his own defense and explain the borrowed effect in the previous lines. He begins with an acknowledgement of his duplicated praise. “And if things like these, have been said by me / Of others; call not that

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<sup>116</sup> John Donne, “To the Countess of Salisbury,” in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 250.

<sup>117</sup> Donne, “To the Countess of Salisbury,” 251.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

idolatry.”<sup>119</sup> He acknowledges that he has lavished these same praises upon other women (simultaneously replicating a conceit he used in “Reason is our soul’s left hand” establishing his patroness as God of her own religion) and asks that the Countess not consider that false worship of another person. His next jump in reasoning is a clever defense of his own actions, by what might be described as a typical Donne device.

Donne explains that he had only praised the women who came before the Countess because he had never met the Countess, and he did not know that anything better or more beautiful could exist. He brings in a religious reference to the Garden of Eden, explaining that had God made man first and man had seen the beauties of the world in the order that they appeared he would have thought each one was more beautiful than the last. Donne explains that it took learning about and loving these previous women to fully appreciate the greatness of the Countess of Salisbury. Donne brilliantly tries his best to foster a brand new patronage relationship, while not completely severing ties with his previous patrons. Lucy, the Drurys, and other patrons, should they read this verse, would feel valued, and the Countess would not consider Donne’s praises insincere.

Donne does call the Countess angel outright in line 74, but the implications reach far beyond the typical angelic reference. “For as your fellow angels, so you do / Illustrate them who come to study you.”<sup>120</sup> It is Donne who comes to “study” or praise the Countess of Salisbury. “Illustrate” in this period meant illuminate, or shed light upon. The Countess, knowing that she is heavenly being, helps those who hope to praise her by illuminating herself, but considering that angels do not always take a physical form, that can be difficult. The brilliant angelic imagery at the very end of the poem expands on this idea. Having

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Donne, “To the Countess of Salisbury,” 252.

professed his love for his former employers and attempted to reconcile it with his very similar praises here, Donne turns again to praising the Countess of Salisbury. He begins with a classical reference to Homer, author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, whom he calls “The first whom we in histories do find / To have professed all arts.”<sup>121</sup> Donne makes a point to mention that according to myth, Homer was born blind and “lacked those eyes beasts have as well as we.”<sup>122</sup> Donne, however, gives Homer a different kind of eyes. Instead of being able to see what men see physically, Homer was given eyes “by which angels are seen and see.”<sup>123</sup> Since it was a common belief that angels had no form, to see angels was to see an invisible being. Donne uses this reference to Homer’s supernatural sight to praise the Countess of Salisbury in a number of ways. Donne humbles himself and admits that he, unlike Homer, was not given the ability to see angels by Fortune, who he claims, is also blind. These eyes are required “to see bright courts and you.”<sup>124</sup> It would take someone as blessed by heaven as Homer to see the Countess, bright courts being a reference to God’s heavenly courts of angels. However, Donne writes that by some miracle he is able to see the Countess of Salisbury, an angelic figure who should be invisible. The last couplet of the poem is dedicated to assuring the Countess that he has finally realized her goodness as an angel, and promises to cast away his “library” of other patronesses to focus on praising her.

“Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn” contains possibly the most literal use of both types of angel imagery in Donne’s secular poems. It is his earliest patronage poem, likely published in 1595. What marriage the poem celebrates is unknown, but it is suggestive of Donne’s ever-evolving poetic style. The language is beautifully crafted, but the imagery,

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

especially the angelic imagery is fairly simple for Donne's style. The complicated "The Bracelet" was likely published two years previous to this poem, in 1593, so the issue is not that Donne was not skilled enough to implement his usual elaborate imagery.

The "Epithalamion" describes the events of a wedding day, beginning at dawn when the bride awakes for the event, and ending when the couple consummate their marriage in their shared bed, each stanza ending with the refrain: "Today put on perfection, and a woman's name." The first stanza describes the bride beginning her day, and the second, which includes the mention of angels, describes her bridal party. The "Daughters of London" who wait on her are associated by this imagery with piety and wealth, an ideal wife to Donne and his contemporaries. The ladies in waiting are described as "You which are angels, yet still bring with you / Thousands of angels on your marriage days."<sup>125</sup> Not only are the women angels themselves, but they come from wealthy families who provide them with golden angels as dowries. Donne also encourages these bridesmaids to "Make her for love fit fuel, / As gay as Flora, and as rich as Ind; / So may she fair, rich, glad, 'and in nothing lame."<sup>126</sup> This imagery is combined with praises once again, and as in "To his Mistress Going to Bed" Donne never mentions the physical appearance of the bridesmaids or the bride. It is their wealth and their perceived piety that make them attractive marriage specimens. Even on a bride's wedding day, Donne does not consider her physical appearance important.

Angelic imagery is used in three different ways in each of these three patronage poems, and though they do not line up exactly with "Air and Angels" and "The Bracelet" their messages still deal with the importance of the intangible. "Reason is our soul's left hand" puts a woman at the head of her own religion and Donne "worships" her for her good

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<sup>125</sup> John Donne, "Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn" in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

breeding, wit, and piety, rather than for her beautiful physical appearance. Though perhaps more simply than its fellow patronage poems, “Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn” implies that a large dowry, a gay personality, and a love for God are all more important than beauty when looking for a wife. While perhaps the expectation is the opposite in poems written to please wealthy women, Donne basically ignores the physical appearance of the aristocrats he writes about and pays most attention to non-physical attributes.

Donne’s admiration for his patrons and patronesses is predicated not on beauty, but on wealth and spirituality. The dual use of “angels” in many of Donne’s poems is a sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious example of this. Donne dedicated himself to the patronage of several aristocratic women, and this theme of the importance of the intangible is present in his patronage poems as well. He respected the intelligence, influence, power, wealth, and religious involvement of these women over their physical beauty. He even goes as far as almost to insult the appearance of one of his patronesses, Magdalen Herbert. “The Autumnal,” thought by most scholars to be about her, remarks constantly on the subject’s wrinkles. “Call not these wrinkles, graves; if graves they were, / They were Love’s graves; for else he is nowhere.”<sup>127</sup> Donne assures his patroness that her wrinkles are not the “graves” that others may consider them to be, but to point out any such perceived flaws would have been considered an insult, or at the least, very bad form. To Donne, physical appearance and flaws are truly inconsequential.

As previously discussed, the patronage poems and the funeral elegies are two similar genres. While one would expect many similarities in how imagery is utilized in them, that is

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<sup>127</sup> John Donne, “The Autumnal” in *John Donne: The Major Works* ed. John Carey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63.

not the case. The patronage poems use far more conceits and are more concerned with the aspect of body and soul than the funeral elegies and obsequies.

There are other uses of angelic imagery in Donne's poems that have categories of their own. . In "Love's War" he uses the metaphor of countries going into battle against each other as a metaphor for a romantic relationship. Within this political metaphor, Donne also employs dual angelic imagery. Donne describes war with different countries, such as Flanders, Ireland, and Spain, as well as France, which is where the angel references come into play. Donne makes a reference to England's conversion to Protestantism and France's continuing Catholicism. "France in her lunatic giddiness did hate / Ever our men, yea and our God of late."<sup>128</sup> England and France had a long standing rivalry. Donne makes the reference to that strained relationship, as well as England's split from the Catholic church. Henry of Navarre, the French king had recently converted to Catholicism as well, putting the two countries further at odds. Donne does not hesitate to refer to France's duplicity when it comes to this matter. Using the monetary form of angel, Donne mentions that France "relies upon our angels well."<sup>129</sup> Despite the fact that the French and the English have long been in conflict, politically and religiously, France still relied on British money until the British ceased to provide it. "Love's War" is in a category by itself, the angel imagery being a political reference rather than anything to do with body and soul.

Ultimately, Donne does not use angelic imagery in his poetic works for any single purpose, as can also be said of his metaphors generally. Coins, maps, shadows and other images are constants in many of his poems, and none of them work for only one purpose. This of course does not mean that scholars are unable to explore Donne's thoughts, feelings,

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<sup>128</sup> John Donne, "Love's War," in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 56.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

and messages through his works and his use of these images. Quite the contrary, these multiple uses in multiple contexts give readers multiple perspectives on Donne's outlook. Being able to use angels and other images in so many different ways is only a small example of his immense skill with words, and one of the reasons he is considered the father of metaphysical poetry in England. The essential concerns of his poems always concern the body and soul duality. The relationship between the two and the value of each on its own fascinated him from his time as "Jack Donne" through his days as "Dr. Donne" of the Protestant church. These essential elements are nearly always present in Donne's poetry, even if sometimes in a small way.

While it is not possible to truly make an absolute rule about how Donne uses angelic imagery in his works, certain patterns do emerge, especially when examining the poetry by genre. The religious poems do not use extended metaphors or elaborate imagery, but state the message in factual terms. The funeral poems generally follow a similar structure, using fewer metaphors and instead using angels as examples to explain virtues or situations regarding the dead men and women he writes about.

As far as Donne's religious poetry goes, he does include some conflicting or heretical ideas in his secular works, but for the most part he does not directly contradict his own ideas about angels. He does contradict some of his own ideas, most notably between "Love's Alchemy" and "Love's Progress," but the theology remains the same. Most of Donne's contradictions are part of his own deep struggle with his two faiths, Catholicism and Protestantism. Poems such as "A hymn to the Saints and to Marquis Hamilton" may contradict Protestant doctrine, as they show that Donne never entirely left the faith he grew up with. The ideas that he uses regarding angels in his religious works guide his them and he

also abides by those rules in most of his secular poems. None of his ideas about angels were necessarily revolutionary or new, in fact most of them were taken directly from Aquinas, but they were compliant with both of Donne's faiths, which no doubt made his transition much easier when he converted.

Scholars focus heavily on Donne's theological ideas of angels, how closely he follows Thomas Aquinas' ideas, where he thinks angels reside in the heavenly hierarchy, and how his Catholic upbringing impacted how he thought about these messengers from God. Donne's theological standpoint is important, but considering how many of his secular poems have angelic imagery, more emphasis needs to be put on how he thought secularly about angels, both in the monetary sense and in the Christian sense. Those references must be evaluated for dual meaning at every opportunity.

This study still leaves many new questions remaining to be answered that cannot be addressed in this short space. One subject only lightly touched upon is the relationship between John Donne and the Countess of Bedford. While Donne's poems to Lucy follow some of the predetermined patterns of the time, there is no doubt that their relationship was fairly unique. Their exchange of ideas about religion, among other topics was distinct within the patronage tradition. Their relationship was in constant flux, changing with religious and political instabilities. They never lost their affection for each other, but there was an underlying tension in their interactions for some years. The exact nature of their relationship, and how it changed over time deserves further research.

Another interesting topic this study might inspire further study of is the similarities between Donne's patronage poetry and funeral elegies. He had a variety of patrons and wrote poems for several notable aristocrats. Despite the variety in his clientele, many themes



appear across his works in this genre of poetry. In some cases, language is repeated almost exactly, yet somehow Donne is able to make these poems unique to their patrons, but the similarities are an interesting phenomenon.

John Donne is one of the most interesting poets of the English Renaissance. Very few poets have his skill and complexity, and fewer still the complex inner life that informs so much of his poetry. He was a man who cared deeply about his faith and struggled mightily with the decisions he made, constantly hoping that God would forgive him if he made the wrong decision. Much of his poetry reflects that struggle: his personal holy sonnets, the love poems, and the poems he wrote for patrons. Scholars will never run out of questions about Donne, and doubtless the world will never completely understand this complicated man. If any conclusion can be drawn from this study, it is that for him angels were some of the most important, complex members of the heavenly hierarchy, and the coins were worth more than ten shillings. Angels, both heavenly and golden were a symbol of body and soul. The belief that angels had no form, and that the true value of coins was not in their often ugly physical form but in their intangible value, deeply affected Donne and his poetry.

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