The Sacred and Erotic Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi and John Donne: A Comparison

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To compare Rumi and Donne, two poets so wide apart in culture, religion, and language would not be an easy task at all. Due to the uniqueness of poems, it would even be challenging to draw a parallel between two poets from the same culture and language. This task will be doubly complicated in the case of Rumi and Donne. Yet, in spite of the apparent gap that exists between these two poets, the similarity of the subjects of their works as well as their poetic styles is so striking that it can hardly escape the notice of any reader with a fair amount of familiarity with them. After all, mankind and its relation to God, to universe, and to other human beings serves as the foundation of the literature of all peoples and cultures, and since human nature does not fundamentally vary, it should not be utterly surprising to find in Rumi and Donne the same store of subjects and themes and more or less the same way of putting them into words.

Both Rumi and Donne can be seen as thoroughly immersed in the poetic and philosophical traditions of their cultures and times, but they also demonstrate a high degree of appreciation for innovation. It is interesting to note that their innovations spread through all dimensions of their works because underlying their departure from the past is a desire to better grasp the intertwining of the self with the Divine. And it is this dialectic that informs their poetry at every level.

The intensive intellectual and highly metaphysical preoccupations of the minds of both poets find their way in both poets’ resorting to images, figurative devices, and language not commonly used by their predecessors. References to philosophy, logic, divinity, and religion abound in the works of both poets and make them highly complicated and difficult to understand. Yet, in spite of the highly sophisticated nature of the images in the works of both poets, one does also see frequent references to activities taking place in everyday life. The realistic
aspect of the poetry of both Rumi and Donne, in other words, owes much to the
allusions made to daily life; references to children, food, disease, sports and
games, travel and exploration, animals and a host of other domestic word
pictures are seen everywhere throughout the works of both poets. Most
specifically, Donne’s consciousness of the facts of life, his short, frank words in
this connection, and the details he pays attention to, are evidence of his acute
sense of realism. Rumi, on the other hand, brings realism to his work mostly
through the detailed and graphic tales of the Mathnawi.

In contrast to the intricate imagery as well as the extensive use of
complicated figures of speech as conceits in the poetry of Rumi and Donne one
cannot, in general, help but notice the employment of simple words and the
colloquial use of language. The general simplicity of diction and the use of
common speech make both poets remarkable literary figures in their respective
traditions.

It would be also interesting to note that both Rumi and Donne have been
criticized for bad grammar. The conspicuous grammatical deviations in their
poetry, however, demonstrate their disregard for form and literary convention,
a matter that will be addressed later in this article.

At the outset, it is important to know that both Rumi and Donne were
prominent literary figures whose influence remained long after they ceased to
live. Yet, in spite of their worldwide prominence, neither of the two poets
considered poetry as their priority. Rumi even goes so far as to explicitly voice
his contempt for the art of poetry by identifying it with “dark back clouds in the
sky,” while he talks about “the poet’s lofty other device” as “the full moon.”
Interestingly enough, to Donne, too — and even at the time of his “unruly
youth — poetry is only a means of conveying his different moods as a lover of
women and as a seeker of Truth. The following lines from “The Triple Foe”
are illuminating in this respect:

I am two fooles, I know,
For loving, and for saying so
In whining poetry;
But where’s that wiseman, that would not be l
If she would not dye?
Then as th’earth’s inward narrow crooked lanes
Do purge sea waters fretful salt away,
I thought, if I could draw my paines,
Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay.
Griefe, brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse. (Donne 7, 1.1-10)

The above lines clearly show the secondary position and the less important value
attached to poetry by Donne. The subordination of the art of composing poetry
to the poet’s priority becomes mostly clear, of course, in the latter half of his life
and in the collection of his divine poems. In short, the secondary value attached
to poetry by both Rumi and Donne results from both poets’ intellectual
preoccupation with the intensive desire to define the self and to find union with
the Divine. In the works of both poets, moreover, poetry becomes a means to
make philosophy palpable to those who either do not understand the language
of philosophy or else have no taste for it.

That Rumi and Donne were mystical poets, there is no doubt. Both were
lovers of Truth and their poetry reveals their passionate search for union with
the Divine. Love, in this way, becomes the central theme in the works of Rumi
and Donne. In my view, both were among the few poets who succeeded to write
genuinely passionate poems about love. Even a superficial look at the Mathnawi
and the Divan-e-Shams as well as the Songs and Sonnets and the Holy Sonnets reveals
the degree of both poets’ indebtedness to amorous subjects. Both Rumi and
Donne were, moreover, devoted clergymen and mystics. In mysticism, both
Christian and Islamic, the Love of God and the passionate relation of the
individual with God serve as the basis of the practice. Interestingly enough in
Persian/Islamic mysticism, mysticism is equated with love. Out of the
equivalence of love and mysticism in Persian devotional poetry as well as in
authentic Christian texts such as the Bible itself arises the allegorical treatment
of love as a physical relation between the lover and his Beloved. Rumi, from the
very beginning of his career as a mystic poet and Donne in the latter half of his,
have examined the relation between the seeker of Truth and the Beloved from
the erotic perspective. Rumi essentially owes his incorporation of erotic subjects
in the metaphysical context of his poetry to this allegorical bent of his mind as
well as to the long tradition set by his sufi-poet predecessors.

There are, of course, several other theories about the ontological question
of these stories in the Mathnawi which will be examined later in this paper. To
a certain degree these other more or less authentic reasons for the presence of
eroticism in Rumi’s work are what make the nature of his eroticism different
from that of Donne’s. John Donne, on the other hand, treats love from two
epistemologically different perspectives, of which only the second resembles
Rumi’s views. The effort of this paper would then be to elucidate the nature of
the similarities and differences in the combination of the erotic and the sacred in
the poetry of these two literary monarchs.

When Rumi set out to compose poetry he had already left behind the
period of intellectual unrest and metaphysical doubts. His initial encounter with
Shams-e-Tabarizi and the historic conversation that took place between them at the first moments of this encounter practically brought Rumi the peace of mind and the love of God which remained with him for the rest of his life. To Rumi, then, from the time of the first composition of his poetry it was evident that love was the only safe and secure way of leading the sufi to the Source of all love, a doctrine upheld by all sufis. Understandably enough, the Mathnawi opens with the famous poem, "The Song of Reed" in which the reed-pipe stands as a symbol of "the soul emptied of self and filled with Divine Spirit" (Nicholson 1950, 31):

Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations —
Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-pipe, my lament hath
caused man and woman to moan.
I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire.
Every one who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united
with it.
In every company I uttered my wailful notes, I consorted with the unhappy and
with them that rejoice.
Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets
from within me.
My secret is not far from my plaint, but ear and eye lack the light (whereby it
should be apprehended).
Body is not veiled from soul, nor soul from body; yet none is permitted to see the
soul.
This noise of the soul is fire, it is not wind: whose hath not this fire, may he be
naught!
'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in the wine.
(Nicholson 1968, 5, Book 1, 1-10)

For Rumi, as it can be read through the above allegorical lines, the love of God
is the point of departure. The opening poem is reasonably followed by a long poem narrating the story of a king falling in love with a maiden-servant already

in love with someone else. The significance of this narrative poem and a host of other similar stories in the Mathnawi is to elucidate the true nature of love as well as to differentiate between true and derivative love. In Rumi's philosophy God is the source of all love and "all things participate in God's Love, the motivating force of creation, so all things are lovers" (Chittick 195). Based on this philosophy Rumi attributes the attraction that exists between all phenomena in life to love. Rumi's philosophy, however, makes a distinction between the love and attraction between human beings and the attraction between all other creatures, inanimate and animate, including the angels. The differentiating quality of the attraction between human beings is that it is based on knowledge and, therefore, superior to all other kinds of love (Zarin-Koob 1985a, 495). Nevertheless, although completely valid, the love and attraction between human beings and all other animate and inanimate creatures derive from the Love of God.

In this respect and from the philosophical point of view of Rumi, earthly love, although derivative by nature, is a valid relationship and serves as a means of bridging the sufi to God. In other words, in Rumi's philosophy, the body is as important as the soul. He does, however, insist that the individual should not stop at the earthly level of love and should transcend it to experience True Love. Put briefly, Rumi does not consider earthly love as an obstacle in worshipping God. On the contrary, it is in the image of human beauty that sufis believe one can see the image of God. Based on this tenet of sufism and the long tradition of Persian mystical poetry, God in the works of Sufi poets is almost always portrayed as either a beautiful woman or a youthful man and the relation between the two is often alluded to in terms of the physical relation between a lover and his beloved. The following poem is a good example of how Rumi describes women in the Mathnawi:

The accursed Iblis said to the Creator, "I want a mighty snare for this hunt."
God showed him gold, silver, and herds of horses; "You can steal away people with these."
He said, "Marvelous," and his lips dropped
Down morosely; he became shrivelled and sour like a lemon.
Then God gave that ill-starred Satan gold and
Jewels from wonderful mines.
"Take these other snares, oh accursed one!" He said, "Give me more than this, oh Best of Helpers!"
He gave him sweet and rich foods, delicious Drinks, and many garments of silk.
He said, "Oh Lord, I need more help than this
So that I can tie them with a rope of palm-fiber
Then those who are drunk with thee, who are
Masculine and courageous, can break these bonds like men.
Through these snare and cords of self-will, Thy
men will be separated from the unmanly.
I want another snare, oh Sultan of the Throne —
A man-throwing snare, treacherous in deception."
God brought wine and music and placed them
Before him. Iblis smiled a bit and almost became happy.
Then he called out to God's eternal Attribute of
"Leading Astray"; "Stir up dust from the depths of
temptation's ocean!" ... 
So He showed him the beauty of woman,
Greater than the intellect and patience of men.
Iblis snapped his fingers and began to dance
With glee. "Give her to me at once — I have attained to my
Desire!"
When he saw those languorous eyes that agitate
The mind and the intellect,
Their cheeks' purity, that throws the heart's
Incense into fire,
The face, the mole, the eyebrow, the carnelian
Lips — God Himself seemed to shine forth from behind a
Delicate curtain.
He saw her coquetry and subtle movements as

Thus for Rumi as for all Persian Sufi poets, the exquisite features of a beautiful
woman are symbolic of the Beatitude Vision. Women, in Rumi's work, as Chittick
has observed, "manifest the divine Attributes of Beauty, Mercy, Gentleness, and
Kindness in a relatively direct manner within their outward forms" (Chittick
286).

In this respect the vision of the Beloved becomes "the true capital of love"
(Chittick 284). Moreover, "In the language of love, the Face pertains to union.
But the Beloved's tresses veil His Face and thus pertain to separation" (ibid.).
Once the Face is seen, the fusion of the lover and the Beloved can take place and
nothing can help the lover more in this regard than an embrace:

I am a brooklet, and you the water, and the kiss of the water
happens always on the lips of the brook.

From the water's kiss on the lip of the brook flowers and
greenery come into existence. (Schimmel D 754/7350)

Thus, according to Rumi, "flowers and greenery," explicitly the symbols of life
and the beauty of nature, are the direct outcome of the physical contact of the
brooklet (the lover) and the water (God). Or again in the following lines:

Give a kiss on your own face, tell the secret into your own ear,
Look at your own beauty, speak yourself your praise!
(Schimmel D 2148/22738)

Intoxication intensifies the passionate state of the lover and helps him
drown himself in the ocean of the beauty of the Beloved. Wine is just one of the
resources available to the lover that can help him reach the state of intoxication.
References to wine, the cup of wine, the cup-bearer, the tavern, and the drinking
companions of the lover are abundant not only throughout the Ma'navi and the
Divan-e Shams, but also in all Persian mystical literary texts. As it has already
been discussed, the symbolically erotic character of these images is, of course, not
new in Rumi and is deeply rooted in other classical Persian mystical texts.

Music is yet another intoxicating means of achieving union with the
Beloved. The reference to musical instruments in Rumi's works is, however, not
as simple as the recurrence of images pertaining to wine and wine-drinking.
Rumi often identifies the musical instrument with the lover and the musician or
the player of the musical instrument with the Beloved. Based on this analogy, the
life of the musical instrument would be in the hands of the musician and its
existence would, thus, entirely depend on whether the Beloved touches it or not.
The eroticism of the situation, of course, arises mainly from the fact that Rumi
insists on placing the reed-pipe on the lips of the beloved and the harp or the
rebeck on her lap (Schimmel 212, 213):

In the lap of your grace I am like the melodious harp,
Place the plectrum softer and more tenderly, so that you do not
weep my strings! (Schimmel D 1829/19015, 302/3294)

Or again:

I have surrendered my face like the tambourine(daf)
Strike hard strokes and give my face a neck-stroke! (Schimmel D 1914/20133)
Indeed, music was for Rumi an indispensable part of his mystical life. Rumi believed that music especially, when accompanied by dance, could better help the sufi empty himself of the self and be fused in the Divine. He is said to have established the structured whirling dance of the dervishes. Interestingly enough in the whirling dance of the dervishes each bodily movement has a specific symbolic meaning. Hence, according to Schimmel the clapping of hands connotes separation and union, the two crucial stages in the sufi path of Love (Schimmel 219). In a similar way whirling itself signifies monotheism, the conviction that towards whatever direction one turns one would always see God and nothing else. Jumping and stepping, likewise, symbolize the conquest of the ego and everything that exists besides God. Finally clapping is believed to derive from the satisfaction of having achieved union with God. It is only under such circumstances that it is permissible for the sufi to embrace a male partner during the whirling dance (Hakemi 149-51).

According to Schimmel, in Rumi’s poetry sensuality is yet another intoxicating means for the lover seeking union with the Beloved. Rumi believes that for the lover and the thief alike the night is very long:

Take the Leyla “Night” (ley) on your breast, O Majnun:
The night is the secret chamber of twihad, and the day idolatry (Sherk) and multiplicity.... (Schimmel D 947/9995)

The above lines imply that for Majnun the night is sacred because the lover can hold Leyla close to his breast. The separation of the lovers during the day likewise implies the profanity of the lover because of the obligation of attending to daily activities and, thus, being separated from the beloved. It is noteworthy that in the above lines Rumi has deliberately chosen Leyla as a pun to refer both to night and also to one of the most popular female-lover figures in Persian literature. The following lines are, yet, another example of the allegorical importance attached to sensuality in Rumi’s poetry:

It is fitting that I should not sleep at night, for secretly the
moon gives a kiss every night to whom who counts the stars.
(Schimmel D 97/1087)

The significance thus attached to the physical union of the lovers and the aptness of this central analogy owes much to one of the most fundamental tenets of sufism. According to Sufis, complete union with the Beloved results after the annihilation of the self; when there remains no distance between the lover and the beloved. The story of the separation and final union of a pair of lovers in the

Mathnavi is an allegorical narration by means of which Rumi elaborates on this significant stage of mysticism. The story concentrates on a pair of lovers who have not seen each other for a long time. After a long period of separation when the lover returns he is again forced to leave his beloved because he did not provide the right answer to her question inquiring about the identity of the visitor. In answer as to who had been knocking at her door the lover had answered: “It’s me.” To the beloved this answer had implied distance; distance that should not exist but existed between her and her lover. Upon hearing this answer, the beloved asks the lover to leave. A year later when the lover comes back again, this time more mature, the same question is put to him and he answers, “It’s you,” and he is let in.

The amorous and erotic nature of the stories in the Mathnavi and the poems of the Divan-Shams should, thus, be considered against the metaphysical contexts of the works. In other words, Rumi’s erotic poetry is an allegory by means of which he attempts to elucidate the intense mystical relation of the lover of Truth and God. Fundamental as this allegorical way of referring to the Beloved is, it is not the only reason why Rumi incorporates highly erotic anecdotes — as the story of “The Maid-Servant and the Donkey” — in his work. Different sorts of insults and the names of sexual organs as used by the lowly and uncultured layers of society appear throughout the Mathnavi. Rumi, it is essential to know, belonged to the Malamati-ye branch of sufism. The Malamati-ye believed in performing different sorts of obscene and even amoral things to be rebuked and condemned by the public. Practical annihilation of the self, they believed, would then follow the public condemnation by the people. The state of annihilation would, then, lead to complete union with God.

Rumi incorporates such stories in the Mathnavi also to move against the conventional norms of society and literary production. The close observation of literary conventions and the use of elevated language in poetry, Rumi believed, were more suitable to the purposes of secular and courtly poets. It is also worth mentioning that Rumi’s father, Bahā-ʾ Valad, one of the most popular preachers and a celebrated cleric of his time, had also used similar terminology in his sermons.

Fundamental to Rumi’s philosophy is the distinction that he makes between “form” and “meaning” (Chittick 19). The world and everything in it, according to the Mathnavi, corresponds to form. Ultimately, “meaning is that thing as it is known to God Himself. And since God is beyond any sort of multiplicity, in the last analysis the meaning of all things is God” (ibid.). As Chittick has observed, for Rumi form and meaning are inextricably connected, yet form is naught when compared to meaning: “form is shadow, meaning the
Sun.” From this general observation Rumi is said to have concluded that everything in the world of form should be dealt with in a harsh and undignified manner. Thus the incorporation of such erotic stories in the Mathnavi serve to illuminate the secondary and unrefined character of the world of form as compared to the elevated world of meaning.

Rumi had always believed that as a sufi and a preacher he should inform people of his valuable mystical convictions, and thought that erotic stories had a better pedagogical value than others in this regard. Besides, Rumi believed that these stories were highly realistic and deeply rooted in the consciousness of all people. At the same time it was only through highlighting the basic instinctive drives in human beings that Rumi could demonstrate his superior knowledge of human nature.

In his profound analytical study of Rumi’s works, Zarrin-Koob has added yet another theory to the above list. According to Zarrin-Koob, the pressure the clergy had put on people during the Middle Ages could not be tolerated by the sufis. Rumi is among the few clergymen who had revolted against jurisprudence in its strict sense as well as against the rigid doctrine of the Islamic law by basing his mystical approach on secular love, one of the manifestations of which is, of course, eroticism (Zarin-Koob 1985b, 385). After his encounter with Shams, Rumi had realized that one could gain proximity to God better through the heart than as the mind as it was always recommended by the theologians. Allegorical love stories and erotic narratives, he believed, could better reveal a relation thus based on love. Sufis had, moreover, a reputation for being immoral during Rumi’s time. Part of this reputation was due to the homosexual character of the gatherings of young men and sufis in their mystical assemblies (ibid.). By highlighting erotic stories in the Mathnavi, it is commonly believed that Rumi wanted to warn the sufis of the rumors surrounding them.

Understandably enough and although both a celebrated poet and a true seeker of Reality, the explicit erotic character of John Donne’s secular and divine poetry resembles that of Rumi’s only on certain levels. Donne’s life and literary career, it is important to remember, is divided into two essentially different periods. Based on this dichotomy, two different types of eroticism can be identified in Donne’s works. The Songs and Sonnets is a collection of love poems which belongs to the first half of Donne’s life in which one sees more or less a record of the love experiences of the poet. At the same time and based on these love experiences, Donne expresses his attitude towards women in general and several of his female acquaintances in particular. This attitude, understandably enough, ranges from bitter cynicism to sincere admiration and in both cases sexual imagery and erotic language become the means of expressing this attitude.

Thus, the erotic character of the Songs and Sonnets barely owes anything to mysticism and to the relation of the speaker of the poems to the Divine. The passion seen in these poems highlights “love as an actual, immediate experience in all its moods” (Grierson 23). It would, therefore, be quite safe to say that the eroticism that arises from the Songs and Sonnets is unlike the eroticism that is seen in the Mathnavi and the Divan-e Shams. Nevertheless, even in this gathering of amorous poems love and eroticism are dealt with from at least three different perspectives. Some poems like “The Flea” belong most certainly to the “unruly” period of Jack Donne’s life — as he had himself described this period of his life — and celebrate pure appetite in the relation between a man and a woman:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this
How little that which thou deny’st me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea out two bloods mingled be;
Thou know’st that this cannot be said
A sin nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do. (Donne 22, 1.1-9)

And thus he concludes in the final couplet:

Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me,
Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee. (Donne 23, 1.26-28)

The explicit note of seduction in this poem and its erotic character arise from the speaker’s reasoning with his presumably coy mistress to yield to him. As stated by Roy Roussel, “The Flea” “[on] its most basic level, ... dramatizes the man’s attempt to voice his desire forcefully and demand a complementary response from the woman” (23). The poem, undeniably, has one central layer of meaning and is, therefore, quite different from the kind of eroticism explicit in Rumi’s works.

A similar theme is central to “The Indifferent,” “a poem celebrating, it would seem, the brash erotic adventurism of the young male lover, a man who is an expert on women and who can joke about them in a self-satisfied manner” (Marotti 76):

I can love both faire and browne,
Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betrays,
Her who loves lonenesse best, and her who maskes and plaies,
    Her whom the country form'd, and whom the town,
Her who believes, and her who tries,
    Her who still weepes with spungie eyes,
And her who is dry corke, and never cries;
I can love her, and her, and you and you,
I can love any, so she be not true. (Donne 4, l.1-9)

Donne was born, however, a Roman Catholic and was brought up in a family that had faced severe problems in keeping up their faith. Because of his religious upbringing, he could not rid his mind easily of the inherent conflict that existed between the demands of the body and the soul in Catholicism. The conflict between the platonic notion of love and the physical aspect of it, then, becomes the subject of another set of the love poems like “The Ecstasy.” The controversy sounds initially settled in the first half of the poem where Donne seems to have embraced the platonic doctrine of love:

If any, so by love refined
    That he souls' language understood,
And by good love were grown all mind,
    Within convenient distance stood;

He (though he knew not which soul spake,
    Because both meant, both spake the same)
Might thence a new concoction take,
    And part far purer than he came.

This Ecstasy doth unperplex,
    We said, and tell us what we love;
We see by this it was not sex;
    We see we saw not what did move: (Donne 30, l.21-33)

Yet the dilemma is only superficially resolved. According to Grierson, Donne had “consciously or unconsciously [...] set over against the abstract idealism ... of the Middle Ages” (32) and it remained for him to express the antithesis to the initial stage of the problem in the second part and conclusion of the poem:

To our bodies turn we then, that so
    Weak men on love revealed may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
    But yet the body is his book.

And if some lover, such as we,
    Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
    Small change, when we're to bodies gone. (Donne 31, l.69-76)

As the above lines clearly argue, the poet has apparently fallen short of believing in a platonic concept of love only, and has come to consider the body an indispensable part in the religion of love. Although a host of critics have argued for and against the mystical meaning implied by “The Ecstasy,” to my knowledge no one has ever refuted its expression of the essential conflict that exists between platonic and physical love in the mind of the poet. “The Ecstasy,” no doubt, is a complicated poem and, according to Joan Bennett, there are at least three different ways of examining the relation between the soul and the body in this poem:

    The Manichean view that the body is the work of the Devil; the materialist view
    that “explains all physical processes by physical and chemical changes in the nervous
    system” and so makes the soul non-existent; and the orthodox Christian view that
    the body and the soul are both from God and therefore both good. (Bennett 169-70)

Indeed, as aptly highlighted by Elaine Scarry, throughout his sermons and speeches Donne had often insisted on:

    The obligation to touch the human body, whether acutely alive or newly dead, with
    generosity and fierce decency; and what is most remarkable and perhaps also most
    moving about this insistence is that he locates the precedent for the generous
    reflexes of the hand in what he identifies as the willful materialism of the Judeo-
    Christian God. God, says Donne, has not only repeatedly “dignified” and
    “crowned” the human body, but (invoking the word that becomes nearly electric
    in its ethical resonance) “associated” himself with it: he created the body in His
    own person; he took it as his own in the person of Jesus; he inhabits it in the person
    of the Holy Ghost. (Scarry 70)

Clay Hunt’s scholarly observation in this regard is also quite illuminating. Donne, writes Hunt,

    is writing against the background of the general Debate between the body and the
    soul which was the dominant intellectual issue... The two most sharply opposed
    points of view in this debate can be roughly identified, in their literary
    manifestation with the Ovidian and the Platonic traditions of Elizabethan love
    poetry. (187)
As Fatima Mernissi has aptly observed, however, “the Christian concept of the individual as tragically torn between two poles — good and evil, flesh and spirit, instinct and reason — is very different from the Muslim concept” (1). Islam, Mernissi concludes, has a more sophisticated theory of the instincts... It views the raw instinct as energy. The energy of instincts is pure in the sense that it has no connotation of good or bad... Therefore, in the Muslim order it is not necessary for the individual to eradicate his instincts or to control them for the sake of control itself, but he must use them according to the demands of the religious law. (Ibid.)

Based on this doctrine and bearing in mind that for Rumi the conflict between the flesh and the spirit did not exist, the incompatibility between the eroticism present in this group of Donne’s amorous poems and Rumi’s erotic poetry is clarified. It can, however, hardly escape the mind of the reader of the poetry of Donne and Rumi that at this stage Donne seems to have reached the conviction Rumi had effortlessly believed in from the very beginning, the conviction in which love is looked upon as a passion in which “body and soul alike have their part and of which there is no reason to repent” (Grierson 33).

In the next group of the Songs and Sonnets love is approached from a totally different perspective. These poems deal neither with the seductively erotic character of love nor with the conflict within the mind of the poet in terms of the physical and platonic aspects of love. In a poem like “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”, for instance, one can clearly see the glorification of virtuous love, the kind of love that can exist between a true couple; between the poet and his adored wife:

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
These things which elemented it.

But we, by a love so much refined
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss. (Donne 29, 1.13-20)

“In love of his wife” Donne is said to have “found the meaning and the infinite value of love” (Grierson 33). The implicit passion in these lines, therefore, can hardly be categorized as erotic. On the contrary, the dominant note of the poem is a “justification of love as natural in the human heart the meaning and end of which is marriage” (Ibid. 32).

In a similar way in “The Undertaking” and “The Relique,” “a Platonic Lover proclaims that love of virtue in a woman is superior to carnal love and, like the Hedonists, admits of no possible blending of the two” (Pinka 66):

First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why,
Difference of sex no more we knew,
Than our Guardian Angells doe;
Coming and going, wee
Perchance might kisse, but not between those meales;
Our hands ne'r toucht the scales,
Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free:
These miracles wee did, but now alas,
All measure, and all language, I should passe,
Should I tell what a miracle shee was. (Donne 38, “The Relique” 1.23-33)

It is, however, in the second period of his life and after taking holy orders and becoming the dean of St. Paul’s that the nature of Donne’s poetry becomes entirely sacred. In these poems — as contrasted with the love poems — Donne exclusively deals with God and his relation to Him. Nevertheless, some scholars such as Donne’s celebrated critic, Helen Gardner, believe that even at this stage Donne was struggling to establish a stable relation with God. Donne’s divine poems, writes Gardner, “are the product of conflict between his will and his temperament” (1962b, 135). In other words, the conviction of the mystical basis of religion and the genuine love between Donne and God was not as sudden as it was with Rumi. Donne’s discovery of the true nature of the relation between God and himself was slow and gradual. This evolutionary process can be seen not only in the second part of Donne’s literary career but also as early as the time of the composition of the love poems. The critics, moreover, almost unanimously agree that the structure of the divine poems as well as the two Anniversaries and even some of the love poems is based on the “Spiritual Exercises” of St. Ignatius Loyola, any corresponding practice to which is barely present in any of Rumi’s poems. Nevertheless, despite the highly spiritual atmosphere of these poems, the employment of sexual imagery in them is highly conspicuous. Donne’s Holy Sonnet 10 is illuminating in this respect:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit You, but Oh, to no end!
Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captivated, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved again,
But am betrothed unto Your enemy:
Divorce me, unite or break that knot again,
Take me to You, unite or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me. For I,
Except You enchant me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me. (Donne 86)

As we saw in the first part of this discussion the metaphor likening the passionate relation between the individual and God to the erotic relation of a pair of lovers is not considered to be a strange and uncommon comparison in Persian mystical literature and, most certainly not in Rumi's sacred poems. According to Knox, "the traditions of Christian mysticism [too] allow such symbolism of ravishment as a kind of 'as if'" (Parish 256). Likewise, the image of Christ as lover and bridegroom can be seen in these group of poems as an allegory for the mystical relation of the individual and God.

It is, nevertheless, in poems like "Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed" that the erotic character of the poem and the convergence of the sacred and the erotic become most conspicuous. Thus, Hunt observes that in this elegy: "Donne launches into an intricate and detailed analogy between the ecstatic physical consummation of this *affaire de corps* and the consummation of a purely spiritual love in the religious ecstasy of the Beatific Vision" (190). It is, undeniably, in the employment of eroticism in the service of mysticism in this poem as well as in some of the holy sonnets and the satires2 that Donne's method comes closest to that of Rumi's. A quick look at the following lines of the elegy reveals the remarkable similarity of the central image of the poem to the images in Rumi's poetry examined earlier in this paper:

Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,
As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be
To taste whole joys. (Donne 55, 1.33-36)

Closely connected to this discussion and based on the following lines, it would not be altogether wrong to conclude that from Donne's perspective women's beauty is a means of guiding the seeker of Truth to Love:

Come, madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
Until labor, I in labor lie.
The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,
Is tired with standing though he never fight.
Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glistering,
But a far fairer world encompassing. (Donne 54-55, 1.1-6)

Or again:

Gems which you women use
Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,
That when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem
His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them. (Donne 55, 1.36-39)

The central analogy of identifying the beauty of women with the Attributes of the Beloved was also central to Rumi's poetry. A specific branch of sufis called Holmamiyan — named after the founder of the school, Abu-Holman-e Dameshghi — worshipped the beauty of women and young men as manifestations of Divine beauty. According to historical texts of mysticism, these mystics used to kneel down in front of beautiful women or men instantly upon seeing them. Although Rumi is said not to have completely agreed with their doctrines, he had apparently shown intense interest in this tenet, and the central imagery of beautiful women in his poems is a good proof of this claim. Thus, Donne too, concludes:

Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made
For lay-men, are all women thus arrayed;
Themselves are mystic books, which only we
(Whom their imputed grace will dignify)
Must see revealed. (Donne 55, 1.42-44)

For Donne too women are examples of mystical essence which can help man direct his thoughts to the essence of God (Hunt 194). The emphasis here, of course, is on the transcendence of True beauty over the derivative one, a topic also central to Rumi's philosophy.

2 Satire III is an appropriate example in this respect.
In the discussion of the erotic character of the poetry of Rumi and Donne, the implicit note of homosexuality is also worthy of consideration. According to Klavitter, where the subject of the poems is the infidelity and unfaithfulness of the fair sex, the addressees in some of the Donne’s love poems are undeniably men (128):

If thou be’st born to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand days and nights,
Till age snow white hairs on thee,
Thou, when thou return’st, wilt tell me
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And swear
Nowhere
Lives a woman true, and fair.

If thou findst one, let me know,
Such a pilgrimage were sweet.
Yet do not; I would not go,
Though at next door we might meet;
Though she were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
Yet she
Will be
False, ere I come, to two, or three. (Donne 2, “Song” l.10-27)

The note of homosexuality is most evident, however, in poems like “The Blossom” where the poet explicitly states his desire to “be with men.” Thus, in the concluding stanza of the poem and after elaborating on the fickleness of the fair sex the poet says:

Meet me at London, then,
Twenty days hence, and thou shalt see
Me fresher, and more fat, by being with men,
Than if I had stayed still with her and thee. (Donne 36, l.34-37)

Though the addressee in this poem is neither a man nor a woman but the speaker’s heart, the subject of the lines is, most definitely, the faithlessness of women and, according to Donne, enough reason for the poet to prefer men over them.

Charges of homosexuality against Rumi are both due to his life style — as a Sufi — and the recurrence of images of beautiful young men in some of his most erotic poems. Rumi’s Takhallus, being the very name of his much loved friend, Shams-e Tabrizi is yet another source of this accusation:

Shams-e Tabrizi’s footsteps were above souls’ heads
Don’t put your feet but rather your head where his footsteps were
(Rumi 824, Ghazal 2196, l.10, my translation)

As mystics and poets Rumi and Donne have based their works on love. The common sexual imagery and the uncommon erotic language in the religious poetry of both poets are metaphors for the elucidation of the nature of the passionate relation of the lover of Truth and Truth. Interestingly enough, this allegorical treatment of love, mostly manifesting itself in the form of erotic imagery is neither uncommon in Islamic mysticism nor in its Christian counterpart. This is the basic point of resemblance in the convergence of the erotic and the sacred in the works of both poets. Both Rumi and Donne were, moreover, writing against the dominant restrictive atmosphere of their times. Part of the peculiarity of the stories and poems in their works is, thus, due to their resistance to conform to these restrictive laws. Both poets were also accused to have had feelings for the members of their own sex. There are, however, certain other singular factors which determine the unique character of the sacred and erotic poems of each individual poet. Of these is, for example, the fact that Rumi belonged to the Malamatiye school of mysticism. John Donne’s mind, on the other hand, was obsessed with resolving the conflict inherent in Catholicism between the demands of the body and the soul in the love relation between a man and a woman.

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3 Rumi’s samas gatherings as well as the long hours be spent alone with Shams. Rumi’s younger son, Alaeddin Muhammad is said to have twice plotted against Shams’ life for this very reason.
4 The pen name of the poet appearing usually in the last line of ghazal or Persian sonnet.
Women Writers and Cinematic Texts:

Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and A. S. Byatt

SUZETTE HENKE

Tenured professors who have been teaching modern literature for a decade or more often face a peculiar and unexpected pedagogical challenge. How is it possible to remain fresh, intelligent, enthusiastic, and innovative when presenting course materials that have all but ossified in the 20th-century canon? Where does one begin? And how can one try to remember those mellow days of September, when it was still possible to imagine the tabula rasa represented by a callow undergraduate’s struggle with innovative and experimental texts? In matters of love, pedagogy, and culinary delight, one must constantly seek strategies to start, de novo, each time.

Northcote House Publishers, in association with the British Council, have provided an answer to this conundrum in the form of a series of critical texts on Writers and Their Work, with Isobel Armstrong serving as general editor, and Bryan Loughrey as advisory editor. The general format of the series is surprisingly helpful in the simplicity of its configuration. Each volume begins with a short biographical outline and concludes with a select bibliography. In between the preface and postscript of this conventional frame, individual scholars provide informative introductions to prominent writers. Or, at least, that’s the general idea.

Carol Watts’s critical study of Dorothy Richardson is especially noteworthy, insofar as it attempts to restore to a more prominent place in the canon the

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