Crafting Transcendence: Mystery and Poetic Authority in Early Modern England

By

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Introduction

In the *peroration* of his *Defence of Poesy* (1595), Sir Philip Sidney harnesses the language of enchantment in order to compel readers to affirm the mystical power of poetic art. "I conjure you all," he intones,

> that have had the evil luck to read this ink-wasting toy of mine, even in the name of the nine Muses, no more to scorn the sacred mysteries of poesy; no more to laugh at the name of poets, as though they were the next inheritors to fools;…[but] to believe, with me, that there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused; to believe with Landino, that they are so beloved of the gods that whatsoever they write proceeds of a divine fury; lastly, to believe themselves, when they tell you they will make you immortal by their verses.[1]

With his assertion that poets give voice to divinely inspired mysteries, Sidney lays claim to the godlike powers attributed to poets by Florentine Neoplatonists such as Cristofero Landino, Marsilio Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola. Following Plato's *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, as well as those texts' Neoplatonic interpreters, these writers characterized poets as mages whose language channels and conceals deep cosmological mysteries. Sidney alludes to this tradition at various points throughout the *Defence*, first in an approving description of the poet as a *vates*, or "a diviner, forseer, or prophet," and secondly in a passage claiming that ancient philosophers learned "the right discerning true points of knowledge" from "the sweet mysteries of poetry," taught with a "divine delightfulness."[2] His *peroration* amplifies the rhetorical force of this

[1] Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or, The Defence of Poesy)*, 3rd ed., ed. R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 116.

[2] Ibid., 84 and 106.

argument as Sidney speaks *as* a magus, attempting to cast a spell on his audience in order to engender their belief in poetry as a divine and mysterious craft.

However, Sidney's "conjuration" simultaneously serves a quite different purpose: to reveal that poets are liars and, therefore, not necessarily privy to mysteries at all. Previously in the *Defence*, he counters the accusation that poetic fictions are falsehoods by arguing, famously, that the poet "nothing affirms and therefore never lieth." He follows this assertion by reassuring readers that "The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes."[3] Yet in his *peroration* he does just this. The moment at which Sidney most vehemently defends poetry is also the moment at which he most viciously undercuts its powers, suggesting that the claims poets make for their work cannot be trusted. Poets may speak mysteries, but that might just as easily use seductive rhetoric to create illusions of mysteries that do not exist. The art may well be what its detractors suggest – a dishonest, crafty mystery rather than a mystical craft.

Scholars have interpret Sidney's *peroration* in a variety of ways. Some have viewed it as a sincere declaration of poetry's divine nature, others as a winking nod to the skeptical reader, and still others as an attempt to distance poetry from magic while claiming an aesthetic instrumentality for their art.[4] Whatever the intention behind his wily conjuring, it is my belief that Sidney's ambiguous treatment of mystical poetic theory registers a conflict central not only to *The Defence of Poesy*, but to early modern England as a whole. *"*Crafting Transcendence: Mystery and Poetic Authority in Early Modern England" tells the story of this conflict, or, rather,

[3] Ibid., 103.

[4] For examples of these respective interpretations, see Robert Kilgore, "Poets, Critics, and the Redemption of Poesy: Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* and Metrical Psalms," in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Mary Arshagouni Papazian, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2008), 108-31; Ronald Levao, *Renaissance Minds and Their Fictions: Cusanus, Sidney, Shakespeare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); and Genevieve Guenther, *Magical Imaginations: Instrumental Aesthetics in the English Renaissance* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

set of conflicts, which centered on the elusive notion of mystery. A term that straddled the line between the human and the divine, hidden truth and ritual practice, and knowledge made and revealed, mystery was central to Reformation controversies and natural philosophical debates over method. Poetic craft, I contend, was deeply implicated in these controversies. As an art perceived to mediate, mystery-like, between the divine and human realms, poetry was believed to provide special access to mysteries of nature and divinity. However, even as early moderns employed allegory, metaphor, and other poetic technologies to apprehend these mysteries, they came to link "false mysteries" with the poetic imagination. Protestants decried the mysteries of the Catholic mass as playacting, while Catholics dismissed Protestant interpretations of scriptural mysteries as the products of fancy. Meanwhile, natural philosophers attacked one another's models of nature's mysteries by derisively labeling them "poetical."

While poetry's divine artifice promised to confer knowledge and experience of the unknown, its connection to human fantasy threatened to create devilish illusions, false mysteries that could lead individuals into error and sin. I argue that as early modern thinkers sought to "prove" which mysteries were authentic and which were merely counterfeit, poetry and poetic ways of knowing came to be viewed in the most polarized of terms, as purveyors of ultimate truth and ultimate falsehood. The writers featured in my dissertation – the poet Ben Jonson, poet-divine John Donne, and natural philosopher Thomas Browne – all intervened in their culture's mystery wars, attempting to elucidate poetry's connection to mysteries of nature and divinity. Working through literary forms of agonistic drama, lyric and homiletic assays, and paradoxical prose, they forged divergent and at time frustratingly contradictory responses to the question of whether it is possible to craft transcendence. In charting these writers' efforts to define and defend the mysteries of their art, my project illuminates a concept central to early modern

poetics, religion, and science, while re-contextualizing the period's ambiguous responses to poetry itself. With powers of transformation and revelation that were feared as much as revered, poetry stood, I show, as man's best aid and greatest enemy in the pursuit of truth.

Mystery played a significant and versatile role in early modern English poetic theory, serving to connect poetry variously to hidden knowledge, the holy sacraments, and guild lore. In addition to Sidney's (admittedly ambiguous) statements on poetic mystery in the *Defence*, George Puttenham's *Art of English Poetry* also asserts the importance of mystery to English poetics. Identifying poets as "the first priests and ministers of the holy mysteries," Puttenham suggests that poetry is a sacramental art, one that not only speaks mysteries, but also administers them.[5] More than Sidney, who claims, however ironically, that the poet's knowledge of mysteries springs from divine inspiration, Puttenham associates this knowledge with the poet's artisanal facility with speech, a faculty that is itself "artificial and made by man." Since "poets were also from the beginning the best persuaders and their eloquence the first rhetoric of the world," he reasons, "it became that the high mysteries of the gods should be revealed and taught, by a manner of utterance and language of extraordinary phrase."[6] Poets were chosen to reveal mysteries, in other words, because their language is the most persuasive, or efficacious, of all humankind.

In relating poetic mystery to human artifice, Puttenham also hints at the craft's potential connection to the mysteries of guilds and guild knowledge. Richard Mulcaster, the great humanist schoolmaster, makes this association explicit in his pedagogical treatise *Positions Concerning the Training up of Children* (1581), in which he writes that painting is "so gallant a

[5] George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poetry*, eds. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 97.

[6] Ibid., 98.

misterie….so neare a cosen to the fairest writing, whose cradlefellow it is."[7] In an even earlier reference to poetry as a guild mystery, Henry Howard's "Excellent Epitaph of Sir Thomas Wyatt" (published 1545) extols the deceased poet as "A Head, where wisdom mysteries dyd frame / Whose hammers beat styll in that lyuely brayne / As on a styth, where some worke of fame / Was daily wrought, to turn to Brytayns gain."[8] When it came to speaking mysteries, the early modern English poet was thus viewed as both potter and vessel. His efficacious utterance was seen to derive from his maker's knowledge of poetic craft as well as from his prophetic capacity, which opened him to divine inspiration. These ideas intersected in two common early modern images of the poet: the Neoplatonist magus, who manipulates the material and spiritual cosmos through verbal art, and the craftsman-priest whose creations are infused with a sacramental efficacy.

The connection between poetry and mystery became so commonplace in the early modern period that some writers defined "poetry" in terms of its revelation of mystery alone. In the *Anatomy of Absurdity*, Thomas Nashe defends the inclusion of prose fiction within the category of poetry, musing "whether ryming be Poetry, let the indifferent Reader diuine, what deepe misterie can be placed vnder plodding meter."[9] Neoplatonist Henry Reynolds shows a similar disregard for literary form in his theoretical treatise *Mythomystes*, which defines poetry as writing that expresses "the secreter Mysteries…of most high diuinity" and "the mysteries and

[7] Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training up of Children*, (London: 1581).

[8] Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, "A Third Tribute to Wyatt," in *The Poems of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey*, ed. Frederick Morgan Padelford (New York: Haskell House, 1966), 5-8.

[9] Thomas Nashe, *The Anatomy of Absurdity*, in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Robert McKerrow (London: 1904), 26.

hidden properties of Nature."[10] Reynolds goes so far as to suggest that natural philosophers should be considered poets, since their prose seeks to ascertain and encode nature's mysteries. As we will see, this idea was of some consequence to thinkers such as Thomas Browne.

While poetry's ability to access mysteries is lauded by these writers, most of whom were poets themselves, the relationship between the two grew decidedly more vexed over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as participants in religious and natural philosophical disputes came to code false mysteries as fictive or poetic. As a result, mystery occupied a much more ambivalent position in early modern poetics than did the complementary concept of wonder, a cognitive passion similarly associated with artisanal enchantment and the revelation of hidden knowledge. By activating human curiosity about natural and preternatural phenomena, wonder, as numerous scholars have shown, provoked early modern poets and natural philosophers alike to create new knowledge through art.[11] Artifice proved a liability, however, when it came to the revelation of mystery, a concept associated strongly with sacramentality and transcendent truth. While poetic craft promised to make sacred mysteries accessible to the human understanding, it also threatened to warp supernatural truth and rituals to fit the desires of human fantasy. It therefore proved a volatile tool for navigating Reformation and natural philosophical debates regarding the mysteries of doctrine, sacrament, and nature.

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[10] Henry Reynolds, *Mythomystes*, *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 1, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 161-62.

[11] Cf. Among many studies of wonder in early modern Europe, see Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,) 1992; Peter G. Platt, ed., *Wonders, Marvels, and Monsters in Early Modern Culture* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999); Mary B. Campbell, *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Lorraine Daston and Kathleen Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2001). On poetic craft and early modern knowledge production, see Michael Witmore, *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580-1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Henry S. Turner, *The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts 1580-1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Despite its central, albeit troubled place in early modern poetics, mystery has received scant attention from scholars of English literature, and what little it has received has suggested that poetry's relationship to mystery was unequivocally celebrated in early modernity. Significantly, however, influential accounts of mystery highlight tensions within the concept that, as I will show, fueled early modern religious, scientific, and poetic debates. Edgar Wind's seminal *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958) demonstrates that mystery carries tandem associations with hidden knowledge and ritual experience, connotations that often overlap in early modern uses of the term.[12] Wind shows that classical and Renaissance Neoplatonists perceived an analogical connection between *mystères cultuels*, the initiation rituals of ancient Greece, and *mystères littéraires*, philosophical and theological truths believed to be hidden beneath the surface of ancient poetic texts. Thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Edmund Spenser thus came to perceive the process of allegorical interpretation as an initiation rite open only to the purest and wisest of readers.

D. J. Gordon likewise elucidates mystery's dual associations with knowledge and ritual in his essays on the works of Ben Jonson, Inigo Jones, and George Chapman, which tease out the intricate relations between verbal and visual art, Christian Neoplatonism, pagan myth, and the mysteries of state in Stuart iconography.[13] While observing that mystery is a point of intersection for materiality and spirituality, contemplation and action, and divine truth and human symbol, neither Wind nor Gordon recognizes the degree to which these tensions exacerbated crucial early modern cultural conflicts, from Reformation arguments about the relative prioritization of sacramental and scriptural mysteries to the question of whether sacred mysteries are revealed by

[12] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).

[13] D. J. Gordon, *The Renaissance Imagination*, ed. Stephen Orgel, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

the natural world. Consequently, they do not acknowledge the role poetry plays in these controversies, which, taken together, amounted to an unofficial public debate about the use-value of poetic craft.

Beyond these foundational studies, mystery has largely appeared as a secondary or tertiary concern in works devoted to other topics: allegory, the occult arts, literary labor, and sacramental theology. Don Cameron Allen, for example, shows how early modern curiosity about the mysteries of an ur-theology fueled allegorical exegetical practices in the period, while Gordon Teskey reflects on the importance of mystery to allegory's veiled political speech.[14] Frances Yates's research shows that mystery was central to the lexicon of Renaissance occult and hermetic literature.[15] Laurie Ellinghausen, writing about labor and authorship, observes that poetry is figured as a guild mystery in the works of certain English poets.[16] These and similar studies reveal the structural importance of mysteries accessed through poetic forms of signification to central sites of spiritual, intellectual, and religious authority in early modern England. Yet because mystery is not their primary focus, they do not explore the ambiguity surrounding the concept and its interconnection with poetic art.

A potential exception to this rule can be found in the numerous recent studies of early modern sacramental poetics: Theresa di Pasquale's *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne*, Robert Whalen's *The Poetry of Immanence: Sacrament in Donne and Herbert*, Regina Schwartz's *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left*

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[14] Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970); Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), esp. 56-76 and 122-47.

[15] See Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (Oxford: Routledge Classics, 2005); *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (Oxford: Routledge Classics, 2013); and *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Oxford: Routledge Classics, 2014).

[16] Laurie Ellinghausen, *Labour and Writing in Early Modern England, 1567-1667* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008).

the World, Ryan Netzley's *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry*, Sophie Read's *Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination in Early Modern England*, and Kimberly Johnson's, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England*.[17] With the exception of Schwartz's *Sacramental Poetics* (about which more below), mystery does not rise to the foreground in any of these works. Nevertheless, as Johnson observes, these studies collectively map the "interpretive overlap between sacramental worship and the processes of signification," highlighting the manner in which "the sacramental conjunction of text and materiality, word and flesh, in the ritual of Communion registers simultaneously as a theological concern and as a nexus for anxieties about how language – particularly poetic language with its valences of embodiment – works."[18] In doing so, they illuminate the complex intersections between early modern poetics and seismic Reformation controversies regarding Eucharistic mystery. Not only do studies of sacramental poetics explore how early modern poetry served to reveal, replace, recreate and reconsider this central Christian mystery, but they also show that theological debates about the Eucharist doubled, in a sense, as debates about poetic signification and its appropriate role in religious life.

Helpful, too, is the growing body of scholarship on early modern "secrecy," a conceptual cognate of mystery. Much research on this topic centers on the circulation of artisanal knowledge, or secrets of trade, through recipe books and instruction manuals, as well as guild

[17] Theresa DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh: Duqesne University Press, 1999); Robert Whalen, *The Poetry of Immanence: Sacrament in Donne and Herbert* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ryan Netzley, *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Sophie Read, *Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

[18] Johnson, 1-2.

initiations.[19] Particularly pertinent to this dissertation is the observation made by historians of science Pamela Long and Pamela H. Smith that the experiential knowledge gained through the revelation of craft secrets often resembled or intersected with the mystical knowledge gleaned through religious ritual.[20] As I will suggest, early modern writers often deliberately draw attention to the intersection of material craft and mystical experience by referring to craft secrets as mysteries, a term that carries more overt sacramental overtones. Tropes of secrecy also aided in the construction of authority and community, as demonstrated by Long's *Openness, Secrecy, Authorship: Technical Arts and the Culture of Knowledge from Antiquity to the Renaissance* and Lois Potter's *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature 1641-1660*.[21] My dissertation shows that early modern writers similarly deployed the concept of mystery in order to establish the authority of their own religious and scholarly communities, often through the exclusion of individuals or groups said to practice false mysteries.

Despite the significant insights contained in the literature on sacramental poetics and secrecy, however, further research is needed in order to elucidate the capacious role of mystery in English poetics and culture. Concerned as they are with Eucharistic theology, discussions of sacramental poetics generally have not recognized that the Reformation Eucharistic controversy is merely one of the most significant manifestations of a much broader cultural struggle over the mysteries of religion, nature, and state. Meanwhile, research on secrecy cannot fully elucidate

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[19] See William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Allison Kavey, *Books of Secrets: Natural Philosophy In England, 1550-1600* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Elaine Leong and Alisha Rankin, eds. *Secrets and Knowledge in Medicine and Science, 1500-1800* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

[20] Pamela O. Long, *Openness, Secrecy, Authorship: Technical Arts and the Culture of Knowledge from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Pamela H. Smith, "What is a Secret? Secrets and Craft Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," in *Secrets and Knowledge*, 47-66.

[21] Lois Potter, *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature 1641-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

mystery's association with allegory and sacramentality, as secrets are more closely aligned with natural, hidden knowledge than with supernatural ritual. No account, then, has yet demonstrated the degree to which early modern perception of poetry's spiritual and intellectual efficacy hung in the balance during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the tools of poetic craft were applauded for making and revealing high mysteries while also accused of creating false mysteries and satanic illusions. By contrast, my project "Crafting Transcendence" limns the semantic web of early modern mystery in order to elucidate the intersecting fortunes of poetic craft and the mysteries of nature and divinity. Grounded in the methodology of cultural semantics inaugurated by Raymond Williams in his classic study *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, the project takes as its premise that cultural change is often reflected and engineered by shifts in "keywords," that is, words that are "significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation" and that are "significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought."[22] As Anna Wierzbicka observes, keywords provide the conceptual tools with which societies understand and shape their experiences. As "society changes, these tools, too, may be gradually modified or discarded."[23] While recognizing, as Phil Withington points out, that the relationship between "words, concepts, practices, and historical change" is "relentlessly complex," an attentiveness to the ways certain terms grow in visibility, come under pressure, or

[22] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 15. Williams's study sought to bring an ideological awareness to bear on the methodology formerly known as historical semantics. See also Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

[23] Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures Through their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

change in meaning at specific historical moments can illuminate the evolving values and experiences of the societies that use them.[24]

Because this dissertation specifically seeks to understand how changing conceptions of mystery affected the early modern understanding of poetry's intellectual and spiritual authority, my analysis of the keyword does not range indiscriminately across discursive registers as does, for example, Withington's recent study of "society" in early modern England. Rather, I follow closely the uses of mystery and related concept clusters (e.g. craft and rite in Jonson, knowledge and privacy in Donne, metaphor and paradox in Browne) in the works of three authors in order to determine how their theories of poetic craft developed in dialogue with ongoing cultural conflicts over mystery. I therefore seek to heed Patricia Parker's call to read "the texts of early modern culture with an awareness of the historical resonance of their terms, not just for the purposes of local interpretation but as a way of perceiving links between [them] and larger contemporary discursive networks."[25] The resources provided by the *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) and the *Early English Books Online - Text Creation Partnership* (EEBO-TCP) databases have greatly heightened my awareness of these networks, enabling me to consider my authors' treatment of mystery *vis-à-vis* contemporary theological and natural philosophical discussions.

What I have found in the course of my research is not a tidy narrative of semantic and cultural change. It would be disingenuous for me to argue that mystery began the early modern period as a sacramental token and ended it as a hollowed out signifier, or that the concept was once aligned with rationality, but came, over the course of the seventeenth century, to be viewed as irrational. In order to tell either of these stories (the latter of which has more than a grain of

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[24] Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modenr England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 6.

[25] Patricia Parker, ""Othello and Hamlet: Dilation, Spying, and the 'Secret Place' of Woman," *Representations* 44 (1993): 60.

truth to it), I would need to expand the borders of my dissertation beyond the conventional chronological boundaries of early modern literary studies. A future iteration of this project may do just this; however, at present I seek to paint a picture that is more complicated, though, I hope, no less fascinating.

I argue that mystery in early modern England functioned as what Roland Greene has termed a semantic "engine," meaning that "when it changes…a number of other concepts change with it, in correspondence and reaction."[26] Among these changing concepts, we will see, are the holy sacraments, the institution of the Church, and cosmological reality itself. But mystery does not undergo a simple transformation from one primary meaning to another – for instance, from efficacious sign to bare metaphor. Rather, I contend, mystery visibly *multiplies* in the period, as tensions existing within the polyvalent concept catalyze large-scale disputes regarding the appropriate place of mystery in intellectual, religious, and political life. Consequently, mystery and the discourses associated with it are caught between the rhetorical poles of truth and falsehood, with one person's sacred revelation coming to stand as another's imaginative delusion. For the writers featured in this project, the ambiguity of mystery serves as a source of anxious productivity. While it enables them to assert the incredible power of poetry to access the most remote natural and supernatural mysteries, it also forces them self-reflexively to interrogate their art lest the mysteries it conveys prove untrustworthy.

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[26] Roland Greene, *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 10. Greene has recently called for a "critical semantics" that takes "words, rather than authors or works, as the primary objects of investigation" (12). Because he wishes to understand words themselves more than the texts in which they appear, Greene is much less interested than Parker in situating keywords within dense discursive networks. Emphasizing the distinctiveness of literary language from other discursive regimes, he tells his semantic history through exemplary literary passages that draw upon the resources of narrative, character, and trope to reify or unsettle keywords in a manner philosophical and historical writing are, to his mind, incapable of. While I am sympathetic to this methodology, my study remains keenly interested in how authors' perceptions of the utility of poetic mystery are indelibly marked by controversies surrounding the mysteries of divinity and nature.

In the rhetorical polarization of mystery and the cultural upheaval that surrounds it, we can see the stage being set for an epistemic shift. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, efforts (however futile) would be well under way to cordon off religious mystery and related symbolic modes from the purportedly "rational" realms of government and science.[27] This shift does not happen within the historical confines of the present study, which ends on the eve of the Enlightenment with Thomas Browne seeking mystical hieroglyphs in nature while simultaneously critiquing symbolic cosmological models. Rather than interpret Browne and other writers' paradoxical treatment of mystery as a sign of England's inevitable secularization or Protestantisation, I seek to preserve the deep ambiguity of a cultural moment in which individuals saw themselves caught less between an "old world" of enchantment and a "new world" of disenchantment than between many worlds and many forms of mystery. My account of mystery may be seen to resemble Brian Cummings's recent argument about early modern religion (contra the myth of early modern secularization): I argue that mystery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was in flux, not decline, and that though it was subject to reinterpretation, it was never overturned.[28]

My dissertation is thus in conversation with Schwartz's *Sacramental Poetics*, which argues that the process of de-sacralization associated with modern secularization is to some degree impossible since humans inevitably create new gods to replace those that they banish. Taking the Protestant rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation as a case study of a historical moment in which God left the world, Schwartz maintains that Reformation poets looked to the mysteries of poetry and theater to re-enact and re-present the mysteries of Christ once made

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[27] See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2007), 221-69.

[28] Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, and Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

materially present in the Eucharist. In this way, she contends, "many of the values embraced and encoded in ritual life find their way into broader cultural expressions, including the domains of the state and the arts."[29] While corroborating Schwartz's overarching argument about de-sacralization, my project looks beyond Eucharistic controversy to a broader exploration of early modern mystery. In doing so, I arrive not, as Schwartz does, at a narrative of loss, longing, and reclamation, but rather at a tale of repeated conflict and ambiguity.

By considering the works of Ben Jonson, a sometime Catholic, alongside those of Protestant writers, and by expanding my discussion of mystery to encompass the mysteries of scripture, nature, craft, and (to a lesser degree) state, I seek to demonstrate that the problem with early modern mystery was not that it dissipated, but that it pluralized.[30] As early moderns argued over the relative priority of mystery's associations with materiality and spirituality and knowledge and ritual experience, the doctrine of transubstantiation was joined by doctrines of consubstantiation, the Real Presence, and memorialization. Protestants opened the *mystères littéraires* of scripture as an alternative site of mystery to the *mystères cultuels* of the holy sacraments, and natural philosophers debated whether nature's mysteries were material, spiritual, or both. Amidst this confusion, poetry served, as Schwartz argues, as a vital tool for accessing and conveying mysteries of divinity. However, the art's own perceived entrapment between divine inspiration and human craft caused it just as often to be perceived as dangerous,

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[29] Schwartz, 13.

[30] By emphasizing Jonson's Catholicism in addition to Donne's conversion to Protestantism, my dissertation participates in scholarly efforts to incorporate early modern English Catholic history within mainstream literary and cultural history, long dominated by a narrative of Protestant triumphalism. See Lowell Gallagher, *Redrawing the Map of Early Modern English Catholicism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Christopher Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ronald Corthell, *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2007); and Allison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

diabolical, or (what's worse) merely fictitious. It is the deep ambivalence of early modern poetic mystery that this dissertation takes as its subject.

Defining Mystery in the Early Modern English Context

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the troubled relationship between mystery and early modern poetics, it is important to establish a sense of the prevailing definitions of the keyword in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Such an account is not easy to provide, especially in a truncated space. As Wind observes at the outset of his study, "the term 'mysteries' has several meanings, and…these tended to become blurred already in antiquity."[31] The subject became even further confused, I have been arguing, in the early modern period. Therefore, rather than attempt a comprehensive overview of mystery's many connotations, the following pages highlight those of its uses most important to the present study, with the caveat that multiple meanings are often operative in any given early modern use of the term. I then turn to the idea of "false mystery" that arises in the period, briefly exploring its conceptual links to the poetic imagination in religious and natural philosophical discourse.

Derived from the ancient Greek *mustērion* and classical Latin *mystērium*, which were used to signify the rites and rituals of Greco-Roman religious cults, mystery has, from its etymological and historical point of origin, been bound up with the idea of numinous truths that are constituted and accessed poetically. The pagan mysteries honored poet-figures such as Orpheus and Dionysus, and were designed to lead initiates to a spiritual understanding of ancient myth. As noted above, fourth-century Neoplatonists looked to the secretive nature of these mysteries when devising allegorical reading practices based on the idea that poetry cloaks

[31] Wind, 13.

mysteries in enigmatic figures comprehensible to only the purest of readers. This hermeneutic method was adapted by early Christians, who employed a similar approach to Biblical exegesis and who used the vocabulary of mystery to refer to the rites and mystical truths of their own faith.[32] As made evident by Sir Thomas Elyot's definition of "Mysteria" as "mysteries, thynges secrete or hid in wordes or ceremonies" in his Latin-English *Dictionary* (1538), early modern writers were aware of the latent tensions between sacred words and actions present in the concept of mystery.[33]

These tensions are further exemplified by mystery's additional association with craft in medieval and early modern England. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* records, confusion between the post-classical Latin *ministerium* and *mysterium* resulted in "mystery" being used to connote ecclesiastical service, a fairly unsurprising mix-up given the historical relation between the two terms. By the thirteenth century, mystery in England could be used generally to refer to a "Ministry, office; service, occupation," or to any craft or profession, and by the fourteenth century, it was used synonymously with "guild" as well as to indicate the specialized "art and craft of a trade."[34] This latter migration of the term, while possibly the result of further confusion with "mastery," derived from the Anglo-Norman and Old French *maistrie,* makes sense given the structural and institutional intersections between craft guilds and the Catholic church. Organizationally, both groups followed a hieratic model akin to that found in ancient mystery cults, with the Catholic priest, keeper and administrator of religious mysteries, occupying a position parallel to that of the craft master, who practiced and taught the mysteries of a trade. For

[32] "Mystery, n1" Defs. 1a, 3, 4 and 7. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Significantly, the Latin *sacramentum* was a common translation of the Greek *mustērion*.

[33] Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Dictionary of Sir Thomas Elyot, Knight*, (1538), 160.

[34] "Mystery, n2."

Catholic and craftsman alike, mystery connoted secret knowledge as well as a form of embodied, ritualized action aimed at producing material - and, for the priest, spiritual – transformations.

Such connections between the two groups were strengthened by the late medieval mystery cycles, dramatic productions that were paid for, staged, directed and maintained by guild members. Conventionally, guilds were placed in charge of pageants with some relation to their trade. Thus, when the tile-thatchers built the stable roof for the nativity pageant or the pinners crafted the wooden pegs used in the Crucifixion play, they actively re-created the mysteries represented onstage. The plays therefore posit a model of participation, rather than of mere analogy, between craft and sacramental mystery, showing that God uses the labor of human mysteries to enact and fulfill mysteries of his own. Sarah Beckwith argues that plays in the York Corpus Christi cycle pushed this message even further, drawing a connection between human and divine "work," or "making," that contradicted the "ancient theological maxim" that "God did not make the world like an artisan makes an object."[35] Reminding readers that "sacraments are best understood as actions, not things," Beckwith contends that theater - and, in particular, a theater concerned with artisanal making – "is not so much inimical to the sacramental disclosure of God as the perfectly consonant form for the religion of incarnation."[36] According to this vision, craft, theatrical performance, religious ritual and holy sacrament are bound up together as potentially synonymous forms of incarnational labor, works in which humanity and divinity

[35] Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 42. For recent work on the mystery cycles, see also Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); *The Stage as Mirror: Civic Theatre in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Alan E. Knight, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997); and Hans Jürgen Diller, *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form*, trans. Frances Wessels, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). On artisanal labor and medieval poetics, see Lisa H. Cooper, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies: Labor and the "Work" of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350-1500* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006). For the social history of medieval artisans, see Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[36] Beckwith. 59.

mingle to make a mystery. As I demonstrate in my discussion of Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare, though the mystery plays were abolished by the mid-1570s, the sacramental valences of craft mysteries lingered throughout the early modern period, bringing divine ritual into contact with the maker's knowledge of the guild.[37]

These short etymologies demonstrate how poetry and poetic technologies such as allegory, metaphor, and theater were viewed as indispensable means of revealing and manufacturing transcendent mysteries. They also highlight the interlocking tensions between ritual practice and hidden knowledge, matter and spirit, and words and things embodied within prevailing early modern uses of the term. Such tensions underlie many of the period's most prominent mystery debates, particularly those concerning the Protestant Reformation, in which arguments over the true meaning of mystery rent the Church asunder.

Many Reformation arguments stem from competition between the two primary categories of Christian mystery: those that convey sacred experience and those that offer sacred knowledge. The former category includes the holy sacraments, the mysteries of Christ's life (such as the Incarnation and Resurrection) celebrated in the rosary and various spiritual exercises, and, for Catholics, church traditions communicated orally by Christ to his apostles. In the latter category belong the mysteries of scripture, located in the Bible's spiritual meaning, and difficult points of doctrine (such as predestination or the holy trinity). In many ways, the Reformation may be seen to turn on the conflict between these two forms of mystery, as well as on the question of who has the authority to access them.

On the whole, Catholics prioritized ritual mysteries over scriptural, emphasizing the embodied, incarnational nature of spiritual symbols such as the holy sacraments. Though

[37] It seems likely that it is because of its sacramental overtones that mystery is no longer used to designate knowledge of non-occult crafts. Like the mysteries of state, long reduced to state secrets, the mysteries of craft have given way to the secrets of a trade.

Catholics believed that scripture was a source of mysterious truths, they discouraged laymen from peering too far into this sacred knowledge, which was reserved for priests and the learned alone. In lieu of contemplating doctrinal and scriptural mysteries, Christians were encouraged to pursue the lived mysteries of their faith. Fifteenth-century affective devotional manuals trained readers to meditate constantly on the mysteries of the *vita Christi*, imaginatively projecting themselves into the events of Christ's life. Likewise, as noted above, liturgical dramas performed throughout Europe allowed believers physically to recreate these mysteries, encountering the incarnated Christ through complex acts of re-presentation. Most significantly, God was seen to make himself present to Christians through the mediated forms of the seven holy sacraments.

The mystery of the Eucharist occupied pride of place among these efficacious signs, enabling Christians literally to ingest the body and blood of Christ through an act of incorporation that bestowed grace upon the entire community of believers. As Richard Fitzjames explains in his 1495 Easter sermon,

> These sacraments were institute once for man should meek himself: which had offended by pride and seek help everlasting in things sensible not of themself: but of God in them and by them. Again these sacraments were institute for man's ghostly erudition, that man which by his sin had lost the sight and perfect knowledge of God had in the state of innocency might by visible signs and outward tokens come to the knowledge of secret mysteries and graces of God.[38]

Fitzjames' description of the sacraments points to the intersection of sacred knowledge and experience in these ritual mysteries. By humbly partaking of the sacraments, seeking God through the clouded veil of material signs, humans are able to regain through ritual experience the "ghostly erudition" lost in the fall. Humility repairs what pride has damaged, conveying

[38] Richard Fitzjames, *Sermo die lune in ebdomada Pasche*, (Westminster: Wynken de Word, 1495), 52.

sacred knowledge through ceremonial observance. As Eamon Duffy has noted in magisterial detail, this sacramental worldview, grounded though it was in an exclusionary, hierarchical model of religious practice, suffused even the most mundane experiences with a profound sense of mystery.[39]

It is common knowledge that Reformers, with their *cri de coeur* of *sola scriptura*, prioritized scripture over sacraments and church traditions, though religious ceremony maintained a vital, if reduced, role in Protestant theology. But it is important to note that in doing so they did not actively dispel mystery. Rather, they chose to value one form of mystery over another, or, as members of the Church of England might argue, they chose to value both equally, correcting Catholicism's seemingly disproportionate emphasis on the sacraments. It is true that Protestants reduced the number of sacramental mysteries from seven to two and that in rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation they re-defined what had long stood as the central mystery of the Christian faith. But while early English reformers such as John Frith followed Ulrich Zwingli in re-defining the mystery of the Eucharist as a non-efficacious sign -- a mere representation, similitude, or token of remembrance -- it was John Calvin's doctrine of the Real Presence that came to prevail in the English church.

This doctrine effectively ritualized the mysteries of the Word, maintaining that the Eucharist holds the spiritual efficacy to unite believers with Christ, the divine Word, through the corporeal figures of bread and wine. Such a ritualization can likewise be observed in Protestant scriptural exegesis, which, like the Neoplatonic *mystères littéraires*, was afforded its own ceremonial qualities. According to Protestant hermeneutic theories, the Word as written in scripture and spoken by God's ministers was inspired by the Holy Spirit, who occupied a role

[39] See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), esp. 91-154.

suspiciously analogous to that of the pagan muses. As with the material signs of baptism and the Eucharist, God's Word was seen to contain a sacramental efficacy to convey Christ to the believer. Just as Catholic sacramental ritual disclosed sacred knowledge, so Protestant exegesis proffered sacred experience. Though Reformers to varying degrees sought to overturn the hieratic structure of the Catholic Church, they did not seek to overturn mystery, but rather attempted to differentiate "true" mysteries from the "false" mysteries of Catholicism.

The degree to which most Reformers believed Protestantism to foster mystery is exemplified by believers' numerous statements of awe and humility in the face of ineffable truth. Writing of the Eucharist in his commentary on Ephesians, Calvin confesses, "I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and with Paul am not ashamed to acknowledge in wonder my ignorance."[40] Calvin's expression of wonder underscores the fact that in opening the mysteries of scripture to all believers, reformers did not set out to evacuate them of their mysterious qualities. Divine revelation is not the same as the confession of a secret. When one learns a secret or solves a problem, clarity is achieved, and mystery vanishes. Conversely, when contemplating mysteries that exceed human reason, growing understanding is often outpaced by a deepening sense of ignorance – of being overwhelmed with wonder, as Calvin writes. If the initial goal of studying mysteries of doctrine and scripture was mastery, its outcome was surrender. As Thomas Browne would write, mysteries such as those of Christ's Incarnation and the Holy Trinity were doctrines in which "to lose" oneself, to exercise human reason until it was forced to give way to the rule of faith.

In licensing believers to peer into the high mysteries of God, Reformers helped set in motion a chain of events that would make it possible for a man such as John Toland, in 1696, to

[40] John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol 11, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas J. Torrance, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 209-10.

publish a book entitled *Christianity Not Mysterious*, the main argument of which is that all Christian doctrine can be perfectly understood through the light of reason. Their early actions, though, merely pluralized the mysteries of the faith, placing new mysteries in competition with old and exacerbating existing tensions between Christian "mysteryes hid in wordes [and] ceremonies." Both Catholics and Protestants employed poetic tools of metaphor and symbol to repair the chasm separating humanity and a mysterious divinity. While Catholics looked for mystery in embodied, corporeal signs, however, Protestants preferred to seek it in the audible and written word of God, non-corporeal language that, in their opinions, came closer to the realm of the spirit.

A similar conflict between the physical and spiritual properties of mystery can be traced in early modern theorizations of the mysteries of nature, the genealogy of which intersected with that of religious mysteries in the mythographic tradition (the *mystères littéraires*) described above. As Pierre Hadot documents, a rift between mysticism and materialism was present in this tradition from its very beginning.[41] Whereas Stoic exegetes sought to debunk mythology's supernatural claims by identifying the mysteries of physical processes hidden beneath its narratives, Neoplatonists pursued spiritual mysteries in poetic texts, believing them to mirror the allegorical composition of the natural world. Both groups looked to poetry to apprehend the mysteries of nature, but they defined those mysteries in the contrasting terms of materiality and allegorical truth.

In early modern Europe, conflict over nature's mysteries spilled over from mythographic debates into discussions of the book of nature, the commonplace metaphor that posited nature, after scripture, as a second source of revelation. The question of whether the book of nature

[41] Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase, (Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 39-75.

should be read for its spiritual sense became a matter of some controversy as symbolic cosmologies (e.g. Neoplatonic, Neopythagorean, and Signaturist) sprang up to compete with Aristotelianism and developing mechanical models of nature.[42] There were a range of opinions on this subject – perhaps as many as there were natural philosophers – each of which held different consequences for the role of poetic technologies in natural philosophical study. The complexity of this issue is perhaps best illuminated by the case of Johann Kepler, who defended a Neoplatonic view of nature throughout his career, modifying, but never repudiating, his theory that the universe was modeled proportionately after the five Platonic regular solids and that its numerical harmony served as an image of the Holy Trinity. The title of his earliest publication, *Mysterium Cosmographicum* (1596; 2nd ed., with notes 1621), seems designed to call to mind "divine mysteries, visible and physical expressions of the divine presence."[43] Yet Kepler worked to distance his astronomical studies from any association with poetry, preferring instead to wed material and spiritual mysteries through the verifiable language of mathematics.

Other thinkers took a more extreme position, envisioning nature's mysteries in verbal, if not poetic terms. The German mystic Jacob Boehme, influenced by the Paracelsian doctrine of signatures, argues in *Signatura Rerum* (1621) and *Mysterium Magnum* (1623) that the visible world is animated by signatures of the divine word that "express God's spirit in letters and

[42] These philosophies all exhibit strains of what Brian Vickers has dubbed the "occult mentality" in the Renaissance – a "symbolic" discourse in which "Metaphors (such as the microcosm and macrocosm) are taken as realities, words are equated with things, [and] abstract ideas are given concrete attitudes" ("Introduction," in *Occult and scientific mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. Brian Vickers, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)), 9. Contrary to Vickers, Ian Maclean argues in *Logic, Signs and Nature in the Renaissance: The Case of Learned Medicine* that "there are not two distinct mentalities – the rational and the hermetic – but rather one, informed by…looser dialectical logical categories," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 336.

[43] Kenneth James Howell, *God's Two Books: Copernican Cosmology and Biblical Interpretation in Early Modern Science* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 114. Howell notes that there was "no precedent in astronomy or any related natural discipline for choosing [*Mysterium*]," and thus it seems quite likely that Kepler intended the term to carry a spiritual valence (114).

syllables."[44] Echoing Protestant claims of exegetical inspiration, he contends that man's "inward Spirituall soul…was breathed in to the visible *Image* by the *in-Speaking*, or inspiration of the invisible Word of the divine Power." For this reason, he argues, humans have the unique ability to recognize and "re-express" nature's signatures "whereby the invisible wisdome of God is pourtraied."[45] Showing little concern for the empirical grounds on which his theories rest, his philosophy instead makes use of the figurative and flexible language of similes, metaphors, and correspondences that are the stock-in-trade of poets.

On the other end of the spectrum were those who vigorously opposed reading the book of nature according to its allegorical sense. In England, Francis Bacon disavowed sacramental models of nature, arguing that "the works of God…shew the omnipotency and wisdom of the maker, but not his image."[46] Bacon, like Kepler, presents a complicated case, since he believed there was a role for poetry in the study of science. His *Wisdom of the Ancients* (1619) applied Stoic exegetical methods to ancient myth in order to demonstrate that "beneath no small number of the fables of the ancient poets there lay from the very beginning a mystery and an allegory."[47]

On the whole, however, Bacon viewed poetry as a more useful tool for religious practice than scientific. He argues that in "rais[ing] and erect[ing]" the human mind while obscuring forbidden "secrets and mysteries of religion," poetry enables a "communion" between divinity and a fallen humanity that would otherwise be "interdict[ed]."[48] In fact, the art's sacred valences

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[44] Vickers, 107.

[45] Jacob Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum* (London: 1656), sib. A1v.

[46] Bacon, *Advancement*, 212.

[47] Bacon, *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 6, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath (London: Longman and Co., 1958), 696.

[48] Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* in *The Works of Francis* Bacon, vol. 6, ed. James Spedding (New York: Hurd and Houghton 1864), 203.

made it somewhat unfit for natural philosophical study. While in religion Bacon worked to apprehend the "mysteries of God" through figurative language, "by way of illustration," in natural philosophy he strove not to trespass against the limitation set forth in the *Advancement of Learning*: "We do not presume by the contemplation of nature to attain to the mysteries of God."[49] In order to preserve the sanctity of religious mysteries, Bacon looks to nature for material mysteries alone, opting, like his contemporary Galileo Galilei, to leave the search for first and final causes to the theologians.

Early modern natural philosophy, like early modern Christianity, was a site of many mysteries. The concept's entanglements with opposing notions of *res* and *verba*, efficacious and non-efficacious signs, materiality and spirituality drove the competition between varying cosmologies and natural philosophical methods devised in the period. Early modern thinkers loved paradox, but their tolerance for contradiction was stretched to a breaking point by these controversies, which touched on truths essential for humankind's salvation. To accept the truth claims of one form of mystery was often to reject those of another as false. False mystery, as my concluding section lays out, thus came to stalk early modern mystery debates, suspiciously resembling, in its fictitiousness, the very same poetry that promised to reveal mysteries to worthy interpreters.

The idea of false mystery is surely as ancient as mystery itself. As a concealed truth that often eludes human understanding, mystery serves as a convenient veil for corruption or fraud. For early moderns struggling to adjudicate contradictory accounts of mystery, false mystery seemed to lurk everywhere, and it most often appeared in the guise of poetry or theater. This phenomenon has been best documented in discussions of early modern religious discourse. As scholars have noted, Protestants believed the rites of the Catholic mass to deceive the multitude

[49] Ibid., 896, 95.

through the use of theatrical, sensory illusions.[50] No longer the protector and dispenser of God's holy mysteries, the Catholic Church was perceived by reformers such as Frith as "very Antichriste teaching...for the trueth, a cloaked vysare; for secreat mysteryes, outward faces; for the gospell, lawes and rydles; for pure clennes, sotle craftes."[51] Their ceremonies, William Barlow writes, "pretend some hid mystery," but are ultimately empty and damning.[52]

Peter Lake and Michael Questier have shown that complaints about the corrosive theatricality of the Catholic Church were soon levied at the public theater, seen by anti-theatricalists such as Philip Stubbes to "ensnare its victims" through similar appeals "to their base, fleshly instincts."[53] (Stubbes admonishes playwrights to "leue of[f] that cursed kind of life, and giue them selues to such honest exercises, and godly misteries, as God hath commanded them…to get their liuings withal.")[54] Promising a mystery, theater instead presents a diabolical, riddling craft. Given this environment, it is unsurprising that mystery cycles themselves were abolished, as religious theater, in Beckwith's terms, "became profaning by definition, a betrayal and not a revelation of the mysteries of the faith."[55] Both Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare, I will argue, respond to this controversy, attempting to ascertain whether theater's mysteries are sacred or profane.

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[50] Regina Schwartz observes that "Anti-theatrical prejudice found common cause with anti-popery, equating ritual with magic, magic with the theatre, and all of them with lies" (42).

[51] John Frith, *A pistle to the Christen Reader* (Antwerp: 1529).

[52] William Barlow, *Rede me and be nott wrothe for I saye no thynge but trothe* (Strasbourg: Printed by Johann Schott, 1528).

[53] Peter Lake with Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 454.

[54] Philip Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses*, ed. William Barclay Turnbull, (London: 1836), 167.

[55] Beckwith, 3. For a nuanced reading of the political and religious forces that ended the mystery cycles, see Clopper, 268-94.

Due to lingering Protestant biases in English historiography, while much has been written about extreme Protestant attacks on Catholic mystery (or mystery perceived to be influenced by Catholicism), less has been written about Catholic attacks on Protestant mystery, though Catholics also connected false mystery to the poetic imagination. As is to be expected, much Catholic polemic centered on Protestant Eucharistic doctrines, which men such as Bishop Stephen Gardiner described as an "open assault" on the "high mystery of our religion."[56] More relevant to this dissertation is the Catholic dismissal of Protestant scriptural exegesis as the product of "fancy," a concept closely linked with poetic creation.[57] To Catholic observers, the seemingly subjective foundation of Protestant hermeneutics, which relied upon the inner revelation of the Holy Spirit, broached a kind of egomania, leading individuals to discern in Holy Writ mysteries of their own devising.[58] In *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), Sir Thomas More feigns surprise that

> Of so many great cunning authors and holy saints as have often read and deeply considered those words [of 1 Timothy] before, there was never none that had either the wit or the grace to perceive that great special commandment [that priests could marry] this two thousand year til now that God hath at last by revelation showed this high secret mystery to these two goodly creatures Luther and Tyndale.[59]

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[56] Stephen Gardiner, *A Detection of the Devil's Sophistry* (London: John Herford, 1545), 1.

[57] Seventeenth-century anti-Calvinists similarly came to associate Puritan exegesis with fancy. Cf. Reid Barbour, *Literature and Religious Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 91-117. For more on "fantasy" and early modern cognitive theory, see Margaret Healy, "Poetic 'making' and the moving soul," in *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England*, eds. Katherine A. Craik and Tanya Pollard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 173-90.

[58] On the Catholic association of Protestant hermeneutics with solipsism, see Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144-95.

[59] Sir Thomas More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 6, eds. Thomas M. C. Lawler, Germain Marc'Hadour and Richard C. Marius, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 304.

He makes the same attack in *The Supplication of Souls* (1529), which caustically applauds Luther and Tyndale for "spy[ing] out [a] great secret mystery that neither God nor man could espy."[60] As David Loewenstein has recently pointed out, More also accused Protestants of being "cunning theatricalists," who deceived the multitude through dissimulating performances, a fact which suggests that theatricality came to be associated with perceived heretics of all stripes, and not just with Roman Catholics.[61]

The contention that Protestant mysteries are imaginative fabrications would remain a staple of Catholic thought throughout the early modern period. The translators of the Douai-Rheims New Testament condemn Protestant translators who "follow their owne spirit and know nothing, but their priuate fantasie, and not the sense of the holy Church and Doctors."[62] They claim to have undertaken their vernacular translation against their better judgments, out of "compassion to see our beloued countrie men, with extreme danger of their soules, to vse onely such prophane translations, and erroneous mens mere phantasies, for the pure and blessed word of truth."[63] From More's mockery of Protestants' local scriptural interpretations to the Douai-Rheims critique of their biblical translations, it is not a far jump for Thomas Wright (the priest who may have converted Ben Jonson) to dismiss the entire Protestant religion as a "forged fancy."[64] By undermining Protestants' pretensions to divine inspiration, scorning as fanciful their revelation of mysteries, Catholics denigrated truth-claims that intersected with those made by the

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[60] Thomas More, *The Supplication of Souls*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, eds. Frank Manley, Germain Marc'Hadour, Richard C. Marius, and Clarence H. Miller, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 151.

[61] David Loewenstein, *Treachersou Faith: The Specter of Heresy in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 47-49.

[62] Gregory Martin, "The Preface to the Reader" (*The New Testament of Iesus Christ*, Rhemes: 1582), sig.4v.
[63]Ibid., sig.5r.

[64] Thomas Wright, *The Disposition or Garnishment of the Soul to Receive Worthily the Blessed Sacrament* (English Secret Press, 1596), sig.B1r.

period's poets, particularly the aspiring prophets Sidney praised in his *Defense of Poesy*. Though both groups turned to poetry to access religious mysteries, they each emphasized the manufactured nature of poetic craft when attacking the mysteries of their opponents. Protestants viewed Catholic sacramental mysteries as mere theater, while Catholics perceived Protestant scriptural mysteries as fanciful delusions.

Even more overtly than religious writers, natural philosophers tended to perceive false mystery as the product of poetic creation. Kepler, for example, denounces Englishman Robert Fludd's natural philosophy on the grounds that it is "poetic or rhetorical rather than philosophical or mathematical," and he argues that the illegitimacy of Fludd's philosophy is signaled by its treatment of mystery. [65] Whereas Kepler, as a proper astronomer, works to bring obscure notions "out into the light of understanding" by "enquir[ing] into the causes of things," Fludd "takes great delight in topics which are hidden in the darkness of riddles."[66] His opponent's penchant for darkness over light, Kepler argues, indicates his affinity with hermeticists who traffic in symbolism rather than the true mysteries of nature, verifiable through observation and mathematical calculation.

Francis Bacon likewise dismissed hermetic models of nature as poetical.[67] As noted above, Bacon believed that there was a limited place for poetry in natural philosophical study. Overall, though, he viewed it as a dangerous tool, apt to lead humans into error. In particular, Bacon was concerned by poetry's indifference to the laws of nature. As a property of the imagination "not tied to the laws of matter," poetry "may at pleasure join that which nature hath

[65] Johann Kepler, *The Harmony of the World*, trans. E. J. Aiton, A. M. Duncan and J. V. Field, (American Philosophical Society, 1995), 505.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 66.

severed and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things."[68] For this reason, it is technologically inferior to the mechanical arts, which follow Bacon's most crucial dictum: "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed."[69]

Similar to Kepler, Bacon fretted over the fact that poetic mystery can be used to "disguise and veil" truth as well as to "clear and throw light upon it."[70] While he sanctions such obfuscation in the realms of religion and statecraft, he rejects it vehemently in the practice of natural philosophy, where it is seen to impede the advancement of learning by concealing esoteric theories and practices from a public that could verify or overturn them. The art can thus be used to legitimize mysterious philosophies that are in reality quite hollow. Often this is accomplished, as in the case of the Paracelsians, by dangerously intermingling divinity with philosophy, overlaying the natural world with divine conceits. Because of poetry's spiritual properties, Bacon argues, when applied to the study of nature it "flatters" the human understanding, leading thinkers to construct world systems that are "fanciful and tumid and half poetical."[71] By "submit[ing] the mysteries of God to our reason," philosopher-poets risk perverting not only the discipline of natural philosophy but also the practice of theology.[72] Though for philosophers such as Boehme and even, to a limited degree, Bacon, poetic craft illuminated nature's deepest mysteries, for others it appeared endangered investigations of the divine cosmos.

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[68] Ibid., 202.

[69] Bacon, *Novum Organum* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 4, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Dennon Heath, (London: Longman and Co., 1860), 47.

[70] Bacon, *De Sapientia Veterum*.

[71] Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 66.

[72] Bacon, *Advancement*, 213.

As I have been arguing, the mysteries of poetry, craft, religion, and nature were deeply imbricated in early modernity. Latent tensions within the concept amplified Reformation and natural philosophical debates that opened up new sites of mystery. Arguments over which of these mysteries were true or false produced an odd standoff wherein poetic craft came to be viewed both as a conduit of sacred mystery and as a creator of false mystery. The remainder of my dissertation explores the consequences of this ambiguity for the period's poets, who sought the elevated titles of priest and prophet while fending off accusations of base charlatanism.

Chapter Overview

Like many other early modern writers, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Thomas Browne grappled with the significant spiritual, intellectual, and political challenges posed by the early modern pluralization of mystery. Importantly, their works explore these challenges as they were manifest in a number of different social and discursive domains, from the London public stage and the Jacobean court to the pulpit of the Church of England and the commonplace books of natural philosophers. Their inclusion in this dissertation thus enables a trans-disciplinary investigation of some of the most pressing problems surrounding early modern notions of poetic mystery: Are there mysteries the poet shouldn't look into? Is it possible to "prove" the sacred utterances of poets and ministers? Does poetry illuminate or distort the mysteries of God's creation? While exhibiting increasing levels of doubt about the spiritual and intellectual efficacy of poetic craft, each author affirms poetry's ability to transform its readers through the powerful mysteries of craft, religion, and nature.

As a practicing Catholic for part of his life, Ben Jonson had to reconcile the poet's claims to divine inspiration with the Church's insistence that laymen exercise humility in the search for sacred mysteries. Chapter 1 demonstrates that Jonson rejected the role of the Protestant *vates* in favor of that of the craftsman-priest whose labor is inspired with a supernatural efficacy. Refusing to speculate on high religious mysteries, I argue, he divorced poetic mystery from its associations with transcendent knowledge and aligned it instead with the incarnational labor of civil interaction -- the "mysteries of manners, arms, and arts" that bring a sacred order to everyday life ("To Penshurst" 98). In order to transform the manners of his audience, he employed agonistic dramatic forms to initiate spectators into the mysteries of poetic craft while expelling the art's idolatrous, fashionable imitators.

Far from mimicking Jonson's religious humility, John Donne, as an aspiring poet-prophet and minister, sought to reveal the highest mysteries of divinity through the craft of his inspired Word. To a far greater extent than Jonson, though, Donne experienced anxiety that the mysteries he proclaimed were mere illusions. In Chapter 2, I explore Donne's strained efforts to "prove" the mysteries contained within his secular lyrics and sermons. His *Songs and Sonets*, I contend, run a series of experimental trials, or assays, on the heterodox mysteries of love and love poetry, while his 1624 and 1627 Trinity Sunday sermons work through forms of deductive logic to verify the orthodox mystery of the holy trinity. Both his poetry and sermons intimate that efficacious language, authorized by community, is the best tool for affirming mysteries. However, ongoing tensions between affect and intellect in Donne's search for mystery reveal the epistemological instability of a concept poised uneasily between ritual practice and hidden truth.

Chapter 3 turns from the book of scripture to the book of nature in order to examine the place of poetry in Thomas Browne's natural philosophical method. I argue that Browne is unique

among his contemporaries in developing a natural philosophy that simultaneously insists upon and rejects poetic mystery. Whereas *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* attempts to quarantine mystery and metaphor from scientific study, asserting that "Poetical" reasoning is satanic in its contradiction of "reality," *Religio Medici* and *The Garden of Cyrus* proclaim "All Creation a Mystery" accessible only through poetic figuration. In a self-dialogue that moves between the rhetoric of the divine and the diabolical, Browne attempts to reconcile the claims of competing cosmological models, to create a paradox capable of preserving multiple worlds and multiple mysteries.

The dissertation's conclusion casts light on the mysteries of *Measure for Measure* introduced above. In the dialogue between Shakespeare's hangman and bawd, I find a dark sendup of the period's futile efforts to prove mysteries that exceed human comprehension. Of the authors discussed in this project, Shakespeare alone is willing to contemplate the possibility that not only the mysteries of poetry, but also those of religion, occupation, and state are the fabrications of human craft – a proposition that, for him, as I will explain, that holds both tragic and comic implications.

A final note about terminology is perhaps warranted. Throughout the project, I follow early modern English writers in defining "poetry" capaciously, as a term that applies to the dramatic, verse, and prose creations of self-styled poets, as well as to certain symbolic modes of thought and action. Ben Jonson, for example, insists on referring to his dramatic works and court masques as poems, and his commonplace book, *Discoveries*, characterizes poetry tautologically as "the work of a poet." At the same time, I try to respect any demarcations writers construct between poetry and other genres. For instance, while I recognize their ample rhetorical and stylistic commonalities, I do not refer to Donne's sermons as poems, as it is unlikely that he

would have approved of the designation. The dissertation thus aims to recover a broader understanding of “poetry” along with a more nuanced vision of the art’s mysteries.

Chapter 1:

Forge and Altar: The Priestly Craft of Jonsonian Poetics

God offered us those things and placed them at hand and near us, that He knew were profitable for us; but the hurtful He laid deep and hid. (*Ben Jonson* Discoveries)

Many might go to heaven with half the labour they go to hell if they would venture their industry the right way. (Discoveries 131-32)

It may seem perverse to begin a study of mystery with a chapter on Ben Jonson. Most readers come to know Ben Jonson as an anti-mystery poet, one who defines his literary project against all that is obscure, enigmatic or otherworldly. This perception is in part the legacy of early twentieth-century criticism, for which Jonson often stood, in implicit or explicit contrast with Shakespeare, as the epitome of rationality and openness. These qualities were ascribed to nearly every aspect of his art, from his style (plain), to his aesthetic (social realism), his subject matter (anti-superstitious) and his religious disposition (secular). Even his biography was said to be devoid of riddles. Citing the abundance of self-references and autobiographical statements in Jonson's works, Gregory Smith wrote in a 1919 essay that "There are no mysteries, or at least great mysteries, in [Jonson's] literary career, and the biographer is not driven, with the Shakespearians, to conjectural reconstruction from the shards of record and anecdote."[73]

Over the course of the last few decades, the majority of these assumptions have been challenged, if not altogether unsettled. Certainly, the notion that Jonson's numerous literary self-portraits provide a transparent window onto his life and times has long been dispelled, as has the misguided notion that his religious beliefs are not reflected in his writing. And although his verse has yet to be wholly freed from its association with the so-called plain style, Richard S. Peterson showed as early as 1981 the degree to which this label fails to capture the allusive and often

[73] Quoted in Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

highly experimental nature of his poetry.[74] Recent studies by Ian Donaldson and Martin Butler shore up Richardson's claims, demonstrating that while Jonson preferred to see himself as a "forthright" man, it was his masterful ability to communicate via "hints, obliquities, gaps, suppressions, and poised ambiguities" that enabled him -- a sometime Catholic ex-felon of low birth -- to navigate the dangerous political waters of seventeenth-century England.[75] On the whole, scholars have become increasingly comfortable identifying moments of opacity and even enchantment in Jonson's works, and as a result he has come to seem a much less stable, hyper-rational character than he once did. One might even say that he has grown somewhat mysterious.

And yet, when held up to any number of his contemporaries, both his style and substance take on a rather terrestrial cast. In theory and, for the most part, in practice, Jonson distances himself from those attributes we have come to associate with poetic mystery: religious paradox, esoteric philosophy, verbal obscurity and "far-fet" metaphors.[76] Whereas conventionally mysterious poets such as John Donne or Henry Vaughan respond in complex ways to the affective and doctrinal dimensions of Christian mystery, Jonson endorses a stubbornly earth bound view of poetry's religious role, asserting that poets should teach pious behavior, not doctrinal truths. His relationship to the mystical elements of classical poetic theory is similarly ambivalent. Though he never ceases to defend the sacred origin of poetic craft, he offers a qualified endorsement of the concept of the *divinus furor* that underwrote Neoplatonic theories of poetic mystery, and in general his assessment of such esoteric doctrines, as well as the arcane language used to express them, is genuinely hostile. "Truth and goodness are plain," he observes

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[74] Richard Peterson, *Imitation and Praise in the Poetry of Ben Jonson*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

[75] Donaldson, 147.

[76] Ben Jonson, *Discoveries* in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 8 vols., ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2012), 7:562. All citations will be taken from this edition. Subsequent citations will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

in the *Discoveries*, "but darkness is ever afraid of the light: Puppet-plays must be shadowed, and seen in the dark, for draw back the curtain, *Et sordet gesticulatio*" (And the pantomime appears vile) (170-73). Like Francis Bacon, Jonson believes that darkness and obliquity signal an art's corruption rather than its profundity. It is this principle that fuels the de-mystifying strain of his poetics, a strain seen perhaps most notably in *The Alchemist* (1610), which lays bare the mechanisms of alchemical and theatrical enchantment even as it wryly charms its audience members out of their money.

The potential conflict between the rational and irrational sides of Jonson's imagination, between his penchant for de-mystification and his capacity for enigma, only appears heightened when we examine his abiding preoccupation with "mystery." One need only point to the "more removed mysteries" of his court masques to adduce his interest in an esotericism he elsewhere eschews, and if only for his involvement with these glittering Stuart spectacles, Jonson's vexed relationship to mystery would be worthy of investigation (*Hymenaei* 13). His fascination with the concept can be seen to extend beyond an immediate court context, however. "Mystery" and its variants appear some sixty-seven times in Jonson's works (seventy-two including the related terms "mystical" and "mysterial"), nearly four times more than in those of Shakespeare.[77] Of these references to the term, only sixteen are within a court masque, with the plays accounting for thirty-five of its uses, the non-dramatic verse for fourteen and the *Discoveries* for two.[78] In addition to such overt reflections on mystery, Jonson's writing engages heavily with the related ideas of theophany, ritual, divine inspiration and craft initiation, all of which prove as crucial to his plays and non-dramatic verse as they do to his court masques. Nevertheless, over half of the

[77] "Mystery" and its variants are used nineteen times in Shakespeare's plays. The term never appears in his poetry.

[78] Mystery appears in all but four of Jonson's plays: *Poetaster*, *Eastward Ho*, *Catiline* and *The Sad Shepherd*. Including the terms "mystical" and "mysterial," Jonson refers overtly to "mystery" thirty-seven times in the plays and nineteen times in the court masques.

poet's references to mystery are negative, in that they either mock false mysteries or decline to discuss the mysteries of religion. The concept thus serves as a source of satire or disapprobation for Jonson as often as it emerges as a subject of praise.

In this chapter, I examine the apparent discrepancy between Jonson's career-long, multi-faceted engagement with "mystery" and the often "un-mysterious" flavor of the poetic and philosophical principles he endorses. I contend that this seeming incongruity does not stem from a contradiction on Jonson's part so much as from an impoverished understanding of "mystery" on our own. Today we tend to define mystery almost exclusively in terms of a hidden or transcendent truth, as something one *seeks* or *contemplates*. This meaning was certainly available to Jonson, as I show in my discussion of Donne; however, Jonson's refusal to speculate on matters beyond human comprehension led him, I argue, to conceive of poetic mystery in relation to the active mysteries of arts and rituals - as something one *does*. For Jonson, I argue, true mystery resides in the "mysteries of manners, arms, and arts" that bring a sacred order to everyday life. He sees it as the poet's duty, in the related roles of priest and craft master, to teach men to practice true mysteries and destroy those that are false. His works thus construct a vision of poetry as an art of metaphysical ethics in which the "skill / or science of discerning good from ill" is revealed as a sacred mystery (*Und.* 13.109-110), a form of incarnational labor that forges civil sacraments, infusing a divine principle into human action.

I advance this argument in four stages. In the chapter's first section, I locate Jonson's notable reticence towards transcendent subject matter within the context of post-Reformation debates over exegetical authority. Examining his characterization of religious mystery in the *Discoveries* and a number of lyric poems, I contend that his studied silence on matters of doctrine and metaphysics should be interpreted not as a marker of skepticism, but rather as a

positive theological statement: an enactment of the Catholic position, endorsed in part by the Church of England, that lay people should study moral rather than dogmatic theology, the precepts of manners rather than the doctrines of faith. Jonson does not fully excise religious mystery from his poetry, however. As I show in the chapter's second section, he draws on the term's double association with the rituals of craft and sacrament in order to identify the art of manners as a mystery over which the poet presides as priest and master. Section three explores Jonson's twin model of poetic creation, contending that it is within the inspired labor of literary craft that he locates the poet's authority as maker and dispenser of civil mysteries. The final section turns to *Cynthia's Revels, or the Fountain of Self-Love* (1616), the play that displays Jonson's fullest vision of the poet's art as a mystery of manners. Working through an agonistic dramatic structure that pivots on "dynamics of confrontation and leads to exclusion," the play, I demonstrate, portrays poetry as a divine mystery capable of transforming artist, audience, and community.[79]

Taken as a whole, the chapter demonstrates the inadequacy of modern definitions of mystery to account for the concept's function within Jonson's works. By situating his poetics within the tangled web of early modern mystery discourse, my project identifies mystery as a point at which, for Jonson, sacred and secular concerns intersect and the poet is moved to speak in both his human and divine capacity. It thus recuperates mystery's associations with forbidden revelation and sacred labor while shining new light on the interconnection of religion and craft in Jonson's poetic practice.

"Better be dumb than superstitious!": Jonson Attempts Humility

[79] G. Beiner, *Shakespeare's Agonistic Comedy: Poetics, Analysis, Criticism*, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1993), 239n.

Jonson was not, as critics once assumed, a secular writer. Like other early modern humanists, he conceived of poetry as a sacred art, one that "had her original from heaven" (*Discoveries* 1693) and whose poets were "teacher[s] of things divine, no less than human" (*Volpone* "The Epistle" 21). His writing explores a wide range of religious themes, from the relatively uncontroversial realm of Christian ethics to the politically combustible ground of English Catholicism.[80] And yet, unlike the vast majority of his fellow poets, Jonson often balks at using poetry to explore Christian "mysteries," a category that includes some of the most controversial subjects in post-Reformation Europe: the holy sacraments, difficult points of doctrine (such as transubstantiation and predestination), the allegorical or figurative senses of scripture, and events of Christ's life contemplated in various spiritual exercises.[81] Where they do speak, as Richard Harp notes, it is often in the most broadly orthodox of terms, reflecting Jonson's concern to say only those things "about God and the mysteries of divinity [that] all Christians would agree with."[82]

Taken as a whole, his works appear to focus on human ethics and behavior to the general exclusion of doctrinal and metaphysical concerns, a fact that has led some scholars to conclude

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[80] Recent studies of Jonson and religion include Robert S. Miola, "Ben Jonson: Catholic Poet," *Renaissance and Reformation* 25.4 (2001), 101-15; Richard Harp, "Catholicism, Religion, and Ben Jonson," *Cithara* 42.2 (2003): 25-34; Peter Lake, "From *Leicester his Commonwealth to Sejanus his Fall:* Ben Jonson and the politics of Roman (Catholic) virtue," in *Catholics and the 'Protestant Nation': Religious Identity in Early Modern England*, ed. Ethan H. Shagan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 128-61; Richard Dutton, *Ben Jonson, Volpone, and the Gunpowder Plot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 138-47 and 271-75.

[81] "Mystery, n1." Defs. 2a, 3, 4 and 6, *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. The mysteries of Christ's life commemorated in the rosary and Ignatian spiritual exercises were non-controversial, as they were revealed in the literal Biblical story, accessible to all believers.

[82] Harp, 26-28.

that Jonson is disinterested in, or even skeptical of, Christian mystery. [83] Such a radical claim, which would paint the poet as something of an anomaly in his cultural milieu, is difficult to reconcile with what we know of his religious commitments and intellectual pursuits. A man who converted to Catholicism at a time when it was politically disadvantageous to do so; who endured multiple interrogations by state authorities regarding his religious beliefs; who participated in public and private debates on the nature of the holy sacraments; who wrote one, if not two, theological treatises in the second half of his career; and who at the time of his death, owned numerous works of a devotional and theological nature hardly appears indifferent to the mysteries of his faith.

Indeed, I would argue, he was not. Jonson's aversion to transcendent subject matter does not signal his disinterest in religious mystery, but instead reflects his belief that lay people should not speculate on the high mysteries of God. As I demonstrate, Jonson's few direct references to religious mystery are consonant with this position as articulated by Erasmus, Thomas More and other influential Catholic thinkers.[84] Constituting a series of partial aversions, or "turnings-away," from God's highest truths that are striking in their abnegation of his typical air of authority, these passages indicate that Jonson takes humanity as his sphere not because he rejects divinity as his subject, but out of a sense that it is profane to speculate on transcendent truths.

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[83] D. J. Gordon, "*Hymenaei:* Jonson's Masque of Union," in *The Renaissance Imagination*, 177-79; and Parfitt, 77-88.

[84] All early modern Christians believed to some degree that one must not pry too far into God's mysteries. However, Catholic officials tended to exceed even the most conservative members of the Church of England in their sense of the dangers of curiosity and their belief that certain parts of scripture are forbidden to the laity. Though anti-Calvinists associated Calvinist and puritan exegesis with subjective "fancy," just as Catholics did Protestant exegesis, they did not condemn private scriptural interpretation so long as individuals followed the Church's teaching in points of doctrinal controversy. Richard Montagu, for instance, counters the Catholic assertion that scripture is too difficult for lay interpretation, writing that "Where the Scripture is hard, and needeth interpretation, there that Spirit which dictated it at first, must direct in the understanding it at last. For man is permitted to expound himselfe, and best can giue his owne meaning…..[though] in Case there be a Doubt, we are not to addresse vnto priuate Fancies, or peculiar opinions, but to the Direction of Gods Spirit, and that in the Church" (*A New Gagg for an Old Goosel*, (London, 1624)), 6.

Among the most notable of these instances is a passage found in "An Execration Upon Vulcan" (1623), in which Jonson laments the destruction of his "twice-twelve years' stored up humanity, / With humble gleanings in divinity / After those fathers and wiser guides / Whom faction had not drawn to study sides" (*Und.* 43 101-04). Jonson's characterization of a quarter-century's worth of theological musings as "humble" rings of false modesty, especially coming, as it does, at the end of a staggering list of his lost accomplishments. As we will see, however, humility and anti-factionalism were loaded concepts in early modern religious discourse, particularly when linked, as they are here, with deference to patristic and Scholastic authorities. English Catholics and conformists both attacked the "presumption" of their enemies (Protestants and puritans, respectively), whose disregard for authority they cited as a prime cause of religious schism. Jonson's invocation of "humility" would almost certainly have been read in these terms, as a sign of conservative religious affiliation, rather than as a confession of personal inadequacy.

In 1623, the year of the poem's composition, it might also have been interpreted as a gesture of obedience to James I, whose distress at the apocalyptic furor surrounding the Thirty Years' War had led him to take what for his reign were unprecedented measures to control biblical exegesis. The year prior, he issued a flurry of proclamations intended to stamp out dissent regarding his irenic response to the war and the Spanish match: a declaration to Parliament to cease all discussion of "mysteries of State, namely matters of Warre or Peace, or Our dearest Sonnes Match with Spaine;" an order that university divinity students be "directed away from 'the heretical doctrines of both jesuits and puritans' and toward the writings of the fathers and the Schoolmen;" and the Directions on Preachers forbidding clergy to preach on politics or the doctrine of predestination.[85] By asserting that his lost religious treatise followed

[85] James I, "His Maisties Declaration, Touching his proceedings in the *late Assemblie and Conuention* of Parliament," *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville, (Cambridge: Cambridge

the teachings of "those fathers, and wiser guides / Whom faction had not drawn to study sides," Jonson appears, in fact, to be taking sides, supporting James's bid to end the factional strife of the 1620s.[86]

It would be wrong to read these lines solely through a political lens, however. Jonson adopts a similar posture of religious humility in a number of other works, a fact that suggests the convictions expressed in the poem transcend its immediate political circumstance. Consider, for instance, the speaker's struggle in "An Elegy on My Muse...the Lady Venetia Digby" (*Und.* 84.9) to balance his desire to apotheosize Lady Digby with the imperative to exhibit humility toward divine mysteries. No sooner does he imagine Lady Digby in her resurrected state -- "where love is all the guest, / And the whole banquet is full sight of God" (63-65) -- than he pulls back from the vision, exclaiming,

> Better be dumb than superstitious!
> Who violates the Godhead is most vicious
> Against the nature he would worship. He
> Will honoured be in all simplicity,
> Have all his actions wondered at and viewed
> With silence and amazement, not with rude
> Dull, and profane, weak, and imperfect eyes,
> Have busy search made in his mysteries! (73-80)

University Press, 1994), 261; Kenneth Finch and Peter Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policy of King James I," *Journal of British Studies*, 24.2 (1985): 199.

[86] For James' and Jonson's ecumenical irenicism, see David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 155-72, and Anthony W. Johnson, "Jonson's Eirenic Community: The Case of *The Masque of Augurs* (1622)" in *Writing and Religion in England, 1558-1689*, eds. Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 169-94.

Jonson here unequivocally states that God's mysteries should command our silence. When ultimately he gives in to his desire to describe Lady Digby's heavenly surroundings, he pointedly avoids speculating on doctrinal mysteries. Such knowledge, he intimates, is for the resurrected Lady Digby, to whom the "holy, great, and glorious mystery" of the trinity has now been revealed (129).

Certain sections of the *Discoveries* also promote anti-factionalism and anti-curiosity in terms similar to those found in "An Execration." The best known of these passages is an adaptation from Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio* (1524) in which Jonson declares his disdain for "fencers in religion" who, like "swaggerers in a tavern,…turn everything into a weapon" (757, 750). Scriptural controversies, he asserts, "carried with more labour than profit, are odious, where most time the truth is lost in the midst, or left untouched. And the fruit of their fight is they spit one upon another, and are both defiled" (753-56). A similar passage, derived in part from Justus Lipsius's *Politica* (1614), likewise warns against inordinate curiosity and exegetical hubris – factors Catholics identified as central causes of factionalism:

> Man is read in his face, God in his creatures; but not as the philosopher, the creature of glory reads him, but as the divine, the servant of humility; yet even he must take care, not to be too curious. For to utter truth of God (but as he thinks only) may be dangerous, who is best known by our not knowing. (377-80)

We see again the language of humility present in "An Execration," here lodged conspicuously in a text in which Jonson arrogates to himself, as a poet, the knowledge of all arts. The sharp limit Jonson places on his right to seek and publish the mysteries of God stands out in this context, seeming to stem from a real sense that claims to such knowledge are dangerous. Even a divine, he argues, must exercise caution in spiritual inquiry, being careful not to interpret

scripture according to his own private desires - "as he thinks only." This caveat, which does not appear in Jonson's Lipsian source, is particularly significant, as it was a common refrain in Catholic and anti-Calvinist critiques of Protestant and Puritan exegesis.[87] As observed in the introduction, many Catholics believed the claims to inspiration that underwrote Protestant exegesis (claims that dovetailed with those made by the period's poets) "amounted to subjectivity, even solipsism," promoting a "private theory of meaning" that resulted in heresy and faction.[88] The first person fully to articulate this argument, notably, was Erasmus, in the very lines of *De libero arbitrio* that Jonson excerpts in *Discoveries.*

As early as *Enchiridion* (1501) Erasmus warned readers "in bringing mysteries…to light" not to "follow the conjectures of [their] own mind[s]," an admonishment he would repeat with greater force in the foreward to the third edition of his Latin New Testament (1522).[89] By the time he wrote his missive against Luther, he had come to see willfully subjective biblical exegesis coupled with an absolutist approach to religious truth as the greatest causes of recent religious upheaval. He lambasts theologians who are "uncontrollably attached to an opinion and cannot tolerate anything that disagrees with it."[90] Solipsism and violence go hand in hand, he argues, for those who believe their own interpretation of scripture to contain the one, inspired truth:

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[87] The passage from Lipsius reads, "Nec plura addam: quia *de deo etiam vera dicere periculosum est:* Qui *melius scitur, nesciendo*," that is, "I will not add more [about the nature of God]; since *it is dangerous even to speak the truth about God.* Who *is better known by not being known*" (*Politica: Six Books of Politics or Political Instruction*, ed. and trans. Jan Waszing (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2004), 264-65).

[88] Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 151. See also Barbour, *Literature and Religious Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, 98-103.

[89] Desiderius Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 66, trans. Charles Fantazzi, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 69.

[90] Erasmus, *De Libero Arbitrio: A Discussion of Free Will*, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 76, ed. Charles Trinkhaus, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 7.

> Just so boys immoderately in love with a girl imagine they see the object of their love wherever they turn, or, to give a better comparison, when people have come to blows they turn anything that happens to be at hand, be it a cup or a dish, into a weapon….What results do disputations like this produce, beyond each party going off covered with the others spit?[91]

Far from being divinely inspired, Lutheran exegesis, Erasmus maintains, is madness -- delusional, destructive and utterly opposed to the will of Christ. In contrast to what he perceives as the presumptive individualism of Lutheranism, Erasmus envisions a faith in which each Christian sacrifices his or her private will to the common good, subordinating their own beliefs to those of the Church, "whether [they] fully understand what the church commands or not."[92] To accord with this principle, laymen must cease and desist the search for scriptural mysteries, recognizing that "in Holy Scripture there are some secret places into which God did not intend us to penetrate very far, and if we attempt to do so, the farther in we go the less and less clearly we see."[93]

This position marks a significant reversal for Erasmus, who declared less than a decade prior that while "the state secrets of kings have to be concealed, Christ wanted his mysteries to be disseminated as widely as possible."[94] By 1524, the political and spiritual battlegrounds of the Reformation had convinced him that the cost of egalitarian Biblical access was simply too high. "What results have these laborious arguments so far brought," he pointedly asks, "except that, with great cost to unity, we love too little even as we try to know too much?" Concluding that

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid., 4.

[93] Ibid., 8.

[94] Erasmus, "Paracelsis: or, An Exhortation," in *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company,1989), 121

"it is more reverent to adore the unknown than to analyze the incomprehensible," Erasmus suggests venerating doctrines such as the holy trinity and the incarnation of Christ with a "mystical silence."[95] The heart of the Christian message, he argues, does not lie in the deep recesses of doctrinal mysteries, but rather in the plain Gospel message of love and goodness. Unlike the inscrutable paradoxes of the trinity or of predestination, "the precepts for a good life" are "things [God] intended to be absolutely clear to us."[96] Erasmus surmises that if we turn to scripture for lessons in virtue, we may avoid the contention that emerges from thorny theological disputes, resting assured that "Here indeed is the word of God, which need not be sought by scaling the heights of heaven or brought back from far across the sea, but is close at hand, in our mouths and in our hearts. These should be learned by everyone."[97]

Though Erasmus's oppositional stance toward the Catholic hierarchy led his works to be placed on the papal index of forbidden books in 1559, his message regarding religious mystery was shared by several influential English Catholic thinkers. In 1529, Thomas More railed against the "inordinate" curiosity of men who "vnlerned though they rede it in theyr langage / wyll be bysy to enserch and dyspute the grete secrete mysteryes of scrypture / whiche thoughe they here they be not able to perceyue."[98] He maintained that "This thynge is playnly forboden vs that be not appoynted nor instructed thereto."[99] Some fifty years later, the same message was taken up by the translators of the Douai-Rheims *New Testament* (1582), who in the work's preface argue forcefully that scripture should be used as a tool for moral instruction, not for theological debate.

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[95] Erasmus, *De Libero Arbitrio*, 10-11.

[96] Ibid., 10.

[97] Ibid.

[98] More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, 333.

[99] Ibid.

Keen to link post-Reformation spiritual and political turmoil with Protestant presumption, the translators contend that by upsetting the divinely appointed relationship between layman and priest Protestant hermeneutics threaten to upend all social hierarchies.

Adding to the chaos, the translators assert, is Protestantism's tendency to degrade "good life" and manners by leading individuals to ignore the Bible's moral teachings in favor of its dazzling mysteries. The pride at the heart of Protestantism, they maintain, pushes readers to

> either contemn or easily pass over all the [Bible's] moral parts, good examples and precepts of life (by which as well the simple as the learned might be much edified) and only in a manner, occupy themselves in dogmatical, mystical, high and hidden secrets of God's counsels, as of Predestination, reprobation, election...and other incomprehensible mysteries.[100]

In a barbed attack on the rhetoric of reform, the translators assert that the Protestant approach to Holy Writ runs exactly counter to that espoused by the primitive Church, which "used [the scriptures] with fear and reverence, and specially such parts as pertained to good life and manners, not meddling, but in pulpit and schools (and that moderately, too) with the hard and high mysteries and places of greater difficulty."[101] Good life and manners, not hard and high mysteries, are for the Douai-Rheims translators, as for Erasmus, the true substance of Christianity.

We see, then, that Catholics of all stripes commonly viewed the Protestant search for transcendent scriptural mysteries as profane, presumptuous, solipsistic and socially disruptive. They urged Christians to study morals rather than mysteries, to promote the public good over

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[100] *The Preface to the Rheims New Testament* in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Lewis Bray (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1994), 373.

[101] Ibid., 368.

private interest and to defer to church authorities on matters of scriptural interpretation. This vantage point is one Jonson seems temperamentally disposed to admire, and if he could be proven to hold it, it would go some way toward explaining the emphatically ethical bent of his works. Unfortunately, given the permanent loss of his "humble gleanings in divinity," there is no definitive way to determine Jonson's beliefs on the issue. Nevertheless, as I have shown, several of his works may be seen to endorse various elements of the Catholic position. One poem in particular, which I will examine by way of concluding this section, emphatically defends the poet's subordination of ineffable mysteries to everyday virtues.

Written in 1631, "An Elegy on the Death of the Lady Jane Paulet, Marchioness of Winchester" plumbs the boundaries of the natural and supernatural in a manner that is rare for Jonson. A proto-gothic elegy on the death of Lady Jane Paulet, a Catholic English woman who had recently died in childbirth, this relatively neglected poem makes one of his most direct statements on the poet's relationship to human and divine knowledge. The elegy unfolds according to an elaborate conceit stemming from a fateful encounter between its unnamed speaker and Paulet's "gentle ghost" (*Und.* 83.1). Mesmerized by her beauty, the speaker follows the beckoning spirit, lamenting that she has no breath to "give [her] shade a name" (7). He persists in his inquiry even as he realizes with a sense of "horror" that his joints are stiffening and his blood turning to steel. When at last he identifies the ghost as the daughter of "Great Savage of the Rock," (Paulet's father), he is immediately punished for his curiosity as his body turns to stone and Paulet's shade disappears.

This unfortunate turn of events serves as a catalyst for the elegy that follows. Finding himself "all marble" and thus unable to write, the metamorphosed speaker calls upon Fame to "write the rest" of Paulet's elegy "upon [his] breast," so that he "who would her poet have

become / At least may bear th' inscription to her tomb" (13-18). Rendered figuratively coextensive with his own text, the would-be poet's body becomes a conduit for Fame's inscriptions. Even with this drastic intervention, the speaker's efforts to eulogize Paulet get off to a rocky start. In an exchange that provides a parallel to his earlier interaction with the deceased's ghost, the speaker asks Fame to "Sound [Paulet's] virtues, give her soul a name" (21) – a request to which Fame responds in a violently negative manner. "Had I a thousand mouths, as many tongues / And a voice to raise them from my brazen lungs," she proclaims

> I durst not aim at that…
>
> ... I or my trump must break,
>
> But rather I, should I of that part speak!
>
> It is too near of kin to heaven, the soul,
>
> To be described! Fame's fingers are too foul
>
> To touch these mysteries! We may admire
>
> The blaze and splendour, but not handle fire! (24-32)

This is, to say the least, an odd way to begin an encomium. Not only does the passage dwell at length upon a subject the poem cannot speak of, but it also raises the specter of Fame's cataclysmic destruction – an event that, given the poem's central conceit, would threaten the existence of its speaker and the poetic text. The hyperbolic force of Fame's reaction underscores the sense of taboo she associates with the speaker's request. For worldly Fame, to speak of divine mysteries would be as foolish as handling fire, a symbol that here recalls Prometheus' theft from the Olympian gods and God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush. Unlike the poem's speaker, whose presumption in naming a spirit led to his own frightful transfiguration,

Fame chooses to observe the limits placed on earthly knowledge, admiring holy mysteries without deigning to touch them.

The passage is also striking in the way that Jonson's Fame distances herself from the pagan Fama, frequently depicted with the abundance of mouths and tongues ascribed to her by Virgil's *Aeneid*. By divesting herself of these iconographical attributes, Fame prompts readers to consider her words in light of Christian tradition. This is significant not only in terms of her turn away from heavenly mysteries, but also with regard to the actions that follow. Refusing to allow the elegy to end in failure, both its primary and secondary speakers muted by their elevated subject matter, Fame declares that while she cannot name Paulet's soul, she can praise her earthly behavior: "What she did here, by great example well / T'enlive posterity her fame may tell!" (33-34). Briefly alluding to Paulet's noble lineage, she goes on to enumerate her many virtues and recount the stoic equanimity with which she faced death. This speech generally accords with Cicero's prescribed formula for funeral orations, which advises orators to list the deceased's virtues and brave deeds in order to prove that they "made a right use" of their earthly fortunes.[102] However, Fame's classical speech is undergirded by Christian principles. By turning her attention away from Paulet's heavenly soul and towards her human actions, Fame -- and the poem through her -- performs an act of reverent humility. At the same time, she works to "enliven" posterity, providing imitable examples of Paulet's virtuous deeds that would have been absent from a treatise on her immortal soul.

To at once soften and reinforce her message, Fame reminds readers that divine mysteries will be revealed to Christians after death. Imagining Paulet in heaven, she muses that "now, through circumfusèd light, she looks / On nature's secrets, there, as her own books: / … /

[102] Cicero, *de Oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1948), 2.10.44-45 and 2.84-85.

Beholds her Maker, and in him doth see / What the beginnings of all beauties be" (70-74). One might contrast this sentiment with John Donne's assertion in *The Second Anniversary* (1611) that Elizabeth Drury grew "in th'Art of knowing Heauen,… / Here upon Earth, to such perfection, / That shee hath, ever since to Heauen shee came, / (In a far fairer print,) but read the same."[103] This passage goes some way towards explaining Jonson's infamous distaste for Donne's *Anniversaries*. The aversion to divine knowledge he displays in the elegy on Paulet and elsewhere is not a marker of skepticism but of piety, an acknowledgement that there are some boundaries the earthly poet must not cross. The speaker's stone body stands in the text (and, metaphorically, *as* the text) as an emblem of this lesson, reminding readers that, for Jonson, poetry is meant to shape human action, not transcend it.

'Mysteries of manners, arms, and arts': Civil and Uncivil Sacraments in Jonson's Poetry

At this stage of my analysis, two potential problems emerge. While Jonson declines to grapple with complex points of doctrine, he exhibits a career-long fascination with mystery. The word appears some sixty times throughout his works in reference to the diverse arts and rituals of fencing, tobacco smoking, courtship, statecraft, marriage, court masques, women's arts, the parasite's craft, alchemy, manners, gypsy tricks, midwifery, the barber's profession, hawking, horse racing, and more. The relationship between these active mysteries, many of which are fraudulent, and the contemplative mysteries discussed above therefore remains to be determined. Secondly, though I have argued that Jonson's sense of orthodox humility is tied to his status as a

[103] John Donne, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 300. All citations of Donne's poetry will be taken from this edition. Future citations will appear parenthetically in the text.

layperson, he himself often identifies poets as priests. Shouldn't he then believe himself authorized to expound Christian mysteries?

The answers to these questions, I suggest, lie in Jonson's conceptualization of manners and the related spheres of civility and ethics as mysteries – mysteries not in the sense of transcendent or ineffable truths, but of sacred arts and rituals that mediate between divine truth and human action. Though most Catholic writers cautioned against open discussion of doctrinal mysteries, they viewed the teaching of "manners" as profitable for all Christians. It is precisely the realm of manners, understood as the ritualized expression of moral ideals, which Jonson claims as the poet's purview. Following his master Horace, who bids "the learnèd maker look / On life, and manners, and make those his book" ("Art of Poetry" 453-55), Jonson declares the poet "a master in manners; [who] can alone, or with a few, effect the business of mankind" (*Volpone* "The Epistle" 22-23). The art of poetry, he observes in *Discoveries*, is "the absolute mistress of manners and nearest of kin to virtue," and its degradation is bound up with the decay of manners and the state (1701). "Wheresoever manners, and fashions are corrupted," he writes, "language is….The excess of feasts and apparel are the notes of a sick state, and the wantonness of language, of a sick mind" (684-85). Perusing Jonson's works, we find that any number of the false mysteries he lambasts, from fencing in *The Case is Altered* (1597) and *Every Man In his Humour* (1598) to tobacco smoking in *Every Man Out* (1599) and horsing and hawking in *Discoveries* are in fact fashions mistaken for manners. These soulless arts, lauded by their practitioners as mysteries, lead to social dissolution and the base worship of corporeal rites. Conversely, texts such as "To Penshurst" depict true manners as a mystery that blurs the

boundaries between craft and sacrament, working to bind together the sacred order of the commonwealth.[104]

Peterson has elucidated the Stoic and Neoplatonic underpinnings of Jonson's distaste for empty forms of fashion, opposed in his works to "full" men whose bodies are "informed" by virtuous souls.[105] I argue that Jonson's use of the term "mystery" to heap praise and blame upon these arts suggests an additional sacramental dimension to his treatment of them. Jonson never characterizes weaving, tilling and other "arts that serve the body" as mysteries, despite the fact that they were regularly designated as such in the period (*Discoveries* 113-15). When not used to describe divine truth, mystery serves an almost exclusively epideictic function in his works, praising the noblest forms of human ceremony and labor and satirizing the basest. In taking it upon himself to administer the true mystery of manners and destroy the false mystery of fashion, Jonson positions himself as neither Protestant seer nor rude mechanical, but something in between, a priest and craft master for whom the "business of mankind" is itself an efficacious rite.

What we find reflected in his distinction between manners and fashion is a conflict in the early modern discourse of manners centering on the art's ethical and spiritual merits. In its most idealistic form, the craft of manners was seen to reflect and condition one's inner virtue. Both the Protestant and Catholic reform movements embraced the "new manners" as a vehicle for moral reform, seeing in its disciplined behaviors a means of subordinating the animalistic passions of

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[104] On Jonson and manners, see Michael C. Schoenfeldt, "'The Mysteries of Manners, Armes, and Arts": 'Inviting a Friend to Supper' and "To Penshurst,'" in "*The Muses Common-weal": Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), 62-79; and Lorna Hutson, "Civility and Virility in Ben Jonson," *Representations* 78, no.1 (2002): 1-27.

[105] Peterson, 70-101.

the lower body to the Godlike rationality of the upper.[106] This is the vision of the art promulgated in Erasmus's *De civilitate morum puerilium* (1530), a book given curricular pride of place in Latin schools across Europe. Though he readily acknowledges the political utility of good manners, Erasmus insistently figures the art as an ornament to the greater pursuits of religious piety and the liberal arts. While noting that it "is seemly for the whole man to be well ordered in mind, body, gesture and clothing," he maintains that true nobility belongs to "everyone who cultivates their mind in liberal studies."[107] Such well composed minds declare themselves in the countenances of those who possess them; they cannot be imitated by empty gestures.

While manners could serve as a virtue-producing technology, however, its emphasis on external appearances and reliance on the dissimulating practice of *sprezzatura* (theorized in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528)), simultaneously threatened to undermine virtue. Harry Berger, Jr. details this phenomenon, as well as the spiritual conflicts it produced, in his analysis of Giovanni della Casa's *Galateo* (1558), a courtesy book that notably opposes manners to virtue.[108] *Galateo*'s narrator admits that the virtues of "liberality, courage, or generosity are without doubt far greater and more praiseworthy things" than decorous manners.[109] However, he observes that manners are more useful than virtues since many men "not worthy of high praise in other things" have procured advancement as a result of their facility

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[106] Cf. Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 125-54; and Dilwyn Knox, "Erasmus's *Civilitate* and the Religious Origins of Civility in Protestant Europe," *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte*, 83 (1995): 7-55.

[107] Erasmus, *De civilitate morum puerilium*, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 25, ed. J. K. Sowards, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 273-74.

[108] Harry Berger, Jr., *The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Renaissance Courtesy Books*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2000.

[109] Giovanni Della Casa, *Galateo*, trans. Konrad Eisenbichler and Kenneth R. Bartlett, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 3.

with the art.[110] The narrator foregrounds this split between manners and morals throughout the text, in a performance Berger reads as a foxlike exposé of the code of behavior taught by *Galateo* itself. The world of *Galateo* is one replete with ceremonies that are shadows rather than substance, in which empty words and gestures have replaced virtuous actions. Though the metaphorical weaponry of the new manners has largely replaced the war machinery wielded by the feudal nobility, civility has come at some cost. It has yielded an "apprehensive society dominated by the desire to take and the fear of being taken," in which people are punished not for their sins, but for their failure to conform to arbitrary and ever changing rules of conduct.[111]

This is the culture that Jonson believed to pervade the English court. His works seek to transform court manners along Erasmian lines, purging its members of their humourous fixation with fashion. Central to this goal is Jonson's rejection of *sprezzatura* in favor of the inspired labor of the poet's mystery. As Laurie Ellinghausen has detailed, Jonson seeks to distinguish his poetry from that of courtly amateurs by calling attention to the strenuous labor that produces it. He parallels this labor with that required by the art of manners -- an art, like poetry, that takes a significant amount of time to master. "It were strange that he / Who was this morning Anderson should be / Sidney ere night," he writes in "An Epistle to Sir Edward Sackville." "'Tis by degrees that men arrive at glad / Profit in aught; each day some little add; / In time 'twill make a heap. This is not true / Alone in money, but in manners too" (127-36).

Jonson also, however, relentlessly exposes the labor courtiers exert to maintain fashionable appearances, revealing the hypocrisy that fuels their purportedly artless performances. What distinguishes the poet's art from the courtier's, then, is not the degree of work each requires. Rather, it is the degree to which the work is inspired, raised above the realm

[110] Ibid., 4.

[111] Berger, 211.

of mechanical labor by a "divine instinct." By attempting to transform fashionable aristocrats into well-mannered nobles, Jonson seeks to lead the court away from a corporeal, ultimately idolatrous mystery towards an art in which virtue and its habitual bodily expression are mutually reinforcing. In this art, as in the poet's craft, human labor and divine inspiration are interdependent forces.

Though it arguably receives its greatest expression in the 1616 folio, the notion that poetry teaches the mystery of manners is present in nascent form quite early in Jonson's career. In Act 2 of *Every Man in His Humour,* Lorenzo Senior "decipher[s]" the "deep, concealed, and precious mystery" of the microcosm / macrocosm, observing that just as a "sullen wife" opposes her husband in the body of marriage and political traitors "rebel / Against their sovereign" in the body politic, so human affections "tread / Upon [the] holy and anointed head" of Reason until brought under the sway of its "rules" (2.2.9-10, 25-26). While mystery in these lines is presented as a hidden truth, it takes on an active character when ritually enacted through the Jonsonian comedy of humors, a form in which the force of satire is used to purge unruly affections, returning individual characters to the rule of reason and order to the body politic. Though the mystery of humors comedy is not specifically a mystery of manners, it does share in the new manners' goal of disciplining the passions so that they might be brought into line with human reason.

The mystery Lorenzo Senior elucidates is not only the governing conceit of humors comedy, but also of *Hymenaei* (1606), a court masque that presents the rational ordering of the body politic as a full blown sacramental rite. Performed at court on January 5 and 6, 1606, in honor of the ill-fated marriage of Frances Howard and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, the masque uses the occasion of their nuptials to promote King James's equally ill-fated policy of

Union. *Hymenaei's* mysteries have long captured the imagination of literary scholars, who have analyzed them in relation to Renaissance iconography, Neoplatonic allegory and (increasingly since the advent of New Historicism) the *arcana imperii,* or mysteries of state. Scholars, however, have largely failed to recognize the sacramental overtones of the masque's mysteries. Though Andrew W. Johnson recently noted that "it is easy to sense, behind a masque like *Hymenaei,* with its altars, priests and vestments, ritualistic elements that are strongly reminiscent of the Catholic mass," little has been made of these and other factors that position the masque as, if not a Eucharistic mystery, at least a civil sacrament.[112]

In order to understand how mystery functions in the masque, it is important first to turn, as so many scholars have, to *Hymenaei*'s famous preface, which contains Jonson's earliest statement on the masque genre as well as his lengthiest remarks on mystery. "It is a noble and just advantage that the things subjected to understanding have over those which are objected to sense," he writes

> that the one sort are but momentary and merely taking, the other impressing and lasting. Else the glory of all these solemnities had perished like a blaze, and gone out in the beholders' eyes. So short-lived are the bodies of all things in comparison of their souls....This it hath made the most royal princes and greatest persons, who are commonly the personators of these actions, not only studious of riches and magnificence in the outward celebration or show...but curious after the most high and hearty inventions to furnish the inward parts, and those grounded upon antiquity and solid learnings, which, though their voice be taught to sound to present occasions, their sense or doth or should always lay hold on more removed mysteries. (1-13)

[112] Johnson, 180-81.

As Joseph Loewenstein observes, critics have often interpreted this passage's dualistic vision of the masque form as antagonistic, seeing in its opposition of subjects and objects, souls and bodies, removed mysteries and present occasions a pronouncement of poetry's superiority over the spectacle of masque performance that anticipates Jonson's quarrel with Inigo Jones.[113]

This reading does not, however, take account of Jonson's discomfort with mysteries unmoored from the body of tradition, nor does it make sense of the fact that *Hymenaei* is a ceremony that celebrates "union[s] of unequals."[114] Husband and wife, reason and passion, king and subject, England and Scotland and the divine and human are all wedded in and by the rites of the masque. That one half of each of these pairings is considered superior to the other does not mean that the two should be separated. Rather, as in a sacramental mystery (and marriage, notably, is designated as such by the Catholic Church), the comingling of unequal opposites signifies divine perfection and grace.[115] It is the poet's role not to disavow the body in favor of the soul, but, like the priest performing a mass, to join the two in a mystical union. The fact that the term "mysteries" is used in the masque proper only to refer to rituals being performed, not to esoteric knowledge, is one indication that *Hymenaei* is intended to bring about such unions. As in a Christian sacrament, removed mysteries cannot be distinguished from the present occasion in which they are manifest, for the occasion *is* the mystery.

Loewenstein astutely notes that a union of contraries is implied in the very language of the preface, which "use[s] the same word, *sense*, to describe both the fugitive experience of the

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[113] Joseph Loewenstein, "Printing and 'The Multitudinous Presse': The Contentious Texts of Jonson's Masques," *Ben Jonson's 1616 Folio*, eds. Jennifer Brady and Wyman H. Herendeen, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1991), 179-80.

[114] Butler, 119.

[115] As Butler observes, this is signaled in the masque through an emphasis on the nuptial number 5 (a combination of 2 and 3) as a symbol of perfection (119).

spectator and the purport of the masque's 'inward part.'"[116] This is not the only such slippage in the passage, however. Most obviously, the "not only / but also" construction of the fifth sentence signifies that spectators are correct to care about both the outward spectacle and inward moral of the masque, a sentiment conveyed typographically by the elaborate design of the printed masque text, which calls attention to the material body that houses the work's poetic soul. Looking closely, we also find that *Hymenaei*'s renowned "more removed mysteries" are said to be taken from "high and hearty inventions…*grounded* upon antiquity and solid learnings." This paradoxical grounding of the removed is enacted centrally within the masque, as Reason seeks to quell a rebellious uprising of the Humours and Affections by explaining the "mystic sense" of *Hymeneai*'s "mysterious rites" from "th'authentic grounds" (131-34).[117]

In subduing, though not expelling, the Humours and Affections that threaten the order of the human body, the body of marriage and the body politic, Reason takes on the role of the satirist in humors comedy. The connection between the mysteries of the plays and *Hymenaei* is underlined in Jonson's marginal explication of the Humours' rebellion, which draws the same analogical connection between disturbances in natural bodies, politic bodies and the "mystical body" of marriage "and the rites that were soul unto it" as does Lorenzo Senior in *Every Man In* (*Hymenaei* 9n). While his humors comedy does not indicate that the ordering of these corresponding bodies has any strong religious significance (though Lorenzo Senior does describe

[116] Loewenstein, "The Multitudinous Press," 179. As John Peacock observes, *Hymenaei*'s preface is in part a riposte to the preface of Samuel Daniel's *Vision of the Twelve Goddesses* (1604), which follows Italian poetic theory in depicting the court masque as a dream or fantasy and its mysteries as subject to the whims of the poet's present needs. This vision of the masque form may be seen to share certain commonalities with what (to the Catholic mind) are Protestant approaches to scriptural mysteries. It is perhaps unsurprising that Jonson responds to Daniel by arguing that true mysteries are grounded in ancient tradition, not devised to fit our immediate desires. They are rites performed by priests, not dream visions expounded (as in *A Vision*) by prophetic Sibyls. Cf. Peacock, "Ben Jonson's Masques and Italian Culture," in *Theatre of the English and Italian Renaissance* , eds. J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (London: Macmillan, 1991), 73-95.

[117] It is also enacted visually in this and other masque texts, where Jonson's plentiful marginalia serve to literally and figuratively ground the poetry of the masque in references to learned authorities.

Reason as “holy and anointed”), *Hymenaei* clearly presents this mystery as a sacred rite, presided over by Reason, Hymen, the god and priest of marriage, Juno, the goddess of “nuptial mysteries” and James, the “king and priest of peace” (72) who “with so much sacred pain” has “bound” the kingdoms of England and Scotland (377-79). James's “sacred pain” parallels that of both the masque's bride and bridegroom, whose union is described as a “sacrifice” (72), and its poet, whose labor is featured so eminently in the masque’s paratextual apparatus. Like the sacrifice of the Eucharist, *Hymenaei*’s rites of union effect reparation on a cosmic scale, an event represented in the masque by the dancers’ climactic depiction of the “golden chain let down from heaven” that “bind[s]” each member of the created order, from “the Supreme God even to the bottommost dregs of the universe” (281; 42n). To constrain one’s humors and affections under the rule of reason, ensuring, as Reason remarks, that the “gall” is purged from civil “sacrifice[s]” (290-91) is thus to participate in a divine mystery, to sacrifice one’s private desires for the good of communities both civil and sacred.

By characterizing poetry’s ritual subordination of passion to reason as a mystery, Jonson comes close to aligning the mysteries of his craft with the manners he claims as his subject. This connection is made explicit in the conclusion of “To Penshurst,” in lines complimenting the Viscount and Lady Lisle’s education of their children. “They are / and have been taught religion,” Jonson exclaims, “thence / Their gentler spirits have sucked innocence. / Each morn and even they are taught to pray, / With the whole household, and may, every day, / Read, in their virtuous parents' noble parts, / The mysteries of manners, arms, and arts” (93-98). As Michael Schoenfeldt observes, Jonson’s peculiar assertion that the young Lisles “Read” the mysteries embodied by their parents serves to connect the mysteries mastered by the Sidney

family with those exemplified by his own text.[118] The spiritual character of these mysteries, which editions typically gloss merely as crafts or arts, has gone unnoticed, however, perhaps because of the secular bent of manners criticism.

As my analysis of *Hymenaei* demonstrated, Jonson often treats the mysteries of civil order in religious terms. [119] This is the case, I would suggest, in "To Penshurst," which indicates the double signification of "mysteries" syntactically, setting the young Lisles' exposure to the mysteries of manners, arms, and arts parallel to their instruction in prayer, a connection reinforced by the corresponding liturgical time markers "Each morn and even" and "every day." Daily prayer and exercise in virtuous mysteries are thus presented as complementary aspects of "be[ing] taught religion." In a clever twist, Jonson's emphasis on "reading" serves to balance contemplative paradigms of mystery, based on the interpretation of sacred texts, with active, concerned with the performance of sacred rituals. The Lisle children, like all good Protestants, read Christian mysteries. Those mysteries are not, however, profound doctrinal revelations, but instead craft-rituals embodied in their noble parents, whose virtuous actions serve family, state and God.

In addition to the family's venerable poetic heritage, what is in part so remarkable about the Sidneys in Jonson's estimation is their demonstration of true nobility apart from their aristocratic lineage. So many nobles in his works are shown to worship at the wrong altars, being either unable or unwilling to distinguish the mysteries of manners from the hollow arts of fashion

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[118] Though Jonson did not, as Schoenfeldt observes, have "the 'arms,' or status, of a gentleman" (63), he did serve as a soldier in his youth and so could claim, with the Sidneys, to have wielded arms in England's defense.

[119] We see a similar portrayal of mystery as civil sacrament in the opening lines of "Lord Bacon's Birthday" (*Und.* 51): "Hail, happy genius of this ancient pile, / How comes it all things so about thee smile? / The fire, the wine, the men! And in the midst / Thou stand'st as if some mystery thou didst!" (1-4). Figured as a pagan deity, the noble Bacon stands among his friends and followers as if presiding over a sacramental rite. While this might seem like a somewhat overblown description of a birthday party, the poem makes it clear that in honoring Bacon – who has been appointed Keeper of the Seal - the text celebrates the kingdom of England as a whole.

– a failure with grave consequences for the commonwealth. Though Jonson's satire of false mysteries does attack commoners as well as aristocrats (in "An Epistle to Edward Sackville" (*Und.* 13) for instance, he describes those who enjoy the "mystery" of coney-catching pamphlets as participants in a profane communion), the fashionable nobility are a special target of his ire.[120] Such aristocrats, whose false mysteries we might term uncivil sacraments, are described prominently in *Discoveries* in a passage on "scurrilous" comedies. Citing Aristophanes' *The Clouds* as an example of a comedy that fails to morally edify its audience, Jonson asks

> What could have made the audience laugh like to see Socrates presented - that example of all good life, honesty, and virtue - to have him hoisted up with a pulley, and there play the philosopher in a basket; measure how many foot a flea could skip geometrically by a just scale, and edify the people from the engine?....This is profitable, this instructs, and would inform us! What need we know anything, that are nobly born, more than a horse race, or a hunting match, our day to break with citizens, and such innate mysteries? (1889-98)

Typical of Jonson's satire of false mysteries, the dark humor of this passage derives from the nobles' dismissal of Socrates' "example of all good life, honesty, and virtue" (Erasmus's favorite example after Christ himself) in favor of the empty "mysteries" of horsing, hunting and socializing. Their direct inversion of priorities reveals a sickness endemic to society itself, suggesting that fleshly pastimes have replaced the virtuous practice of the good life.

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[120] Of those who enjoy the criminal exploits of coney-catching (described by Robert Greene as a "mysticall science"), experiencing a "religious horror" at "the taking a clown's purse" (90) and "giving worship" upon witnessing "th'kicking of a punk" (93), Jonson muses: "Sure there's a mystery in it I not know / That men such reverence to such actions show! / And almost deify the authors, make / Loud sacrifice of drink for their health's sake, / Rere-suppers in their names, and spend whole nights / Unto their praise, in certain swearing rites! (97-102) Unlike true poets, such authors teach false mysteries rather than true, leading men to partake in profane rites rather than to practice "the skill / or science of discerning good and ill" (109-110).

This sickness is detailed with greater savagery in "A Speech According to Horace," in which Jonson castigates the Caroline aristocracy's damaging pursuit of fashion in terms identical to those used in his discussion of *The Clouds*. "Why are we rich or great," he asks, once again ventriloquizing the nobles,

> except to show
> All licence in our lives? What need we know,
> More than to praise a dog, or horse, or speak
> The hawking language, or our day to break
> With citizens? Let clowns and tradesmen breed
> Their sons to study arts, the laws, the creed:
> We will believe, like men of our own rank,
> In so much land a year, or such a bank,
> That turns us so much moneys, at which rate
> Our ancestors imposed on prince and state. (69-78)

Though these lines do not directly invoke the concept of mystery present in *Discoveries*, they tell the same tale of social perversion bordering on profanation. England's nobility is shown to have deviated radically from social and religious norms, giving not only their time, but also their belief, to the gods of leisure, profit and – above all -- fashion. Leaving the defense and rule of the country to the sons of clowns and tradesmen, they pursue the "study" of "Gait, / Carriage, and dressing," meeting one another at "The academy" to "make legs" (87-90). They believe that their "blood is now become / Past any need of virtue" and so sacrifice their humanity to appearances. No longer fully living, they are mere "carcasses of honour; tailors' blocks, / Covered with tissue" (99-100). Like the courtiers we will encounter in *Cynthia's Revels*, these men pursue a mystery

where there is none and in doing so threaten the state and their own souls. If they are to be saved, they must learn to comport themselves according to reason, to learn virtue and good living through the mystery of manners. If they are to be saved, they need a poet.

"In sacred raptures swimming": Jonson Belabors Inspiration

Despite Jonson's conviction that the poet is a master of manners, both he and his contemporaries recognized that his own manners left something to be desired. Beyond his youthful venery and murder of the actor Gabriel Spencer, he was prone to drunkenness, gluttony, envy and self-praise. His more serious moral failings were compounded by his tendency to dominate conversations, boasting of his own talents while insulting the works of his fellow poets. Yet he genuinely believed that one could not "be a good poet without first being a good man" (*Volpone* "Preface" 17), and he maintained throughout his career that true poets are among "those few can think, / Conceive, express, and steer the souls of men" (*Staple of News* 1627 22-23). That Jonson felt himself in any way qualified to administer the mystery of manners indicates, I suggest, his belief in the power of poetry to elevate the poet, to raise him, through the combined forces of labor and sacred inspiration, to the dual role of priest and master craftsman of humanity.

Many of his contemporaries mocked this vision as ludicrous pretension. Act 2 of Thomas Dekker's *Satiromastix* (1602) takes aim at Jonson's claims to divine inspiration through the boorish character Horace, shown struggling mightily over a poetic composition. Sitting alone in his study, surrounded by books and a lone candle, he intones:

O me thy Priest inspire.

For I to thee and thine immortall name,

In -- in -- in golden tunes,

For I to thee and thine immortall name --

In -- sacred rapures flowing, flowing, swimming, swimming:

In sacred raptures swimming,

Immortall name, game, dame, tame, lame, lame, lame,

Pux, ha it, shame, proclaime, oh --

In Sacred raptures flowing, will proclaime, not --

O me thy Priest inspyre! (1.2.8-17).[121]

The poem Horace writes is a parody of Jonson's early "Ode to James, Earl of Desmond" (*Und.* 25), in which the speaker calls upon Apollo to "inspire / Thy priest in this strange rapture; heat my brain / With Delphic fire / That I may sing my thoughts in some unvulgar strain" (10-12). Dekker's mock depiction of the laboriousness with which Horace's raptures "swim" - a joke on Jonson's famously slow process of composition - exposes the poet's highfaluting rhetoric as a "lame" affectation. Certainly true rapture, if it exists, is an instantaneous and uncontrollable affair - the opposite of Horace's bumbling, bookish efforts. Would a deity, Dekker seems to suggest, really struggle over a rhyme?

When it came to mocking pretensions to divine inspiration, however, Jonson had already beaten Dekker to the punch. In the induction to *Every Man Out of his Humour*, Cordatus responds to Asper's elevated description of the satirist's art by exclaiming, "Why, this is right *furor poeticus*!" (Induction 145), a jibe no less humorous given that the satirist Macilente experiences something akin to the *furor* in the play's last act. Despite this joke, and despite the

[121] Thomas Dekker, *Satoriomastix, or the Untrussing of the Humourous Poet*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, vol. 1, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

fact that he did not appreciate Dekker's characterization of his writing process, the model of "labored inspiration" parodied in *Satiromastix* is one Jonson embraced throughout his career. It is in this twin paradigm of poetic creation - one that strikes a middle-way between inspiration and mechanization - that he locates his claim to be a maker and dispenser of the mystery of manners.

Critics have long recognized the importance of labor to Jonsonian poetics. Bruce Boehrer, Laurie Ellinghausen and others have detailed the extent to which Jonson's authorial self-identity is bound up with his sense of himself as a laborer whose intellectual toil sets his "works" apart from the trifling efforts of poetasters.[122] Scholars have tended to dismiss the importance of inspiration to his poetic theory, however. Boehrer identifies a paradoxical conflict between nature and art in Jonson's poetics, but his definition of nature in terms of the inward self overlooks the role of inspiration and rapture in the poet's discussions of natural wit. Ellinghausen, meanwhile, maintains that the poet "wants his audience to know that what they read from him is the result of laborious *process*, not of fancy, accident, or sudden inspiration."[123]

As I have been arguing, Jonson was certainly suspicious of the potentially prideful subjectivism inherent in claims to inspiration, particularly when such claims were used to buttress an individual's interpretations of transcendent religious truths. This distrust is manifest in his refusal, in David Norbrook's terms, "to present himself as a prophetic poet," a divergence from the Spenserian and Sidneyan ideal reflected in the absence of the Latin *vates* from the *Discoveries*' definition of the term "poet."[124] Nevertheless, Jonson "did not believe that

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[122] Cf. Bruce Thomas Boehrer, "The Poet of Labor: Authorship and Property in the Work of Ben Jonson," *Philological Quarterly* 72.3 (1993): 289-312; Ellinghausen, 63-92.

[123] Ellinghausen (66-67).

[124] Norbrook, 155.

discipline alone would produce real poetry."[125] The *Discoveries* maintains that the first requirement of the "poet or maker" is *ingenium*, or "a goodness of natural wit," a quality described not with reference to the poet's inward self, but rather in terms of possession by a deity -- a sacred rapture:

> For whereas all other arts consist of doctrine and precepts, the poet must be able by nature, and instinct to pour out the treasure of his mind, and as Seneca saith, *aliquando secundum Anacreontem insanire, iucundum esse*: by which he understands, the poetical rapture....Thence it riseth higher, as by a divine instinct, when it contemns common and known conceptions. It utters somewhat above a mortal mouth. Then it gets aloft, and flies away with his rider, whither before it was doubtful to ascend. This the poets understand by their Helicon, Pegasus, or Parnassus;....And hence it is that the coming up of good poets (for I mind not *mediocres,* or *imos*) is so thin and rare among us. Every beggarly corporation affords the state a mayor or two bailiffs yearly, but *solus rex aut poeta non quotannis nascitur*. (1712-29)[126]

As Jonson would have it, good poets are distinguished from poetasters by virtue of their inspiration, not their labor.[127] We see a similar principle at work in his descriptions of architecture, which, as Donaldson notes, indicate that "Building in itself is nothing: what matters is the life that animates a building."[128] Like Lord Lisle, who "dwells" at Penshurst, the poet's

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[125] Stewart, 175.

[126] Jonson's paraphrase of Seneca reads "Sometimes, according to Anacreon, it is a pleasure to be mad." The complete passage also cites Plato and Aristotle on the poet's rapture. Jonson concludes the section by noting that "Only a king, or a poet, is not born every year," a maxim he asserts more forcefully in an epigram addressed to Sir Philip Sidney's daughter Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland, which maintains that "poets are far rarer births than kings" (*Epi*. 79 1).

[127] On "indwelling presences" in Jonson's works, see Peterson, 70-101.

[128] Ian Donaldson, *Jonson's Magic Houses: Essays in Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 69.

sacred rapture animates the structure that is his poem, giving life and spirit to an otherwise hollow carcass. It is the absence of such life that Jonson references when he attacks the false mysteries of the architect's craft in "An Expostulation with Inigo Jones."[129]

To say that Jonson is more invested in the notion of the *divinus furor* than is typically recognized is not to say that he abandons the bodily part of poetic craft. "To Penshurst," for all its celebration of its occupants, is also a poem about a house. Jonson frowns upon the discussion of disembodied souls, and he refuses to seek out mysteries unmediated by structures of hierarchy and tradition. Likewise, he is "sceptical of poetic 'inspiration'...not chanelled by study and application."[130] "A good poet's made as well as born," Jonson writes in his elegy on Shakespeare, and this sentiment is prevalent in *Discoveries,* where artisanal metaphors are repeatedly used to describe the process of poetic making, and where the poet's "perfection of nature" is said to be worthwhile only when combined with exercise, imitation, study and art. While inspiration is essential, an aspiring writer must "not think he can leap forth suddenly a poet by dreaming he hath been in Parnassus, or having washed his lips (as they say) in Helicon" (1767-69). Only "common rhymers" expect to "pour forth verses, such as they are, extempore;" the good poet – like the man of good manners -- labors over his craft (1737-39). If a poem does not succeed, he does not waver, but in the manner of the blacksmith "bring[s] all to the forge and file[s] again" (1735). Just as a poet cannot perfect his craft without inspiration, so, Jonson insists, his inspiration is dependent upon the rote practice of his craft. Only by sweating over his forge can he immerse himself in the springs of Helicon.

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[129] "You ask no more than certain politic eyes, / Eyes that can pierce into the mysteries / Of many colours, read them, and reveal / Mythology there painted on slit deal! / Oh, to make boards to speak! There is a task: / Painting and carpentry are the soul of masque" ("An Expostulation" 45-50).

[130] Dutton, 76.

Just as humans need homes and earthly souls need bodies, so, the *Discoveries* indicates, a poet's *ingenium* needs the structure of labor and tradition. This model of poetic creation is operative in Jonson's work by 1598, when in a dedication to Thomas Palmer's manuscript treatise *The Sprite of Trees and Herbs* he offers a fascinating account of poetic rapture channeled by labor. The poem recounts an ekphrastic encounter between the speaker and Palmer's manuscript, the objects of which, he recalls, "rapt" him (13). "Thus," he writes

> as a ponderous thing in water cast
> Extendeth into infinities,
> ...
> So in my brain the strong impression
> Of thy rich labours worlds of thoughts created,
> Which thoughts, being circumvolved in gyre-like motion,
> Were spent with wonder as they were dilated;
> Till giddy with amazement I fell down
> In a deep trance * * * *
> * * * * * (16-26)

In its vertiginous imagery, convoluted syntax and climactic visual pyrotechnics, this passage recreates for the reader the whirligig sensation of the speaker's rapture, the ultimate experience of which exceeds linguistic representation, "issuing merely in a set of typographical markers" (i.e. *).[131] While the "rapturous run of asterisks" and the mysterious something they represent are central to the text's statement on the nature of artistic reception and creation, however, they do

[131] Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life*, 147.

not constitute the ending of the poem.[132] Rather, the speaker details the moments following his trance,

> When lo, to crown [Palmer's] worth
> I struggled with this passion that did drown
> My abler faculties, and thus brake forth:
> *Palmer, thy travails well become thy name*
> *And thou in them shalt live as long as fame*. (28-31)

The speaker does not give himself over to his rapture, resting his mount, as it were, on Helicon. If he did, he would be unable to "crown [Palmer's] worth" -- to write the poem we are reading. As in his treatment of Christian mystery, Jonson here indicates that transcendence is not, ultimately, the poet's object. The *divinus furor* authorizes poetry and infuses it with efficacy; it does not produce it. Rather, the speaker's "struggle" allows him to praise the "rich labours" that incited his rapture, inspiring his own process of composition. Poetry, an art created when the poet's "passion" is mediated by the labor of his "abler faculties," is therefore shown to be constitutionally related to the mystery of manners it seeks to teach.

Poet-figures in a number of Jonson's works fit the type of the inspired laborer or priest-craftsman described in the dedication to Palmer's manuscript. Among them, notably, is the Author featured in the "Apologetical Dialogue" to *Poetaster*, Jonson's response to *Satiromastix*' Horace. Alerted by his friend Polyposus that critics "say you are slow, / And scarce bring forth a play a year" (180-81), the Author responds by arguing that his labors demonstrate the quality of his invention. Unlike the writing produced by his enemies, for whom poetry is a mere "trade," the Author's "long-watched labours… / …born when none but the still night / And his dumb candle saw his pinching throes" are the product of a higher calling (183, 198). The Author's

[132] Ibid.

monastic level of sacrifice (he claims to spend "half my nights and all my days / Here in a cell, to get a dark, pale face") is proven to be in service of the divine when he suddenly breaks off his description of his labors, demanding that his interlocutors leave him. "There's something come into my thought," he pronounces, "That must and shall be sung, high and aloof, / Safe from the woolf's black jaw and the dull ass's hoof" (223-25). His friends immediately comply, observing simply that they "reverence these raptures, and obey 'em" (227). In defiance of Dekker and his other critics, Jonson insists that labor and rapture go hand in hand. A good poet is an artisanal maker, but he is also a priest. His forge cannot be distinguished from his altar.

Jonson's poetry may decline to grapple with complex points of doctrine, but it does not abandon mystery. Rather, it locates poetry's mystery in its capacity to ritually craft and transform human manners, a capacity that for the satirist involves the denunciation of fashionable, false arts. For Jonson, poetry is particularly suited to this task only in part because of its mimetic function, which equips it to represent the entire spectrum of human character and moral action.[133] Beyond the craft of mimesis, it is poetry's divine power to break in upon its audience – to rapt their spirits, move their emotions, strengthen their reason and buttress their wills – that enables it to effect spiritual and communal transformations. Jonson's response to Thomas Palmer's manuscript demonstrates this principle beautifully, showing how poetry at once jars us out of our normal perceptions and sets in motion a civilizing process akin to that at work in the production of poetry itself. As with the art of manners, in which virtue and its habitual bodily expression are mutually reinforcing, so with poetry, human artifice and divine inspiration are interdependent forces. The poet's art is a mystery in two senses of the word, a sacramental craft created through the incarnational union of labor and grace.

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[133] To fulfill his role as a master of manners, Jonson argues that the poet must attain "the exact knowledge of all virtues, and their contraries; with ability to render the one loved, the other hated, by his proper embattling them" (*Discoveries* 744-45).

Jonsonian poetics thus highlight the continuity between habit, craft and sacred ritual registered etymologically in the pre-modern designation of guilds as "mysteries." Only through rote labor can practitioners of poetry or the manners it seeks to teach gain mastery of their crafts, rendering their practice efficacious. Poetic transformations, whether of the poet's craft or the audience's manners, do not occur once and for all time, but rather incrementally. They depend upon the repetition of the poet's incarnational labor as well as upon the audience's efforts to understand the poem and to practice its mysteries in daily life. One does not take the Eucharist once and have done with it, but returns to the ritual time and again, meditating upon it and Christ's other mysteries in the interim. For Jonson, poetic mystery requires similar acts of repetition, calling its practitioners to devote themselves to a lifelong process of re-creation, re-writing, re-reading and re-enactment.

"Masters of the Mystery": Embattling Manners and Fashion in *Cynthia's Revels*

Though the conflict between the mysteries of manners and fashion runs throughout Jonson's works, the two are brought into most direct competition in the 1616 folio edition of *Cynthia's Revels*. The play pits scholar-poet Crites against fashionable hangers-on at Cynthia's court, dramatizing through their antagonism the tension between the poet's art of manners and the courtiers' false art of fashion. This quarrel erupts in the play's final acts in a standoff between two forms of courtly ritual: the courtiers' trial of courtship, erroneously framed as a mystery, and the revels and penitential rite devised by Crites. In these scenes, Jonson structurally "embattles" the mysteries of manners and fashion, following his own recommendation that the poet embattle virtues and vices in order "to render the one loved, the other hated" (*Discoveries* 7454-45). In

this way, the play distinguishes the hollow art practiced by the courtiers from the poet's efficacious craft, capable of steering the souls of men. *Cynthia's Revels* doesn't merely represent these transformations, however; it also seeks to enact them. Through a series of meta-theatrical gestures, it incorporates its audience and Jonson himself into the play's ritual, thereby extending its mystery into the world.

Cynthia's interrogation of human ceremony, from mundane interaction rituals to courtly spectacle, is facilitated by its structure, which propels its story not by a linear plot, but according to the "paratactic dramaturgy" associated with the "sequential divisions of ritual."[134] What little plot the play does have is revealed by a child actor in the Praeludium when, in the first of several scenes meant to confuse the distinction between play and world, three child actors enter into a staged argument over the right to speak the prologue. After these introductory preludes, the play opens onto an interaction between Echo, Mercury and Cupid that results in the cursing of Narcissus' Fountain, thereafter known as the Fountain of Self-Love. This act of contamination is reversed only in Act 5, when the goddess Cynthia's unveiling initiates a purification of the court. Sandwiched between its founding mythology and concluding theophany are a host of the courtiers' vapid games and social exchanges (from oath taking to countenance forming competitions) aptly described by Loewenstein as a "concatenation of shows, filling but not shaping the interim."[135]

Like Jonson's mature court masques, the play takes its shape from an agonistic structure: in this instance, the opposition between the mysteries of manners and fashion. The competition between these arts is signaled prominently in the folio's dedication of the play to "The Special

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[134] Ibid., 78.

[135] Joseph Loewenstein, *Responsive Readings: Versions of Echo in Pastoral, Epic, and the Jonsonian Masque*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 79.

Fountain of Manners: The Court," in which Jonson advises readers that "It is not powdering, perfuming, and every day smelling of the tailor that converteth to a beautiful object, but a mind, shining through any suit, which needs no false light either of riches or honours to help it" (6-8). Having provided this rather Erasmian interpretive rubric, the dedication goes on to suggest that the play's duel between fashion and manners is one that reflects and seeks to shape the conflict as it is waged in present-day England. Since the court is the mirror in which the "whole kingdom dresseth itself," Jonson argues, courtiers must fashion themselves in the mirror of his play, lest in mistaking fashion for manners they bring about the deformation of the entire realm ("Dedication" 2).

The play's thematic antagonisms are most visible in the increasingly tense exchanges between Crites and the courtiers. A lover of Helicon, "the muses' well," whose intellectual toils have left him "smell[ing] all lamp-oil with studying by candlelight," Crites is a natural foe of the Self-Love drinking courtiers, "great proficient[s] in all the illiberal sciences, as cheating, drinking, swaggering, whoring, and such like" (1.4.7, 3.2.9, 2.2.75-76). He withstands their mockery and insipidity for much of the play, only to lash out in righteous anger at the trial of courtship, a buffoonish ritual that the courtiers mistake for a mystery. The culmination of the fashionable pastimes showcased in the play's first three acts, the trial of courtship stands as a parodic cross between a craft initiation, mystery rite and court entertainment. The courtier Amorphous devises it as an initiation rite for Asotus, the newcomer he has been tutoring in the "subtle mystery" of courtship (5.3.73). In a scene that literalizes the weapons of the new manners described by Berger, Asotus challenges "all masters of the mystery whatsoever, to play at the four choice and principal weapons thereof, viz., the bare accost, the better regard, the solemn address, and the perfect close" (5.3.71-76). Depicting courtship as a "succession of learned

movements" that comprise a collection of fashionable behaviors, Amorphous's entertainment seeks to imitate the combat at a tournament barriers or the choreography at a court masque.[136] Whereas in true court entertainments dance is meant to align courtiers' outward movements with the masque's inner, mystical message, the "weapons of court compliment" featured in the trial scene are concerned solely with the participants' exterior presentation.

While courtiers such as Phantaste are impressed by "the solemnity" of the tournament (5.3.86), the ceremony's carnal nature is signaled from its outset, when in reference to what appears to have been a customary Jacobean practice, a citizen's wife is admitted to the proceedings without her husband, making her easy prey for the noble spectators' sexual advances. Both the competitors and spectators of the trial are consumed by worldly desires. Rather than gathering to honor the goddess Cynthia, they intend "to perform and do [their] uttermost for the achievement and bearing away of prizes" (5.3.79-80) – in Berger's formulation, to take and avoid being taken. Material fixations are only to be expected, however, from characters who appear to have no inner lives, but, like the courtiers described in *Galateo*, exist solely as the hollow products of fashion. This is the case not only with Asotus, who is present at the trial "by the help of his mercer, tailor, milliner, sempster, and so forth" (5.4.77-78), but also of the female spectators, whose "painters [maintain] their beauties" and of the other competitors, whose appearances are re-constructed onstage between the second and third weapons by a tailor, mercer, perfumer, feather-maker, milliner, barber and jeweller.

The courtiers' "mystery" is exposed for the hollow art it is when Crites enters the fray. Having remained on the sidelines as a satiric observer for the event's duration, Crites is provoked to action by a courtiers' boast that "[Coutship] is none of your seven or nine beggarly sciences,

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[136] Eric Rasmussen and Matthew Steggle, introduction to *Cynthia's Revels, or the Fountain of Self-Love, revised scenes from the 1616 folio*, in *The Cambridge Works of Ben Jonson*, 5:5.

but a certain mystery above 'em" (5.4.449-50). In order to defend the exalted position of the liberal arts over the false mystery of courtship, he offers to "venture a hit" in the competition (5.4.150-51, 454-55). Expressing astonishment at the amount of labor devoted to an art no "reasonable creature" would undertake as "his serious studies and perfections," Crites performs a broad parody of the courtiers' weapons that reveals their "noble and subtle science" as nothing but a set of empty formulae, easily aped by outside observers. The courtiers know themselves "mocked" and so disband, being advised to "Tell to your guilty breasts what mere gilt blocks / You are, and how unworthy human states" (5.4.489; 506-07). The soulless trial of courtship, which began as an initiation rite, thus concludes in an act of disincorporation, a structural movement that identifies it as both anti-masque and anti-mystery.

The dissolution of the mystery of fashion unfortunately does not spell the triumph of the mystery of manners since the courtiers have in no way repented of their actions. As Crites recognizes, "Though they may see it, yet the huge estate / Fancy and form and sensual pride have gotten / Will make them blush for anger, not for shame" (5.4.521-23). The courtly reformation he (and Jonson behind him) craves is set in motion not by the poet's satirical condemnation, but by the restorative encomium of Cynthia's revels. The masque, importantly, is authored by Crites, whose true nature is revealed when he is informed of his commission. Left alone to prepare, Crites calls upon Apollo for inspiration, confessing that his scholarly labors have doubled as "ancient rites / And due devotions" at the god's shrine (5.5.59-60). No pedantic drudge, Crites is Jonson's quintessential poet-priest-craftsman, a man whose forge and altar are one and the same.

Despite his divine inspiration, Crites' masque does not immediately transform the courtiers, who are all still drunk on the waters of self-love. Two significant events at the ceremony do, however, enable the courtiers' renunciation of the mystery of fashion and

reunification through the mystery of manners. First, in the play's most explicit foray into meta-theater, the revels work to incorporate the audience into the ritual that follows. As part of the entertainment, the courtiers present Cynthia with a crystal ball fashioned by Crites. Inside this "little crystal world," Cynthia magically beholds Queen Elizabeth, "Another Cynthia, and another queen / Whose glory, like a lasting plenilune / Seems ignorant of what it is to wane!" (5.7.17, 5.8.10-12). In summoning England's monarch into the presence of the play, just as the play is present to its English audience, the crystal acts as a hyperlink joining the realms of myth and reality. Thus, when in the revels' second significant event, Cynthia unveils herself, her act of theophanic discovery is meant to humble not only the courtiers, but also the play's audience, rendering them jointly amenable to instruction.

This instruction comes in the form of a sacramental rite of penance authorized by Cynthia and overseen by Crites, on whom she bestows her divine favor. Designed as a renunciation of the art of fashion and an initiation into the sacred art of manners, this poetico-religious ceremony, rather than the trial of courtship or the court revels, stands as the play's true mystery. Charged by his queen to "impose what pains you please; / Th'incurable cut off, the rest reform" (5.11.96-97), Crites presides over the courtiers as a judge over a courtroom and a priest over a congregation. Though scholars have largely overlooked the religious content of this ritual, which bears comparison with priestly rites performed in works such as *Sejanus* (1604) and *Hymenaei* (1606), its sacramental, if not emphatically Catholic, overtones are striking. In his judgment of the courtiers, Crites hews closely to the retributive model of justice central to the Catholic doctrine of penance, seeking "to revenge / Th'indignity hence issuing to [Cynthia's] name" by doling out a "punishment" proportionate to the courtiers' crime of drunkenness on "self-love" (5.11.128-

29).[137] He first speaks to the courtiers as their confessor, asking whether they "confess" that they "are offenders" and "merit sharp correction" (5.11.135-39). When they respond in the affirmative, he "sentence[s]" them to a "penance known of all," ordering them to renounce the mystery of fashion as they march, singing a palinode, to Niobe's stone, where they must "offer up two tears apiece thereon" (5.11.145).

Their pilgrimage completed, the courtiers must begin their initiation into the mystery of manners with another sacrament - a baptism. Crites orders them to journey to the "well of knowledge, Helicon," where they will gain absolution, being "purgèd of [their] present maladies" and transfigured into what they "would seem to be" – that is, the "Special Fountain of Manners," Cynthia's court (5.11.155-58). The play concludes as the courtiers disavow the mystery of fashion through the Palinode, asking, in a suggestive parody of the litany, "Good Mercury" to "defend" them from courtly affectations such as "Spanish shrugs, French faces, smirks, irpes, and all affected humours" (Palinode 1-3). They exit the stage hastening to Helicon, where their poetic cleansing will enable them "with refinèd voice report, / The grace of Cynthia and her court" (Palinode 35-39).

Cynthia's Revels concludes with the apparent triumph of Crites over the courtiers and manners over fashion. However, while the courtiers repent the mystery of fashion onstage, their initiation into the mystery of manners is left incomplete. We see them venture towards Helicon, but we do not witness their arrival. This is because, I suggest, the audience is meant to complete the journey. *Cynthia's Revels* never allows its audience members to position themselves as mere spectators of the play's actions. Instead, it asks them to view their own play-going and reading as rituals bound up with those practiced by the play's characters; it invites them to dress themselves in art's exemplary mirror; and it interpellates them into the rites of its sacramental theater. It is

[137] Cf. Deborah Shuger, "The Reformation of Penance," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71.4 (2008), 558-60.

then for them, if they have been led by the play to repent their folly, to pattern themselves after the example of Crites, to devote their pious labor to the sacred mystery of manners.

This sacred task does not belong to the audience alone. In a lovely grace note, the epilogue's final lines remind us that Jonson, too, is a fallen human who must labor over the very mysteries he has come to master. Unable to find a way to bid farewell to the audience, the epilogue's speaker falls back on the author's own sentiments: "I'll only speak what I have heard him say: '/ 'By (-), 'tis good, and if you like't, you may'" (19-20). Though a number of Jonson's contemporaries interpreted these lines as more of his insufferable boasting, their place at the conclusion of a play on the dangers of self-love are intended as a gesture of humility, an indication that he is susceptible to the vanity his play warns others away from. [138] In presenting himself as more of an Amorphous than a Crites, Jonson admits (at least in this instance) that his lamp burns so long into the night because he is so far from perfect. Like the audience whose souls he hopes to guide, he also needs the grace of God's mysteries.

Conclusion

Scholars have misjudged the importance of mystery to the works of Ben Jonson because they have looked for it in the wrong places. Like Erasmus, Jonson does not seek mystery in the heights of heaven or across a distant sea. He perceives the mysteries of art and religion to lie in their potential to reconstitute the present, simultaneously transforming artist, audience and community. We see this most emphatically in *Cynthia's Revels*, a play that refuses to allow its audience to escape into the otherworldliness of its own mythology. Even in the court of Cynthia, surrounded by Echo, Mercury and Cupid, the audience is continually pointed back to *this* time,

[138] Cf. Rasmussen and Steggle, 99n.

this England, *this* ritual. Jonson seems to have believed even in moments of discouragement that if poetry is truly efficacious it can save humankind.

To study Jonson's conception of mystery is to revise our vision of the poet, whose secular preoccupations can no longer be seen to exclude spiritual concerns. It is also to revise critical estimations of mystery itself. As Jonson demonstrates, early modern thinkers did not necessarily associate mystery with the extra-rational or esoteric. Rather than transcending civil order, mystery in his works is shown to constitute it. For the period's readers, poetic mystery thus provided access to Apollonian order as well as to Dionysian or Christian ecstasy, teaching individuals how to do God's will in this life as surely as it helped them seek his presence in the one beyond. However, the history of early modern England would look quite different if all individuals had resisted the beckoning call of transcendent mysteries. Many of the period's greatest thinkers are those who dared to follow this call from the deepest abyss to the highest precipice of the human understanding. Such an individual was John Donne, to whom we now turn.

Chapter 2:

Evidence of Things Unseen: John Donne's Mysterious Proofs

"But yet as weake credulous men think sometimes they see two or three Sunnes, when they see none but Meteors, or other appearances; so are many transported with like facilitie or dazeling, that for some opinions which they maintaine, they think they have the light and authority of Scripture, when, God knowes, truth, which is the light of Scriptures, is Diametrically under them, and removed in the farthest distance that can bee." – John Donne, Biathanatos (1607-08)

No study of mystery and early modern English poetics would be complete without a discussion of John Donne. As king of the so-called metaphysical poets, Donne delights in testing the outermost bounds of understanding and in probing the darkest corners of the imagination. Ecstasy and agony, love and death, eternity and infinity are his subjects. His aim is the beyond: beyond time, beyond space, beyond knowledge, beyond language. His end, ever and always, is mystery.

How ironic, then, that Donne, unlike Ben Jonson, experienced grave doubts about the mysteries at the heart of his verse. Even before taking religious orders, Donne flirted with the vatic role Jonson rejected, turning the paradoxical wit and daring ratiocinative maneuvers of his poetry toward the illumination of mysterious truths. But his nagging uncertainty about mystery continually undermined the prophetic pretensions expressed in poems such as "The Second Anniversary" (1611), the final lines of which proclaim, "I ame / The Trumpet, at whose voice the people came" (527-28). In the section of his "Litany" on the prophets, Donne implores "Those heavenly Poëts which did see / [God's] will, and it expresse / In rhythmique feet, in common pray for mee, / That I by them excuse not my excesse / In seeking secrets, or Poëtiqueness" (68-72). Donne here expresses a deep anxiety that his search for secrets (a term he often uses synonymously with "mystery") is not only profane but feigned, an excuse to showcase the leaping displays of wit so characteristic of his "Poëtiqueness."

Such wariness of mystery is evident in as early a work as "Satire 3" (c. 1597-98), Donne's great poem about the post-Reformation search for religious certainty. At the pinnacle of the satire, the speaker argues that while truth may no longer have a clear geographical location (be it in Rome, Geneva, England, nowhere, or everywhere), it can still be sought in the spiritual realm of metaphor and emblem. "On a huge hill, / Cragged, and steep," he muses, "Truth stands" (79-80). Though the journey to the top is treacherous, with faith and great effort it is possible. The speaker triumphantly reasons, "Hard deeds, the bodies paines; hard knowledge too / The mindes indeavours reach, and mysteries / Are like the Sunne, dazling, yet plaine to'all eyes" (86-88).

This hard-won sentiment is inspiring, yet as Richard Strier observes, there is something peculiar about "these 'dazzling, yet plaine' lines."[139] In the first place, they recall the poem's earlier reference to the character Graccus, whose embrace of all religions is characterized ambiguously as a metaphorical "blind-/nesse" that "too much light breeds" (68-69). Dazzling Christian mysteries are thus potentially linked to the light of pagan revelation. The lines also muddle the relationship between mind and mystery, leaving it unclear whether "'the minds indeavours' can reach mysteries as well as 'hard knowledge,'" or whether the two are no more connected than "mysteries" and "the bodies paines."[140] Furthermore, the speaker's claim that mysteries "are plaine to all eyes" seems to call into question the search he is championing. If mysteries are readily apparent, then why brave the cragged hill of Truth? If they dazzle us, then how can we possibly undertake the search?

The interpretive stumbling block presented by the "dazling, yet plaine" mysteries of "Satire 3" is, I will suggest, the earliest iteration of a problem Donne would return to time and

[139] Richard Strier, "Radical Donne: 'Satire III,'" *ELH* 60 (1993): 304.

[140] Ibid.

again in his writing: the fact that the same mysteries that revealed and confirmed religious truth stood in a post-Reformation world as the greatest evidence of that truth's instability. As I've alluded to elsewhere in this work, wars were fought and monarchs overthrown over the immense difficulty of telling true mysteries from false, of distinguishing revelation from fancy and sacred ritual from playacting. Everyone agreed that there *were* divine mysteries -- this was "plaine to all eyes" – but no consensus could be reached about which were real. This conundrum placed layman and divine alike in the strange position of "proving" mysteries that by their nature transcended rational proof, standing as the highest evidence of the Christian faith. Individuals on both sides of the confessional divide marshaled the evidence of scriptural proof texts, supernatural miracles, religious authorities, and divine inspiration in order to confirm the veracity of their faith's mysteries and discredit those held sacred by their opponents. In their shift from ultimate truths to dangerously ambivalent signs, "mysteries" thus underwent a more dramatic version of the transformation Lorraine Daston has traced in seventeenth-century miracles, reduced by Reformation controversy from "pure evidence" of a Church's doctrine to potentially counterfeit events requiring their own extensive proofs.[141]

Writing in the mid-1590s when he was between confessional allegiances, Donne displays in "Satire 3" a troubled awareness that "mystery" is not just the endpoint of his search for truth; it is an obstacle that may fatally impede his journey. The impossibility of verifying mysteries according to any rational measure means that the excessive light bred by Graccus's many religions maintains an uncomfortable similarity to the dazzling spectacle of Christian mysteries. So long as one cannot behold mysteries without being intellectually and spiritually incapacitated

[141] Lorraine Daston, "Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe," in *Critical Inquiry*, 18.1 (1991): 93-124.

(and if one could do so they would cease to be mysterious), it remains exceedingly difficult to differentiate between those that are true and those that are well-wrought fictions.

For Donne, the potentially heavy consequences of this difficulty were all too clear. His brother Henry had recently died for the Catholic cause, adding his name to a venerable list of family members who suffered exile and martyrdom in defense of their faith. (The most famous of these, of course, was Donne's great-uncle, Sir Thomas More, one of the earliest and most prominent English Catholic martyrs.) Yet Donne came to believe that Catholicism and its mysteries – the mysteries his own brother died for – held a lesser purchase on the truth. It is perhaps for this reason that he, more than any other writer in this dissertation, recognized the epistemological instability of post-Reformation mysteries, which stood at once as axioms of Christian belief and as propositions that had to be proven.

In this chapter, I show that Donne responded to ongoing anxiety about mystery not, as Jonson did, by mounting reactive defenses of poetic craft, but instead by placing the mysteries of his writing on trial. He undertakes this task most explicitly in the fascinatingly different contexts of his secular love lyrics and his sermons, both of which seek to prove the mysteries they reveal. Accordingly, the first half of this chapter limns Donne's interrogation of the heterodox mysteries of Love's deity (i.e. Cupid) in the *Songs and Sonets*. I contend that he adopts strategies of inductive experimentalism to test the private rites of *eros*, which stand in a playfully ambiguous relationship to the mysteries of the Christian faith. Conversely, the chapter's second half shows how Donne's 1624 and 1627 Trinity-Sunday sermons employ deductive reasoning to lead his congregation to a public, orthodox view of "so steepy a place" of knowledge, the mystery of the Holy Trinity. I argue that despite their disparate subjects and methods, Donne's poems and his sermons locate the "proof" of a mystery in the efficacy of its expression, that is, in the degree to

which the Word pronouncing the mystery transforms those who hear and speak it. At the same time, his works highlight the deep epistemological tension between intellectual speculation and affective experience in his search for mysteries of love, religion, and poetry. This tension results, I will suggest, from his blurred conception of mystery as a hidden truth to be uncovered through the use of reason and an efficacious rite best tested by emotion and faith.

Private Experiments: Assaying Love's Mysteries in the *Songs and Sonets*

In the opening lines of "Farewell to Love," the poem's speaker recalls a time, "Whilst yet to prove, / I thought there was some Deitie in love / So did I reverence, and gave / Worship; as Atheists at their dying houre / Call, what they cannot name, an unknown power / As ignorantly did I crave" (1-6). Addressing his audience from the vantage point of knowledgeable experience, the speaker seeks to distance himself from these sickly atheists, driven to faith by death's advances. Now, the reader is led to believe, his fortune has changed. Either he has proven love's divinity and so grounded his previously ignorant faith in knowledge, or he has disproven it and so ceased to worship at love's temple.

As the poem unfolds it soon becomes apparent that the truth lies elsewhere. Sex, the speaker goes on to reveal, is "the thing which lovers so / Blindly admire, and with such worship wooe" (15). Similar to the atheists he envisions, lovers crave ecstatic union most intensely at their "dying hour." However, the *petite mort* that spells the fulfillment of their desires both confirms and denies their belief in love's deity. Once one experiences love, the speaker complains, "enjoying it decayes," and lovers are left "indammag'd" by the encounter they had so ardently pursued (16, 34). For this reason he determines to disavow love's religion, pledging to

avoid beautiful women as men avoid the heat when "the summers Sunne / Growes great" (36-37). Almost immediately, though, the speaker's seemingly steadfast conviction is shown to be compromised. "If all faile," he surmises in the poem's final turn, "'Tis but applying worme-seed to the Taile" (39-40). Though the syntax here is confusing, scholars generally take the speaker to mean that if his strategy fails it will have been as useless as applying a purgative to his genitals (as opposed to ingesting it).[142] Like a man who lives his life as an atheist but calls out to God on his deathbed, the speaker currently denounces love's deity, but is resigned to return to his desperate worship the next time he craves the mysteries of *eros*.

Does this cynical state of affairs show that there is no deity in love? Perhaps. The speaker's recurrent dissatisfaction suggests that his desires remain unfulfilled because he serves a false god. Yet the compulsive nature of his deathbed "cravings" may also point to the opposite conclusion. Certainly Donne would not claim that the Christian God is false because atheists acknowledge him only as they lie dying. The speaker's emptiness might just as plausibly be attributed to his own lack of faith as to the hollowness of love's deity. Rather than proving or disproving love's religion, "Farewell to Love" dramatizes the frustratingly repetitive cycles of desire, belief, doubt and unbelief that bind its speaker, for whom the experience of sexual union at once buttresses and undermines faith.

I highlight this poem because its emphasis on proving love's divinity and the ambivalence with which it treats this proof are paradigmatic of the *Songs and Sonets* as a whole.

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[142] Noralyn Masselink addresses the longstanding ambiguity of these lines in "Wormseed Revisited: Glossing Line Forty of Donne's 'Farewell to Love'" *English Language Notes* 30.2 (1992): 11-15. Following the misguided lead of John Hayward, who in 1936 glossed wormseed as an anaphrodisiac, editors for decades have interpreted the lines to mean that the speaker plans to misapply an anaphrodisiac to his "tail," or penis. Masselink, finding no evidence that wormseed was used as an anaphrodisiac in the period, suggests that the speaker instead aims to apply it as a purgative either to his penis (in which case it would be ineffective) or to his posterior "tail," his anus. The latter method was deemed effective, though less complete, than oral ingestion. Massellink observes that "Either way, the reader [sic] has yet to take *any* action. Just as his other proposals were declarations of intent…likewise, here in the final line, the speaker has not yet completed his farewell to love" (14).

For all their celebration of love's religion, Donne's secular lyrics rarely if ever depict this faith as unequivocally true. His Petrarchan lovers languish under the seeming tyranny of Cupid, agonized by unrequited desire. His libertines seek to the point of psycho-sexual exhaustion mysteries that would verify their religion, while the speakers of his faithful love poems go to elaborate lengths to hide their affairs from a public that perceives them as profane. Even those lovers most assured of their union's mysterious nature must perform miraculous feats and dexterous rhetorical demonstrations to persuade a skeptical laity of its sanctity. [143] Though acolytes (if reluctantly) of love's deity, the men and women who perform rituals of desire within Donne's verse do not confidently dispense their mysteries to congregations of fellow believers. They desire the mysteries of love, quest after them, testify to their existence, seek to create and sustain them, but they do not declare them boldly with no justification, assured of a consensus surrounding their faith.

Indeed, scholars who have suffered long to distinguish between the puritans, Calvinists, anti-Calvinists, church papists, avant-garde conformists, Laudians, latitudinarians and so on represented within the early modern English church will scarcely find it easier to categorize the denominations of belief that make up Donne's *Songs and Sonets*. Longstanding critical disputes register the fractured nature of love's religion as depicted in these poems. Most scholars concur with Louis Martz's observation that the imbrication of the sacred and the profane is a defining

[143] Throughout this chapter I assume a plurality of speakers in *The Songs and Sonets*. There is no evidence that Donne intended these poems to form a collection or that he strove, like early modern sonneteers, to convey the mercurial passions and perspectives of a single lover. Nor does much internal or external evidence support the relatively common supposition that *The Songs and Sonets* track Donne's personal conversion from a libertine to a mutual lover. My own perspective aligns with that of N. H. Keeble, who contends that "The 'Songs and Sonets' are fictions in which Donne tries on a succession of masks, acts a series of roles" ("To 'build in sonnets pretty roomes?': Donne and the Renaissance Love Lyric," in *Donne and the Resources of Kind*, eds. A. D. Cousins and Damian Grace, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2002), 82).

feature of Donne's poetry.[144] However, in tracing the spiritual and philosophical traditions that underpin his search for "the face of God in the face of the lover," critics have arrived at radically different conclusions regarding the relationship between love's mysteries and those of Christianity.[145]

Writing in 1991, Anthony Low argued that the *Songs and Sonets* depict "a union between lovers that is essentially communal, sacred, and religious in a certain sense, but neither Christian nor social."[146] By contrast, criticism produced in the wake of the "religious turn" in early modern studies has located the poems within an explicitly Christian framework, emphasizing in particular their deep engagement with the competing sacramental theologies of post-Reformation England. Scholars remain deeply divided, though, over the confessional nature of the poems.[147] Where one critic finds anti-Catholicism in their sacramental themes another finds anti-Calvinism. Still others maintain that "no coherent theological poetics emerges" from Donne's lyrics despite their embeddedness in early modern sacramental discourse.[148] Moreover, the relentless playfulness of the *Songs and Sonets* has led at least one critic to question the degree to which

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[144] Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth-Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 215-16.

[145] Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*, 88.

[146] Anthony Low, *The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 63.

[147] Among numerous recent works on the sacred valences of Donne's secular lyrics are Arthur L. Clements, *Poetry of Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and the Modern Poets* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Achsah Guibbory, "'The Relic', *The Song of Songs*, and Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," in *John Donne Journal* 15 (1996): 23-44; Theresa DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament*; Robert Whalen, *The Poetry of Immanence*; Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*; James S. Baumlin, *Theologies of Language in English Renaissance Literature: Reading Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012; and Sophie Read, *Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination*.

[148] Read, 79.

Donne takes their theological engagement seriously – a query that harkens back to Low's observation, pre-religious turn, that the poems are in no way straightforwardly Christian.[149]

It is my contention that critics have not reached a consensus regarding the nature of love's religion because Donne himself may not have done so. The *Songs and Sonets*, I argue, do not advance a unified theology of love. Instead, they stand as a series of experimental trials, or assays, through which Donne tests contrasting visions of the mysteries of love and love poetry. Though the poems were not written to form a collection, the same images, themes, and settings recur time and again, along with ubiquitous references to love, Cupid, and mystery. The promise of thematic unity extended by these recurring elements (which today we might refer to as experimental constants) is misleading, since their significance rapidly shifts as they are used to illuminate the individual, variegated experiences of the poems' lyric personae. As Donne moves between the variable perspectives of Petrarchan, libertine, and mutual lovers, poems with similar setups yield divergent conclusions about love. Through this inductive method, which turns on the sixteenth-century ambiguity between *experimentum* and *experientia*, Donne attempts to prove alternative theologies of love's mysteries.[150] At the same time, he finds within the metaphorical temple of *eros* a safe test space in which to consider strategies for interrogating controversial Christian mysteries.

It might seem counterintuitive to argue that the *Songs and Sonets* anticipate the experimental method Francis Bacon would soon champion. Unlike Thomas Browne after him, Donne held a rather low opinion of the New Science's insatiable and, to his mind, ineffectual preoccupation with "unconcerning things, matters of fact" ("The Second Anniversary" 285).

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[149] Whalen, 24-25.

[150] Cf. Charles Schmitt, "Experience and Experiment: A Comparison of Zabarella's View ith Galileo's in *De Motu*," *Studies in the Renaissance* 16 (1969): 80—138. Donne's sermons frequently use the term "experiment" as a synonym for experience.

("Why grass is green or why our blood is red," he sneers in "The Second Anniversary," "Are mysteries which none have reach'd unto" (288-89)). However, Donne's love poems are not the last place in which he would subject the mysteries of his writing to a type of forensic investigation. His *Essayes in Divinity* (c. 1614), written as he was trying to decide whether or not to take religious orders, turned to the new essay genre to try, or assay, his ability to seek out and verify the mysteries of scripture. It would thus perhaps not be amiss to view the *Songs and Sonets* as Donne's *Essayes in Love's Divinity*, in which he uses the famously variable lyric mode to explore a series of sincerely held questions: Are all forms of love equally valid, or is there only one path to love's mysteries? Do love poems reveal Christian mysteries, or are they diabolical in their depiction of sexuality, as Donne himself would eventually claim to believe? How does one investigate something as numinous as a mystery, whether of Cupid or Christ's church? In seeking answers to these questions, Donne's verse pits reason against affect, theological speculation against spiritual edification, and private experience against public consensus. If he arrives at any stable conclusions (and it is far from clear that he does), it is perhaps that a mystery is as true as it is efficacious, not only for the individual lover, but for all who witness, affirm, and therefore participate in the experience of love's deity.

Donne's experimental method is perhaps most transparent in the poems "The Funerall" and "The Relique," which feature nearly identical dramatic situations but come to articulate opposing theologies of love. The similarities between the two poems are numerous: both feature Platonic lovers buried with strands of their beloved's hair wrapped around a part of their bodies; both are addressed to interlocutors who come into contact with the speakers' bodies after death; and both ponder the possibility of the lovers' remains being exhumed and worshipped as relics. Yet the difference in their messages ultimately eclipses this high number of lyric constants. At

their outset, the speaker of "The Funerall" appears to have experienced the more sacred love of the two. He identifies the "subtile wreathe of haire, which crowns [his] arme" as a "mystery," a "sign" that must not be harmed, questioned, or touched by onlookers (1-4). Through such language, he depicts his love token as a mysterious religious talisman, comparing it specifically, as Theresa di Pasquale notes, to the Catholic Eucharistic host, which only priests were permitted to touch.[151] By contrast, the speaker of "The Relique" irreverently characterizes his beloved's gift as "a bracelet of bright hair about the bone" (6), a sexually-charged image that takes on blasphemous overtones as he goes on to indulge a "distinctly Catholic" fantasy that his and his beloved's remains one day will be mistaken for relics of Christ and Mary Magdalene.[152]

As the poems unfold, the reader's judgment of the speakers' love begins to reverse. The lover of "The Relique" confesses that he wears his mistress's hair in hopes that it will draw her soul to his at the day of Resurrection, when they can meet once more as lovers before entering the marriage-less kingdom of heaven. He fondly imagines that in "a time, or land, / Where mis-devotion doth command" their remains may be worshipped as relics (12-13). Observing that "miracles" will be sought" to prove their bodies' sacred nature, he deigns to teach them "What miracles wee harmlesse lovers wrought" through "this paper" – that is, the poem we are reading (20-22). As he envisions his own writing as a kind of scripture, he communicates the story of their love as a sacred history, one which transcended the constraints of mortality and carnal lust. The poem concludes with its speaker's testimony of his unspeakable passion for his beloved, as he laments, "These miracles we did; but now alas, / All measure and all language I should passe, / Should I tell what a miracle she was" (31-33). The relationship first described in blasphemous,

[151] DiPasquale, 162.

[152] Read, 82.

overtly sexualized terms is here revealed as a *via negativa* exceeding all quantitative and linguistic description.

The speaker of "The Funerall," conversely, dons his bracelet because he wishes to take revenge on its original owner, a woman who didn't unequivocally return his affections. Though he first characterizes the gift as a mystery, we quickly recognize that the matter is not so straightforward. His explanation of the bracelet's significance shifts repeatedly. First he describes it as a mystery, then as his "outward Soule," meant to protect his body from decomposition (5-7). Veering wildly from such spiritual explanations, he then speculates that his beloved intended it as a "manacle," whereby he would know pain "As prisoners…, when they're condemned to die" (15-16). Finally, the speaker admits that he does not know "What ere shee meant by'it" when she bequeathed him her hair (17). Less a sacred mystery than a mystery born of confusion, the bracelet stands, like Christian mysteries in a post-Reformation world, as a sign of indeterminate signification. Unable to ascertain the token's meaning, the speaker resolves to use it as a means of punishing his coy mistress, and the poem closes with a menacing threat. "Since you would save none of me," the speaker growls, "I bury some of you" (24).

"The Relique" and "The Funerall" open onto nearly identical situations, with two deceased Platonic lovers marveling about their possession of a mysterious band of hair. Yet their distinctive personae and lived experiences lead them to different understandings of love's mysteries. For the speaker of the "The Relique," love is a reciprocal, eternal, and ultimately inexpressible mystery that can be revealed to others through the sacred objects of his body and his verse. Love is also an eternal mystery for the speaker of "The Funeral," but in his case it is a mystery of stagnation rather than transformation, of doubt and vindictiveness rather than joy. If asked which poem reveals the true mystery of love, most readers would cast their vote in favor of

"The Relique." The pervasive bitterness of "The Funerall," many critics have argued perverts the mutual adoration depicted in its companion poem. If in "The Relique" the beloved's hair prompts the speaker to turn inward and upward in worship of a love transcending bodily desire, in "The Funerall," they contend, it leads to idolatry – to the speaker's popish, masturbatory fetishization of a carnal object.[153]

This interpretation of the poems has the advantage of corresponding to what seems to be the typical affective experience of reading them. The final lines of "The Relique" aim to provoke a sense of wonder and awe within the reader, one that cannot be marred by the speaker's confessional allegiance or the bitter vindictiveness of "The Funerall." Though we have not seen the speaker's beloved, we tend to believe with him that she is a miracle, and in the moment of our belief we share his faith in love's mystery. One of the more interesting aspects of Donne's lyric experiments, however, is that they rarely let readers rest in their emotional response, but instead push them to shuttle between the roles of empath, empiricist, and exegete as they weigh the competing claims of affect and intellect in the search for mysteries. In the case of these particular poems, the combustible interaction of love's religion and Christian sacramental discourse within the poems threatens to disrupt readings grounded in passionate experience.

One might validly argue, for example, that the two speakers demonstrate an equally Catholic (and thus equally deluded) sensibility in their attempts to "transcend absence" through the use of "sacramentalised tokens" that "always threaten to subside into the merely figurative."[154] Moreover, when one locates the *Songs and Sonets* within the context of love's religion rather than Christianity, it becomes even less obvious that "The Funerall" advances an inferior understanding of the mysteries of love. The misogynistic idea that women are cruel

[153] See Whalen, 32-33 and DiPasquale, 159-64.

[154] Read, 82.

mistresses, fickle and dishonest, is central to the Petrarchan and libertine conceits of Donne's lyrics such as "Song," "Woman's Constancy" and "Twicknam Garden." His Petrarchan poems in particular understand these women to act at the behest of Cupid. Unlike the god of love described in "Valediction of the booke" as all "love or wonder" (30), Cupid as depicted in Petrarchan poems such as "Love's Deitie" is a tyrannical child god who would "extend / His vast prerogative, as far as Jove, / To rage, to lust, to write to, to commend, / All is the purlewe of the God of Love" (15-18). As critics have noted, this Petrarchan god of love bears a complicated resemblance to the Christian God of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*.[155] Women's manipulation of men's passions in these poems may thus be seen to participate in love's divinity, not pervert it.

My aim is not to argue with any absolute conviction that "The Relique" and "The Funerall" illuminate equally valid doctrines of love's mysteries. What I hope to show is that because the standard by which we are to judge them is unclear, their versions of love's religion are in more direct competition, both with each other and with other theologies of love in the *Songs and Sonets*, than they are often seen to be. As I have been arguing, the counter-evidence produced by the poems results from Donne's efforts to assay love's religion by examining similar elements of poetic and theological discourse through the experience of individual lyric personae. Such experimentation is visible in Donne's treatment of early modern sacramentalism, as made evident by the wide range of interpretations the subject has inspired among critics. It is also present in the poems' investigation of another touchstone in early modern mystery debates: the degree to which hiddenness, or privacy, is an accurate index for mystery. In testing the relationship between privacy and mystery, Donne scrutinizes his own experimental method,

[155] Among recent studies of the Petrarchism of Donne's sacred verse are Gary Kuchar, "Petrarchism and Repentance in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*," *Modern Philology* 105.3 (2008), 535-69; Elizabeth M. A. Hodgson, *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999), 50-54; and Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

which pivots on the controversial notion that individual experience might turn up general proofs for the mysteries of love.

Donne's *Songs and Sonets* has been read as a theorization of the private sphere "as a shelter and defense against the [public] world."[156] The poems' lovers notoriously play out their affairs in the contracted spaces of bedrooms and graves, sonnets, tears and well-wrought urns. Thus sequestered, they miraculously translate the microcosm into the macrocosm, making of "one little roome, an every where" ("The good-morrow" 11). His lovers themselves often read their feats of concealment as indicative of their religious sanctity. As previously established, though, the early modern relationship between mystery and concealment was vexed, since, depending upon one's vantage point, the concealment of a mystery could indicate either its profundity or its corruption. Recognizing the shifting nature of hiddenness as a form of proof, Donne tests its evidentiary value throughout the *Songs and Sonets* by devilishly linking the concepts of mystery and "privity," a term that in early modern England could refer to divine mysteries, the mysteries of state (hence the Privy Council), the privacy of intimate seclusion, and human genitalia (hence the privy).[157] As he plays on these discordant associations, Donne investigates a wide range of orientations toward love's mysteries, from the libertines' quest for mystery in bare sexuality, to the Neoplatonic belief in mysteries that transcend the veils of

[156] Low, 49. On the tension between the private and the public in Donne's love poetry, see also William Shullenberger, "Love as Spectator Sport in John Donne's Poetry," in *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*, eds. Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 46-62; and Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and their Contemporaries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 65-67 and 107-12.

[157] "Private, adj. 1" Defs. 2a, 3a, 6, 7b, B, C1, C3, C4, *OED Online.* Oxford Univrsity Press. See also "Privy, adj., n, and adv."

fleshly desire.[158] Such experimentation leads him not to a singular endorsement of love's privity (or associated concepts like the *arcana imperii*) but rather to a cacophony of conclusions concerning the nature of love and desire.

The ambiguous relationship between privacy and mystery is highlighted in "The Undertaking," or "Platonic Love," a poem that encourages treating the female body as a Neoplatonic *mystères littéraires*, a carnal text to be read for its private spiritual mysteries. The lyric opens with its speaker's boast, "I have done one braver thing / Then all the *Worthies* did, / And yet a braver thence doth spring, / Which is, to keepe that hid" (1-4). This speaker isn't particularly endearing (he's the kind of person annoying enough to announce he possesses hidden knowledge, then to refuse to reveal it), but he does believe that his love is a mystery in several senses of the word. In the first place, it is hidden – so hidden that he does not confirm he is in love until the poem's fifth stanza. Secondly, he argues in the second and third stanzas, it is like the mysterious art of alchemy. Noting that "It were but madnes now t'impart / The skill of specular stone, / When he which can have learn'd the art / To cut it can finde none" (5-8), he indicates that he does not share his hidden art with others because his beloved is as rare as the specular stone, used alchemically to make glass. There is "no more / Such stuffe to work upon" (aka women), therefore if he uttered his secret others "Would love but as before" (11-12).

In the fourth stanza, the speaker situates his love in a Neoplatonic framework, arguing that he has found a private mystery hidden within his love's outward body. He lectures, "he who lovelinesse within / Hath found, all outward loathes, / For he who colour loves, and skinne, / Loves but their oldest clothes" (13-16). From this point on, the poem's relationship between the public and the private becomes more complicated, as the verse takes on the form of a craft

[158] I use the term "libertine" as shorthand for Donne's poems that advance a purely carnal vision of love. This is common critical parlance in Donne studies, but it may be an anachronistic designation, since English writers do not evince much interest in libertinism before the Restoration.

manual that opens the mystery of Platonic love to worthy readers. (It thereby ironically imitates Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, which instructs readers in the art of sexual love.) Those who would become Platonic lovers, the speaker indicates, must admire a woman's inner virtue; disregard markers of her sexuality ("forget[ting] the Hee and Shee" (20)); and conceal his love, as one might conceal a religious mystery, from "prophane men" who "will no faith on this bestow, / Or, if they doe, deride" (22-24). If he succeeds, the reader will have completed his initiation into the mystery of Platonic love, replacing the speaker as the doer of brave deeds. This possibility is marked in the text by the speaker's switch in the final stanza from first person to second person pronouns: "Then you will have done a braver thing / Than all the *Worthies* did" (25-26).

If any love is truly mysterious, we might think, surely it is this one, described by the speaker as a hidden mystery, an alchemical mystery, a craft mystery, a religious mystery, and a mystery rite, or initiation. On a number of points, the speaker's rhetoric broaches a soaring Neoplatonic idealism. To look beyond the beloved's outward form to her private, inner virtue is of course the underlying goal of Petrarchism, modeled on Plato's *Symposium*. The speaker's language, too, often recalls that of Donne's most powerful love lyrics. His admonishment that the would-be lover "forget the Hee and Shee" conjures up the miraculous achievement of Platonic lovers in "The Relique," who claim to have known no "Difference of sex" (25). Likewise, his effort to shield the mystery of his love from a profane laity resembles the actions of mutual lovers in "The Canonization" and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning."

Yet some evidence works against the notion that the speaker's private mystery is authentic. His inability fully to hide his emotions suggests the unattainability of his own ideal; by

the end of the poem, he has countered his "brave" deed of concealment.[159] More problematically, his professed "loathing" of women's outer forms attests to the misogynistic potential of Petrarchan idealism. In the manner of Donne's libertine misogynists, the Petrarchan speaker figures the beloved's body in terms of an increasingly gross materiality, describing it first as color, then as skin, and finally as old clothes to be stripped away. In this he sounds like no one so much as the libertine speaker of the poem "Community," who portrays women as food to be consumed and thrown on a scrap pile, stating "when he hath the kernel eate, / Who doth not fling away the shell?" (23-24).

Like the Platonic lover of "The undertaking," the libertine couches his misogyny in the rhetoric of mystery. The imagery of the kernel and shell plays on common figurations of Eucharistic and allegorical mystery which liken the soul, or substance, of a mystery to a kernel hidden within the literal body, or accidents, of a shell. Even if the libertine perceives a mystery in his ritualistic use and violation of women's bodies, to the outside observer his actions read as profane. That the Platonic lover's language approximates the libertine's bespeaks the potential perversion of his love, despite the value he places on his beloved's soul. Perhaps the "prophane men" from whom he conceals his mystery are right to deride his faith, poised as it is between a theology of transcendence and one of crass misogyny. A woman should be reduced to her private virtue, the poem may intimate, no more than she should be reduced her to her genital "privity." Both spiritual and material theologies of love's mysteries are potentially found wanting.

[159] See Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet,* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 1986), 200. Marotti's work on Donne as a coterie poet, writing for a select, semi-private audience, serves as a reminder that his lyrics also test notions of privacy and poetic mystery with regard to networks of manuscript circulation.

As with "The Relique" and "The Funeral," however, the emotional response the poems provoke may be seen to stand in tension with their claims to theological truth.[160] In the offending final couplet of "Community," Regina Schwartz finds a celebration of Protestant Eucharistic theology. "Having taken in Christ (the kernel)," she writes, "the shell (the bread and wine) are unnecessary."[161] This more positive interpretation of the passage is supported elsewhere in Donne's poetry by language that, perhaps surprisingly, relates divine mysteries not to the female soul, but rather to the female body, and more specifically to female genitalia, the physically hidden "privity." The elegy "Love's Progress," written in the same timeframe as many of the *Songs and Sonets*, draws just such a connection between religious ritual (here the rites of *eros*) and the sexualized female body. "Search every sphear," Donne writes

> And firmament, our *Cupid* is not there:
> He's an infernal god and under ground
> With *Pluto* dwells, where gold and fire abound:
> Men to such Gods, their sacrificing Coles
> Did not in Altars lay, but pits and holes.
> ….
> So we her ayres contemplate, words and heart,
> And virtues; but we love the Centrique part.
> Nor is the soul more worthy, or more fit

[160] Regina Schwartz pushes back against this common critical tendency, noting that "many of the same critics who are willing to argue that there is no secular Donne distinguishable from the religious thinker reject their own presupposition, for they reinscribe erotic dualism when they claim that Donne writes profane as well as sacred love lyrics" (96). While my sense of the ambiguity of mystery in the *Songs and Sonets* leads me to differ from Schwartz in the degree of confidence with which I place any of Donne's love lyrics within a stable sacred or profane framework, I agree that we must be attuned to sacred possibilities even in those passages that most offend modern sensibilities.

[161] Schwartz, 102.

For love, than this, as infinite as it. (27-38)

At his most irreverently Ovidian, Donne here draws on religious discourse to figure the woman's "Centrique part" as a sacred mystery, equal to the soul in its infinite expansiveness. It, rather than the soul, is the female substance, or essence, to be venerated above accidents of virtue, beauty and wealth. The mysteries of the altar and the bedroom collide in the speaker's anatomy, as oral sex is made analogous to Christian communion – a ritual consumption performed as a sacrifice to the god of love.

This depiction of the female's physical privity as a mystery comes into direct conflict, of course, with Christian theology of both Protestant and Catholic varieties, each of which condemn sexual relations out of wedlock. (For Catholics, "Love's Progress" commits the additional sin of endorsing a non-procreative sex act.) It also counters the Petrarchan message of "The Undertaking," which locates mystery in women's private, spiritual virtue. As if to draw attention to such sustained contradictions, the poem "Love's Alchymie" declares in language similar to that of "Love's Progress" that the purported hiddenness, or privacy, of love conceals nothing but the absence of a mystery. The lone atheist voice of the *Songs and Sonets*, the libertine speaker of "Love's Alchymie" claims that his many assays at love have convinced him that its mysteries do not exist. "Some that have deeper digg'd loves Myne than I," he implores,

Say, where his centrique happinesse doth lie:

I have lov'd, and got, and told,

But should I love, get, tell, till I were old,

I should not find that hidden mysterie;

Oh, 'tis imposture all. (1-6)

Like "Farewell to Love," "Love's Alchymie" features a speaker who seeks a mystery he cannot find. The language he uses to describe his search – metaphors of depths, mines and alchemical elixirs – conjures up Neoplatonic and libertine theologies of mystery, both of which he rejects as inefficacious. Unable to venerate women's souls or their bodies, he subscribes to neither the Neoplatonic belief that mystery is concealed behind the veil of flesh nor to the libertine identification of mystery with the "centrique happiness" of the female privity. Love's religion, he concludes, is an illusion, and women's bodies, far from concealing private spiritual or physical mysteries, are dead, empty shells. His despair of being transformed by love leads him into a state of spiritual depravity, as made evident by the poem's misogynistic final lines: "Hope not for minde in women, At their best / Sweetnesse and wit, they'are but *Mummy*, possesst" (23-24). Such sentiments might lead readers to conclude, as does the Christian speaker of *Holy Sonnet 3*, that the private search for love's mystery amounts to nothing more than "Idolatry" undertaken by "itchy Lecher[s]" (5, 10).

As with his investigation of relics and sacramentalism, Donne's examination of privity and mystery produces theologies of love's religion that are not easily reconcilable, from a dualistic Neoplatonism that privileges women's private virtue above their bodily forms to a carnal theology that worship's female genitalia as a mystery, and even to a materialistic atheism, which rejects both versions of love's mystery as false doctrine. In this way his secular lyrics reflect not only the landscape of post-Reformation Christianity, torn asunder by Catholic and Protestant theological disputes, but also that of 1590's English poetry, in which the paradigms of love celebrated in Petrarchan sonnets jostled against those of the Ovidian epyllia and of Spenserian and Shakespearean paeans to companionate marriage. Donne's poems also exploit the ambiguous iconography of Cupid, who, as Jane Kingsley-Smith recently has demonstrated,

was linked in the early modern imagination with both sensualized Catholic ritual and the sovereign, arguably tyrannical God of Calvinism.[162] In a final turn of the screw, the private, affective experience of reading the poems (which may change from person to person or reading to reading) must be weighed against their various theological and poetic claims. The excitement and frustration this provokes must capture something of what the early modern Christian felt as they shifted between the often clashing authoritative registers of inspiration, scripture, doctrine, and Church and patristic authorities.

To determine which of these experiments is successful, which "proves" the mysteries of love's religion, it would help to consult evaluative criteria that transcend each speaker's individual circumstance. Yet Donne's jumbled references to clashing Catholic, Protestant, and pagan theological frameworks, as well as to Petrarchan, Ovidian, and companionate paradigms of love, seem deliberately to undermine readers' efforts to construct such criteria. As Meg Lota Brown has noted in her discussion of casuistry in the *Songs and Sonets*, the difficulty of establishing a frame of reference external to the individual speaker's subjective consciousness is a point of dramatic conflict in many of Donne's lyrics. Even in mutual love poems like "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" and "The Sun Rising," the speaker's defense of love is threatened by the fact that "His frame of reference is not Scriptural."[163] Though he tries to "substitute love for religion as the measure of truth," ultimately, his "authority is of his own construction" and so is subject to critiques of human fallibility.[164] Like the experiments recorded

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[162] Cf. Jane Kingsley-Smith, *Cupid in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 32.

[163] Meg Lota Brown, *Donne and the Politics of Conscience in Early Modern England* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 100. See also Dwight Cathcart, *Doubting Conscience: Donne and the Poetry of Moral Argument* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).

[164] Ibid.

by Francis Bacon in his *Sylva Sylvarum* (1627), Donne's inductive method thus seems better at generating particular truths than at discovering universal axioms of love's mysteries.

And perhaps this is as it should be. Certainly in the Western world today we believe – or wish to believe -- that the mysterious truths of love arise from private, particularized experience, which cannot be dictated by institutional doctrines or social norms. We believe this in small part because the poems of John Donne helped show the world that it was possible. But as Anita Gilman Sherman has argued, even as he courted relativism and skeptical doubt, Donne longed for certainty that transcended private conviction.[165] Interestingly, the lyric in the *Songs and Sonets* whose speaker most confidently claims to "prove" the mysteries of love is one who takes the greatest pains to unite the joys of private experience with the authorizing force of public expression. This is the speaker of "The Canonization," and it is with this lyric that I end this section, as it is the one that most resembles Donne's sermons in its conception of the inspired Word as a means of transcending the public/private divide. The poem opens like a number of Donne's other love lyrics, with its speaker addressing his desire to be left alone with his beloved in the private sphere, safe from the critical gaze of public authorities. Unlike the "The Sun Rising" or "The Good-Morrow," however, the speaker never fully retreats into the private world of love. Instead, beginning in the poem's defiant third stanza, he works to make his private love a public mystery through the performative force of language. "Call us what you will," he taunts the reader

> wee are made such by love;
> Call her one, mee another flye,
> We'are Tapers too, and at our owne cost die.

[165] Anita Gilman Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 41-42.

And wee in us finde the'Eagle and the Dove.

The Phoenix ridle hath more wit

By us, we two being one, are it.

So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,

Wee dye and rise the same, and prove

Mysterious by this love. (19-27)

A kind of magic happens in reading these lines, as we recognize that the lovers are being imaginatively translated into the metaphors we, at the speaker's behest, are "calling" them. Together with the speaker's private acts of love, the reader's performative acts of naming work to transform the lovers into an increasingly mysterious series of emblems. In its ascending movement from flies, associated, as Arthur L. Clements and others have noted, with Satanic lust, to tapers, the eagle and the dove, and the phoenix, symbolizing the philosopher's stone the passage enacts "advancing steps in the alchemical process," transmuting the lovers' sexual lust into a sacramental union of spiritual and physical "privities."[166]

This mystical art also serves to bridge the gap between the mysteries of love's religion and Christianity. As Clements observes, the eagle, dove, and phoenix are also "complex Christian symbols of higher realities, especially associated with Christ and the Resurrection."[167] In their embodiment of the eagle and the dove, the lovers symbolize the Holy Spirit and the mysteries of Christ's baptism and Resurrection. Fitting two sexes to "one neutrall thing" in their imitation of the phoenix, they participate in the Christian mystery of the Holy Trinity, with its union of three-in-one. Most miraculously, the phoenix's Christ-like promise of rebirth enables them to subvert the impending threats of mortality and the *petite mort* that unsettle other

[166] Clements, 49.

[167] Ibid.

relationships in the *Songs and Sonets*. As they "die and rise the same," enacting the emblematic expression the reader and their love together have created, they "prove mysterious" in a manner that satisfies both affect and intellect, revealing the hidden, Christian theological resonances of their union while sharing with the reader the re-creative power of their passion.

Not satisfied to communicate the mystery of love only to the individual reader, the speaker imagines extending it to all the world through the medium of his verse. He rejects the public genre of the chronicle as a vehicle for the lovers' "legend," preferring instead to "build in sonnets pretty roomes" in celebration of their love (30, 32). Though this generic choice initially seems to confine their story to the subjective, private sphere of the sonneteer's lyrics, the speaker soon reveals that their sonnets will serve as public "hymnes" through which "all shall approve / Us *Canoniz'd* for Love" (35-36). Just as the speaker and reader's joint composition of the third stanza yielded proof of the lovers' mystery, so the communal utterance of their sonnet-hymns solicits universal approval of their canonization in love's religion. The Church of Love the speaker envisions is called into being in the poem's final stanza as the love lyric is metamorphosed into a hymn through which readers "invoke" the canonized lovers:

> You whom reverend love
> Made one anothers hermitage;
> You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
> Who did the whole worlds soule contract, and drove
> Into the glasses of your eyes
> (So made such mirrors, and such spies,
> That they did all to you epitomize,)
> Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg from above

A patterne of your love! (37-45)

As we pronounce these words, the speaker's private voice is subsumed into the public chorus of invocation through which readers affirm, publish, and enact the mysteries of the lovers. Simultaneously, the divide between microcosm and macrocosm, public and private that structures the *Songs and Sonets* is dissolved. Inverting the act of the lovers, who transformed the microcosm into the macrocosm by driving "the whole worlds soule" into their eyes, readers seek to transfigure the macrocosm into the microcosm through the "pattern" provided by the canonized lovers. If their invocation succeeds, they will join with the lovers in the "phoenix ridle" and themselves "prove mysterious by this love."

The communal utterance of "The Canonization" unites speaker and reader, public and private, and theological speculation and emotional edification. Arguably, it comes closest of all the *Songs and Sonets* for making claims for love's mysteries anchored in an authority beyond the lyric speaker's private consciousness. Even here, though, mystery must be assessed by subjective standards, and there is plenty of fodder for the skeptical reader. What are we to make of the poem's invocation of saints, a Roman Catholic practice? Likewise, what does it mean that the poem never mentions marriage, the only rite that legitimizes sexual union in the eyes of the Christian church? Is the imagined sanctity of earthly love an idolatrous illusion, as Donne himself would come to argue in the *Holy Sonnets*? Though individual speakers may temporarily address readers' concerns, none can fully withstand the whispered reproofs of other lyric voices, urging readers to privilege body over soul, intellect over affect, experience over doctrinal theory, or vice versa. To escape these shifting grounds, we must look beyond Donne's private assays at love's mysteries and seek out his public efforts to "prove" mysteries endorsed by accepted

religious authorities. Let us then turn from the enclosed pages of coterie manuscripts to the open pulpits of the Church of England.

Vox de Cælis: Seeking Mystery Aright in Two Trinity-Sunday Sermons

In a 1620 Lent Sermon, Donne can be found preaching at Whitehall on the mystery of godliness identified in 1 Timothy 3:16.[168] As if to announce his repudiation of the model of lyric experimentation practiced in the *Songs and Sonets*, he contends

> There is no private interpretation of scripture. I see not this mystery, by the eye of Nature, of Learning, of State, of my own private sence; but I see it by the eye of the Church, by the light of Faith, that's true; but yet organically, instrumentally, by the eye of the Church. And this Church is that which proposes to me all that is necessary to my salvation, in the Word, and seals all to me in the Sacraments. And this mystery is, Faith in a pure conscience. (3:210)

Gone is the private assayer of love's religion. Donne, as priest of the Church of England, publicly speaks the mysteries of the Word and administers the mysteries of the Sacraments. His authority is no longer of his own dubious construction, having been vested in him by the powerful triumvirate of God, the Church, and the state. Unlike the young, radical Donne of "Satire 3," the mature Dr. Donne, as Jeffrey Johnson points out, "cannot conceive of Christian life outside the Church as a corporate body."[169] In the orthodox sphere of the pulpit, he finds

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[168] "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory" (KJV).

[169] Jeffrey Johnson, "John Donne and Paolo Sarpi: Rendering the Council of Trent," in *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation*, ed. Mary Arshagouni Parpazian, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 102.

what he could only imagine in heterodox lyrics like "The Canonization": mysteries proven jointly through the private inspiration of faith and the public affirmation of God's Church.

Yet Donne remained Donne – inquisitive, probing, doubtful. He held that "To be a good Divine, requires humane knowledge; and so does it of all the Mysteries of Divinity too" (II: 308), but he did not use his authority as a minister unilaterally to pronounce upon mysterious truths. Instead, his sermons seek to open up methods by which he and his congregation together can gain assurance of Christian mysteries. This section examines Donne's 1624 and 1627 Trinity-Sunday sermons delivered at St. Dunstan's-in-the-West, each of which explores the means by which Christians might confirm their belief in the mystery of the Trinity. Both sermons locate this confirmation in the transformative efficacy of God's Word as spoken by the minister, affirmed by the congregation, and authorized by Church ceremony. In this way, they bear out the observation made by several recent critics that Donne places a "Calvinist emphasis on the word 'preached' as efficacious," endorsing a sacramental vision of the sermon form.[170] Importantly, though, these particular Trinity Sunday sermons diverge in their portrayal of the Word's performative function. Donne's 1624 sermon, similar to his lyric poems and *Essayes in Divinity,* figures the Word as a pathway by which Christians might assay and prove religious truth, a process he depicts as an essential religious duty. His 1627 sermon, conversely, frames efforts to prove religious mysteries as doomed to failure. The spoken Word is seen in the later sermon to justify faith in the Trinity by arousing Christians' "holy affections" as they verbally celebrate, acclaim, and publish their beliefs. While reinforcing the idea that efficacious language, authorized by community, is the best tool for apprehending mysteries, the sermons' explanations of the Word's performative function shifts in light of their contrasting portrayals of mystery.

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[170] Cf. Jeanne Shami, *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 142; Whalen, "Eating the Word: Donne's 1626 Christmas Sermon," in *The Poetry of Immanence*, 83-109; and Margaret Fetzer, "Donne's Sermons as Re-Enactments of the Word" *Connotations* 17.1 (2007-08): 1-13.

Taken together, they highlight how the ongoing tension between affect and the intellect in Donne's search for mystery confuses his understanding of language's appropriate epistemological role.

Donne delivered his St. Dunstan's sermons some twenty years before the eruption of anti-Trinitarian sentiment in early modern England.[171] The absence of doctrinal controversy makes his interrogation of the mysteries of the Trinity no less urgent. As David Nicholls and Jeffrey Johnson convincingly have demonstrated, the theology articulated in Donne's sermons is principally Trinitarian, in that it characterizes the doctrine of the Trinity as the central tenet of Christianity. (This fact sets him apart from thinkers such as John Calvin, who believed in the Trinity, but took the sovereignty of God as a theological first principle.)[172] In the doctrine of the Trinity, Donne finds a paradigm of community – of unity forged through plurality and consensus through dialogue – that informs his understanding of the tripartite human soul, the communal body of the Church, and the consultative monarchy of the state.[173] The doctrine of the Trinity, he believes, is what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. On its foundation, as Nicholls notes, rests "the doctrines of creation, sin, incarnation, atonement, ecclesiology, as well

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[171] On seventeenth-century anti-Trinitarian controversy, see Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

[172] Cf. David Nicholls, "Divine Analogy: The Theological Politics of John Donne," *Political Studies* 32 (1984): 570-80; "The Political Theology of John Donne," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 45-66; and Jeffrey Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999).

[173] Observing Donne's frequent comparisons between divine and kingly power, Debora Shuger has made the influential argument that Donne's sermons support an absolutist political theology ("Absolutist theology: the sermons of John Donne," in *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, literature and history* 1600-1750, eds. Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 115-35). Contra Shuger, Jeanne Shami contends that the politics of Donne's sermons are ambivalent and, indeed, that he challenges the "rhetoric of absolutist prerogative" through his casuistical conviction that all human actions (including the king's) are subject to "some clearly articulated law" (76-77). Both Nicholl and Johnson's studies support Shami's conclusion, demonstrating that Donne's Trinitarianism leads him to view the ideal monarchy as consultative rather than absolutist.

as the sacramental and devotional life of the Church."[174] "This mystery of the Trinity," Donne insists in 1624, "is the Rule of our faith, this onely regulates our faith….It is all the Christian Religion, to believe aright of the Trinity" (6:138-39). To confirm the existence of the Trinity is thus essential not only to the individual Christian's salvation, but also to the survival of Christianity as a whole. Despite the necessity of affirming this mystery, its grounds remain elusive. Donne warns that "there is not so steepy a place to clamber up, nor so slippery a place to fall upon, as the doctrine of the Trinity" (139). His aim in both 1624 and 1627 is to clear a safe path by which he and his congregation might mount the hill of truth. However, the latter sermon seeks to usher Christians quickly and quietly away from the trail forged three years prior, as if in the intervening years Donne had come to realize it was susceptible to a landslide.

Commonalities in the sermons' treatments of the Trinity make differences between them all the more striking. In keeping with Donne's belief that the relationship between preacher and congregation mirrors "the creative council of the Trinity" who created the world "*in sermone*, in a consultation" (1:289), both highlight the reciprocal duties of minister and congregation *vis-à-vis* the spoken word of God. This shared emphasis on collective utterance is reflected in the sermons' *exordia*, which offer justifications of church ceremonies such as the practice of reading from the lectionary and the observance of holidays such as Trinity Sunday. Similarities in tone and content end here, however. Written as if to give the lie to Dennis Quinn's classic argument that Donne's sermons privilege moral edification over theological speculation, his 1624 sermon is relentlessly cerebral and complex.[175] Throughout, it employs a vocabulary of knowledge, proof, testing, and studiousness that stands in sharp contrast with the language of celebration, declaration, and affection favored in the later work.

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[174] Nicholls, "Political Theology," 50.

[175] Cf. Dennis Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," *English Literary History* 27 (1960): 276-97.

The text of the 1624 sermon is Matthew 3:17, "And lo, a voyce came from heaven saying, this is my beloved sonne, in whom I am well pleased." This verse recounts the event of Christ's baptism, in which the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove as God identified him publicly as his son. Though this passage is not especially recondite, the tone of Donne's *divisio* is academic, even scholastic. Employing the "Aristotelian-Thomistic" language of formal logic that Terry Sherwood finds in a number of his sermons, Donne announces that in exploring the "unsearchable mystery" of the Trinity, "The *Quid*, what it is; the *Quomodo*, How we are to learne it; and the *Quantum*, How farre we are to search into it, will be our three Parts" (6:133).[176] Such methodological rigor is necessary in testing the doctrine, he stresses, since "A Christian must not thinke he hath done enough, if he have been studious, and diligent in finding out the mysteries of Religion, if he have not sought them the right way" (133). From its outset, then, the sermon intimates that intellect is as important as faith in apprehending divine truth, a fact that would seem to confirm Sherwood's claim that reason is of paramount importance in Donne's epistemology.[177]

Indeed, at a number of points throughout the oration, one might be forgiven for thinking they were listening to a university lecture rather than a sermon. Much like a schoolmaster urging on his reluctant students, Donne stresses the necessity of persistent intellectual and spiritual labor in the search for divine truth. Speaking "to the most learned, to him that knowes most, To the most sanctified, to him that lives best," he rebukes the impulse to prideful complacency (140). Since the Christian life, he argues, is like "*Iacobs* Ladder," the perpetual pursuit of increasing

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[176] Terry G. Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 38-39.

[177] Ibid., 21-62. For the broader debate surrounding Donne's epistemology, see Janel Mueller, *Donne's Prebend Sermons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 30-35; Noralyn Masselink, "Donne's Epistemology and the Appeal to Memory," *John Donne Journal*, 8 (1989): 57-88; Elizabeth Tebeux, "Memory, Reason, and the Quest for Certainty in the Sermons of John Donne," *Renascence* 43 (1991): 195-213; and Anita Gilman Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

knowledge and goodness is a fundamental Christian duty. He reasons that those who fail in their labors have only themselves to blame, since God aids his followers in discernment: "whomsoever God cals, to him hee affords so much light, as that, if he proceed not by that light, hee himselfe hath winked at that light, or blown out that light, or suffered that light to wast, and goe out, by his long negligence" (140).

As if he were teaching a lesson in logic or geometry, Donne goes on to outline three forms of proof by which Christians might ascertain the mystery of the Trinity. He first surveys two "uneffectual" proofs of divine knowledge: nature and miracles. Addressing the common argument that Christian truths are revealed in the Book of Creatures, Donne (once again proving himself no Thomas Browne) argues that nature helps support belief in divine mysteries, but does not introduce those mysteries to the human mind. Such is the duty of holy writ. "When the Word of God hath taught us any mystery of our Religion," he reasons, "then the booke of Creatures illustrates, and establishes, and cherishes that which we have received by faith, in hearing the word" (143). Supernatural miracles are likewise deemed inadequate as evidence for divine mysteries. Perhaps remembering heated post-Reformation debates over the veracity of miracles, Donne notes that it is next to impossible for humans to distinguish between miracles and illusions. In order to cite a miracle as proof of a mystery, one must first establish the validity of the miracle via reference to "the Word of God, who cannot lie" (143). Neither natural creatures nor supernatural miracles therefore provide sufficient proof of the mystery of the Trinity.

According to Donne, such proof must be gleaned from a more original source, one that cuts a middle way between the natural and the supernatural.[178] That way is not merely *a* way, but "the way it self," the voice of God heard in Matthew 3:17 (133). Unlike the ineffectual proofs

[178] For the Protestant sermon's emphasis on "the listener's ear" as the "site where natural and supernatural processes meet," see Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 112-21.

provided by miracles and the book of creatures, the "*Vox de cælis, A voyce from heaven*" has a sacramental efficacy to compel belief. "Take the largest Spheare, and compasse of all proofes, for the mysteries of Religion, which can be proposed," Donne argues

> Take it first, at the first, and weakest kind of proofe, at the book of creatures,….And then, continue this first way of knowledge, to the last, and powerfullest proofe of all, which is the power of miracles, not this weake beginning, not this powerfull end, not this *Alpha* of Creatures, not this *Omega* of miracles, can imprint in us that knowledge, which is our saving knowledge, nor any other meanes then a voyce; for this knowing is believing. (133-34)

Like the sacramental mystery of baptism, through which individuals are re-born as Christians, so the *vox de cælis* alters those who hear it, imprinting "saving knowledge" within them as a king's image imprints value on coins. Donne equates this knowledge with belief and by extension with faith, but it is notable that even in discussing the event of salvation – the life-changing acquisition of spiritual assurance – his language remains in the intellectual register.

Continuing his spate of academic classifications, Donne tells his congregation that they must distinguish the *vox de cælis* from four other voices. Two of these are human: *voces de terra*, men who use reason alone to prove religious mysteries, and *voces de medio*, moral philosophers. The other two are diabolical: *voces de Inferis* and *voces de profundis*, heretics who speak with the voice of Satan. Amidst the clamor of these many voices, only the *vox de cælis* delivers knowledge conducive to belief. Intellectual and spiritual leisure do not await those who manage to discern the voice from heaven, however. The *vox de cælis* as Donne characterizes it is a call "of Correction, and of Direction," which spurs Christians to "leave [their] blindnesse, look

up, shake off [their] stupidity, look one way or another" (133).[179] In other words, it is a way, not a waystation. Revealing the path of Jacob's Ladder, it beckons Christians to continue the long, arduous journey to truth and mystery.

At this point, it may seem unclear who among Donne's congregation would actually be inspired to seek proof for the mysteries of the Trinity. Surely only the most irritating over-achiever, his or her hand forever waving in response to the teacher's questions, would willingly traverse the *Quids* and *Quomodos*, sort through three forms of proof and five kinds of voices, all to meet the demands of a taskmaster God.[180] But in introducing the contents of this sermon in a digestible format, I have largely passed over Donne's descriptions of the voice from heaven and its relation to the Trinity that are interwoven throughout the text. These passages are suffused with pathos, and they make it clear that the voice from heaven comforts as much as it commands, opening the mystery of the Trinity to the simplest as well as the wisest members of the congregation.

Though God's voice calls Christians to follow the path of religious inquiry -- the path of his Word -- it also acts as a light unto that path. Donne reassures his audience that God would never "call man to see, and then blow out the candle, or not shew him a candle, if he were in utter darkness; for this is an *Ecce directionis*, an *Ecce lucernæ*, God cals and he directs, and lightens our path" (141). Drawing on Matthew 3:17, he argues that the opening of the heavens when God speaks indicates that in the sacrament of baptism "The mysteries of Religion are made accessible to us, we may attaine to them" (138). He argues that God so wishes to open his

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[179] Donne's reliance on metaphors of disability to illustrate intellectual and spiritual fallibility is pervasive in both his poetry and sermons. Shami discusses these metaphors in "Squint-Eyed, Left-Handed, Half-Deaf: *Imperfect Senses* and John Donne's Interpretive Middle Way," in *Centered on the Word: Literature, Scripture, and the Tudor-Stuart Middle Way*, eds. Daniel Doerksen nad Christopher Hodgkins (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2004), 173-92. However, no one has yet applied the insights of disability studies to this aspect of Donne's thought.

[180] Ben Jonson would likely have been up for the challenge – that is, if he didn't find the whole enterprise profane.

mysteries to all individuals that he reveals them not through written scripture, but through the spoken word, comprehensible to all men. The voice from heaven, Donne observes, is "*vox dicens, a voyce saying*, speaking, which is proper to man, for nothing speaks but man; It is Gods voyce, but presented to us in the ministery of man" (134). That Christ's ministry began with his baptism is an indication, he argues, that God wishes humans to look for proof of mysteries in the inspired voice of his minister.

At a number of points, Donne reiterates the notion that God speaks through ministers as an act of accommodation. Like the mysteries of the sacraments the *vox de cælis* makes the divine present to the human through a mediated form – here, the minister's speech. His sermon makes God's word available, Donne insists, to "all that shall be saved," from the most "graceless man" in the congregation to the holiest (142). Humans are aided in their understanding of the minister's words by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, whose descent upon Christ in the form of a dove signifies that he is not only "a Schoolemaster to teach us all truths," but also a comforter who "brings peace of conscience with him" (138). The voice from heaven may be a voice of correction, but it is also a voice of love. "If the Dove bite," Donne assures his audience, "it bites with kissing" (149).

While often formidable in tone and vocabulary, the underlying message of the 1624 sermon is ultimately a simple one: that God makes the "unexpressible" mystery of the Trinity available to all who seek it in the inspired voice of his ministers. "For our knowledge, in this mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, let us evermore rest," Donne suggests, "*in voce de caelis,* in that voyce which came from heaven" (145). Casting aside his lecture notes and taking up the mantle of the poet, he moves in the sermon's stirring *conclusio*, as in the final lines of "The Canonization," to extend divine mysteries to his congregation through the medium of communal

utterance. "Rise, and ascend to that growth, which your Baptisme prepared you to," he challenges them

> And so baptized, and so pursuing the contract of your Baptisme, and so crowned with the residence of his blessed Spirit, in your holy conversation, hee shall breathe a soule into your soule, by that voyce of eternall life, *You are my beloved Sonnes, in whom I am well pleased*. (149)

As God's ordained minister, Donne speaks with the confident belief that his is the voice of heaven. Pronouncing the scripture "appropriated" to the celebration of Trinity Sunday by the Church of England, he seeks to breathe a soul into the souls of his congregation through the words he is speaking, words he believes are made efficacious by the "residence" of the Holy Spirit. In the laborious, yet fruitful "holy conversation" between minister and congregation, Donne's sermon achieves its goal. In the collective imagination of congregation and minister, the mystery of the Trinity is proven.

Three years later, in 1627, Donne again preached a Trinity Sunday sermon at St. Dunstan's that emphasized the efficacious, communal word as the ultimate affirmation of divine truth. However, the sermon takes a fundamentally different approach to the search for mysteries, seemingly rejecting the project of "proof" that had occupied the poet throughout his career. History may provide some explanation for the shift in his thought, for the years separating the two addresses were short but eventful. The Calvinist King James died in March, 1625 and was succeeded by his son Charles, whose anti-Calvinist leanings soon made themselves known.[181] Even before the death of James, doctrinal controversy swirled around Richard Montagu's

[181] For James I's Calvinism, see Fincham and Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policy of James I;" and Nicholas Tyacke, , *Aspects of English Protestantism c. 1530-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 136-40. However, W. B. Patterson contends that James is better defined as ecumenical (*King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

influential Arminian treatise, *A New Gagg for an Old Goose* (1624). When in 1625 the House of Commons raised the issue of the document's orthodoxy, the new King Charles, as an Arminian sympathizer, expressed displeasure at their actions.

In early 1626, Charles ordered Lancelot Andrewes to consult with a select group of bishops in order to make an official determination about Montagu's book. As the bishops chosen were all anti-Calvinists, they unsurprisingly condoned its theology. Arminianism was given another implicit royal endorsement in February of that year when the royal favorite, George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, hosted the York House conference to debate the merits of *A New Gagg*. The House of Commons retaliated in the summer by voting to punish Montagu. In response, the king issued a proclamation that, combined with a further royal order in 1628, effectively "suppressed" Calvinism in the Church of England.[182] High church ceremonialism would thereafter rule in the English church for the duration of Charles's reign, despite ongoing dissent. With an increasing emphasis on the sacraments and the dignity of the episcopacy, the church grew closer to Catholicism in its official stance on religious mystery, seeking to foster religious awe and wonder in the individual believer rather than a sense of searching doubt.[183]

It was in this changed atmosphere that Donne addressed his congregation in 1627. From its outset, his later sermon exhibits a sharply negative attitude toward religious inquiry. While in 1624 Donne condemned the *voces de terra* that sought to prove mysteries through human reason alone, he also insisted that Christians actively test their faith. The Word was seen to provide reassurance of belief while spurring individuals to seek further divine knowledge. By contrast, his 1627 sermon underscores the insurmountable difficulty of scripture, discouraging the

[182] On the rise of Arminianism in the English church, see Tyacke, 132-60.

[183] For Caroline ceremonialism, see Achsah Guibbory, *Ceremony and community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, religion and cultural conflict in seventeenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Barbour, *Literature and Religious Culture*.

congregation from peering too hard into mysterious truths. We should not "think alwaies to learne, or alwaies to have a cleare understanding of all that is written," Donne states early in the *confirmatio* (8:39). He stresses in particular the difficulty of the sermon's text, drawn from Revelation 4:8: "And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him, and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was and is, and is to come."

Given the notoriously opaque nature of the book of Revelation, as well as its political volatility, one must consider the possibility that Donne's newfound cautiousness reflects what Jeanne Shami has identified as his "concern for decorum and audience, for the "fit" place in which to discuss controversial matters."[184] However, the humility, bordering on anti-intellectualism, of this work often seems designed deliberately to counter the inquisitive message of his 1624 sermon. Whereas in the earlier text Donne went to great lengths to outline possible proofs for the mystery of the Trinity, in 1627 he warns that "He that seeks proofe for every mystery of Religion, shall meet with much darknesse; but he that believes first, shall find every thing to illustrate his faith" (40).

The sermon as a whole serves as a reminder, as Elizabeth Tebeux has argued, that Donne's "stance on reason in the *Sermons*" is inconsistent.[185] He underscores the link between reason, proof, and darkness throughout the text, effectively negating the connections forged in 1624 between mystery, proof, and light. There God's voice was described as an *Ecce lucernæ*, a light that revealed the path of divine knowledge. In 1627, the Trinity is depicted as "*Lux*, but *Lux inaccessibilis*." Donne maintains in the later sermon that "God hath made darknesse his secret place;…God, in the Trinity, is open to no other light, then the light of faith" (54). In contrast to

[184] Shami, 12.

[185] Tebeux, 195.

his 1624 sermon, which emphasized the union of the natural and the supernatural in the minister's voice from heaven, Donne here sequesters natural reason and supernatural faith in different disciplinary spheres. Reason aids humans, he argues, in the study of nature, but in the search for divine mysteries only faith will suffice.

This heightened sense of the importance of faith over reason in apprehending mystery is reflected in comments on the sermon form that seem to rebuke the tone and style of his 1624 oration. Arguing that ministers are to "Preach for the saving of soules, and not for the sharpening of wits" (42), Donne seems to repudiate the rationalistic thrust of his previous sermon and embrace the homiletic philosophy ascribed to him by Dennis Quinn, which maintains that sermons should "reveal the *affective* meaning of the text."[186] In words that might easily have been written by the Catholic Douai-Rheims translators, Donne enjoins ministers to avoid "fly[ing] high at matter of mysterie, and leav[ing] out matter of edification" (49). He argues that their labor should be turned toward the "cleering, not the perplexing of the understanding" (42). Though Donne concedes that ministers should be willing to engage the congregation's rational faculty in order to bolster faith, he reasons that on the whole their sermons should appeal to the human passions. Ideally when in the pulpit "The Preacher stirres and moves, and agitates the holy affections of the Congregation, that they slumber not in a senselessnesse of that which is said" (43). His role is not to lead his audience through complex verbal proofs of divine mystery, but to "make a holy noise in the conscience of the Congregation," to "cast some claps of thunder" in order to incite holy fear in those present (44). If in 1624 the *vox de cælis* was a laborious path to divine knowledge, in 1627 it is a reverberating shout that compels assent.

Fittingly, the ideal relationship between minister and congregation is seen to emerge through structures of humility and secrecy analogous to those operative in the monarch's Privy

[186] Quinn, 291.

Council and in the political doctrine of *arcana imperii* that would gain increasing importance throughout Charles's reign. Since ministers are "dispensers of the mysteries and secrets of God" who come "From his Councell, his Cabinet, his Bosome," Donne urges his congregation not to display too much curiosity about their private lives, but instead to show them the same deference that ministers show to God (46). For their own parts, divines must not attempt to "looke fully upon the majesty of the mysteries of God" or to reveal his mysteries to their congregations (47).[187] These joint displays of humility are to be repeated in the church's approach to sermonic Word. In a position on religious humility that approaches that of Jonson, Donne argues that neither congregation nor minister should "looke for Revelations, nor Extasies, nor Visions, nor Transportations" within sermons, but rather view them as an opportunity for moral edification, in which they may "rest in Gods ordinary means" (46).

If the hyper-intellectual sensibility of Donne's 1624 sermon posed an impediment to Christians seeking to affirm the mysteries of the Trinity, the anti-intellectual posture of 1627 threatens to do the same. After all, how is one to apprehend a mystery that can't be searched or looked upon? Donne poses this question at the climax of his sermon through two extended metaphors. The first of these likens ministers to visual artists, noting that the mystery of the Trinity forces a crisis of representation:

[187] In order to enforce conformity and stamp out dissent, both James and Charles sought to prohibit ministers from disclosing controversial mysteries to their congregations. Each issued proclamations (James in 1623 and Charles in 1626 and 1628) forbidding speculation on the mysteries of predestination, in particular. Donne preached a controversial sermon at Paul's Cross on November 22, 1629, in which he appears to violate this order by speaking at length on the doctrine of predestination. However, his embrace of a position similar to that of the king's (who, as an Arminian, opposed to the doctrine) seems to have saved him from punishment. See Mary Morrissey, *Politics and the Paul's Cross Sermons, 1558-1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 98-99. It is worth noting, though, that Donne's stance on the doctrine of predestination is notoriously difficult to pinpoint. For an argument regarding the Calvinist orientation of his belief, see Daniel W. Doerksen, "Polemist or Pastor?: Donne and Moderate Calvinist Conformity," in *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives,* ed. Mary Arshagouni Papazian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 12-34.

> To make representations of men, or of other creatures, we finde two wayes:….Statuaries doe it by Substraction; They take away, they pare off some parts of that stone, or that timber, which they work upon, and then that which they leave, becomes like that man, whom they would represent: Painters doe it by Addition; Whereas the cloth, or table represented nothing before, they adde colours, and lights, and shadowes, and so there arises a representation. Sometimes we represent God by Substraction, by Negation, by saying, God is that, which is not mortall, not passible, not moveable: Sometimes we present him by Addition; by adding our bodily lineaments to him, and saying, that God hath hands, and feet, and eares, and eyes;….Some such things may be done towards the representing of God, as God; But towards the expressing of the distinction of the Persons in the Trinity, nothing. (54)

As he had done so long ago in "Satire 3," in this passage Donne confronts the epistemological, spiritual, and artistic stumbling block posed by "dazzling, yet plain" mysteries. What was then largely a matter of private concern – the question of how an individual might "stand inquiring right" outside the bounds of the institutional church -- is here transformed into a very public dilemma. How can a minister awaken the faith of his congregation if the central doctrine of his religion confounds both apophatic and cataphatic strategies for representing divine truth? If an artist cannot create art without addition or subtraction, it follows that a minister may not be able to "shew" his congregation Heaven if he is unable to traverse either the negative or the positive way.

Donne's 1624 sermon offered a potential solution to this problem by treating the minister's language non-representationally, as a path of inquiry and as a sacramental conveyor of mystery. The Word, understood as the "way," offered proof of the Trinity by at once assaying

the mystery and making it present to the congregation, transforming their souls through "holy conversation." From the standpoint of the 1627 sermon, this strategy is dangerous, as it may lead Christians to rely too much on human reason in the pursuit of divine truth. Donne frets over this possibility in his second extended conceit, which revisits the "hill of truth" first depicted in "Satire 3."

> Though our naturall reason, and humane Arts, serve to carry us to the hill, to the entrance of the mysteries of Religion, yet to possesse us of the hill it selfe, and to come to such a knowledge of the mysteries of Religion, as must save us, we must leave our naturall reason, and humane Arts at the bottome of the hill, and climb up only by the light, and strength of faith….If we think to see this mystery of the Trinity, by the light of reason, *Dimittemus*, we shall lose that hold which we had before, our naturall faculties, our reason will be perplext, and infeebled, and our supernaturall, our faith not strengthened that way. (54-55)

The concern Donne expressed in 1624 that his congregation might stumble and fall upon the slippery, "steepy" doctrine of the Trinity is here reiterated, though in different terms and with an added threat. If Christians do not surrender the natural tools of reason and the arts in seeking mysteries, they will not merely fail to increase their faith; they will damage their natural reason. Reason is thus portrayed as a doubly disabling instrument in the pursuit of mystery in that it impedes the process of inquiry and causes cognitive impairment in individuals. This extreme argument revises the claims of Donne's 1624 sermon, with its insistence on the joint cooperation of natural and supernatural faculties in the *vox de cælis*.

If the minister can neither represent nor assay mystery with his voice, Donne must then determine how he is to help his congregation possess the hill of truth. He finds his answer once

again in the Word, though in the Word differently conceived than in 1624. Pointing to the beasts of Revelation 4:8 who "rest not day and night, saying Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come," he identifies a model for his and his congregation's emulation. While forbearing to look into the mystery of the Trinity, the beasts incessantly, assiduously acclaim it, refusing to be interrupted by emergencies, losses, or troubles. Donne argues that it is likewise the duty of "all Gods saints, *Vt dicant*, That they speak, utter, declare, publish the glory of God" (52). He urges his congregation to "joyne with us in this Open, and Incessant, and Totall profession of our Religion, which is the celebration of the Trinity in this acclamation" (50).

As in 1624, communal utterance is shown to provide the best mode of access to the mystery of the Trinity. In an echo of his earlier sermon, Donne draws attention to the spoken nature of the creature's words, the fact that "They did it, sayes the Text, *Dicentes*, *Saying*" (39). Yet the verbs attached to this action illustrate Donne's altered understanding of the Word's performative function. Christians do not look, inquire, or seek after God's mysteries in his 1627 sermon, and they certainly do not prove them. Rather, they celebrate, declare, and acclaim the Trinity, publishing it through the illuminating light of faith. As they sound a "holy noise," the mystery of the Trinity is made manifest to them through the word of God.

In a fascinating passage, Donne argues that by publishing the Word, Christians themselves become like it, gaining the ultimate assurance of mystery through their transformation.

> Since that God that created thee was *Verbum*, The Word,…Since that God that redeemed thee was *Verbum*, The Word,…Since that God that sanctified thee is *Verbum*, The Word,…since God, in all the three Persons, is *Verbum*, the Word to thee, all of them

> working upon thee, by speaking to thee, Be thou *Verbum* too, A Word, as God was; A Speaking, and a Doing Word, to his glory, and the edification of others. (52)

As in "The Canonization" where the joint expression of reader and speaker mysteriously metamorphoses the lovers (and possibly the reader) into "a Speaking, and a Doing Word," so here the interpenetrating utterance of God and the Church translates the individual Christian into a Word analogous to the Trinity. As they gain knowledge of the mystery through divine resemblance, Christians themselves become efficacious utterances, walking sermons capable of edifying the souls of others.

In both 1624 and 1627, Donne concluded his Trinity Sunday sermons by extending the mystery of the Trinity to his congregation through the medium of his inspired Word. Whereas his earlier sermon figures the Word as a *way* that proves mystery, however, his latter sermon depicts it as a *noise* that acclaims it. This significant shift seems attributable in part to Caroline religious policy and the incipient influence of Archbishop Laud. Though Donne's relative prioritization of faith and reason wavers throughout his sermons, his Caroline sermons more consistently elevate faith over reason in their treatment of religious mystery. However, the battle between theological speculation and moral edification that plays out so neatly in these two sermons reflects the struggle between reason and passion that plagued Donne's search for mystery from its beginning. In speaking with the public authority of the Church of England, he managed to settle the problem of relativism that dogged the *Songs and Sonets*, but he did not clarify the role of the poet-prophet's voice as an epistemological tool. This is in part, I suggest, due to confusion inhering in the concept of mystery itself, caught as it is between knowledge and experience. Donne's mysterious proofs attempt to answer the contradictory demands of affect and intellect. His

inability to satisfy both of them leave him wondering, even at the end of his life, whether in seeking secrets he truly seeks a witty Poetiqueness.

Conclusion

If Jonson shows us how mystery and its poetic expression can be seen to undergird early modern civilization, Donne demonstrates how they threaten to upend it. The destabilization of religious mystery occasioned an epistemological crisis for post-Reformation Christians. As they sat out to prove the mysteries that underwrote their faith, they faced a number of seemingly insurmountable challenges. How does one examine a mystery that cannot be viewed by human eyes? Is "mystery" a hidden truth, a ritualistic experience, or something in between? What standard should be given priority in testing mysteries, and how might this shift depending upon one's answer to the latter question?

Donne's writing shows us the degree of fracture these questions caused, both in the macrocosm of early modern Europe and the microcosm of the individual Christian's psyche. For the poet-prophet-divine, whose social role it was to reveal mysteries, they raised difficult questions of poetic method and philosophy of language, asking how it might be possible to prove, through language, incomprehensible mysteries. As Donne sought to answer these questions through his private, lyric experiments, his public *vox de cælis*, and, finally, his celebratory shout, he added multiple voices to the mystery gabble that murmured, unceasingly, throughout Europe. Faint among these was a voice that would grow in strength in the decades after Donne's death, as the crises of early modern mystery proved insurmountable -- an insidious whisper from the speaker of "Love's Alchemy": "Oh, tis imposture all."

Concerns about poetic technologies and the search for mystery were not confined to the religious, artisanal, and court contexts addressed by Jonson and Donne, however. They also permeated the arena of natural philosophy that would soon be transformed into "science," one of the defining discourses of modernity. As it underwent this metamorphosis, natural philosophy shed its associations with poetic modes of thought, but before this happened, debates raged over the potential efficacy of poetry in the search for nature's mysteries. In order to understand the terms of this conflict, it is helpful to look to the writings of Thomas Browne, a man who, like Donne before him, believed in a God who is both literal and figurative, not only in his word "but in [his] works too."[188]

[188] John Donne, "XIX. Expostulation," in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 99.

Chapter 3:

Circumscribing Reality: Mystery and Poetic Truth in Thomas Browne's Natural Philosophy

The Compage of all Physical Truths is not so closely jointed, but opposition may find intrusion, nor always so closely maintained as not to suffer attrition. Many Positions seem quodlibetically constituted, and like a Delphian *Blade will cut on both sides. Some Truths seem almost Falsehoods, and some Falsehoods almost Truths; wherein Falsehood and Truth seem almost aequilibriously stated, and but a few grains of distinction to bear down the balance.*
Sir Thomas Browne, Christian Morals, II.3

In his Neoplatonic treatise *Mythomystes* (c. 1632), Englishman Henry Reynolds laments that "modern" poets have abandoned the central duties of their vocation: the search for sacred mysteries of nature and divinity and the concealment of those mysteries in verbal "riddles and enigmaticall knots," safe from the prying eyes of the "profane multitude."[189] His despair at poets' "general ignorance" and woeful lack of curiosity regarding "the mysteries and hidden properties of Nature" is somewhat mitigated by his belief that one group of thinkers remains devoted to the search for mystical truths in God's handiwork – natural philosophers. "We haue many Prose-men excellent natural Philosophers in these late times," Reynolds comments, "that obserue strictly that closeness of their wise Masters, the reuerend Auncients: So as now a dayes our Philosophers are all our Poets, or what our Poets should bee."[190]

The last two chapters of this dissertation explored the works of two self-proclaimed poets, charting the intersections between poetry and the mysteries of craft, love, and divinity. This chapter moves outside of the realm of poetry proper in order to examine the relationship between poetry and nature's mysteries as it is conceived in the writings of "prose-man" Thomas Browne. In the introduction to this dissertation, I noted that nature, especially as it was textualized in the book of nature metaphor, was a primary site of controversy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mystery debates. Whereas some early moderns looked for spiritual

[189] Reynolds, *Mythomystes*, 153.

[190] Ibid., 162.

mysteries in the *mystères littéraires* of the book of nature, others maintained that nature's mysteries were merely physical. Through this conflict, the period's ongoing arguments about the intellectual and spiritual efficacy of allegory, metaphor, representation, and other poetic technologies came to be played out on a cosmic scale.

For Neoplatonists such as Reynolds, poetry was an apt tool for investigating nature's mysteries because nature itself was a kind of poetry – an allegorical emanation of divine reality. Porphyry argued in the fourth century that poets write allegorically in order to imitate an allegorical nature, stating "Since [Nature] has concealed the knowledge of her being from mankind's coarse senses, by hiding beneath the vestments and envelopes of things, likewise, she has wished that sages should discuss her mysteries only under the veil of mythic narratives."[191] Looking to the playful *Timaean* demiurge as their exemplar, many early modern Neoplatonists, Neo-Pythagoreans and Paracelsians (among others) similarly understood the cosmos as a puzzle animated by the play of divine, semi-poetic symbols, be they the harmonic intervals of Robert Fludd's monochord or Jacob Boehme's signatures. Viewing nature in such "poetical" terms, these thinkers, as Rosalie Colie has argued, believed that the natural philosopher, like the poet, was meant "to recreate, to make an exact model of the world in all its ambiguity, and its contradiction." [192]

As previously noted, such ideas were anathema to individuals like Francis Bacon, who contended that symbolic cosmological models were poetic fictions created to satisfy the human desire to peer into forbidden mysteries of religion. Because he wished to avoid moving from "the contemplation of nature" to an over-curious examination of mysteries of the Christian faith,

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[191] Quoted in Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, 53-54.

[192] Colie, 304. See also Paula Findlen, "Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43.2 (1990), 292-331.

Bacon largely spurned the use of poetry in the study of natural philosophy, preferring instead to employ the mysteries of the mechanical arts in order to reveal nature's hidden truths.[193] Yet, as Bacon's disagreement with other natural philosophers makes clear, the definition of nature was very much a matter of dispute in the early modern period. By the mid-seventeenth century, traditional Aristotelian cosmology existed in competition not only with various symbolic and sacramental world systems, but also with developing mechanical models of nature, such as the corpuscularian theories favored by Thomas Hobbes, Robert Boyle, and Rene Descartes. (It is unsurprising, amidst this explosion of world systems, that Epicurean philosophy gained popularity, suggesting as it does that there are an infinite number of possible worlds.) Natural philosophers' perceptions of nature's mysteries differed in accordance with their understanding of nature, as did their beliefs regarding the role of poetry in natural philosophical practice. Those who perceived nature as itself poetic thought that elements of poetic craft were necessary to the study of nature's mysteries. Philosophers who disagreed with this perception of reality did so, importantly, not because it was medieval or regressive, but because they believed it was fictive. Like Catholics criticizing Protestant exegesis, philosophers who denigrated symbolic models of nature argued that they altered the forms of nature to fit human fancy, creating a mysterious cosmos in place of the material one God created.

Thomas Browne, fascinatingly, wished to inhabit poetic and non-poetic worlds simultaneously. Unlike Ben Jonson, who sought to preserve poetry's sacred claims through the banishment of false mystery, or John Donne, who attempted to prove the superior truth-value of the mysteries he revealed, Browne attempted to preserve poetic mystery alongside those cosmological models that critiqued it. He did this, I argue, by taking a dyadic approach to the book of nature, insisting upon reading it, like the book of scripture, according to both literal and

[193] Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 350.

allegorical levels of meaning. In *Religio Medici* (1635-43) and *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658), those of his works that promote allegorical hermeneutics, Browne contends that the natural philosopher is meant to use flexible and figurative language in order to adumbrate and re-create sacred mysteries revealed through a poetic nature. In *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1643-72), however, he espouses a literal hermeneutic method that offers physical explanations or "definitions" of natural processes. In keeping with medieval allegorical theory, which locates a text's mystery in its allegorical, or spiritual, sense, *Pseudodoxia* does not seek mysteries. Rather, it sequesters them within the realms of religion and poetry, the latter of which is depicted as separate from the natural world.[194] While Browne presents these two hermeneutic methods, *prima facie*, as complementary, I show that in actuality they lead to multiple forms of paradox: exegetical, spiritual, cosmological and ontological. When viewed from the perspective of Browne's allegorical hermeneutics, these quandaries seems easily resolvable, as allegory works to subsume and assimilate the literal, ritually "*accommodating* a privileged text to the system of ideas."[195] Such resolution dissipates, I show, when we consider Browne's literal hermeneutics, which denounce the assimilative, mystical properties of allegory as satanic delusion.

Critics have long have recognized Browne as a paradoxical thinker; however, they have tended to characterize his paradox as dispositional and easily resolvable.[196] Those who have approached paradox as an important figure of thought in Browne's works generally have invoked

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[194] To read for allegory is, in other words, to read for mystery. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2, trans. M. Macierowski (Edinburgh: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000),19-24. Consider Bacon's claim that "beneath no small number of the fables of the ancient poets there lay from the very beginning a mystery and an allegory" (*De Veterum Sapientia*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 6, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath (London: Longman and Co., 1958), 696).

[195] Angus J. Fletcher, "Allegory Without Ideas," in *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, ed. Brenda Machosky (Stanford University Press, 2009), 11.

[196] Cf. D. K. Ziegler, *In Divided and Distinguished Worlds: Religion and Rhetoric in the Writings of Sir Thomas Browne*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943); and E. S. Merton, *Science and Imagination in Sir Thomas Browne* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969).

his belief in the *coincidentia oppositorum* as a means of resolving contradictions between them.[197] This chapter draws on W. V. Quine's 1966 discussion of paradoxical kinds in order to demonstrate how Browne uses paradox to hold together the multiple worlds and mysteries that vied for dominance in seventeenth-century England. In the course of doing so, I reveal that his use of paradox is more radical than has previously been recognized. Quine differentiates between three forms of paradox, the veridical, falsidical and antinomial. Veridical paradoxes initially appear absurd, but ultimately resolve into truth, while falsidical paradoxes derive from faulty premises. Since the conceptual tensions they generate are unsustainable, neither are paradoxes in the most rigorous sense of the term. Antinomial paradox, on the other hand, "produces a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning."[198] Irresolvable according to conventional patterns of thought, antinomial paradox can in our current intellectual milieu "be accommodated by nothing less than a repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage."[199]

While these categories are modern constructs, they provide a useful vocabulary with which to discuss Brownean paradox vis-à-vis the problem of poetic mystery. In stressing the emphasis of Browne's allegorical hermeneutics on the coincidence of opposites, critics have associated his natural philosophy with veridical paradox, in which all contradictions mysteriously coincide in the oneness of God. Analyzing morphological asymmetries between Browne's major works, I show instead that his natural philosophy produces an antinomial

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[197] See Frank L. Huntley, "Sir Thomas Browne: The Relationship between *Urn Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus*," *Studies in Philology* 53 (1956): 204-219; Leonard Nathanson, *The Strategy of Truth: A Study of Sir Thomas Browne* (The University of Chicago Press, 1967); Janet Halley, "Sir Thomas Browne's *The Garden of Cyrus* and the Real Character," *English Literary Renaissance* 15 (1985): 100-21; and Kathryn Murphy, "'A Likely Story': Plato's Timaeus in the *Garden of Cyrus*," in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, eds. Reid Barbour and Claire Preston, (Oxford University Press, 2008), 242-58.

[198] W. V. Quine, "The Ways of Paradox," in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, (New York: Random House, 1966), 3-20.

[199] Ibid., 7, 11.

paradox that exposes the deep instabilities in seventeenth-century thought regarding poetic craft and the study of nature's mysteries. Though it may aspire to the symmetrical closure of the quincunx, Browne's natural philosophy produces the generative anti-closure of the antinomy. Chiral rather than chiasmic, it "turns back on itself….play[ing] back and forth across terminal and categorical boundaries" that underpin human reason.[200]

As early modernity gave way to modernity, such antinomies could no longer be tolerated, and the competing models of nature that Browne championed would cease to coexist. At the historical moment in which he was writing, however, he found it possible to recreate a nature replete with sacred, poetic mysteries while also describing a world devoid of symbolic meaning. In this way Browne shows himself to be a more inclusive thinker than either Jonson or Donne, both of whom viewed poetry as a means of apprehending "true" mysteries and rejecting "false." Jonson uses the agonistic forms of satire and court spectacle to establish the poet's craft as a kind of incarnational labor, capable of initiating individuals into the mystery of manners and destroying the idolatrous mystery of fashion. Donne, for the majority of his career, looked to the poet and priest's efficacious Word as a means of "proving" the mysteries of love and religion he sought to reveal, though his late sermons drew closer to Jonson in envisioning the Word primarily as a source of moral edification.

By contrast, Browne's bivalent interpretation of the book of nature embraces mutually exclusive views of poetic craft, lauding poetry as a means of recreating mysteries of nature and divinity while paradoxically rejecting the art's revelation of mysteries as fictitious. In this way his writing, even more so than Jonson or Donne's, demonstrates the pluralization of mystery that occurred in early modernity. Yet if Browne's paradoxical philosophy shows us the degree to

[200] Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton University Press, 1967), 7. For more on the Renaissance paradoxical tradition, see Peter G. Platt, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).

which it was possible for early moderns to entertain contradiction, his dialogical movement (Jonson-like) between the rhetoric of the divine and the diabolical points to the intellectual fissures that would spell the end of this paradoxical mindset. By attending to the disjunctive claims of his literal and allegorical hermeneutics, this chapter reveals the complexity of his response to ongoing uncertainty, as well as the fragility of his and other early modern writers' efforts to reconcile worlds and mysteries that increasingly came to appear irreconcilable.

"Wee shall…encourage contradiction": Revising Thomas Browne's Book of Nature

The tensions inhering within Browne's double hermeneutics are clearly illuminated by his contradictory treatment of exemplary figures such as Caius the blind, an individual whose story is included in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in order to castigate mystical interpretations of nature and in *The Garden of Cyrus* in order to celebrate them. In *Pseudodoxia*, Browne writes that Caius

> in the reign of Antoninus, was commanded to passe from the right side of the Altar unto the left, to lay five fingers of one hand thereon, and five of the other upon his eyes, although the cure succeeded and all the people wondered there was not any thing in the action which did produce it, nor any thing in his power that could enable it thereto.[201]

Appearing in the second of two chapters on Satan's promotion of "Error" and "false Opinion," Caius's story serves as a cautionary tale on the dangers of attributing supernatural efficacy to natural signs, a category mistake identified in *Pseudodoxia* as one of the prime causes of interpretive error. As Browne warns in the paragraphs preceding the anecdote, Satan "above

[201] Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: or, Enquiries into very many received tenents and commonly presumed truths*, vol. 1, ed. Robin Robbins, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 69. Future citations of this work will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

all...deceiveth us when wee ascribe the effects of things unto evident and seeming causalities which arise from the secret and undiscerned action of himself" (68).[202] Leading humans to assign a false causality or "Magick" power to augurial signs, charms, amulets and rituals, he produces an erroneous confusion of the natural and supernatural, sign and signified and cause and effect. In the instance of Caius's healing, Satan encourages onlookers to perceive a causal relation between the blind man's symbolic, ritualistic action and the restoration of his eyesight, when in reality he himself has repaired the man's vision through the "secret and undiscerned wayes of Nature" (69).

Given the force with which Browne denounces the interpretive confusion displayed in the Caius anecdote, it comes as some surprise when *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658) offers the tale as evidence of the divine and mystical power of the five-pointed quincunx, the hieroglyph or signature that Browne claims best reveals God's presence in nature. In a list of the numerous "mysteries and secrets, accommodable unto this number," among which ranks "the mysticall name of God" composed of five letters, Browne demands "If any shall question the rationality of that Magick, in the cure of the blind man by *Serapis,* commanded to place five fingers on his Altar, and then his hand on his Eyes."[203] Stunningly, an event that in *Pseudodoxia* is attributed to the natural machinations of Satan is in *The Garden of Cyrus* ascribed to the magical power of

[202] Browne voices almost precisely the opposite complaint in *Religio Medici*, where he argues "the Divell" often uses philosophical truths to undermine man's religious beliefs, "demonstrating a naturality in one way, mak[ing] us mistrust a miracle in another." He confesses shamefacedly that "having seene some experiments of *Bitumen*, and having read farre more of *Naptha*, he whispered to my curiositie the fire of the Altar might be natural; and bid me mistrust a miracle in *Elias* when he entrench'd the Altar round with water" (in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 30). Future citations of this work will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

[203] Thomas Browne, *The Garden of Cyrus*, in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 224. Future citations of this work will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

God. Whereas the earlier text chastises those wonderers who perceive a supernatural efficacy in Caius's symbolic actions, the later urges readers to join the crowd.

In these contradictory accounts of Caius's healing, we begin to see the paradoxical manner in which Browne approaches "poetical" thought in natural philosophical study. When interpreting nature literally, he argues that human symbols have no efficacy to create change in nature. When reading nature allegorically, however, he maintains that such symbols are suffused with the mysterious power of God. The opposition between these passages is so stark that one might be excused for thinking they were written by two different people. Furthermore, this tension is reflected in scholarly studies of Browne, which at times feel as though they were written about different thinkers. Though Browne's readers have often acknowledged him as a paradoxical thinker, they typically have worked to neutralize contradictions in his philosophy rather than to foreground them. As early as the late-seventeenth century, readers tended to associate the author with either the "imaginative" or the "sensible" sides of his writing, rarely giving equal billing to both characteristics.[204]

Recent criticism generally replicates this pattern. Readers who favor "allegorical" Browne follow *Religio Medici* and *The Garden of Cyrus* in appealing to the coincidence of opposites to resolve his contradictions, while those who prefer "literal" Browne cite *Pseudodoxia*'s critique of poetic interpretation as evidence that his imaginative works should not be taken seriously.[205] Representative of the former camp is Leonard Nathanson, who, despite

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[204] Cf. Reid Barbour, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 471-81.

[205] There are also those scholars who recognize, but do not seek to explain, contradictions in Browne's thought. Angus Fletcher, for instance, observes in passing that Browne "both fostered and criticized" the "hieroglyphic world view," while Frank L. Huntley similarly notes, but does not reflect on, the fact that Browne "inveighed against" the practice of numerology in *Pseudodoxia* while reverencing it as prophetic in *The Garden of Cyrus* (Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1982),130n**;** Frank L. Huntley, "*The Garden of Cyrus* as Prophecy," in *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Columbia and London: The University of Missouri Press, 1982), 140).

drawing attention to discrepancies in Browne's philosophy, emulates the thinker's allegorical hermeneutics by papering over such tensions. Believing that the *Religio* provides the "most fully visible" expression of Browne's "strategy of truth," Nathanson subordinates *Pseudodoxia* to the terms of the earlier text, the allegorical and paradoxical message of which easily absorbs the "significant" differences between the two works into the mysteries of the *o altitudo* and the "poetic imagination."[206] For Nathanson, adopting the perspective of the *Religio,* Browne is at once committed to a strategy of pluralism and also a "cavalier juggl[er] of different epistemologies," largely unconscious of such a commitment.[207] As such, he is incapable of mounting a truly paradoxical philosophy, since all such contradictions always already coincide in the oneness of God.

In contrast to Nathanson stands Kevin Killeen, whose book length study of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*'s literal hermeneutics addresses the irreconcilable nature of certain "substantial differences" between *Religio Medici* and *Pseudodoxia*. [208] Killeen largely attributes Browne's shifting opinions to the cultural upheaval of the Civil War years, which, he argues, mitigated the writer's "ready fideism" and Laudian ceremonialism.[209] However, Killeen ultimately works to diminish incongruities in content altogether by suggesting that Browne's truest opinions are those expressed in *Pseudodoxia*, while his other works are the products of "literary panache."[210] "There has been a tradition," he writes, "of reading Browne as a figure who inclines toward the

[206] Nathanson, 163-69.

[207] Ibid., 171.

[208] Kevin Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship, Science and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 81. On *Pseudodoxia's* separation of "ways of talking about the world," see also William N. West, "Brownean Motion: Conversation within Pseudodoxia Epidemica's 'Sober Circumference of Knowledge," in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, eds. Barbour and Preston, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 168 – 87.

[209] Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship*, 198-200.

[210] Ibid., 38.

mystic and the platonic,…although it is not an interest that is particularly visible in *Pseudodoxia*, and if it appear in some fashion in *Religio Medici* or *The Garden of Cyrus* it is a fleeting, rhetorical interest."[211]

In pitting Nathanson's portrait of Browne against Killeen's, I do not mean to claim that one is superior to the other. As we began to see above, both visions are true to the author, who held them in tension through a number of intertextual configurations and who engaged both hermeneutic models simultaneously. Like Michele de Montaigne, Browne, as Reid Barbour points out, was "'an inveterate revisionist,'…for whom writing was often provisional, always imperfect, and subject to refinement at the levels of word choice, syntax, organization, argumentation, and content."[212] His tendency to alter and expand the argument of one work while composing others of an entirely different cast thus served to blur, though not erase, chronological distinctions between "early" and "late" works. While Jonson and Donne's works register the early modern pluralization of mystery through combativeness and doubt, respectively, Browne's demonstrate it through his obsessive efforts to stitch together not only competing interpretive methods and world systems, but also competing selves.

As Barbour details, the majority of Browne's major works went through complex processes of composition.[213] *Religio Medici*, for example, though first drafted around 1635, appeared in a second, substantially longer version between 1638-40 and circulated more widely in manuscript before being published in two unauthorized editions in 1642. These editions were quickly supplanted by a newly revised, authorized edition of 1643 that contained further

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[211] Ibid., 153.

[212] Barbour, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 329.

[213] Ibid., 237-55; 272-83. See also Brooke Conti, "*Religio Medici*'s Profession of Faith," in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, eds. Barbour and Preston, 151.

additions and omissions. Though it has been asserted that these revisions do not substantially alter the message of the 1635 *Religio*, a number of scholars maintain that they provide some of the greatest evidence of Browne's political commitments.[214] Interestingly, Brooke Conti argues that a number of Browne's most confident assertions of a so-called Laudian orthodoxy are not the product of the mid-1630s, but rather of the late-1630s and early-1640s, when he revised his manuscript "with an eye towards a different audience and a different political climate."[215] These conclusions suggest that Browne's religious and political persona in *Religio Medici* was crafted contiguously, if not simultaneously, with that of *Pseudodoxia*, the length and scope of which are such that one must assume Browne was already collecting notes or even drafting the text of the 1646 edition while working on one of the last two revisions of the *Religio*. When combined with intertextual evidence, one might consider that these two works, like *Hydriotaphia* and *The Garden of Cyrus*, are meant to form a pair, or that the hermeneutic project of *Pseudodoxia* is meant to supersede that of the *Religio*.

Whatever the original truth of these speculations, they are ultimately undercut by the publication of *Cyrus*, which circles back to the allegorical hermeneutics of *Religio Medici* even as it emphasizes particularity and experimentalism in a manner that signals continuity with *Pseudodoxia*. Though this might be seen to indicate yet another intellectual transformation on Browne's part, one that entails a partial rejection of *Pseudodoxia*'s natural philosophical method, the publication history of his work suggests otherwise. Browne continued to revise and expand *Pseudodoxia* for twenty-five years after its initial publication, seeing it through four authorized

[214] Killeen downplays the significance of these revisions, thereby limiting the chronological proximity between the *Religio* and *Pseudodoxia* (*Biblical Scholarship*, 199). For a discussion of heightened political content in the 1643 *Religio*, see Barbour, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 271; and Michael Wilding, "*Religio Medici* in the English Revolution," in *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. C. A. Patrides, 100 – 14.

[215] Conti, "Profession of Faith," 166.

editions in his lifetime. (The last edition, which in an almost certainly ironic pronouncement he declared "compleat and perfect," appeared in 1672 (3).)[216] Each contained a great deal of new material detailing ancient and modern scientific theories, and none sought to revise or renounce the text's overarching hermeneutic project. Importantly, the third of these editions appeared in 1658, the same year as *Hydriotaphia* and *The Garden of Cyrus*. It seems to be the case that Browne advocated for the literal hermeneutics of *Pseudodoxia* at the same time that he approached the book of nature in both the *Religio* and *The Garden of Cyrus* as a decidedly allegorical reader. Unlike Henry Reynolds, who believed that natural philosophers should play poets in their study of nature's mysteries, or Bacon, who thought that poetry was apt to obscure the workings of nature, Browne attempted to have it both ways, to be at once a poet-philosopher and a strict definer of nature's material truths.

'That universall and publick manuscript': Thomas Browne Reads the Book of Nature

In *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*, Peter Harrison studies the evolving conception of God's two books – the book of nature and the book of scripture – in Reformation Europe. He claims that the Protestant Reformation led to a parallel reformation in the study of natural history, as the Protestant preference for literal, historical readings of scripture spawned a literal understanding of nature that "precluded the possibility of assigning meanings to natural objects."[217] According to this hypothesis, the allegorical interpretations of nature preferred by medieval thinkers, who viewed "All of the elements of the empirical world as 'figures', invested with divinely instituted significance," were replaced by "mathematical and

[216] Cf. Barbour, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 296, 336-40, 446-48.

[217] Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

taxonomic" exegetical schemas.[218] In this way, he argues, science came to supplant poetry and modernity to triumph over antiquity.

Scholars have accepted Harrison's underlying claims that scriptural hermeneutics and natural philosophy were intimately connected in seventeenth-century thought and that the period saw a rise and expansion of "literal" interpretations of nature encompassing an array of antiquarian concerns. At the same time, they have complicated the teleology he posits, observing that allegorical interpretation survived well into the seventeenth century, just as non-symbolic studies of nature abounded in the medieval period.[219] Debora Shuger has observed that cabbalist, hermetic and rabbinic readings of the Bible proliferated in the Renaissance despite Biblical scholars' predilection for literal exegesis.[220] The same can be said for readings of the book of nature, which in the absence of a cosmological consensus were subject to fewer institutional restraints.

The English translator of Boehme's *Signatura Rerum* (1622) praised the "Theosophic Mysteries" of his signaturism precisely for accessing the moral, allegorical and anagogical levels of the *quadriga*, the fourfold system of scriptural exegesis that Christian thinkers "often reduced…to a dyadic set" of literal and spiritual (or literal and mysterious) meanings.[221] Signaturists such as Boehme were not the only of the period's thinkers to exhibit a spiritual approach to the study of nature, however. Kenneth James Howell makes the compelling case that mystical interpretations of nature were much more common in the period than has typically been

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[218] Ibid.

[219] Cf. David Linberg, "Review:*" Isis* 90, no. 2 (1999): 339 – 40; and Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship*, 43 – 69.

[220] Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 13.

[221] J. Ellingtone, "The Preface of the Translator to the Reader," in Jakob Boehme, *Signatura Rerum: or, the Signature of All Things*, (London: 1651), sig. A3v.

acknowledged. Observing that Kepler's geometrical "Trinity-sphere icon rivals the most allegorical view of the cosmos," he argues that the period's "unmistakable diversity of exegetical approaches…undermines the simplistic dichotomy between literal versus figurative hermeneutics."[222] Howell's statement is born out, I suggest, by Browne's philosophy, which challenges this hermeneutic dichotomy through the very act of instituting it, by maintaining the necessity of literal and allegorical exegesis while pointing up their ultimate incompatibility.

Unlike John Donne, Browne believed that the book of nature was an essential source of divine revelation. He famously pronounced that "there are two bookes from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universall and publik Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discovered him in the other" (*Religio Medici* 24-25). Despite the attention given to the book of nature metaphor in Browne's writing, few scholars have observed that different texts use it in different ways, portraying the book of nature and the methods necessary to read it in contradictory terms. In *Religio Medici*, Browne famously conceives of nature as a work of art, declaring, "all is artificiall, for Nature is the art of God" (25). The text repeatedly figures the sensible realm in Neoplatonic terms, as an allegorical emanation, or representation, of intelligible reality. In what is a highly characteristic passage, Browne writes, "The severe Schooles shall never laugh me out of the Philosophy of *Hermes*, this visible world is but a picture of the invisible, wherein as in a pourtract, things are not truly, but in equivocall shapes; and as they counterfeit some more reall substance in that invisible fabrick" (21). This cosmological model is reproduced in *The Garden of Cyrus*, which also figures nature as a work of art, identifying it variously as a garden, a "Symbole of Resurrection" and a "curious embroidery" wrought by God's "Needle" (177, 204).

[222] Howell, 8, 219.

Browne appears to re-conceive of nature entirely, however, in *Pseudodoxia*, the book considered by many to be the crowning achievement of his natural philosophical efforts. As critics recently have emphasized, the text marks a firm distinction between art and nature, metaphor and reality, rejecting as imaginary and irrelevant to natural philosophy any number of figurative modes he elsewhere employs enthusiastically. Arguing that art is "but the imitator or secondary representor" of nature, Browne here asserts that interpretations of nature and history must convey the literal truth, not indulge in "poetical fancies" that "describe things otherwise than they truly are, or have been" (418). Browne holds throughout the *Pseudodoxia* that the task of the natural philosopher is to dismantle vulgar errors deriving from the confusion of allegorical and literal hermeneutics -- in his words, from those beliefs that "conclud[e] metaphors from realities and from conceptions metaphoricall infer realities again" (68). Though the figure of God remains ever-present in the text, Browne here seeks to discern the world's physical reality, eschewing the search for a divine presence in the mysterious hieroglyphs and emblems of nature – that is, in nature's poetry.

Though this goal does not at first appear to denigrate allegorical interpretation so much as to distinguish it from literal, Browne's striking separation of metaphor from reality in fact constitutes a strong rebuke of the cosmology and hermeneutics endorsed by his allegorical works. Whereas *Religio Medici* and *The Garden of Cyrus* consistently portray the material realm as a metaphorical representation of divine reality, *Pseudodoxia* identifies reality with materiality itself, relegating metaphor to the category of the erroneous, or unreal. Poetic, metaphorical, hieroglyphic, and cabbalistic interpretations, all of which are treated synonymously in the text, are identified in *Pseudodoxia* as representative rather than real, and hence are seen to fall outside the purview of natural philosophy. There exists, then, a clear binary opposition in Browne's

depictions of the book of nature that hinges on the problem of poetic mystery. On the one hand, he presents the sensible world as a representation of the "more reall" mystery of creation, while on the other he presents it as a quantifiable reality that in no way intersects with representative expressions of mysterious truths.

The divisions Browne's natural philosophy creates between the mysterious and the literal, the fictive and the real, may initially appear to mark it as Baconian. Browne's own tendency to associate his distinctive hermeneutic approaches with the study of "divinity" and "philosophy" respectively seems further to support this supposition. Baconian labels ultimately prove misleading, though, as his texts continually break down any firm distinction between the categories of natural philosophy and religion. He declares in *Religio Medici* that the "mysticall transmigrations…I have observed in Silkewormes, turn'd my Philosophy into Divinity," leading him to believe that "There is in these workes of nature,…something Divine" (50). *The Garden of Cyrus* confuses the divine and the philosophical in its very sub-title: "The Quincunciall Lozenge,…naturally, artificially, mystically considered." Even *Pseudodoxia*, which purports to address questions of philosophy, marks no distinction between vulgar errors in scriptural and natural philosophical inquiry and frames interpretive error in entirely religious terms. A more apt characterization of Browne's double hermeneutics -- one amply supported by the texts themselves -- is the distinction between literal and allegorical interpretation, coded as a distinction between the philosophical and the divine.

Unsurprisingly, *Religio Medici* decidedly favors the hermeneutics of "divinity" over those of "philosophy." Browne writes that he would rather understand "wingy mysteries in Divinity" with "allegorical description[s]" than the "Metaphysicall definitions of divines" (18-19). He continues to praise allegorical hermeneutics throughout the text, not only with regard to

scripture and the contours of religious faith, but also with regard to nature, the "whole Creation" of which, he tells us, "is a mystery" (72).

In a passage dealing with recent hexaemeral controversy, Browne cautiously distances himself from Reformers who, following Luther and Calvin, have departed from the Augustinian tradition of reading the creation story allegorically.[223] "And truly for the first chapters of *Genesis*," he states

> though Divines have to the power of humane reason endeavoured to make all goe in a literall meaning, yet those allegoricall interpretations are also probable, and perhaps the mysticall method of *Moses* bred up in the Hieroglyphicall Schooles of the Egyptians (45).

Elsewhere he reaffirms his preference for allegorical mystery, or the *sensus spiritualis*, by downgrading the status of history, firmly associated with the literal level of the *quadriga*. He would have his life, a "miracle of thirty yeares," seen not as "a History**,** but a peece of Poetry" (87), and he privileges the faith of those who lived before Christ over those who lived after, as "we owe this faith unto History: they only had the advantage of a bold and noble faith,…who upon obscure prophecies and mysticall Types could raise a beliefe" (18).

Religio Medici's elevation of "mystical" hermeneutic methods over historical and literal is echoed in its description of the book of nature, perceived to be filled with symbolic inscriptions that reveal God's mysterious presence (25). The treatise observes that plants and vegetables, as well as human palms and physiognomies, carry outward signatures of their "inward forms" (72), as Browne sets out to remedy the fact that "Heathens know better how to joyne and reade these mysticall letters than wee Christians, who cast a more carelesse eye on these Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of nature" (25). This model of nature also underlies *The Garden of Cyrus*, the dedicatory preface of which alerts readers to

[223] Cf. Howell, 32 – 35.

its allegorical message, urging them to "expect herein no mathematicall truths" (176) - a strange caveat for a numerological treatise. The text's frenzied search for the five-pointed quincunx in the works of art and nature leads to a revelation of the chiasmic sign as the "fundamentall figure," the poetic hieroglyph that analogically connects the most obscure patterns in the sensible world to deep spiritual mysteries, revealing "the design of the universe by God."[224] Browne's free movement in these texts between signaturist, Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic exegetical methods associated with a poetic natural philosophy reinforces his commitment to a discipline that, like nature itself, is fundamentally figurative and mysterious.

Pseudodoxia Epidemica inverts this formulation, privileging literal, historical interpretations over allegorical and mystical. In the opening chapters of *Pseudodoxia*, Browne argues for the superiority of allegory over literality, deriding the propagators of vulgar errors for being "confined to the literal sense of the Text," incapable of "attaining the deuteroscopy, and second intention of the words" (16). We soon learn, however, that his attack on literal readers is not an attack on literal interpretation as such, but on the confusion of literal and allegorical reading practices. Following Augustine, who warned that the literal interpretation of figurative expressions indicates the carnal subjection of human intelligence, Browne associates this error with the sin of idolatry, arguing that it "overthrows" human reason and God's divinity by creating "sensible representations" of the divine image (24). He draws a direct parallel between this type of exegetical confusion and the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation wherein "the bread and wine which were but the signals or visible signes, were made the things signified, and worshipped for the body of Christ. And hereby generally men are deceived that take things spoken in some latitude without any at all" (24).

[224] Murphy, 252.

In light of the grave spiritual consequences of exegetical confusion, *Pseudodoxia* is singularly intent on distinguishing the figurative from the literal, the poetic from the historical, and the representative from the real, and it does so by reversing the exegetical priorities of *Religio Medici* – that is, by embracing definitions and rejecting allegory. While in the *Religio* Browne rejects the Scholastic's definition of nature as "the principle of motion and rest" (25), for example, in *Pseudodoxia* he works to praise God by elucidating the physical properties of action, causality and motion through which he has ordered the world (espousing, essentially, an Aristotelian cosmology). "Strict and definitive expressions, are always required in Philosophy," Browne writes, "though a loose and popular delivery will serve oftentimes in Divinity....Now if herein I adhere unto Archimedes who speaketh exactly rather than the sacred Text which speaketh largely, I hope I shall not offend Divinity" (72-73). Despite his purported scorn of the literal minded, the cumulative effect of Browne's "corrections" in *Pseudodoxia* amounts to a wholesale celebration of literal investigations into God's two books, as well as of the scholars who perform them. Though he frequently admits that proverbs, hieroglyphs, and the mysteries of religion may contain truth in a moral or spiritual sense, he consistently refutes the notion that they reveal any "real" truth about the natural world – a world that, in his texts that promote allegorical interpretation, is indistinguishable from poetic representation itself. To the modern reader, this bifurcated method appears decidedly Janus-faced, in that it seems to look backwards to a time before the separation of *res* and *verba*, when all of nature spoke a mysterious meaning, and forward to modernity, when spiritual mysteries are often (though not always) sought in art and religion alone. In the 1630s-50s, however, a number of symbolic and non-symbolic models of nature were perceived as equally cutting edge. Just as John Donne's search for "dazzling, yet plain" mysteries of religion long after he had dismissed Catholic mysteries as false speaks to the

early modern multiplication of mystery rather than its dissipation, so Browne's paradoxical hermeneutic method reveals a pluralization of world systems rather than the inevitable demise of poetic and mysterious visions of nature.

Having delineated the divisions between Browne's allegorical and literal hermeneutics, it is possible to reconsider a number of previously baffling intertextual conundrums. Scholars have been puzzled, for instance, by paragraphs I.21 - 22 of *Religio Medici*, which introduce and mock the main subject matter of *Pseudodoxia*. The passages raise the topic of scriptural *curiosa*, set pieces of the commentary tradition that explored seemingly inexplicable matters of Biblical history, many of which overlapped with seventeenth-century antiquarian and natural philosophical inquiries. In these passages Browne is highly disparaging of such questions, which he terms a "bundle of curiosities, not only in Philosophy, but in Divinity,…which indeed are not worthy our vacant hours, much less our serious Studies" (32). He boasts that "my self could shew a Catalogue of doubts, never yet imagined nor questioned," going on to list a number of *curiosa* only to irreverently propose that they are better fit for "*Pantagruel's* Library,…bound up with *Tartaretus de modo Cacandi*" (32). He then dismisses all such queries as "niceties that become not those that peruse so serious a Mystery" (32). In denouncing *curiosa* in such strict terms, however, Browne actually denounces himself, for in publishing the *Pseudodoxia* he "shows" precisely this catalogue of doubts, "a large part of the contents" of which are furnished by the queries raised in the *Religio.*[225] Just as *Pseudodoxia* seems to overturn the mysticism of *Religio Medici*, so the *Religio* preemptively dismisses the antiquarian inquiries of *Pseudodoxia*.

Few explanations have been offered for this odd exchange between Browne's first two publications. Robin Robbins posits that "The raising in *Religio Medici* of questions treated of in *Pseudodoxia* suggests some continuity or even overlapping in work on the two books," while

[225] Killeen, 81.

Killeen volunteers that Browne's ready engagement with *curiosa* in the latter text indicates a shift in his religious opinions.[226] The problem appears easier to resolve when placed in the context of Browne's double hermeneutics. The *curiosa* are deemed praiseworthy by *Pseudodoxia* and inconsequential by *Religio*, I suggest, because the former work does not aspire to "peruse so serious a Mystery." Indeed, it cannot aspire to do so, as its interpretation of nature remains firmly in the literal, while a text's "mystery" is contained in its allegorical sense. *Religio Medici* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, then, may be seen to perform necessarily different, yet complementary readings of the book of nature. That these readings are characterized in such antagonistic terms indicates the unease with which they co-exist, pointing to the presence of a hermeneutic incongruity further exacerbated by their contrasting treatments of reality and of the sacred or sinful nature of their respective interpretive modes.

'The flourish of Poetry': Thomas Browne Writes the Book of Nature

As we have begun to see, the antinomies produced by Browne's dueling cosmological and hermeneutic visions are often revealed most clearly through moments of intertextual contact, in which one and the same interpretive practice is subjected to radically different terms of assessment. This section will explore further instances of such intertextuality in order to demonstrate how Browne's double hermeneutic theory influences his philosophical practice. It will examine the asymmetries produced by his contradictory treatment of numerical mysticism, figurative representation and cabalistic interpretation, mystical exegetical strategies that he allies with rhetorical amplification. Though his works that promote allegorical hermeneutics associate

[226] Robin Robbins, introduction to *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: or, Enquiries into very many received tenents and commonly presumed truths*, vol. 1, ed. Robin Robbins, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), xxi.

poetic depictions of nature with the magnanimity of God, his texts that interpret nature literally connect it to the pride of Satan. This paradoxical state of affairs situates Browne and his readers in a position of potential spiritual peril, suggesting that his double hermeneutics cannot provide a long term solution to the intellectual and spiritual problems raised by the early modern pluralization of mystery.

As demonstrated in the Caius anecdote, Browne's interpretive contradictions are perhaps most evident in his wavering treatment of numerology. In *Pseudodoxia*, he makes one of his most provocative statements on the role of poetry in natural philosophy in a passage on the false nature of numerical mysticism. Attempting to dispel fears surrounding the purportedly fatal "Great Climacterical Year, that is, Sixty three," he argues that people come to believe in numerological signs for the same reason they give credence to exaggerated fables about historical figures: their understanding is deceived.[227] Unlike the senses, which he faults for "apprehending [objects] in lesser magnitudes then their dimensions require," the human understanding errs because it "ascribeth unto many things far larger horizons than their due circumscriptions require: and receiveth them with amplifications which their reality will not admit" (334). In the realm of numerology, commended by Neo-pythagoreans, Neoplatonists, Jewish mystics and even "many Christians," such amplifications, Browne intimates, are abundant (335). He frowns on this state of affairs, maintaining that belief in numerology is "extolled from Arbitrary and Poetical grounds" rather than rational thought; it stems from the misperception that statements "delivered Hieroglyphically, metaphorically, illustratively" actually refer to "active and causall considerations" (342).

[227] Climactericals" are years of astrological importance in one's life thought to bring large transitions. Purportedly occuring every seventh and ninth year of one's nativity, the most critical climactericals are seen to fall on the forty-ninth and sixty-third years of existence.

What is perhaps most significant about this passage is its association of "poetical" reasoning with the "amplification" of the human understanding, a process of mental exaggeration that leads humans to reach beyond the circumscriptions of a divinely created reality, to interpret nature as larger and more mystical than it actually is. This line of reasoning appears to echo Bacon's contention that sacramental models of nature "mislead [the understanding]...by flattery," being "fanciful and tumid and half poetical."[228] Browne's description of poetical philosophy specifically in terms of "amplification" is particularly interesting, as it implicitly locates the deficiency of the human understanding in a susceptibility to rhetoric. A figure of speech indicating the arrangement of words in order of increasing force or the hyperbolic description of an object in "over-large" terms, *amplificatio* is a crucial concept in early modern rhetoric, closely related to both the humanist practice of *copia* and to the category of *inventio*, concerned with developing and augmenting topics of speech. It is, moreover, one of Browne's favorite tropes, a stylistic pattern so frequently deployed in *Religio Medici* that it becomes central to Stanley Fish's critique of the work's aesthetic. Whether or not one seconds Fish's assessment of Browne's numerous verbal crescendos, which, he argues, prove that he "doesn't feel anything, except the impulse to *amplificatio*," the *o altitudo*s peppered throughout his works contain some of his strongest assertions of the power of the divine in and beyond the created order.[229] "All is artificial, for nature is the art of God;" "*[Deus est] Sphæra cuius centrum ubique, circumferential*

[228] Bacon, *The New Organon* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 4, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London: Longman and Co., 1875), 66). Bacon associated poetic thought with the mind's willful enlargement of reality as early as 1605, when he reasoned in *The Advancement of Learning* that since "the world" is "in proportion inferior to the soul" and "the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical" (in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 6, eds. Spedding, Ellis, and Heath (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1864, 203).

[229] Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 368.

nullibi" (God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere) – such expressions are intended to exalt the Creator and his creation (26, 19n).

Though *Pseudodoxia* is happy to describe God, like the *Religio*, with reference to "Trismegistus his circle" (11), when it comes to describing God's works it insists on acts of circumscription, warning against rhetorical amplification as a practice that produces sacramental models of nature. In an argument that strongly recalls Reformation Eucharistic debates, Browne explains that while "God made all things in number, weight and measure yet nothing by them or through the efficacy of either" (342). The numbers in nature, in other words, cannot cause things to happen because they aren't infused with any divine principle: God doesn't work through them, only with them and on them. Just as in Protestant theology the wafer becomes an ineffectual sign that represents but does not confer God's grace, so numbers in nature may be said to represent religious mysteries but not literally to contain them. To perceive reality in amplified, poetic terms is thus to perceive it as immanent, and, in doing so, to fall into the sins of idolatry and ingratitude – of worshipping the flesh while scorning the material reality of God's creation.

Browne's understanding of the relation between reality and the poetic mysteries of number is, predictably, quite different in those texts that espouse allegorical hermeneutics than in *Pseudodoxia*. He writes in paragraph I.12 of *Religio Medici*:

> I have often admired the mysticall way of *Pythagoras*, and the secret Magicke of numbers; Beware of Philosophy, is a precept not to be received in too large a sense; for in this masse of nature there is a set of things that carry in their front, though not in capitall letters, yet in stenography, and short Characters, something of Divinitie. (21)

The passage's point-for-point inversion of the principles later put forward in *Pseudodoxia*'s critique of numerology is noteworthy: Browne endorses numerical mysticism and the

sacramental doctrine of signatures, thereby upholding the Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic models of immanence his literal interpretation rejects. Tellingly, the passage is immediately followed by Browne's assertion that the visible realm is a mere representation of the "more Reall" invisible; numerical mysticism is thus figured not as a violation of God's reality but as a mode of access to it. This vision of reality is strongly reinforced by *The Garden of Cyrus*, which not only assumes a belief in "mystical Mathematicks" as foundational, but which also proclaims, through Browne's characteristic use of *amplificatio*, that "All things" are mere simulacra of God's divine mysteries (226, 218). Taken together, these selections point up the antinomies that disrupt any semblance of unity between Browne's literal and allegorical hermeneutics. Not only does his divided natural philosophy require thinkers to adopt contradictory methods of reading and writing about the book of nature and to perceive the "reality" of that book in mutually exclusive terms, but it places them in the compromising position of practicing methods that frame one another as spiritually erroneous.

The theological weight of this problem becomes even clearer when considered in light of the contrasting treatment of representation – or, as *Religio Medici* would have it, recreation -- in Browne's works. Whereas *Pseudodoxia* develops strict hermeneutic and aesthetic strictures to protect against the idolatrous confusion of literal and figurative modes, *Religio Medici* and *The Garden of Cyrus* identify the play of representation with divine revelation and Christian redemption. *Pseudodoxia* assumes a hard line stance against non-literal representations of reality, sanctioning the "poetical fancies" and "libert[ies]" of poets and painters only in the portrayal of those things that are altogether unreal (417). In the event that "the real works of nature or veritable acts of story are to be described," creative license is seen as an "aberration" (418). Browne maintains

> Art being but the imitator or secondary representor, it must not vary from the verity of the example, or describe things other than they truly are, or have been. For hereby introducing false ideas of things, it perverts and deforms the face and symmetry of truth.

According to this passage, for readings and artistic imitations of God's two books to uphold the truth they must, like *Pseudodoxia* itself, speak definitively rather than largely, strictly rather than jocularly. There is no room in theology or natural philosophy for a spirit of play.

Notwithstanding the text's attempt at hermeneutic severity, however, it is as a playful writer that Browne has come to be received by generations of literary critics. Samuel Johnson argued that one "has little acquaintance with…Browne, who suspects him of a serious opinion;" Samuel Taylor Coleridge delighted at the "Humourist mingling with & flashing across the Philosopher" in *The Garden of Cyrus*; and Virginia Woolf exclaimed over the capacity to "take our ease and trifle and laugh" when reading *Religio Medici*.[230] The impressions of these poets are informed by the self-presentation of texts in which Browne praises allegory, which link "representation" with "recreation" -- a term that Browne "invariably deploys in its twofold meaning of creation anew, and of pleasure."[231] Early in the *Religio,* Browne connects his love of religious mystery with the concept of recreation, noting "'Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved aenigmas and riddles of the Trinity, with Incarnation and Resurrection" (18). He thus depicts leisure and the joys of contemplation as inseparable from the central mysteries of the Christian faith, themselves effected and made comprehensible through numerous acts of divine representation – Christ's re-creation as a man and in the resurrection, the

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[230] Samuel Johnson, "Dr. Johnson's Life of Sir Thomas Browne," in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. 1, ed. Simon Wilkin (London: 1852) xiii; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted in C. A. Patrides, introduction to *The Major Works: Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 40; Virginia Woolf, "Sir Thomas Browne," *Times Literary Supplement*, 1923.See also Frank J. Warnke, "A Hook for Amphibium: Some Reflections on Fish," in *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. C. A. Patrides, 49 – 59.

[231] Patrides, introduction to *The Major Works*, 41.

visible world's re-creation of the intelligible, and the final re-creation of mankind and of nature in the second coming. It is for this reason that the natural philosopher, like the poet, must seek to re-create the natural world: in doing so, he both imitates and participates in the redemption of the entire created order. Browne sets out to repeat this task in *Cyrus*, which he presents to readers as a "Symbole of Resurrection" and "the delightful World that comes after Death" (177).

In contradistinction to *Pseudodoxia*, *Religio Medici* and *Cyrus*'s allegorical hermeneutics position the play of representation - in the sense of both its pliancy and its recreative capacity - as central to Christian theology. Man's greatest duty, as presented in these texts, is to peruse the mystery of creation in nature and scripture. Unfortunately, our carnal natures limit our ability to contemplate spiritual truths. To ask to see God – "truth itself" – as Moses did is, Browne tells us, to "commit a gross absurdity" (*Religio* 60). The solution to this problem comes in the form of representation – the pliable symbols that alone can bridge the gap between man's "divided and distinguished worlds,…the one visible and the other invisible" (45). As a creature with a soul, man is capable of recognizing the existence and primacy of the invisible order, though he can only apprehend it metaphorically – as Browne says, "asquint upon reflex and shadow" (21). In a passage from *The Garden of Cyrus* that draws heavily on Plato's allegory of the cave, Browne states:

> Light that makes things seen, makes some things invisible, were it not for darknesse and the shadow of the earth, the noblest part of the Creation had remained unseen, and the Stars in heaven as invisible as on the fourth day, when they were created above the Horizon, with the Sun, or there was not an eye to behold them (218). [232]

[232] Both the allegory of the cave and the concept of divine shadows make notable appearances in the final two chapters of *Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, where they represent, respectively, human ignorance of the afterlife and the mystical experience thereof (162, 170). My neglect of *Hydriotaphia* in this chapter is occasioned largely by restrictions of space. Apart from the mysticism of the final chapter, the text's antiquarian investigations generally

Just as Plato's prisoner is blinded when first freed from the darkness of the cave, so man is blinded when he catches a glimpse of God's divine truth. In a supreme act of accommodation, God has shadowed his mysteries through the representations of scripture and the visible order, allowing all mankind to perceive them. The greatest expression of this accommodation, Browne tells us, is found in the Incarnation of Christ, who shadowed his divinity in the flesh of humanity, foreshadowing the redemption of mankind. "Partly seen and unseen, according to the visible and invisible side of his nature" (187), Christ, like all men – and like nature itself – is divided between two worlds. However, as divinity incarnate he both symbolizes and brings about the final reparation of these orders. As with the quincunx that emblematizes him and the books of scripture and nature that reveal him, Christ uses the allegorical shadows of the visible world to give humans access to the otherwise inscrutable mystery of a divine reality. God's artifice, we find, is an act of grace.

It is for this reason that Browne looks to metaphor, allegory, and adumbration (all poetic tools) to understand the mysteries of creation. The license of allegory, not the specificity of literality, gives us access to God. The metaphor that comes to emblematize this "shadowy" approach to the book of nature in both *Religio Medici* and *The Garden of Cyrus* is, fittingly, the Ficinian description of light as God's shadow. In the former text, the metaphor is used as an example of a "description, periphrasis, or adumbration" Browne might write in an attempt to understand obscurities in God's two books. "Where I cannot satisfie my reason," he writes,

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follow *Pseudodoxia*'s exegetical model, though one might argue that they are superseded by *Cyrus*'s allegorical interpretations. Relevant in this regard is *Hydriotaphia*'s discussion of the Greek letter *theta* (Θ) as a "character" of *thanatos* or death, the "mortall right-lined circle [that] must conclude and shut up all" (166). This most final of circumscriptions, as Kathryn Murphy observes, is "converted" in *Cyrus* to an emblem of immortality via Browne's description of the *demiurge*'s cosmos, a circle marked with the Greek letter *chi* (x) used by Christians as a symbol of the cross ("A Likely Story," 247-48). As argued below, this cosmic symbol represents not only resurrection, but also amplification in its depiction of a universe founded on contraries.

> I love to humour my fancy; I had as leive you tell me…*Lux est umbra Dei* as *actus perspicui*…for by acquainting our reason how unable it is to display the visible and obvious effect of nature, it becomes more humble and submissive unto the subtilties of faith (19).

To perceive light through the adumbration, or metaphor, of God's shadow as opposed to the literal definition of *actus perspicui* (the impulse of transparency) is to perform a simultaneously imaginative and devotional exercise, one that helps us understand the greatness of divine mysteries by recognizing the limitations of human knowledge.

The metaphor becomes central to the theological message of *The Garden of Cyrus*, appearing at what has been described as the rhetorical apex of the work. The text praises the fortuitous existence of shadows and adumbrations in nature, from the "due expansion of [tree] branches, for shadow or delight," to the dark blue and green colors of plants and water that protect human eyesight (210; 217). As he describes the necessity of shadows to physical sight, Browne builds toward a triumphant spiritual conclusion, declaring

> The greatest mystery of religion is expressed by adumbration, and in the noblest part of the Jewish types, we find the Cherubims shadowing the Mercy-seat: Life it self is but the shadow of death, and souls departed but the shadows of the living: All things fall under this name. The Sunne it self is but the dark *simulachrum*, and light but the shadow of God (218).

In this passage, Ficino's metaphor is revealed as the ultimate adumbration of the central Christian mystery – that of Christ's incarnation, foreshadowed in the Old Testament – and it speaks to a fundamental truth about human existence and the created order, all of which are mere

shadows of God's truth. To interpret light, like all things in nature and scripture, allegorically is thus to grasp the mystery of all creation, shadowed forth in divine and decidedly poetic figures.

Pseudodoxia Epidemica, however, tells a different story. In "A Digression of the Wisdom of God in the Site and Motion of the Sun," Browne argues that we fail to perform our duty to God if we "only bestow the flourish of Poetry [on his works] or those commendatory conceits which popularly set forth the eminency of this creature" (464) Far from endorsing a figurative portrayal of light, the chapter pursues a lengthy discussion of the sun's motion and position in relation to the earth, considering how these enable human optics, the alternation of day and night, and the changing of the seasons. The section concludes in praise of God's creation, with Browne proclaiming he is "not afraid to believe, it may be literally said of the wisdome of God, what men will have but figuratively spoken of the works of Christ; that if the wonders thereof were duly described, the whole world…would not containe them" (468). To honor God through the study of nature is, according to this passage, not to grasp his mysteries allegorically – to view light as his shadow – but to describe his works literally, according to the motion, action and causality by which he has created them.

One of the more striking consequences of *Pseudodoxia*'s literal hermeneutics is that religious mysteries and allegories are seen as no more capable of revealing truths about nature than any other figurative discourse. This outcome is demonstrated in the chapter "That there was no Rainebow before the Flood," which disputes the common belief that no rainbows existed before the one created in Genesis 9:13-17, when God established his covenant with Noah. Browne immediately attacks this notion on the grounds that it "concludes the existence of things" from their "signalities," i.e., that it derives the existence of the signified from the institution of the sign (545). Reiterating the main methodological premise of *Pseudodoxia*, that

symbolic systems and Nature are not one and the same, Browne argues that the rainbow "hath its ground in Nature" and therefore almost certainly existed before God chose it "as a token of the Covenant" (545).

The latter part of the chapter takes a sharp turn, as Browne comes close to relegating Christian interpretations of the rainbow's symbolic valences to the realm of imagination. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> Cabalisticall heads…do literally play on [the sign of the rainbow], and from its semicircular figure, resembling the Hebrew letter כ Caph, whereby is signified the uncomfortable number of twenty, at which years Joseph was sold, which Jacob lived under Laban, and at which men were to go to war; do note a propriety in its signification; as thereby declaring the dismall time of the deluge. And Christian conceits do seem to strain as high, while from the irradiation of the Sunne upon a cloud, they apprehend the mystery of the Sunne of righteousnesse in the obscurity of flesh; by the colours green and red, the two destructions of the world by fire and water; or by the colours of bloud and water, the mysteries of Baptisme, and the holy Eucharist. (547)

The assessment of "Cabalisticall heads" reflects Browne's association of Rabbinic exegetical practices with "stretched and far-flung interpretation," while also underscoring *Pseudodoxia*'s suspicion of recreational exegesis.[233] The derivation of a Hebrew letter from the rainbow's shape is depicted not as a strict or definitive interpretation, but as an act of play. It is an act, moreover, that repeats the basic interpretive fallacy combated in *Pseudodoxia* as a whole, the derivation of a "literal" from a "figure" - here the rainbow's semi-circle. (Even more ingenuous is the fact that in this instance the "literal" is actually a product of figurative interpretation while

[233] Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship*, 68.

the "figure" is a literal reality.) While not condemning the mystical interpretation outright, then, the passage still codes it as suspect.

This makes Browne's next assertion all the more inflammatory: Christian deuteroscopy, applied to nature, is potentially as flawed as the Jewish Cabbala. When Christians "apprehend" the mysteries of their religion – even the highest mysteries, such as the incarnation of Christ and the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist - in the physical properties of the rainbow, they are "straining" their conceits, amplifying nature's reality. While Christian mysteries are spiritually true, the notion that they might be figured forth by the sensible world is deemed problematic, if not outright false. Creation, here, is not a mystery shadowed forth by the art of nature. Mysteries found in nature are instead the product of the human capacity to think metaphorically, to produce poetic conceits. While these conceits may tell us something true about religion, they do not tell us anything about the inherent workings of the natural world. Our error, Browne intimates, is in believing they do – in "concluding the existence of things" from "their signalities." While he does not denounce the "Christian pens" that have "symboliz'd" God from the "mystery of [the rainbow's] colors," he notes that we praise God just as well, if not better, when we consider the rainbow literally, noting that its "colours are made by refraction of light, and the shadows that limit that light" (548). We come to understand the beauty of God's creation not only by searching for its allegorical significance, but by coming to understand its literal makeup – its material reality.

Characteristically, Browne's stirring endorsement of the rainbow's literal properties disappears in *The Garden of Cyrus*. In language that strongly recalls the passage from *Pseudodoxia,* he writes that in the roots of the water-fern we may discern "the form of a Half Moon, Rain-bow, or….Hebrew, Arabick, Greek, and Latine Characters" -- all hieroglyphics that

provide evidence of divine mysteries in nature (207). In this deliberate echo of *Pseudodoxia*'s critique of cabbalistic reading practices we find, once again, an exact opposition between the hermeneutic, ontological and theological messages of Browne's allegorical and literal texts. Where one sees mystical hermeneutics as man's best aid in the search for truth, the other sees it as fundamentally corrosive to such a search.

So corrosive are poetic modes of thought to *Pseudodoxia*'s literal hermeneutics that they come to be associated not with divine accommodation, but with the deceptions of Satan, revealed in Book I of *Pseudodoxia* as the great enlarger and original amplifier of God's truth. Browne devotes the final two chapters of this introductory book, which explores common causes of human error, to "the first contriver of Error, and professed opposer of Truth, the Divell" (58). Though asserting that man is weak enough to have fallen from grace with no outside influence, Browne notes that Satan, "an invisible Agent…[who] playes in the darke upon us" is constantly working to delude mankind, leading it toward false interpretations of God and nature. Though Satan does work his deceptions on a "direct and literall" level, seeking to convince people, for instance, that "there is no such reallity" as God, he is more successful at leading them into the kind of interpretive confusion addressed throughout *Pseudodoxia*. One of Satan's most common tactics is to convince people that historical events are the effect of "supernatural" causes such as comets, astronomical phenomena that Browne notes are often not supernatural at all, but rather "the effects of naturall and created causes" (67). The situation is complicated, as Browne admits, by the fact that God does at times reveal himself through supernatural portents, and these portents can only be distinguished from Satan's through their invisible causes, not their visible effects. Only by adopting a cautious hermeneutic practice, which hesitates to read natural effects

as supernatural signs, can humans hope to avoid being duped by Satan's "Rhetoricall sequells" (68).

Browne takes pains to note that while Satan often counterfeits God's effects in order to bring about this confusion, he does not "imitate" God, because he cannot replicate his powers of causation (69). Rather, Satan acts as a deconstructive principle, working to "entangle" and "confound" God's truth precisely by mangling the distinction between cause and effect (65). Whereas *Religio Medici* and the *Garden of Cyrus* associate Christian mysteries with riddles, enigmas and recreation, here Satan is the joker, whose "wiles" and "Riddles" have "depraved the conception of the Creator" and "entangled the Nature of our Redeemer" (65). He "plays in the dark upon us" just as "Caballisticall heads" play upon the rainbow – by leading us to infer the literal from the figurative and the figurative from the literal. Browne associates this strategy of Satan's with his drive toward amplification. Dissatisfied with nature as created by "the Idea of that minde that formed all things best," Satan and his minions "doe really desire its enlargement," wishing many things true "which in themselves are false" (72-73). As Browne reminds readers, the desire to enlarge truth, to "regulate determined realityes unto…private optations" by making one's nature larger than it actually is, was the first act of disobedience in Satan and mankind (73). To read a literal nature allegorically, looking for religious mysteries in natural causes, is not to participate in the redemptive act of re-creation, but instead to repeat the original sin - to re-enact, as it were, the fall of man.

Browne's double hermeneutics lead us, both in theory and in practice, to a great impasse in our study of poetic mystery and its role in his natural philosophical practice. In applying the dyadic method of scriptural exegesis to the book of nature, he brings together two of the period's competing cosmological models and exegetical approaches, seeking to unite material and

mystical interpretations of nature under the traditionally complementary categories of literal and allegorical exegesis. The antagonistic manner in which each text treats the other's hermeneutics, however, as well as the ontological paradox inherent in the model, brings his two methods to the brink of self-cancellation. Moreover, his association of allegorical hermeneutics with Christ on the one hand and Satan on the other confronts readers with a serious spiritual dilemma, a matter of salvation and damnation that seems potentially impossible to resolve.

Conclusion

Book IV of *The Garden of Cyrus* re-tells the "likely story" of the demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*, who in creating the cosmos

> conjoined the unity and the duality of the soul, and made out the three substances so much considered by him; That is, the indivisible or divine, the divisible or corporeal, and that third, which was the *Systasis* or harmony of those two, in the mystical decussation. (220)

Binding the unified spirit and divided body through the rhetorical figure of the "mystical decussation," or quincunx, the demiurge, like God in *Religio Medici*, founds not only "generation…but also creation itself" on contraries (*Religio* 46). Kathryn Murphy has argued that Browne's use of the *Timaean* allegory serves to unite *The Garden of Cyrus* with its companion piece, *Hydriotaphia*, fusing their opposing contemplations of death and birth, sleep and waking, shadows and light through the quincuncial sign of the cross, with its promise of resurrection.[234] The chiasmic allegory could just as easily function as a figure for Browne's

[234] Murphy, "A Likely Story," 248-52.

natural philosophical practice, which also joins the unity of the allegorical and spiritual with the divisions of the literal and corporeal, all through the mystery of God's divine presence.

To interpret Browne's work this way would be to read it from a purely allegorical perspective, looking to the veridical paradox of divine figuration as a means of resolving all contradiction. Ever the divided thinker, Browne would hardly settle for such an easy conclusion. And so, in his *Letter to a Friend,* (c. 1656; published posthumously, 1690), we find a somewhat different explanation of the relationship between literal and allegorical hermeneutics.[235] Describing a young man who had recently died of consumption, Browne observes that the patient maintained false hopes of his own survival. Unlike *Pseudodoxia,* which would certainly have condemned such a willful misinterpretation of signs, the *Letter* implies that acts of misreading are a psychological necessity. "There are not Felicities in this World to satisfie a serious Mind," Browne writes,

> and therefore to soften the stream of our Lives, we are fain to take in the reputed Contentations of this World, to unite with the Crowd in their Beatitudes, and to make our selves happy by Consortion, Opinion, or Co-existimation: for strictly to separate from received and customary Felicities, and to confine unto the rigour of Realities, were to contract the Consolation of our Beings unto too uncomfortable circumscriptions.[236]

Though this passage takes a remarkably soft stance on the theological consequences of interpretive error, we may identify in it the hallmarks of Browne's literal hermeneutics. The "reputed contentions of this world," the "opinions" and "co-existimations" of the "crowd" are none other than the popular errors and commonly presumed truths exposed by *Pseudodoxia*.

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[235] Browne first drafted *Letter to a Friend* in the mid-1650s, but continued to revise and expand the document for decades. Cf. Barbour, *Life of Sir Thomas Browne*, 329.

[236] Thomas Browne, *A Letter to a Friend*, in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 111.

While here it is merely too uncomfortable to circumscribe ourselves to the rigor of realities, the reality in question is the same as that described in "The Great Climacterical Year," and in escaping its boundaries we are still entering the realm of the unreal, substituting poetic amplification for truth. From the perspective of this text, as well as *Pseudodoxia*, the "likely story" of the "mystical decussation" is just that, a story, and the unifying power of poetry is at best a comforting falsehood and at worst a diabolical one.

It may be impossible to determine which side of his divided hermeneutics Browne finally supported – the side that celebrates the inclusivity of veridical paradox or the side that falters on the impossibilities of antinomy. His approach to knowledge acquisition was often a "negative" one: *Religio Medici* praises the Tertullian maxim "*Certum est quia impossibile est*" (I believe because it is impossible) (18), and even *Pseudodoxia* presents the search for truth in negative terms as the demolition of error.[237] It is therefore possible that the incongruities in his philosophy are an expression of Christian skepticism or of *de docta ignorantia*. For this to be the case, of course, Browne would have had to accept the claims of allegorical mystery, a prospect that cannot be proven. In fact, Barbour contends that Browne's denigration of "flat and flexible truths" in *Cyrus*'s concluding paragraphs suggests his ultimate preference for the "criteria of the *Pseudodoxia*" over "those of the *Religio*," a text that asks to be read in a "soft and flexible sense"

[237] "This is certain because it is impossible." For a discussion of *Religio Medici*'s anti-intellectual tendencies in their cultural context, see Debora Shuger, "The Laudian Idiot," in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, 36 – 62. Achsah Guibbory also considers *Pseudodoxia*'s negative approach to knowledge production in "Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and the Circle of Knowledge," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 18.3 (1976), 486 – 99. Though she doesn't explicitly identify the book's epistemology with Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of learned ignorance, the method Guibbory describes is essentially the Cusan doctrine that the more "deeply" we understand the incomprehensiblility of precise knowledge, "the closer we approach to truth." Cusa's metaphor for this process, fittingly, is that of the polygon approaching the sides of a circle: "even if the number of its angles is increased *ad infinitum*, the polygon never becomes equal [to the circle] unless it is resolved into an identity with the circle." ((*On Learned Ignorance*, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981), 52.)

(10).[238] There is also some evidence that Browne remained genuinely confused. As the epigraph to this essay indicates, his *Christian Morals* (published posthumously, 1714) offers a vision of a mind assailed by contradiction, beset by "Physical Truths" that "like a Delphian Blade will cut on both sides."[239] Resignedly, the text advises readers plagued by such philosophical doubts to take refuge in the certainty of ethics, stating "However thy understanding may waver in the Theories of True and False, yet fasten the Rudder of thy Will, steer straight unto good and fall not foul on evil."[240]

More interesting, I would argue, than the unanswerable question of whether or not Browne was able to reconcile his literal and allegorical hermeneutics, is the fact that he pointed up their incommensurability in the first place. In his syncretic attempt to hold the two together, he demonstrated the utter impossibility of doing so, showing that the circumscriptions of the literal can never contain the amplifications of the allegorical and that the amplifications of the allegorical can subsume, but never be reduced to, the circumscriptions of the literal. By way of association, numerous other conceptual pairs were also held up as incompatible: poetic and non-poetic natural philosophy, sacramental and non-sacramental theology, and representation and reality. To synthesize the claims of these divergent categories, one must have faith in the mysterious, ultimately sacramental power of poetry to combine unlike kinds, a difficult prospect if one considers poetry to be a symbolic structure that is merely representative, not real.

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[238] Barbour, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 363.

[239]Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*, in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne,* vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 263.

[240] Ibid., 248.

Rosalie Colie observed some time ago that paradoxes "exploit the fact of relative, or competing, value systems" and therefore "flourish in a period with many competitive 'truths.'"[241] Early modernity is one such period, and in the works of Thomas Browne we find its many doubts, contradictions, and antinomies writ small. Like Jonson, Browne believes in poetry's capacity to re-create incarnational mysteries, though like Bacon he suspects that those mysteries, as found in nature, are the products of human fancy. Like Boehme, he trusts in the inspired power of the Word to convey Christ to believers, but like Donne he tests the validity of the mysteries that Word reveals. What sets Browne apart is his desire to preserve all of these strains of thought and to unite the mysterious cosmos with the non-mysterious one that would soon come to replace it. Ever teetering between unity and duality, the chiral and the chiasmic, Browne's philosophy reveals both the extent and limit of the early modern capacity to entertain divergent truths, to choose harmony over schism, the flexible figure over the definitive letter.

[241] Colie, 10; 37.

Conclusion:

Taking Mystery's Measure

> *Angelo:* *O place, O form,*
> *How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,*
> *Wrench awe from fools, and tie the wiser souls*
> *To thy false seeming! Blood, thou art blood.*
> *Let's write 'good angel' on the devil's horn –*
> *'Tis now the devil's crest.* (Measure for Measure 2.4.12-17)

John Lyly's *Galatea* (1585) features an interaction between an Alchemist, his apprentice, and the miller's son, Rafe, which calls into question the appropriate designation for the alchemical arts. When the apprentice introduces Rafe to the Alchemist as one who is "desirous to learn your craft," the Alchemist indignantly replies, "Craft, sir boy? You must call it mystery." The obtuse Rafe responds to this admonishment with an unexpected bit of wisdom: "All is one: a crafty mystery, and a mystical craft."[242] Though Rafe does not yet recognize it, the Alchemist's insistence on calling his trade a mystery reflects his ongoing efforts to use the fabrications of language as a means of disguising a "crafty mystery" as a "mystical craft."

We now recognize this exchange as a sendup of the common early modern anxiety about mystery that I have mapped throughout this dissertation, the pervasive fear that poetic language and theatrical performance might lead individuals to mistake false crafts for true mysteries. Ben Jonson, as we saw, structured numerous jokes and even entire dramatic plotlines around the confusion of sacred mysteries and dubious arts. This feared confusion may also be seen to underlie a puzzling scene in *Measure for Measure*, in which the characters Pompey and Abhorson, a hangman and a bawd, seek to prove that their arts might appropriately be termed mysteries. Their interaction, which resembles that between Rafe and the Alchemist in *Galatea*, unfolds after the hangman Abhorson is ordered to take Pompey, the bawd, as his apprentice.

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[242] John Lyly, *Galatea*, in *Galatea: Midas*, eds. George K. Hunter and David Bevington, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 2.3.110-12.

When Abhorson worries aloud that Pompey will "discredit our mystery," the provost who gave him the order exits the stage, leaving the two to draw the spectators' full attention.[243] The bawd immediately challenges Abhorson, not, as one might expect, for insulting his profession, but for mischaracterizing the hangman's craft as a mystery.

Pompey ...do you call, sir, your occupation a mystery?

Abhorson Ay, sir, a mystery.

Pompey Painting, sir, I have heard say is a mystery; and your whores, sir, being members of my occupation, using painting, do prove my occupation a mystery. But what mystery there should be in hanging, if I should be hanged I cannot imagine.

Abhorson Sir, it is a mystery.

Pompey Proof.

Abhorson Every true man's apparel fits your thief –

Pompey If it be too little for your thief your true man thinks it big enough. If it be too big for your thief, your thief thinks it little enough. So every true man's apparel fits your thief. (4.2.25-37)

Upon the completion of this riddling exchange, the provost re-enters the stage, and Abhorson announces that he is now willing to instruct Pompey in his trade. The two take their leave, bound together as master and apprentice.

Shakespeare's engagement with the problem of false mystery in this scene, as well as in the play as a whole, leads him to a fundamentally different conclusion about the mysteries of theater, divinity, and craft than those reached by Jonson, Donne, or Browne. Promoting a

[243] William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, vol. 2, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008), 351. All citations of the text will be taken from this edition. Future citations will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

vantage point hinted at jocularly by Lyly nearly twenty years earlier, Shakespeare indicates in *Measure for Measure* that there may be no distinction between a crafty mystery and a mystical craft. Since all occupations, whether that of the prince, the friar, the prostitute, or the playwright, are shown to be crafted and performed by humans, their spiritual efficacy is questionable at best, while their social efficacy is limited by the forms of power they are afforded within the community along with the moral characters of those who practice them.

Measure for Measure is a dark play, and this appears to be a dark sentiment, one which announces that theatrical and poetic art, trade guilds, statecraft, and religious orders are not participants in and re-presenters of spiritual mysteries, but rather are human creations subject to vice, decay, and death. However, as I will conclude by suggesting, this vision also works to protect the mysteries of theater by freeing them from any straightforwardly didactic or sacramental role. By indicating that theater intersects with the world in ways that cannot be precisely named or quantified, *Measure for Measure* opens up the possibility that art is the means by which humans are constantly recreating (for better or for worse) the world in which they live. It is a mysterious tool that must be wielded all the more carefully for the fact that we do not fully understand the means by which it works – the ways that creations so decidedly provisional, even ephemeral, can be salvific for some and destructive or inefficacious for others.

Measure for Measure can make such a bold statement in part because Pompey and Abhorson's dialogue draws attention to the play's epistemological investigations of the relationship between craft and sacred or profane mysteries.[244] Their parodic interaction does not just mock the characters' association of corrupt arts with mysteries; it asks the audience to

[244] For two influential readings of the scene's thematic import, see Phylis Gorfain, "'Craft against Vice': Riddling as Ritual in *Measure for Measure*," *Assaph C* 5 (1989): 96; and Peter Lake with Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 649-50.

consider how one might go about proving a craft to be mysterious. Contrary to Donne and numerous other early modern thinkers, Shakespeare suggests in this scene that such an exercise is absurd, as it submits supernatural truths to the straightening forms of human reason. Without establishing a working definition of the term, both Pompey and Abhorson provide opaque, illogical proofs that their professions are mysteries. Pompey argues that prostitution is a mystery because whores paint, and he has "heard" that painting is a mystery (4.2.28). This fallacious justification centers on the bawd's punning equation of the cosmetic arts with the visual art of painting, an analogy that fails to take into account the purposes to which the crafts are turned. Whereas the early modern art of painting, like poetry, is ideally meant to provide spiritual edification, a prostitute's paint is meant to entice individuals into vice, as well as to disguise the physical evidence of venereal disease. At most, it is a crafty mystery, not a mystical craft.

Abhorson's proof is even less comprehensible than Pompey's, though it inexplicably convinces the bawd that the hangman's craft is a mystery. Abhorson opens his demonstration with the proposition that "Every true man's apparel fits your thief" (4.2.34), to which Pompey responds, "If it be too little for your thief your true man thinks it big enough. If it be too big for your thief, your thief thinks it little enough. So every true man's apparel fits your thief" (4.2.35-37). Though these lines may allude to the fact that executioners were awarded their victims' clothing after they had performed an execution, it is unclear what, exactly, they have to do with the art of hanging. Instead, they point to the disguise of a dishonest craftsman (a thief) as a "true man," maintaining the scene's thematic focus on the possibility of confusing false arts with sacred mysteries. Neither Pompey nor Abhorson satisfactorily demonstrate that their professions are mysteries; if their bogus proofs reveal any truth, it seems to be that they are practitioners of crafty, false arts. Yet both the hangman and the bawd happily accept these riddling proofs, even

going so far as jointly to craft the last proof in a verbal ritual that appears, as Phylis Gorfain has argued, to serve as Pompey's initiation into the hangman's profession.[245] The unsettling implication of this scene, especially when considered within the broader context of the play, is that "proofs" of sacred and profane mysteries (like those created by Pompey and Abhorson) are merely agreed-upon fabrications, the potential truth or falsehood of which lie beyond human powers of deduction.

Pompey and Abhorson's dialogue thus not only thematizes *Measure for Measure*'s imbrication of the Lenten and the carnivalesque, as Peter Lake and Michael Questier have argued, but it also highlights the play's deep concern with the relationship between human crafts and religious mystery, particularly as regards those crafts practiced by the hangman and the bawd.[246] The city of Vienna, as depicted in the play, is torn between judicial principles of mercy and justice. Under the rule of Duke Vincentio, mercy devolved into a bawdlike over-laxity, while under the deputy Angelo's rule, justice becomes conflated with the tyranny of the executioner. A city overrun by criminals and moral absolutists, Vienna is a place in which nearly all citizens are, in some sense, hangmen or bawds. Notably, Shakespeare, whose stagecraft created this city, does not exempt himself from these categories. The art of comedy, which brings characters to bed, and tragedy, which puts them to death, are drawn together in this notorious "problem play," in which Shakespeare can be seen to put both theatrical genres on trial. When Pompey and Abhorson attempt to prove the mysteries of their crafts, then, they are interrogating the arts most common not only to Vienna, but also to Shakespeare's theater.

The failure of their proofs conclusively to demonstrate that their occupations are mysteries is reflective of the ambivalence about craft that pervades *Measure for Measure*, which

[245] Gorfain, 93-94.

[246] Lake and Questier, 649-50.

repeatedly asks, but rarely answers, the question of whether human arts have spiritual underpinnings. Professions are foregrounded throughout the play, as, in Robert McCutcheon's terms, "one character after another undertakes a new vocation," and scenes of professional instruction and craft initiation proliferate.[247] From its opening scene onward, the play tests the potential connection between Christian morality and various trades, crafts, offices, sciences, professions, occupations, and duties, asking, in essence, whether the term "mystery," in its spiritual sense, pertains to any human craft. Angelo is chosen as the Duke's deputy because of his virtuous behavior, and his ultimate moral failings are considered all the more reprehensible because of his "place i'th' state," an honorable position he uses to veil his practice of illicit crafts (2.4.156-59). When Claudio begs Isabella to sleep with Angelo in order to save his life, she suggests an even closer link between character and vocation, sniping, "Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade" (3.1.151).

Escalus repeatedly rebukes Pompey for making his living as a bawd, indicating that there is something innately grotesque about supporting one's livelihood with money earned from a morally dubious vocation. Yet when Escalus asks him, "What do you think of the trade, Pompey? Is it a lawful trade?" Pompey dismisses the notion that there is any inherent virtue in legality, responding impudently, "If the law would allow it, sir" (2.1.201-02). Though the Duke later admonishes Pompey in terms that echo Escalus's, the tenuous relationship between legality and Christian virtue is reiterated when Pompey expresses his pleasure at the prospect of becoming an executioner. "I have been an unlawful bawd time out of mind," he quips, "but yet I will be content to be a lawful hangman" (4.2.12-13).[248] The notion that the hangman's legal craft

[247] Robert McCutcheon, "The Call of Vocation in Julius Caesar and Coriolanus," *English Literary Renaissance* 41.2 (2011): 340.

[248] The Duke denounces Pompey as "a bawd, a wicked bawd," expressing disgust that "The evil that thou causest to be done / That is thy means to live" (3.1.274-76).

is more virtuous than the bawd's illegal one is scoffed at even by the Viennese provost, who remarks, "Go to, sir, you weigh equally; a feather will turn the scale" (4.2.23). While the play gestures towards the idea that morality and profession are, or should be, linked – that dukes and friars should be better men than bawds and hangmen – it also suggests that this is a fantasy, that human crafts are theatrical rituals afforded moral character not by any supernatural principle, but by those people who perform them.

The seeming disconnection between Christian virtue, legality, professional occupations, and sacred mystery suggested by the play is heightened by its emphasis on the performative nature of all human crafts, including purportedly sacral vocations, such as those of the friar or duke. The play draws a clear parallel between Isabella's entry into a religious order (the original vocational mystery, as noted in the introduction) and the Duke's masquerade as a friar. In order to be more convincing in his role, the Duke seeks tutelage from a true friar in a scene immediately juxtaposed with Isabella's initial introduction to the sisterhood of Saint Claire. Imploring the friar to "Supply me with the habit, and instruct me / How I may formally in person bear / Like a true friar," Vincentio undergoes a faux initiation into the brotherhood that looks uncomfortably similar to Isabella's partial initiation as a nun and Pompey's apprenticeship as a hangman (1.4.46-48).

Though seemingly artificial, this instruction is thorough enough to enable Vincentio to pass as a friar for much of the play, during which time he serves as a spiritual advisor to numerous characters, hears the last confessions of dying men, and uses his religious authority indirectly to manipulate Angelo into bed with his spurned betrothed, Mariana (an act that solidifies the Duke's status as a bawd of sorts). The Duke purportedly undertakes these actions out of a sense of benevolence for the people of Vienna. However, his crafty manipulation of

others under the guise of a Catholic friar – a "true" man – is troubling, even in London's strongly Protestant theatrical economy. The fact that he deigns perform the sacramental mystery of confession for condemned men, an act the play's characters would have understood to threaten their eternal souls, bespeaks his reckless lack of consideration for his own people.

The Duke's performance of the sacrament is also threatening in another way, for it suggests that not only can the mysteries of religious orders be faked, but also that sacramental mysteries themselves might be theatrically crafted. This proposition, of course, was one an early modern audience grappled with regularly. Protestants already denounced Catholic ceremony as profane showmanship, and they likewise stripped the mystery of confession of its sacramental status. However, there is something particularly unsettling about seeing this artifice enacted on a stage, where the line between reality and performance easily blurs. Though in the world of the play there is a distinction between the Duke and the "true" friar, the audience knows that this friar is merely an actor, like the Duke, costumed in a religious habit and instructed in "bearing like" a man of God. Metaphorically speaking, they are both thieves dressed in the apparel of true men.

The play's emphasis on the performativity of human crafts also threatens to undermine the sacral claims of statecraft. Like Pompey learning to perform (i.e. carry out) the "mystery" of hanging or the Duke learning to perform (i.e. dissemble) the mysteries of religion, so Angelo learns to perform (in both senses of the term) the "mysteries" of state. Combining his knowledge of the letter of the law with the Duke's commission and the physical accoutrements of power, he rules over Vienna with an iron fist, razing brothels and punishing sexual indiscretion with death. Yet, as he recognizes when he attempts to blackmail Isabella into sleeping with him, his power is not based in any legitimate moral authority. Rather, like the Duke's spiritual authority, it derives

from his perceived rank, "form" and "habit," theatrical trappings that enable him to "Wrench awe from fools" who see a mystery where there is really only hollow statecraft (2.4.12-14). This recognition opens up questions about the spiritual foundation of Duke Vincentio's own reign, which appeared to have fostered Christian virtue no more than Angelo's. The audience is therefore confronted with the possibility that the Duke does not wield a mysterious power, but instead is merely a "proud man dressed in a little brief authority" (2.2.120-21). The play pushes us to ask whether the mystical crafts of all priests and rulers might, in actuality, be crafty mysteries.[249]

To say that a mystery is performative, of course, is not necessarily to say that it is false. Certainly Ben Jonson believed that the artificial mysteries of theater could wield a sacramental efficacy. *Measure for Measure* interrogates this problem through the theatrical machinations of the Duke, who, in a Jonson-like manner, determines to apply "Craft against vice" in order to right the societal wrongs of Vienna. As Kiernan Ryan has noted, the Duke "doubl[es] as dramatist" throughout the play, using numerous tools of the theatrical trade in order to carry out his plan to punish Angelo and to save Claudio and Isabella, along with the moral fabric of the city.[250] Staging Shakespeare's own theatrical craft, he employs costumes, dissembling, carefully timed entrances and exits, a bed trick, and the dramatic forms of tragicomedy and the disguised magistrate plot in order to achieve his desired outcome: a reformed Vienna. Privy to these actions, the audience is tasked with deciding if the Duke's theater of church and state is sacred or self-serving.

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[249] This questioning of state power of course connects to the notion of the *arcana imperii*, which, in texts such as Machiavelli's *Il principe*, were increasingly being revealed less as mysteries and more as a form state*craft*. I discuss this further below.

[250] Kiernan Ryan, "*Measure for Measure"*: Marxism before Marx," in *Marxist Shakespeares,* eds. Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (London: Routledge, 2001), 235.

Critical responses to this question notoriously waver between those which interpret the Duke as a Christlike figure, an emblem of the early modern ideal of sacral kingship, and those which condemn him as a sinister fraud. At particular issue is the final scene of the play, in which the Duke, for theatrical effect, permits Isabella to falsely confess surrendering her virginity to Angelo, then allows her to believe that her brother Claudio was beheaded prior to her confession and that she will be imprisoned for her accusation of Angelo. After a clever exit and re-entry in the guise of the Friar, who holds evidence of Angelo's sexual encounter with Mariana, the Duke unveils himself and pronounces judgment on the play's characters. He sends the condemned prisoner Barnardine to his doom, frees Claudio from prison, and orders the marriages of Claudio and Juliet, Angelo and Mariana, and the lecherous Lucio and a woman he impregnated. He also proposes marriage to the novice Isabella, who remains silent for the duration of the play, never verbally responding to his offer. Readers have viewed this scene in opposing terms. While some argue that it demonstrates the Duke's benevolence and reveals his divine capacity to reform Vienna, others contend that it depicts him as Machiavellian and self-serving, one who cares more about the virtuosity of performance than the virtue of his actions.

In an influential interpretation of this scene, Debora Shuger argues that the Duke embodies the figure of the early modern "sacred monarch," who in uniting church and state was seen to protect the "sacred loci" of the realm and administer Christian justice by "pardoning, reconciling, and redeeming transgressors rather than punishing them."[251] Sarah Beckwith takes the opposing view, arguing that the Duke violates the sacraments of confession and marriage by theatricalizing them, thereby violating the principles of trust and consent on which they should rest. Far from reconciling and redeeming transgressors, the Duke, she contends, effectively

[251] Debora Shuger, *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 45, 137.

transforms the comedic rite of marriage into a punishing, tragic event, one which Lucio, at least, views as a form of execution. Though the "scripted performance" of the final scene "stages the epiphanic presence of the Duke – like 'grace divine,'" in reality the Duke is merely a man of the theater, a hangman and a bawd whose stately authority is no more mysterious than are the sacramental rites that he stages.[252]

My perception of the Duke comes closer to Beckwith's than Shuger's; however, I believe that Shakespeare, as is so often the case, is intentionally ambivalent in his construction of the Duke's character as well as *Measure for Measure's* plot, with its hopeless entanglement of comic and tragic forms. Their generic imbrication is dramatized, almost to the point of personification, in the dialogue of the bawd and hangman, a scene that obliquely asks whether it is possible to prove the disparate mysteries of church, state, craft, and theater. Despite the number of characters who enter into purportedly sacred religious and political offices in *Measure for Measure*, Pompey and Abhorson are the only ones who use the term "mystery," a seeming indication that theirs are the arts most widely practiced and theirs the knowledge most common. If these dubious occupations can prove mysterious, the play seems winkingly to say, so can those of the Duke, friar, and dramatist, depicted merely as more elevated forms of the same base trades.

Importantly, the characters' enigmatic dialogue neither proves nor disproves their arts to be mysterious. It seems, rather, to suggest the absurdity of attempting to demonstrate supernatural mysteries through the straightening form of logic, itself a human craft. The question of whether the Duke's theatrical art belies or re-creates the mysteries of church and state is likewise left unanswered. Unlike Jonson, Donne, and Browne, Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure* refuses unequivocally to differentiate between crafty mysteries performed by humans

[252] Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 78.

alone and mystical crafts co-created with God. On the one hand, this is to reject the immense intellectual and spiritual efficacy attributed to the dramatist's art by theories of poetic mystery. On the other hand, it is to suggest that claims to such power are at once too burdensome and too limiting. In *Measure for Measure*, the Jonsonian idea that drama might enact a sacramental mystery of manners seems as crude as the anti-theatricalist notion that theater leads spectators into sin. *Measure for Measure* responds to this idea by demonstrating that while a dramatist may apply craft to vice, it isn't clear that this formula produces virtue. Similarly, the Donnean belief that language proves the distinction between true and false mysteries and the natural philosophical theory that material creations bear the visible imprint of divinity are dismissed by the play as simplistic ways of thinking.

Measure for Measure demonstrates that humans necessarily re-create communities and worlds through the performance of numerous kinds of craft. The question of whether an art is inherently mysterious or profane, the play suggests, is ultimately less important than that of whether their practitioners wield them ethically. Human craft, the play recognizes, is always limited; it can never truly create a golden world. For this reason, nearly all of his plays end somewhat uncomfortably, reminding the audience that communities are created through exclusion as well as inclusion and that one person's happy ending is often another's tragedy. They show that it is incumbent upon individuals to keep creating, to craft new worlds to repair existing injustices. Resting in the belief that poetry, priesthood, and statecraft are divine mysteries may lead individuals to ignore the consequences of their art.

According to this line of reasoning, *what* art creates is a more important than *how* it creates it, whether that be through divine inspiration or mere human craft. *Measure for Measure* thus responds to the early modern mystery crisis by changing the terms of the debate. Even as

they interrogate the art's sacred claims, Jonson, Donne, and Browne all mount forceful defenses of poetic mystery, arguing that poetry can make divinity present to humankind. Less convinced of art's power to save souls or to create an ideal society, Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure* focuses his dramatic investigations on the ethical effects of his craft. The ultimate power by which it creates those effects, his plays intimate, should remain a mystery.

In the modern Western world, the idea of "secrecy" has recently come under scrutiny. The early twenty-first century has seen numerous debates concerning the governmental abuse of the state secret's privilege, mass government surveillance and the violation of citizens' privacy, and the ecological consequences of investigations into nature's secrets. While rhetoric figures centrally in some of these controversies, poetry is markedly absent, as, importantly, is mystery. Though they may see such institutions as sacred, Westerners today do not, for the most part, look for divine mysteries in government, the private world of love, or the material workings of nature. At least partly as a result, poetry plays a much different role in intellectual and political life than it did in early modernity. While its veiled metaphors and allegories seemed uniquely fit to convey sacred mysteries to the human understanding, they appear less equipped to decipher legal briefs or repair the environmental damage created by technologies such as fracking.

This dissertation explores a society in which poetry and poetic modes of thought were seen to have the power to access and harness the deepest mysteries of religion, nature, and state. It also reveals, however, that the curiosity about mystery that propelled poetic craft to such a prestigious position also called the art into suspicion, as conflicts stemming from mystery's dueling associations with *res* and *verba*, the material and the spiritual, and human craft and divine inspiration led individuals to associate false mystery with the poetic imagination. While critics have argued that early modernity presided over the decline of mystery and poetic

enchantment, I show instead that it opened, but never fully resolved, culture-defining conflicts regarding the power of poetry to craft transcendence.

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