

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## **John Donne** (1572-1631) *Songs and Sonnets (A, 603-629)*

John Donne was born into a devout Catholic family at a time, in sixteenth century England, when prejudice, harassment, and religious hatred made any faith but that of the Church of England, the cornerstone of British national fervor, suspect and diabolical. Having suffered the victim end of his faith, Donne turned to the Church of England in the 1590's, was ordained a priest of that Church in 1615. There, by stages, he rose to positions of high power, finally assuming the prestigious position of Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. In his priestly role Donne wrote fiery and brilliant sermons, much admired to this day for their theology and their prose style. He also, and foremost, continued to create the brilliant sonnets and songs which, already by the 1590's, were making him a central figure in London letters.

*Question: Can the religious and the erotic sensibilities coincide in great lyric poetry?*

The question speaks for itself, and of course invites a yes, as we are looking at a poet renowned for just such a combination of sensibilities. But if you really mean that yes, try it out on "The Canonization," one of Donne's richest poems. Is that poem both erotic and religious? In their love, the two lovers share a hermitage, in which they are enabled to give full growth to their love, and to become images for one another of the whole created world. Imitators of God—Cf. ll. 44-5—the lovers make themselves saintly, secular saintly, worthy of canonization. Donne's erotic poetry, which is passionate and spiritual at the same time, is forever blending the religious with the secular. Try out this notion on any of Donne's sonnets.

*Comparative Literature:*

1. The fortunes of Donne's poetry are a thermometer for the emotional temper of subsequent English poetry. There was great respect for Donne in 18th century writers like Samuel Johnson and Ben Jonson, but by the 19th century, the moment of Romanticism—we will be there shortly, and your understanding of this point will be sharper—Donne was seen as a wit rather than a real poet. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the turning of the wheels of taste, that the poet T.S. Eliot (and others) drew new and enthusiastic attention to the achievement of the so called Metaphysicals—Donne and his contemporary lyricists—and privileged Donne as one of the greatest English language poets. Cf. T. S. Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," 1921.

2. One of the influential critical movements in 20<sup>th</sup> century literary discourse was called the New Criticism. Flourishing from the 20's to the 50s, New Criticism privileged the importance of the text in its particularity, not as a social or psychologically significant document. One of the style setting books of this critical movement was Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), which borrowed its title from a sonnet by John Donne. You might want to pursue the eminent role played by Donne and the other Metaphysicals (Herbert, Marvell), in the formulation of New Critical practice.