

Poetics of Obedience: John Donne's "A Litanie" and the Oath of Allegiance Controversy (1606–1610)

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John Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*, published early in 1610, was a powerfully committed effort to justify the English state and the 1606 Oath of Allegiance. An extensive and finely wrought polemic, the publication served also for a personal act of Jacobean citizenship that was crucial to Donne's later clerical advancement. King James I's oath had been introduced in response to the 1605 Gunpowder Plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament. It sought to establish the grounds of civil obedience for those in England who acknowledged the spiritual authority of the papacy.¹ "For this Oath," Donne proclaimed, "must worke upon us all; and as it must draw from the Papists a profession, so it must from us, a Confirmation of our Obedience."² Significantly, the preface of *Pseudo-Martyr* announced the end of a "period of irresolution" for the author: Donne's recusant heritage was now firmly behind him, and conformity with the English Church was the present prospect.

On the shades and turns of this "irresolution" the poet's extant correspondence from throughout this period has much to say. Approximately one year before *Pseudo-Martyr* was entered in the Stationer's Register (December 1609), Donne dispatched another in a series of emphatically melancholic letters to his close friend Sir Henry Goodyer. Donne was now living in Mitcham with a young family, seven years into a condition of do-

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1. William B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* (1997; repr., Cambridge University Press, 2000), 76.

2. John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr: Wherein Out of Certaine Propositions and Gradations, this Conclusion is Evicted, That Those Which are of the Romane Religion in this Kingdome, May and Ought to Take the Oath of Allegiance*, ed. Anthony Raspa (1610; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 3.

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mestic exile and unemployment.³ Gripped with neuritis, and preparing for death, the poet writes mournfully of the “poor fame” he will leave behind, and of his concern that his friends should “repent not to have loved me.” He subsequently informs Goodyer of having “made a meditation in verse, which I call a Litany.”⁴ This poem’s chief virtue is that “neither the Roman Church need call it defective because it abhors not the particular mention of the blessed Triumphers in heaven; nor the Reformed can discreetly accuse it, of attributing more than a rectified devotion ought to do.”⁵ Donne’s irenicism here may seem straightforward. But that such a balancing act required considerable adroitness and poise in the England of 1608 can be conveniently if only partially grasped by noting James I’s objection to prayers to the saints, and to litanies in particular, in *A Premonition To all Most Mightie Monarches, Free Princes, and States of Christendom*, published in 1609.⁶ Furthermore, despite the profession of evenhandedness, Donne is notably uneasy about his poem. In the letter he goes on to cite some precedents among the “ancient annals” for “a defence, if any man, to a Lay man, and a private, impute it as a fault, to take such divine and publique names, to his own little thoughts.”⁷ To later observers, this sort of concern has mostly seemed unnecessary. In the annals of literary criticism, at least, “A Litanie” has escaped notoriety or censure, and it is possibly the least noted and interpreted of all Donne’s poetic works. In this essay I will try to demonstrate both why that is and why it need not have been so.

* * *

Donne opens his litany of 1608 with three stanzas comprising a triple direct address. Each of these contains a prayer to a separate personage and action of the Holy Trinity, a move that may be read as an intertextual link to the holy sonnet “Batter my heart three-person’d God.” The sonnet sequences are now generally attributed to the same period of his residence at Mitcham, and both the opening three stanzas of “A Litanie” and “Batter my heart” invoke the exercise of divine violence using a traditional emblem of religious and amatory verse. Both have also been described as

3. Donne’s prospects at court had been brought virtually to nought in the wake of his clandestine marriage to Anne More, who was the higher-born niece of his employer and the Lord Chancellor of England, Sir Thomas Egerton. Donne was dismissed and briefly imprisoned, and James I would recall the incident almost a decade later in passing him over for a secretarial post in Ireland.

4. John Donne to Sir Henry Goodyer, 1608, in *John Donne: Selected Prose*, chosen by Evelyn Simpson, ed. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 131.

5. *Ibid.*

6. This was a response to Cardinal Bellarmine’s *Responsio ad librum inscriptum Triplici Nodo Triplex cuneus* (1608).

7. Donne, *Selected Prose*, 131.

overtly Calvinist moments in Donne's work. They emphasize total spiritual dependence upon God in a Protestant paradigm of regeneration.⁸ Richard Strier, however, observes "theological indecision" in "Batter my heart." He also considers the "Holy Sonnets" at large to be "awry and squint" with "Donne's difficulties . . . and occasional successes at imprinting Calvinism on a soul that had 'first to blot out, certaine impressions of the Romane religion.'"⁹ Much the same, I shall argue, might justly be said of "A Litanie," which under close inspection can appear as explicitly at odds with itself as any poem Donne composed.

This kind of mirroring in imagery, doctrine, and strategy, however, combined with a sense of inferior poetic achievement, has also produced a degree of critical oversight in approaches to "A Litanie." The significance and the specificity of the task Donne set himself in writing the poem has been obscured. It is too rarely noted, for example, that "A Litanie" holds quite strictly to the structure of its liturgical namesake in the Roman rite; or that this prayer—purged of the "blessed Triumphers" (or the intercessions section)—was used by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer as a devotional foundation for the Reformation in England, with his English translation published in 1544. Helen Gardner's extensive annotation in *The Divine Poems* remains the most sustained critical engagement to date. She registers a poem that aspires to "simplicity of motive, 'evenesse' of piety, and a keeping of 'meane waies.'"¹⁰ More recent approaches to Donne's religious poetry have generally made brief comments on "A Litanie" as a striking if unsuccessful example of a penchant for transposing "public forms" onto "private experience"; or, alternatively, noted a folding of the "singular speaker into a collective voice."¹¹

It is with these latter procedures of folding or transposition that I will be chiefly concerned. In particular, two areas have gone unexamined that will be of central importance: first, specific representations of the collective voice within "A Litanie"; and second, the precise means by which a transition from the lyric is achieved. It is not only the heightened political significance of liturgical practices in England and Europe at the opening of the seventeenth century that I think encourages such an undertaking;

8. Richard Strier, "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608–1610," *Modern Philology* 86 (1989): 365.

9. *Ibid.*, 367.

10. John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), xxiv. All quotations from Donne's religious poetry are from this edition, with line numbers given parenthetically.

11. See Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 260; Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 250; Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England*. (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 93.

nor, indeed, the litany's status as a privileged site for articulating politico-theological divisions and fault lines. But additionally, and crucially, as a collective form, operating with an organizing principle of synthesis and unity, as opposed to the individuating impulse of the "Holy Sonnets," "A Litanie" delineates a political and ethical limit in a way that is wholly unique among the poet's early religious verse. Instead of aiming at self-liberation by means of introspective theological paradigms—as the "Holy Sonnets" repeatedly do—"A Litanie" aims at assimilation in the Jacobean church and state by way of a personally articulated self-subjection. This will be the principal thrust of the argument to follow. It is also to be noted that such self-subjection did not proceed without personal and poetic costs to Donne. Another purpose of this essay is to consider what these costs were and how the language and tonality of "A Litanie" can be seen to bear their marks.

In what follows I will examine some aspects of the litany's liturgical history and establish some of the form's historical meanings at the turn of the seventeenth century in England. In so doing I will propose a discursive field that I believe Donne wished to negotiate in "A Litanie," one pertaining to questions of communal identity and exclusion, and one that clearly frames this devotional poem within the context of the Oath of Allegiance controversy and the poet's impending conformity with the English Church. After a close reading of "A Litanie"'s opening stanza, I will then turn to consider in some detail the theoretical significance of James I's 1606 oath, and the implications it has for a reading of Donne's poem. My intention is not to dissolve the poem into a disputation within the history of political thought. Nor do I think that the substance of the work can or should be reduced to a persistent crypto-Catholicism registering itself in a disjointed poem of Anglican devotion. I will argue, however, that the collective contexts within which the work took shape—political obedience, the jurisdiction of conscience, the king's prerogative and the autonomy of the civil state—are all of pressing importance for Donne at this time, and that "A Litanie" depends upon these contexts for an apprehension of its meanings. Other critical moments in the poem will then be examined, and in the final section I will offer some reflections on the subsequent nature of the aesthetic in Donne's work.

I

As a generic term, the "litany" has a complicated history within the liturgical traditions of Christianity. In general, it refers to a free responsorial form of prayer that makes its first textual appearance in the liturgy of the Eucharist in book 8 of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. 375–380 CE). The litany associated with St. John Chrysostom later in the same period at Con-

stantinople also clearly works with many of the same sources as its namesake in the *Constitutions*. It is recorded in Chrysostom's Divine Liturgy, a work that emerged from the efforts of the Cappadocian Fathers to combat heresy and to define Trinitarian theology for the Christian church at the end of the fourth century. Chrysostom's litany, however, has also been associated with a specific episode in Constantinople's history, and one which plays a key part in determining the service's future use.

Drawing on early sources, in *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer* Procter and Frere relate how Chrysostom introduced litanies as a part of the nocturnal processions he established in 398 CE while bishop of the Roman Empire's new capital.¹² The processions were called for in response to assemblies of the Arians, who had been denied access to Constantinople's churches and had taken to gathering around public squares and "singing heretical chants through a great part of the night."¹³ Nathanael Andrade has also recently framed these processions in the context of Chrysostom's feud with the city's secular authorities. They were a part of the bishop's efforts to recast the city's civic spaces as gathering places for a Christian community. As a visual signifier in the semantics of a newly forged *politeia*, or Christian commonwealth, "the processions sought to transcend social differences in the civic order and to make Constantinople's citizenry and pro-Nicene community virtually coterminous."¹⁴ The litany and the famed eloquence of Chrysostom's sermons comprised liturgical and rhetorical counterparts in this broad reconstitution of meaning and communal identity.

The popularity of the custom was also such that it was soon adopted in Western rites. And it appears to be the early Roman processional use of the prayer—the *Litania Maior*—that ultimately establishes itself in the Anglo-Saxon Church, forming the basis for the Litany of the Sarum Rite. This, subsequently, was among the chief sources, along with Martin Luther's German Litany of 1529, and a 1528 Latin translation of Chrysostom's Divine Liturgy published in Venice, for the first official English translation of the litany in 1544 by the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer.¹⁵

A genealogy is important here for developing a fuller picture of the prayer's historical meanings at the turn of the sixteenth century—meanings that dominate its usage during the Reformation in Europe. From the

12. My discussion of the prayer is largely based upon the account given in Francis Procter and Walter Howard Frere, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 403–29. For this line of inquiry and bringing Procter and Frere's work to my attention I am also indebted to Scott R. Pillarz, "Expressing a Quintessence Even from Nothingness': Contextualising John Donne's 'A Litanie,'" *Christianity and Literature* 48 (1999): 399–424.

13. Procter and Frere, *New History*, 405–6.

14. Nathanael Andrade, "The Processions of John Chrysostom and the Contested Spaces of Constantinople," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010): 163.

15. G. J. Cumming, *A History of Anglican Liturgy* (Glasgow University Press, 1969), 54–61.

outset, the litany is a prayer constitutive of and constituted by formative processes of collective identity.¹⁶ That is to say, it is a ritual determined by the effort to create and stabilize a subject-object identity: the conformity of *politeia* and the individual. It is also a collective form whose performance or reproduction evokes the specter of imminent dissolution or destruction—whether by heretic Arians, Turks, or resistant papists—and thus it incorporates potentials both of breach and of conformity. Another formative process can be found in the litany's traditional four-part structure of invocations, intercessions, deprecations, and obsecrations. This structure organizes a hierarchy of petitions and articles of faith that simultaneously serve to consolidate and harmonize spiritual and secular authority within the Christian commonwealth. In this context, the congregation's scripted response after each petition, *Kyrie eleison*, or "Lord have mercy," forms a provision for consent within the text of the prayer.

* * *

One of Thomas Cranmer's most striking formal innovations in his English litany of 1544 is the removal of these responses. Cranmer instead opts to have the congregation repeat each petition in full. While it has been rightly pointed out that this tactic, in this respect, counts among the English Church's early efforts to broaden the scope of public participation in the liturgy, there are good grounds to characterize the English litany as offering a more prescriptive and binding approach to the determination of conscience. It should also be noted that as an instance of official prayer in the vernacular, Cranmer's litany anticipates the emergence of the Anglican rite in a direct precursor to the 1549 Book of Common Prayer.¹⁷ While dismissing the view that it was politically motivated, or sought to create obedient subjects, Ramie Targoff has argued that this transition to common prayer and the emphasis on congregational participation in the new liturgy was driven by "the establishment's overarching desire to shape personal faith through public and standardized forms."¹⁸ For someone so evidently concerned with the "ancient annals" of the prayer, the his-

16. This is true in the context of both uses of the prayer, although I am here primarily concerned with the litany's processional aspect in terms of supplications in times of emergency. For an informative discussion of ritual performance in terms of identity constitution versus identity construction, see the editors' introduction to *Ritual and Identity: Performative Practices as Effective Transformations of Social Reality*, ed. Klaus-Peter Köpping, Bernhard Leistle, and Michael Rudolph (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 9–32.

17. George Soroka, "An Eastern Heritage in a Western Rite: A Study of Source and Method for Archbishop Cranmer's Inclusion of 'A Prayer of Chrysostome' in the English Litany of 1544," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 7 (2005): 250. See also Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 328–35.

18. Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 18.

tory of the litany's function in promoting conformity and collective identity was surely of central importance to Donne as he composed "A Litanie" in 1608.

A further significance of Chrysostom's prayer was the claim to patristic heritage that it gave to the reform-minded English Church. George Soroka has argued that "by including the Prayer of St Chrysostom in the Litany, Cranmer implicitly recognized that recourse to Christian authority existed outside of the sphere of Rome and that this authority could be claimed by the reforming English Church and defined accordingly."¹⁹ Clerical authority is tempered and offset, however, in Cranmer's handling of the intercessions section. He makes a notable departure from his sources by interposing a series of petitions for the king between the prayer for the "holy Church universall" and that for the ecclesiastical orders, which ordinarily would have followed one another directly. The deacon is to pray to God "that it may please thee to keep Henry the Eighth, thy servant and our king and governor"; "that it may please thee to rule his heart"; "that he may ever have affiance in thee"; "that it may please thee to be his defender and keeper, giving him the victory over all his enemies."²⁰ After this sequence, two more prayers follow for the well-being of the queen and for Prince Edward, before a single petition is made for the clergy.

From its earliest appearance in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, then, through the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, and its transmission in the Roman and Sarum rites, the intercessions section of the litany has in effect configured a statement of the settlement between church and state (initially the Roman *imperium*). Cranmer's repositioning of the king of England at the head of the church, along with the emphasis placed upon his person, primogeniture, and his relationship with God, expressly articulated the dependency of the body politic, substantively and spiritually, upon the royal sovereign. As the liturgical expression of the abrogating of papal authority that had occurred over the previous decade in England, Cranmer's prayers for the king, queen, and prince count as foundational statements of the Tudor Reformation. Such a recognition, as noted above, cannot have escaped the reform-minded John Donne in 1608. What is more, he evidently alludes to Cranmer's revisionary precedent in the difficult opening lines of "A Litanie."

I

The Father

Father of Heaven, and him, by whom
It, and us for it, and all else, for us

19. Soroka, "Eastern Heritage," 251.

20. Edward Burton, ed., *Three primers put forth in the reign of Henry VIII* (Oxford, 1834), 482.

Thou madest, and govern'st ever, come
 And re-create mee, now growne ruinous:
 My heart is by dejection, clay,
 And by selfe-murder, red.
 From this red earth, O Father, purge away
 All vicious tinctures, that new fashioned
 I may rise up from death, before I am dead.
 ("A Litanie," lines 1–9)

The rhetorical strategy of this stanza emerges as distinctive within "A Litanie" for its employment of a tripartite structure of prayer, made up of invocation, argument, and petition, in place of a single, continuous unit of discourse.²¹ This stanza presents a double invocation, "Father of Heaven" (line 1) and "O Father" (line 7), as well as a double petition, grammatically distinct if thematically closely linked: "come / And re-create mee" (lines 3–4), and "purge away / All vicious tinctures" (lines 7–8). The articulation of doubleness emerges as crucial for interpreting the stanza's opening lines. Initially, "Father of Heaven" appears to be the sole subject of the sentence, and the three or four clauses following "and him" appear to be attributive elaborations, which would entail that "Father of Heaven" and "him" are a single entity and single referent. But if "Father of Heaven" and "him" are in fact taken to refer to the same single person, then the phrasal conjunction "him by whom / Thou madest, and govern'st ever" proves impossible to incorporate, either grammatically or conceptually, in the enclosing sentence. With this analysis we can see that the pronoun "him," as well as belonging to an attributive clause, is the subject of the subordinate clauses in the second line—clauses which are definitive in function, that is to say, they try to make clear who "him" is. On a second reading and on further reflection, we can see that "him" refers to an instrument of God's creation and everlasting governance ("by whom / . . . Thou") and is a personage mediating between "It" and "us."

There are, to my mind, two possible referents here. Most obviously there is Jesus Christ, the "Sonne of God," addressed in the second stanza of the poem. In this case, "It" would denote the covenant of the New Testament and the prospect of salvation, which fits well enough with the verb "madest" in the third line, but "govern'st ever" seems to require a fuller and more nuanced theological statement of divine judgment and divine mercy. Alternatively, "him" might refer to King James I of England. On this reading, "It" is most likely the institution of monarchy, and "us"—note, the first "us" in the second line—a single community made up of the Jacobean church and state with the king as sovereign head of both. This in turn would amount to an affirmation of James's "divine right of kings" as first articulated in his

21. Laurent Pernot, "The Rhetoric of Religion," *Rhetorica* 24 (2006): 235–54.

tract *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598). The latter recounts “God’s ordinance” in the book of Samuel (1 Sam. 12:13–15) in asserting the absolute claims of monarchy as the “law” and “paterne” to all Christian nations, “being founded by God himself.”²² But from this reading of the poem’s opening, additional complexities and ambiguities arise.

We rejoin the main clause of the sentence after the final comma in the third line, shifting to the imperative: “come / And re-create mee, now growne ruinous.” The speaker is finally situated in the fourth line, petitioning God, and perhaps James I, for re-creation. He is situationally and grammatically displaced from the divinely made and governed reality of the subclauses in the second and third lines. Furthermore, “growne ruinous,” he is personally in a state of being contrary to that of the godly body politic. Line 5 now figures the speaker’s state as a downward transformation of the animate human “heart” into inanimate “clay,” by way of “dejection”—a term connoting both social and spiritual lowering.²³ In line 7, “red earth,” representing the totality of the poet’s fallen state, may come as a reference to Adam, as Helen Gardner thought (*Adam* meaning “red earth” in Hebrew); “red,” however, is also used elsewhere in “A Litanie” as the color of martyrdom.

Finally, we are given a fuller characterization of the re-creation called for in the fourth line: “purge away / All vicious tinctures” (lines 7–8). There might be an allusion here to Isaiah 1:25–26, “And I shall lay my hande upon thee, and purely purge away thy drosse, and take away all tinne.” But Donne also employs alchemical imagery (such as “tinctures”) elsewhere in his early religious poetry to figure the workings of God’s grace in and upon the penitent soul of his first-person speaker. “Batter my heart” implores: “That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow mee, and bend / Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new” (lines 3–4). “I am a little world made cunningly” similarly implores “burne me o Lord, with a fiery zeale / Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heale” (lines 13–14). Noteworthy differences also manifest themselves, however, between the “Holy Sonnets” and “A Litanie.” In the phrase “vicious tinctures” “vicious,” activating connotations of Latin *vitium*, could refer simply to a fault or defect; or, in a juridical context, to “not satisfying legal requirements or conditions.” Nor does the speaker of “A Litanie” pray for wholesale renovation or curative burning and healing but rather invokes God to “purge away” the heart’s “tinctures”—colors or blemishes or, in an alchemical context, defective “spiritual principles.”²⁴

22. James I, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies; or, The Reciprocal and Mutual Duty Betwixt a Free King and His Natural Subjects* (1598), in *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70. Biblical references in this article are taken from the Bishops’ Bible (London, 1578).

23. *OED*, s.v. “dejection, *n.*,” 2a, <http://www.oed.com/>.

24. *Ibid.*, s.v. “vicious, *adj.*,” 5a; “tincture, *n.*,” 6a.

In the foregoing discussion, I mean to suggest that multiple implications are at play in and through the ambiguities of the opening invocation of the first stanza of "A Litanie." These four lines gesture toward a theological-political order that is identifiably Jacobean. The remainder of this stanza is, I think, forensically determined both in etymology and imagery to accord with an official rhetoric of selective toleration. It accords, that is, with a set of religious and political policies explicitly sought by English Catholics in the first decade of the seventeenth century, and pursued, to some extent, by King James I's government in the wake of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot. In this reading, the opening lines of "A Litanie" amount to a figuration of the contractual model of subjection—of political authority and obedience—articulated by James in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* and serving as the basis of the 1606 Oath of Allegiance. They constitute a reworking of Cranmer's liturgical formulations of Tudor royal supremacy, replacing these with an emphasis on Jacobean absolutism. Donne, moreover, outdoes and updates Cranmer in the opening three lines of stanza 1, addressing the Father and King James as coequal creators and governors of a newly ascendant theological-political order in England.

II

In order to think more clearly about what is at stake in this obscure and difficult opening, some further contextualizing will be required. Specifically, it is important to consider in some detail the political dimensions of the Oath of Allegiance controversy in England, as well as the ways in which John Donne was implicated. A vital part of this context, of course, is a political climate in the wake of a narrowly avoided and potentially sizable destruction of the country's ruling strata. The Jacobean state had sought an immediate response to the 1605 Gunpowder Plot. Speaking to the Commons in 1606, King James signaled a move to align the political and legal status of England's Catholic and occasionally insurrectionist subjects with distinctions in spiritual principles:

The wretch himself in hands doeth confesse, That there was no cause moving him or them, but merely and only Religion. And specially that Christian men, at least so called, Englishmen, borne with the Countrey, and one of the specials of them my sworne Servant in an Honourable place, should practice the destruction of their King, his Posterity, their Countrey and all . . . [yet] I would be sorie that any being innocent of this practise, either domesticall or forraine, should receive blame or harme for the same. . . . For although it cannot be denied, That it was onely blinde superstition of their errors in Religion,

that led them to this desperate device, yet it doth not follow, That all professing that *Romish* religion were guilty of the same.²⁵

James foregrounds the “blinde superstition” of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators. But for emphasis and clarity, he continues: “upon the one part, many honest men, seduced with some errors of Popery, may yet remaine good and faithfull Subiects: So upon the other part, none of those that trewly know and believe the whole grounds, and Schoole conclusions of their doctrine, can ever prove either good Christians, or faithfull Subiects.”²⁶ This speech marked an important departure from James’s earlier proclamations of 1604, as well as from his 1599 treatise on government, *Basilikon Doron*. For the purposes of determining political loyalty, the king had previously made it clear that doctrinal concerns applied only to the Roman clergy. For “Layicks,” who “cannot be thought guilty of these particular points of heresies and corruptions, which their Teachers doe wilfully professe,” distinctions were to be drawn solely upon professions of civil obedience.²⁷ After 1605, however, a nondoctrinal basis for civil obedience is no basis at all: “It was onely blinde superstition of their errors in Religion, that led them to this desperate device.” James’s speech introduces a political discourse in England in which the subject’s loyalty, the security of the state, and any policy of religious toleration, are contingent on a guarantee against “errors in Religion”—against, that is, the erroneous conscience. In this instance, the offending doctrine, now for laity and clergy alike, is a corrupt Roman understanding of papal supremacy. It extends to the pope “an Imperiall ciuill power ouer all Kingdomes and Empires” so that England’s Catholics may think “it no sinne, but rather a matter of saluation, to doe all actions of rebellion and hostilitie against their natural Soueraigne Lord.”²⁸ The 1606 Oath of Allegiance proposed to close off any such possibility.²⁹ Formulated explicitly and, by the Crown’s account, exclusively for the purpose of demarcating boundaries of political loyalty, for many English Catholics it nevertheless turned irreducibly upon a theological provision concerning papal authority: “I do further swear that I do from my heart abhor, detest and abjure, as impious and heretical, this damnable doctrine and position, that princes which be excommunicated or deprived by the Pope may be deposed or murdered by their subjects or any other whatsoever.”³⁰

25. James I, quoted in Stefania Tutino, *Law and Conscience in Early Modern England, 1570–1625* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 122; for the full text, see James I, “Speech to Parliament, 9 November 1605,” in *Political Writings*, 147–58.

26. James I, quoted in Tutino, *Law and Conscience*, 123.

27. James I, “Speech to Parliament, 19 March 1604,” in *Political Writings*, 139; see also Tutino, *Law and Conscience*, 120–24.

28. James I, “Speech to Parliament, 19 March 1604,” 140.

29. Dependent, of course, on the divinely binding nature of oaths in early modern England.

30. James I, “The 1606 Oath of Allegiance,” in *Political Writings*, 89.

The Oath of Allegiance controversy has of late received some overdue scholarly and critical attention. Stefania Tutino takes the view that the oath, though not intended as “a weapon against the English catholic community. . . needs to be incorporated into James’s attempt to reinforce and set new boundaries to the sovereign’s temporal authority, by laying a heavy mortgage on the jurisdiction of conscience.”³¹ In a similar vein, Bernard Bourdin has located the oath within the context of the king’s efforts to “autonomise” the civil and political orders. This process involved the dismantling of the conscience as a “private” realm, and provided for the rearticulation of self as obedient political subject—eventuating in what Bourdin describes as a dialectic “of civil obedience and spiritual freedom.”³² Michael Questier’s work has also aimed to correct a dominant historical narrative characterizing Jacobean ecclesiastical politics as restrained and moderate. He describes the Oath of Allegiance as “possibly the most lethal measure against Romish dissent ever to reach the statute book.”³³

Developments in the Jacobean state’s religious policies, however, can be fully understood only in relation to the Establishment’s decades-long struggle with Catholic militancy. Such a stance within English Catholic non-conformism had developed shortly after Queen Elizabeth’s suppression of the 1569 Northern Rebellion.³⁴ Following Pope Pius V’s promulgation of the *Regnans in excelsis* in 1570, which effectively excommunicated the English monarch, Nicholas Sanders’s *De visibili monarchia ecclesiae* (1571) offered a recalibration of political and ecclesiastical authority that theorized sedition as a religious duty for England’s Catholics. Jesuit Counter-Reformation efforts after 1580 were also met with a significant expansion of the penal code, and later champions of Sanders, including Robert Persons, SJ, and William Allen, were accused of “perfectionist heresy” by self-styled moderates at the turn of the century.³⁵ Clerics such as William Watson and William Bishop had responded to increased Catholic persecution in the last fifteen years of Elizabeth’s reign with redoubled efforts to procure a policy of selected toleration, but proposed Gallican models of consensus, and

31. Tutino, *Law and Conscience*, 134.

32. Bernard Bourdin, *The Theological-Political Origins of the Modern State: The Controversy between James I of England and Cardinal Bellarmine* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 196.

33. Michael Questier, “Loyalty, Religion and State Power in Early Modern England: English Romanism and the Jacobean Oath of Allegiance,” *Historical Journal* 40 (1997): 313–14.

34. See A. O. Meyer, *England and the Catholic Church under Queen Elizabeth*, trans. J. R. McKee (1911; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), esp. 73–91.

35. See Anne Dillon, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1535–1603* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), 326; for the Elizabethan expansion of the penal code, see also Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (London: Blackwell, 1985), 57–60.

various acceptable formulae for a negotiated Oath of Allegiance, were made redundant by the Gunpowder Plot's discovery in 1605. This, clearly, brings into view social and religious histories beyond the scope of my present discussion. But as the foregoing survey suggests, the genealogy of the 1606 Oath of Allegiance is of considerable relevance to my reading of Donne's "A Litanie." I now turn to consider this genealogy in the context of my larger discussion, which is primarily concerned with the realm of "high politics."

For both Tutino and Bourdin, the 1606 oath can be seen as largely grounded upon the sacralization of royal power theorized by James in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598). As noted above, James's "divine right of kings" had been advanced by way of a biblical hermeneutics that produced a neat concept of the political order as the first principle and the direct emanation of God's will on earth. Monarchy was the irrevocable result of the political community's primordial and eternal "errour in shaking off God's yoke."³⁶ Such thinking represented a decisive step beyond Tudor conceptions of royal supremacy (as well as Richard Hooker's Christian commonwealth) insofar as it posited a contractual model of subjection that legitimized political authority without resorting to higher rationales advanced earlier in the English Reformation. Instead, "civil Obedience" was imposed as an immutable law of conscience. For Bourdin, James's work recalibrated civil and spiritual authority to produce "a definition of the autonomy of the state that, paradoxically, is theological and political in nature."³⁷

* * *

It is of first importance to a reading of "A Litanie" that this recalibration be recognized as the historical moment to which the poem belongs. The liturgical form of the litanie, that is, which we have seen to be concerned with conformity in the relation of subjects to their monarch, was chosen and adapted by Donne in response to a time in England when the relation between conscience and the state was being politically redefined and prescribed. That this episode in political history was of deep personal significance to the poet is a known historical fact. But there is, I feel, some nuance left in the narrative. And to this end we might turn to another of Donne's letters to Sir Henry Goodyer, one which again demonstrates the poet's grasp of the finer theoretical implications of the redefinition, but with an instructive difference in emphasis from *Pseudo-Martyr*. The letter can be dated to late spring or early summer of 1609, and has the following to say about the ongoing controversy over the oath:

36. James I, *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, 67.

37. Bourdin, *Theological-Political*, 3.

both sides may be in justice, and innocence; and the wounds which they inflict upon the adverse part, are all *se defendendo*: for, clearly, our State cannot be safe without the Oath; since they professe, that Clergie-men, though Traitors, are no Subjects, and that all the rest may be none tomorrow. And, as clearly, the Supremacy which the Ro. Church pretend, were diminished, if it were limited; and will as ill abide that, or disputation, as the Prerogative of temporall Kings, who being the onely judges of their prerogative, why may not Roman Bishops, (so enlightened as they are presumed by them) be good witnesses of their own supremacie, which is now so much impugned?³⁸

Some important elements of Donne's reasoning here can be easily missed. First of all, "the Supremacy which the Ro. Church pretend" (as opposed to what the English state will concede) is that of Cardinal Bellarmine's *potestas indirecta*—the ultimate, indirect, temporal authority of the Roman Church. For Donne, as for Bellarmine, this authority cannot reasonably abide the delimitation enacted by James's oath. Donne perhaps has in mind the following passage from the Cardinal's *Apologia Matthaei Torti*: "Here then we manifestly see, that this oath does not contain only civil obedience in matters purely temporal, as the author of the *Apologia* repeated, but it contains also the denial of the Papal authority, which is not a purely temporal matter, but a sacred one, & given to us from above, and nor mortal can take it away or diminish it."³⁹ It is also significant that the "Prerogative of temporall Kings," in Donne's letter, has no more legitimacy than the supremacy of the Roman Church. Both are self-appropriated, and each, it is implied, is as arbitrary as the other. The side-glance of this analogy, of course, is to the other major political dispute of Jacobean England: the inception of a parallel jurisdictional competition pitting the rights of the Commons and the common law against the royal prerogative of the king. Donne is cautious in his letter to Goodyer, but not so cautious that we fail to register a rationale sympathetic to the arguments of the Commons. Finally, the letter, I think, offers us a typically incisive take on a difficult new dynamism in emergent realities of territorial sovereignty and political autonomy in the early modern period: "for, clearly, our State cannot be safe without the Oath; since they professe, that Clergie-men, though Traitors, are no Subjects, and that all the rest may be none tomorrow."⁴⁰ Here Donne is as casually paradoxical as ever: the oath is a recognition of and guarantee against a potentially subversive interiority. As a political instrument of subjection, it functions to establish the concord of conscience and state as a primary social relation. It also figures among a group of official rituals and behaviors outside of which

38. Donne, *Selected Prose*, 136.

39. Cardinal Bellarmine, *Apologia Matthaei Torti*, quoted in Tutino, *Law and Conscience*, 157.

40. Donne, *Selected Prose*, 136.

the interiority of political subjection becomes externalized only through betrayal of the “State,” whereupon the betrayers emerge as “Traitors.” In their actions against the “State,” Roman clergymen, however, are anomalous, for they, paradoxically, “though Traitors, are no Subjects.” These formulations attest to a historical situation in which the sacred is a primary governing principle of conscience, and in which the state is no longer sacralized. This is also to say that a duty of obedience, in seventeenth-century England, could be secured only by the sacred autonomy of the political or by some participation of the temporal within sacred authority. We have seen that the Oath of Allegiance was, on at least one level, an affirmation of the sacred nature of political authority; but for Roman priests, as Donne points out, the English “State” had neither sacred autonomy nor a place in sacred authority. They were therefore politically intolerable in Jacobean England.

Contrary to my analysis, in his biography of Donne, R. C. Bald took the view that the above extract shows Donne “had not yet entirely made up his mind about the issues involved in the controversy about the Oath.”⁴¹ Bald cites as support the opening of the letter, which is mainly concerned with William Barlow’s *Answer to A Catholicke Englishman* (1609). Here Donne is highly critical of Barlow. “It hath refreshed,” he writes, “and given new justice to my ordinary complaint, That the Divines of these times, are become meer Advocates, as though Religion were a temporall inheritance; they plead for it with all sophistications, and illusions, and forgeries.”⁴² Much more than this sentence, however, a basis for questioning Donne’s conviction emerges in the ingeniously wrought argumentation that he himself would soon offer in *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), his authorized publication of a few months later.

Donne declares that “nothing requir’d in this Oath, violates the Popes spirituall Iurisdiction; And that the clauses of swearing that Doctrine to bee Hereticall, is no vsurping vpon his spirituall right.”⁴³ “All which they quarrel at in the oath,” he writes, “is that anything should be pronounced, or any limits set, to which the Popes power might not extend.”⁴⁴ A difference of formulation that was presented as reasonable, justified, and understood in the letter to Goodyer has become utterly inadmissible in the political polemic of a few months later, and with this shift in orientation Donne signals the tendering of his credentials as a conformist to King James. *Pseudo-Martyr* offered a blistering attack on the Jesuit missionary Robert Persons, and railed against “blind assent” to the pope’s “spiritual supremacy,” along

41. R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 218.

42. Donne, *Selected Prose*, 136.

43. Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr*, 7.

44. *Ibid.*, 357.

with “this venomous doctrine of temporall jurisdiction” (i.e., Bellarmine’s *potestas indirecta*).⁴⁵ It was almost, as Annabel Patterson says, “Protestant nationalist propaganda.”⁴⁶ And the publication, moreover, provided Donne with the opportunity to publicly account for his own period of “irresolution” on matters of faith and doctrine. By his own estimate, this period had “not onely retarded my fortune, but also bred some scandall, and endangered my spirituall reputation.”⁴⁷ Regarding his distinguished Catholic heritage he tells the reader of “being derived from such a stocke and race, as, I believe, no family . . . hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine.” He also writes of having had “to blot out, certaine impressions from the Romane religion . . . and some anticipations early layde upon my conscience.”⁴⁸ Donne scholarship, particularly of the religious poetry, has largely colluded in this blotting out; the remainder of this essay will attempt to redress the critical balance.

III

Such an attempt might at first glance appear to accord with Arthur Marotti, who also holds that “A Litanie” is “politically encoded” with a petition for the new king’s favor. Marotti’s analyses, however, depend too often on easy linkages between Donne’s discursive modes and his biographical situation; any crisis of motive, belief, or commitment found in the devotional verse is too quickly conflated with the careerist’s frustrations, or with petitions for favor, in the prose works and letters of the same period. With this approach insufficient account can be taken of the status of language and judgment within the substance of the poem. The metrical design of “A Litanie” illustrates the significance of the interplay between versecraft and tonal and thematic implications. Dominated by the iamb in stanzas of nine lines, its scansion reveals a striking effort for conformity, and the heavily regulated rhythm must be counted as a constitutive element in the drama of reconciliation conducted thematically and formally in the poem. While the first line scans neatly enough, however, the second is not so straightforward. The profusion of pronouns, conjunctions, and prepositions—all non-stress-bearing elements in spoken English—combined with frequent short phrase breaks produces an indeterminate staccato rhythm that sets the second line apart

45. *Ibid.*, 19.

46. Annabel Patterson, “John Donne, Kingsman?,” in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 262; Patterson wants to hold on to the notion of “resistance,” in this case to “Donne’s resistance to his self-assumed role as the king’s polemicist,” so she instead writes “the treatise as a whole was obviously intended to be taken as a loyal exercise in Protestant nationalist propaganda.”

47. Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr*, 13.

48. *Ibid.*, 8, 13.

from the rest of the stanza. If we attribute such mechanics to dramatic emphasis, to a kind of spontaneous stress-system born of Donne's "athletic" reasoning and intellect, we are still left with the question of what Donne is reasoning about.

A particular site of rich ambiguity in the interworkings of Donne's syntax and thematics is also to be found in the second and third lines of this first stanza of "A Litanie": "us for it, and all else, for us / Thou mad'st, and govern'st ever." If "us" denotes a community of believers, and if "It" is the divinely sanctioned institution of monarchy, and if, furthermore, the hereditary sovereign (James) is "him, by whom / It, and us for it" was made: where is the sense in "and all else"? Are we "for it, and all else"? This would be an argument of Donne the skeptic, perhaps, the rationalist and dialectician, who is at the same time writing elsewhere of conscience (though not publicly) in terms of the "primary reason . . . against which none can plead lychense, law, custome, or pardon," and which "hath in us a soveraigne, and masculine force."⁴⁹ Syntactically, however, another reading is possible: rather, "him, by whom / It . . . and all else, for us / Thou madest": a clause by which the divine right of kings, and a duty of civil obedience, makes an incursion into the inner recesses of eternal and natural law. Here we may see an adumbration of the absolutist theology Debora Shuger has observed in the poet's later sermons.⁵⁰ The reduplication of "us," however, in the second line conveys a sense of effort and ambivalence in this opening act of submission. It intimates, perhaps, that the curtailment of a conscience whose autonomy had until now been the poet's most cherished intellectual principle has not occurred without scruple.

In light of this discussion, I will now examine some other moments of tonal heterodoxy in "A Litanie." These thematize more explicitly the kind of synthesis Donne spoke of aiming for in his letter to Goodyer, and again pose questions for the straightforward Anglican piety and "simplicity of motive" that Helen Gardner perceived in the poem. Stanza 4, titled "The Trinity," brings the poem's opening invocations to a close, with the speaker praying for a further development of his affective and cognitive faculties: "Of these let all mee elemented bee, / Of power, to love, to know, you unnumbered three" (lines 35–36). Structurally, stanza 5 to the Virgin Mary opens the intercessions section of the poem, and ostensibly serves to demarcate the bounds of Donne's "rectified devotion," having been excluded from Cranmer's original litany as well as that of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer. While Donne carefully avoids direct address in this stanza, he nonethe-

49. John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Ernest W. Sullivan II (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 64.

50. Debora Shuger, "Absolutist Theology: The Sermons of John Donne," in *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History, 1600–1750*, ed. Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough (Manchester University Press, 2000), 115–36.

less attributes expansive and multiple significance to Mary's role in our redemption: she is the "Mother-maid, / Whose flesh redeem'd us," "Which unlock'd Paradise," and "who hath such titles unto you" (lines 37–45). These implications become even larger in the reading that I propose, where the Nativity doubles figuratively as the birth of the reconstituted political subject and as the grounding for a possible act of reconciliation that is anticipated in stanza 6:

VI

The Angels

And since this life our nonage is,
 And wee in Wardship to thine Angels be,
 Native in heavens faire Palaces
 Where we shall be but denizen'd by thee,
 As th'earth conceiving by the Sunne,
 Yeelds faire diversitie,
 Yet never knowes which course that light doth run,
 So let mee study, that mine actions bee
 Worthy their sight, though blinde in how they see.
 (Lines 46–54)

Stanzas 5 and 6 evoke complementary phases in a Christian eschatology of redemption: the descent of divinity in the Incarnation opens the prospect of redemption at the end of time. Stanza 6 also develops a heavy quotient of legal and juridical terminology: "nonage," "Wardship," "Native," and "denizen'd." Legally specified concepts and rights of citizenship provide the main metaphorical impetus for the reconciliation that is prayed for. The collective "we" of the first six lines of stanza 6, moreover, figures by implication the predicament of England's Catholics at the outset of James I's reign, and lodges a qualified plea for religious tolerance. "Faire diversitie" encompasses both a "conceiving by the Sunne" (a frequent pun on "Son" in Donne's religious verse) and a perception of "Worthy . . . actions" inferior to that of the angels. Stanza 6 then closes by personalizing the recusant Donne as possessed of contrasting attributes—conduct of worth, blindness of vision. This formulation encapsulates all that James had claimed to require from England's Catholics in the 1606 Oath of Allegiance. In still broader terms the two sets of personae who figure in stanza 6 are, on the one hand, a largely disenfranchised and subjected "wee" with whom the speaker identifies himself, and a company of angels who will lead the way to attaining citizenship and residence—full enfranchisement and legitimation.

To revert to context, it is significant that Donne figures this enfranchisement and legitimation as future event. Such a context of present-tense insecurities would have been relevant to English Catholics who had

embraced exile, death, and insurrection in the face of state persecution. Among Donne's immediate family members, these would include his mother, who with her third husband went into exile at Antwerp sometime in 1595 in search of religious freedom; his brother, who in 1593 was imprisoned in Newgate for harboring a priest, where he quickly contracted bubonic plague and died; and his uncle, Jasper Heywood, who was a Jesuit leader of the Counter-Reformation missionary effort in England, and who was eventually imprisoned in the Tower of London before being deported. Such historical realities were bound to complicate the irenic tone and conception that Donne adopted in his letter to Goodyer. Such realities also point to the conflicts of allegiance, solidarity, and intellectual commitment that "A Litanie" attempts to deflect.

* * *

Such conflicts, to all intents and purposes, would seem to be concluded or resolved by Donne in stanza 7 of the poem, with the opening of the deprecations section. The intercessions, to which stanzas 5 and 6 belonged, come to a close in stanza 13 ("The Doctors"). Dame Gardner pointed to an irregularity here, however. According to the Roman rite, stanza 12 ("The Virgins") should conclude the intercessions section, and this much also appears to be registered in the stanza itself (perhaps suggesting a late edit), as it presents us with the complete assimilation of the lyric speaker into the collective voice. Subsequent to this point in the poem only the third-person plural is used. And the lyric "I"'s final prayer, we find, is for the keeping of his "first integrity":

XII

The Virgins

Thy cold white snowie Nunnery,
Which, as thy mother, their high Abbesse, sent
Their bodies backe againe to thee,
As thou hadst lent them, cleane and innocent,
Though they have not obtain'd of thee,
That or thy Church, or I,
Should keep, as they, our first integrity;
Divorce thou sinne in us, or bid it die,
And call chast widowhead Virginitie.

(Lines 100–108)

The identity of the "True Church," which in *Satire 3*, as in *Biathanatos*, it is the sovereign imperative of conscience to pursue, has been forfeited (lines 104–6). Such individual sovereignty and purity is not permitted

in “A Litanie”’s enactment of reconciliation with the *politeia* of the collective voice—with the mandates of the Jacobean state. At the point of assimilation, the speaker instead asks that thou “call chaste widowhead Virginitie.” An epideictic mode prevails in the final two sections of the poem, which are less prayers than aphorisms of Christian ethics treating of private and public virtues respectively in the voice of a unified Christian commonwealth’s collective subject. The ease of counterpoint between argument and petition becomes facile, and the security of the collective voice feels all but assured. The poem, however, feels compelled to come round at last to the “agonie of pious wits”—to address explicitly, that is, the Oath of Allegiance controversy.

XIX

And through that bitter agonie,
Which is still the agonie of pious wits,
Disputing what distorted thee,
And interrupted evennesse, with fits,
And through thy free confession
Though thereby they were then
Made blind, so that thou might’st from them have gone,
Good Lord deliver us, and teach us when
Wee may not, and we may blinde unjust men.

(Lines 163–71)

On the “problems of distinction and separation” entailed in the 1606 Oath of Allegiance, Conal Condren has suggested that the difficulty of the maneuver was “aggravated when explored with reference to that instantiation of offices in collision, an oath—a spiritual act concerning temporal.”⁵¹ The particular aggravation to which Condren is referring, and which is alluded to in the final two lines of stanza 19, is the Jesuit doctrine of equivocation. Developed by Robert Persons and Henry Garnet in response to the Oath of Allegiance controversy, equivocation in the act of oath taking referred to “a circumnavigation of dishonesty through a mental reservation serving the overall scope of the statement, the act it was trying to bring about.”⁵² It was a “redescriptive strategy” that exploited the dependence of language on the tacit and contextual to create meaning.

Insofar as oath taking was understood to be a “God-given institution” and its efficacy central to the office holding and bare human trust necessary for binding a society together, the doctrine of equivocation was regarded as a particularly sacrilegious threat to the Christian polity of England. It was a threat taken seriously. Thomas Morton attacked it vehemently in his

51. Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England: The Presupposition of Oaths and Offices* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 285.

52. *Ibid.*

1606 pamphlet, *A Full Satisfaction concerning a Double Romish Iniquitie; hainous Rebellion, and more than heathenish Æquivocation. Containing three parts*. In *Triplici Nodo* this “new Catholike doctrine” also preoccupies James, “which” he says, “I in this Oath was so carefull to haue eschewed,” and “which may farre iustlier bee called the Deuils craft, then any plaine and temperate words, in so plaine and cleare a manner.”⁵³ With this context in mind, how are we to account for Donne’s use of the subjunctive in the final two lines of stanza 19? For the loyal English subject—of any confessional stripe—and for the Anglican apologist especially, the potential legitimacy of blind- ing “unjust men” had to be denied.

As a reversion to earlier noncommittal and destabilizing moments in the poem’s articulation of collective identity, Donne’s ambivalence regarding the doctrine of equivocation has the effect of weakening the collective voice and compromising the reconciliations that have taken place locally. As a further complication “teach us when / We may not, and we may blinde unjust men” apparently alludes to a strategy of Jesus’s ministry to those who do not know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven as he himself articulates this in Matthew 13:13, adapting a prophecy in Isaiah 43:8: “Therefore speake I to them in parables: because they seeyng, see not: and hearyng, they heare not: neither do they vnderstande.” Here Jesus’s authority is invoked to buttress an assertion of the rights of conscience—an assertion that is contrary to the earlier formulations and figurative economy of the poem: blindness is not now the quality or condition of an alien subject seeking assimilation (stanza 6, “So let mee study, that mine actions bee / Worthy their sight, though blinde in how they see”). Instead, this condition may be imposed upon “unjust men” by the speaking subject in accordance with his understanding of God’s will. And from this point, the consequences for what remains of the poem are telling.

The final stanza of the deprecations (stanza 22) turns to the public face and ethics of the Christian commonwealth. And in handling a theme that runs throughout the obsecrations section of the poem’s last six stanzas, we find that Donne rapidly shifts to a mordantly satirical tone and perspective in characterizing the Jacobean church and state alike. The dominant imagery becomes that of sickness and corruption: “Churches” are associated with “th’ infirmitie / Of him that speakes”; “Magistrates” with the misapplication of “lay or ghostly sword”; the speaker prays for a cure of “aguish Pietie,” “snatching cramps of wickednesse,” “Apoplexies of fast sin” and “our eares sicknesse.” Then, in stanza 26, “the Magistrate” and “Preachers” are again invoked as coterminous in a juridico-ecclesiastical order that serves to “aggravate” vices and sin and that is grammatically con-

53. James I, “Triplici nodo, triplex cuneus,” in *Political Writings*, 105, 109.

joined with “Satan” and “invenom’d men”—“Which well, if we starve, dine” (line 231). Significantly, the collective voice again becomes oppositional, defining itself against these judicial and ecclesiastical orders, and projecting its condition as one of subjection.

IV

Matthew Arnold described his poetry of “high seriousness” as possessed of a “high criticism of life”—a high criticism born of “absolute sincerity.” “A Litanie” is not such a poem; it is, at root, an effort of conformist literature. In the foregoing discussion I have tried to show that Donne chose and adapted the liturgical form of the litany as a means of reordering the relation between individual conscience and the state as a hypothesized act of reconciliation at a historical juncture in which this relation was being politically redefined and legislated—in the main part through the imposition of the 1606 Oath of Allegiance and the controversy that followed. Both the conception and the development of “A Litanie,” however, entail significant departures from the prescriptive mechanics of the English common prayer model as shaped by Thomas Cranmer and from the relation between individual conscience and the state that that model sought to establish. This tension, I have suggested, also needs to be understood in the context of Donne’s recusant heritage and the concern voiced in his letter to Goodyer that his friends “should repent not have loved me.” As such, I have sought to demonstrate how ambiguity and compression foreclose any “simplicity of motive” at critical junctures in the poem, especially in the constitution of the first-person lyric speaker (singular) and of the collective voice (plural). In closing, I wish to offer some further speculations on the lack of conformity and unity in Donne’s poem, virtues to which the litany as a genre has historically aspired in practice, and on the significance of this composition for Donne’s poetics more generally. With this perspective, I now turn to stanza 7 of “A Litanie.”

VII

Thy Eagle-sighted Prophets too,
 Which were thy Churches Organs, and did sound
 That harmony, which made of two
 One law, and did unite, but not confound;
 Those heavenly poets which did see
 Thy will, and expresse it
 In rhythimique feet, in common pray for mee,
 That I by them excuse not my excesse
 In seeking secrets, or Poetiquess.

(Lines 64–72)

For Donne, who at this point is praying for a “rectified” power “to know,” “Poetiqueness” or expression “In rhythmic feet” in his case is liable to “excesse / In seeking secrets.” A later sermon examines such “Poetiqueness” in the scriptures, and praises it for opening to us “the greatest, mystery of our Religion” or “the thing it self.”⁵⁴ “A Litanie,” however, petitions to be held back from the sort of naming that broaches the mystery of the divine, which Donne again renounces in a poem celebrating the publication of the Sidney Psalter, written after 1625:

Eternal God, (for whom who ever dare
 Seek new expression, do the circle square,
 And thrust into strait corners of poore wit
 Thee, who art cornerlesse and infinite)
 I would but bless thy name, not name thee now.
 (“Upon the Translation of the Psalms,” lines 1–5)

Line 5 here, I think, pertains to the theological distinction Donne draws between the *Praeceptum*, what he describes as “The thing it self,” and the *Nunc*, “When,” or the afterlife of revelation in time. It is the operative distinction between the scriptures and the church. The distinction also carries over to the modalities of poetry and rhetoric. “The Scriptures are Gods Voyce; The Church is his Eccho; a redoubling, a repeating of some particular syllables, and accents of the same voice.”⁵⁵ This relative positioning of poetry might be elucidated by reference to what Philip Sidney described as chief among the “three several kinds” of poetic imitation: that which “did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God.”⁵⁶ In my view, however, this would miss the point of Donne’s post-1606 conception of poetry. I think we must instead appeal to another passage of the *Apology*, the celebrated evocation of the poet at large: “Only the poet, disdain- ing to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature.”⁵⁷ These, I suggest, are imperatives Donne felt sharply—those pertaining to poetry’s refusal of “subjection,” and, moreover, in the “vigour” of “invention,” its insistence, even, upon “forms such as never were in Nature.” But they are imperatives felt also in an English religious and political climate that had become fatally hostile to those qualities of his poetry that Donne terms “excesse.” “A Litanie,” I believe, marks the onset of

54. Donne, “From a Sermon Preached at White-hall, March 4, 1625,” in *Selected Prose*, 249.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Sheppard (Manchester University Press, 2002), 86.

57. *Ibid.*, 85.

a rejection of the claims of freedom and autonomy that Donne's poetry had until then compulsively made for itself. It is a poem instead written out of an acceptance that in the actualities of the Jacobean life world its limits must be such that "neither the Roman Church need call . . . defective . . . nor the Reformed . . . discreetly accuse it, of attributing more than a rectified devotion ought to do."