

5-1999

John Donne's sacred aesthetics and protestant eschatology in La Corona

Karen R. Knudson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/masters-theses>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knudson, Karen R., "John Donne's sacred aesthetics and protestant eschatology in La Corona" (1999). *Master's Theses*. 568.
<http://scholarship.richmond.edu/masters-theses/568>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

John Donne's Sacred Aesthetic and Protestant Eschatology in *La Corona*

Karen R. Knudson

Master of Arts

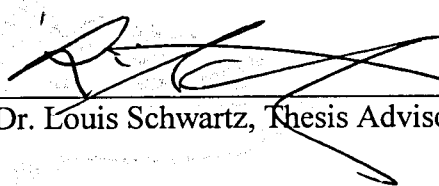
University of Richmond

May, 1991

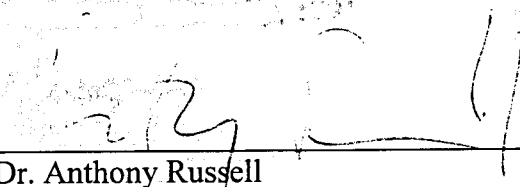
Dr. Louis Schwartz, Advisor

The operative figure for describing John Donne's religious poem, *La Corona*, is not a circle, as it has often been characterized, but a spiral. This figure incorporates the linear narrative and climax of the poem while maintaining the circularity of on-going spiritual experience. Scholars such as Patrick O'Connell and Elizabeth Hodgson are correct in viewing the poem as Donne's *ars poetica sacra* – his apologetic for the religious poet. But such scholars see either a climax and resolution for the speaker of *La Corona* or an unresolved question of his place as a poet. This paper argues that while the speaker of the poem does reach a spiritual crisis and learns a lesson of faith, that lesson is not finished in the eschatological sense. The linked sonnets of the poem take the reader back to the beginning of the poem with a new understanding and ability to continue the catechism.

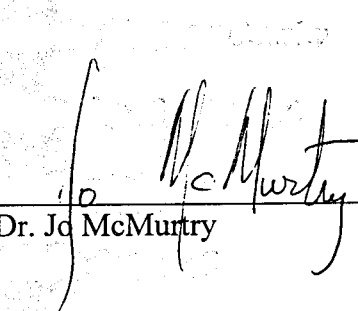
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts/Science.



Dr. Louis Schwartz, Thesis Advisor



Dr. Anthony Russell



Dr. Jo McMurry

JOHN DONNE'S SACRED AESTHETICS AND PROTESTANT ESCHATOLOGY

IN LA CORONA

By

KAREN R. KNUDSON

B.A., Olivet Nazarene University, 1991

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

May, 1999

Richmond, Virginia

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
VIRGINIA 23173

I. : *Reception History*

But, more matur'd: did his full soule conceive,
And in harmonious-holy-numbers weave
A *Crowne of sacred sonets*, fit to adorne
A dying Martyrs brow: or, to be worne
On that blest head of *Mary Magdalen*:
After she wip'd Christs feet, but not till then?

Published in 1633, these lines are the first known commentary on Donne's sonnet sequence *La Corona*. Izaak Walton penned an elegy memorializing John Donne in an edition of Donne's poetry, *Life of Donne* (Smith 91). Walton recites Donne's accomplishments in a series of rhetorical questions. The initial stanzas express a public sense of grief at the passing of Donne. Walton proceeds to describe Donne's youth and literary achievements by his "twentieth yeare." Then come these lines, referring to Donne as "more matur'd" (Smith 92). *La Corona* has ever since been associated with that maturity, even when there are disagreements about the exact dating of the poem.

In the phrase, "harmonious-holy-numbers," Walton acknowledges the form of *La Corona*, an aspect of the poem that has become an integral part of its explication. Walton's most intriguing commentary is, however, his reference to the "Crowne" being "fit to adorne / A dying Martyrs brow," or the head of Mary Magdalen "After she wip'd Christs feet, but not till then." These lines describe a conversion similar to the one we shall see happen within the lines of *La Corona*: salvation comes to the supplicant when he or she commits the right act of humility. The picture Walton paints is one of submission. Walton pays Donne the only kind of compliment a Christian should desire – being an example for the humble. The question arises and remains, can one give one's own

experience as an example of humility and still possess that virtue? Can a poet be a character – the character – in a narrative about God and not be presumptuous? Is there any poetic act that expresses true humility and conversion that isn't implicitly trapped in the human cycle of sin?

In spite of Walton's praise for Donne and his attention, albeit brief, to *La Corona*, readers and scholars lost interest in the poem. For a couple hundred years, the only evidence of the poem's existence was its publication in editions of Donne's poetry. As far as can be determined, *La Corona* received no critical attention during this time. That may be one explanation for modern critics' need to justify any attention to the poem. Need for this justification began alongside the "Donne renaissance" of the early part of twentieth century. Herbert Grierson, in his important edition of Donne's poetry published in 1912, judged that within *La Corona*:

treatment of the subject of Christ's life and death is more intellectual and theological than spiritual and poetical. It is when the tone becomes personal, as in the Holy Sonnets...that Donne's religious poetry acquires something of the same unique character as his love songs and elegies by a similar combination of qualities, intensity of feeling, subtle turns of thought, and occasional Miltonic splendour of phrase (lii).

Grierson determined that *La Corona* was written before the death of Donne's wife and described Donne's poetry written after that event as more sincere and profound, with imagery of "a more magnificent quality, [and] rhythms a more sonorous note" (xlix).

Helen C. White takes notice of *La Corona* in *The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience*, published in 1936, in her chapter on Donne's Divine poetry. She is the first to look at the forms that influence the poem by comparing *La Corona* to the

“semi-dramatic devotional lyric which is one of the greatest glories of medieval Latin poetry.” She states that *La Corona* comes close to this medieval pattern but still contains only a “brief dwelling on the pictorial and dramatic possibilities of the scenes and events invoked and nothing of that rich building-up of emotional suggestion that is the great charm of the medieval prototype” (120). For White, this is not necessarily a reproach, only a comparison that points out the reflective nature of Donne’s Divine poetry.

The next mention of *La Corona* does not come until fifteen years later, when Doniphan Louthan published The Poetry of John Donne: A Study in Explication. He follows the Grierson model more closely by comparing *La Corona* with another of Donne’s poems. In his explication of Donne’s Holy Sonnet, “Batter my heart, three person’d God,” Louthan refers to one line of *La Corona*. He notes that in the first line of this Holy Sonnet, God is pictured as a ram and, “in the seventh of the *La Corona* sonnets, Donne makes this very contrast (and pun) involving the ‘strong Ramme, which has batter’d heaven for mee,’ and the ‘milde Lambe, which with thy blood has mark’d the path...’” (123).

Helen Gardner, in her first important edition of Donne’s Divine Poems, published in 1952, expands upon Helen C. White’s broad statements about medieval influences. Criticism of the sonnet sequence had not progressed so far as to give *La Corona* detailed analysis, but Gardner does treat it as a legitimate object of study and her work in general has received much critical attention. Gardner did much to validate the importance of *La Corona* by addressing the fact that it was usually only recognized as it compared to the Holy Sonnets. She said, “*La Corona* has been undervalued as a poem by comparison with

the Holy Sonnets because the difference of intention behind the two sets of sonnets has not been recognized” (Introduction xxii). Gardner went on to explain that *La Corona* is inspired by prayer in the oral tradition of the church, whereas the Holy Sonnets are inspired by the “simplest method of mental prayer, meditation” (xxix). Of course, the impact of that statement on behalf of *La Corona* is mitigated by her evaluation of the Holy Sonnets. In those poems, according to Gardner, “Donne has used the tradition of meditation in his own way; and it suits his genius as a poet far better than do the more formal ways of prayer he drew upon in *La Corona* and ‘A Litany’” (xxix).

In 1954, K.W. Gransden, in his edition of Donne’s poetry, persists with the comparison and points to the supposed “intellectual” nature of *La Corona*, this time with clear negative connotations by calling it “an attempt to find in a religious exercise some respite from an unsatisfactory and depressing everyday existence.” He called the sequence “less personal, then, than most of the Holy Sonnets” and “personal” in the context is what poetry should be (125).

The attention Louis Martz paid *La Corona* in his seminal study of Donne’s poetry, The Poetry of Meditation, published in 1954, has done much to redeem the sonnet sequence for critics. Martz defines the meditative traditions out of which *La Corona* is written, noting that Donne’s decision or ability to write from these traditions does not have to be linked to particular dates or periods of his life. Martz places *La Corona* within the tradition of “meditations of the corona” of the Catholic church, and its modification within Anglican practice (110). Although neither Gardner nor Martz provide a close reading of *La Corona*, they place the poem in the animating contexts of religion and

literature, thereby establishing a foundation for serious, detailed, scholarly consideration of the poem.

A few years later, in 1960, A. B. Chambers began to take up that challenge. His brief but in-depth study of the fourth sonnet of the sequence, “The Meaning of the ‘Temple’ in Donne’s *La Corona*,” did much to push *La Corona* forward as an legitimate object of academic study, causing critics to take a second, closer look not only at this particular sonnet, but at the sequence as a whole. By presenting a valid argument for the logical inclusion of this sonnet in the sequence, Chambers helped resolve one of the more significant formal difficulties of the work. Indeed, you could say he identified the formal difficulties that have lent the poem a good deal of its interest. His later study of all seven sonnets of the sequence will be discussed at a subsequent point in this paper.

In 1965, Edward Le Comte took the biographical approach in Grace to a Witty Sinner when he discussed metaphors in *La Corona* as revealing Donne’s mindset at a particular point in his life. Le Comte quoted directly from Gransden, reinforcing the perception of the Corona sonnets as a “religious exercise” compared to the “celebrated Holy Sonnets” (104). Le Comte viewed Donne as one who was comfortable in his role as religious poet – “For him there was no conflict between his ‘muse’s white sincerity’ and ‘wit, whose one spark could make good things of bad’” – and who deftly exploited Christian paradoxes. Le Comte believed lines from the first sonnet expressed Donne’s death wish and was, therefore thematically tied to *Biathanatos*.

In 1970, Judah Stampfer published John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture, which included the first true explication of the entire sequence of *La Corona* in his chapter

entitled “The Early Devotions.” Stampfer seems somewhat mystical in his approach, portraying the sonnet sequence as a muted, incense-scented, religious ceremony, and speaking of a sense of “slipping closer to the core of existence” (235). His detailed attention opened a new door in Donne criticism. Stampfer is the first to note that one of the perennial issues of religious literature is also a problem in *La Corona* – the presumption of penning poetry for or about God. Stampfer calls the poet’s offer of a “crown of prayer and praise” an “embarrassment of superfluity, words from a fleck of creation to the source of all salvation” (233).

Seven years later, A. B. Chambers followed his earlier study with an extended analysis of the poem, “*La Corona*: Philosophic, Sacred, and Poetic Uses of Time,” published in 1977. This work provided an analysis of each sonnet according to the liturgical day and year. More significantly, Chambers describes a narrative development within the sequence and connects to liturgical time. Chambers finds the coherence of the poem wrapped in its relationship to the Christian liturgy and calendar, concluding that, “[*La Corona*] is not,” in his opinion, “relatively minor but relatively major...” (168).

In the span of a few years after Chambers’ study there followed a number of detailed analyses of *La Corona*. The primary critical methods of these studies were to approach the poem according to either historical or formal criticism, or some combination. For obvious reasons, one cannot escape addressing form when discussing *La Corona*. For example, John Nania and P.J. Klemp published an article in 1978 called “John Donne’s *La Corona*: A Second Structure.” Their argument is that the key to the structure is the fourth sonnet of the sequence, ‘Temple.’ This middle sonnet is in an “axial” position

which allows the other sonnets to “balance or answer one another” (50). This makes it possible for the sequence to be an unbroken circle. In the same year, Peggy Ann Bloomer published an article, “A Re-examination of Donne’s ‘La Corona,’” which discusses the relationship of *La Corona* to Catholic and Protestant traditions. She considers *La Corona* to be fashioned out of the briefer “La Corona” meditations on the rosary as opposed to the lengthier Dominican rosary. Bloomer also emphasized the public voice of the poem, with a corresponding communal element in which Donne expresses a universal Christian celebration, not his own spiritual needs. Some of her concluding statements contrast *La Corona* and other secular and religious poetry: “Donne’s poem, then, is not an unsuccessful work, even though many admirers miss the dramatic voice and the passion that are present in the ‘Holy Sonnets,’ *Songs and Sonnets* and the *Elegies*. What they fail to see is a public voice in ‘*La Corona*’” (42). The difference in dramatic voice is what makes *La Corona* seem unlike Donne, in some way. She concludes that the “evident skill with which Donne used the pre-existing Corona stanza demonstrates that he is an expert poetic craftsman” (42).

It had become now somewhat commonplace to mention the religious traditions Donne drew from for *La Corona*. Martz saw those influences as primarily Catholic and others have seen them as some combination of Catholic and Protestant. In her landmark study of Donne’s poetry in Protestant Poetics, published 1979, Barbara Lewalski drew a line between the major religious traditions in early seventeenth century and clearly defined the Protestant influence upon Donne’s poetry. Lewalski pointed out that two of Donne’s problems – the relationship between art and the sacred subject, and the proper stance of

the devotional poet – grew out of Protestant poetic concerns of the time. It is ironic that, although she raised this concern, she dismissed it in relationship to *La Corona*, “He usually seems to take for granted the sincerity of his poetic praises – indeed he can affirm that “La Corona” is the product of [his] ‘muses white sincerity’” (226). Lewalski considered the sonnet sequence “not an analysis of or a meditation upon an emblem, and neither is it primarily a meditative exercise upon specific mysteries...but a personal poetic emblem... a poetic crown for Christ out of traditional meditative, liturgical, emblematic, and rhetorical materials” (259).

Studies of *La Corona* blossomed in the 1980’s. In 1980, R. R. Dubinski published “Donne’s ‘La Corona’ and Christ’s Mediatorial Office,” and thereby continued scholarly examination of the formal aspects of the sonnet sequence. Dubinski addressed a particular aspect of Protestant Renaissance theology: the role of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. Protestant theologians gave prominence to the prophetic role, which emphasized Christ’s preaching and teaching activities. Dubinski claimed that focus on Christ in this role in *La Corona* begins with the fourth sonnet of the cycle, ‘Temple’. In the fifth and sixth sonnets, ‘Crucifying’, and ‘Resurrection’, Christ epitomizes the priest. Christ is revealed in his kingly role in the seventh and last sonnet, ‘Ascension’. In 1982, Margaret Maurer addressed the circularity of *La Corona* in “The Circular Argument of Donne’s ‘La Corona.’” Maurer also took up a theme touched on by Judah Stampfer and Barbara Lewalski, what Maurer calls the “problem of art and the sacred subject, and with the devotional poet’s proper stance” (226). Maurer argues that the formal characteristics of the poem are directly related to the poet’s attempt to discover his own state of grace.

When the formal characteristics are least prominent, for example, the poet is most assured of his own place before God. Maurer describes the middle section of the fourth sonnet as “outright lyricism” and the sonnet as a whole as the “psychological climax,” of the sequence. Thus, this sonnet is the point at which the poet reflects the greatest sense of assurance. In the sonnets that follow, the poet penitently prays, but still struggles with the problem – what does one’s wit have to do with one’s salvation? The poem reflects the cycle of true religious experience, and salvation is not, according to Maurer, “a state the soul achieves in time; it is a process occupying the soul until eternity” (68).

In 1983, Anne Ferry wrote, The ‘Inward’ Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne. In her chapter on Donne she argued that “Donne’s acceptance of the [14 line Italian] sonnet as a major form for his religious verse was a deliberate and significant departure from his practice in the *Songs and Sonnets*.” She also argued that the significance of the form was in the fact that the speaker of a sonnet identified himself as a poet in a specific way. By labeling *La Corona* a garland of “prayer and praise” in the first sonnet, the poet unified the activity of the petitioner and the poet (221). The ‘voice’ of *La Corona* is that of the congregation – a public, liturgical voice. Ferry went on, however, to identify one moment in *La Corona* when the speaker diverges from that stance – in line six of the first sonnet the poet asks, “Reward my muse’s white sincerity.” Although he is no longer speaking as one within a community, neither has he stepped back into the role of the speaker of the *Songs and Sonnets* – he is still conscious of the distance between inward experience and its expression in verse. Commenting on the public voice of *La Corona* was not particularly new and some scholars may disagree with Ferry’s views of

the *Songs and Sonnets*¹, but her suggestion that Donne's particular use of the sonnet form and the way it suggests a self-consciously poetic voice caused critics to see the sequence as one coherent whole.

In the same year, Martin Elsky took a fresh approach to the sonnet sequence in "John Donne's *La Corona*: Spatiality and Mannerist Painting." Elsky explains the form of the poem by comparing it to the spatial and temporal organization of mannerist paintings. The author of mannerist paintings deliberately includes what is called temporal inconsistencies to make room for a narrative within the picture. Characters or scenes that could not be in the same place according to chronological time may be side-by-side in the painting. The "space" of a picture is arranged in such a way that one must follow the spatial progression of the story in the painting. Elsky applies this same concept to temporal inconsistencies in *La Corona*, when, for instance, not only is the speaker of the poem present at the birth of Christ and on the journey of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus into Egypt, but so is the reader. Donne deliberately created a "transcendent space" where he, initially the mediator, becomes the actor and "issue[s] imperatives to others outside the space of the narrative" (9). This reading of the sequence follows others' focus on the place of the poet in the narrative of the poem. In fact, from this perspective, the poet is seen as a master arranger, perhaps even master manipulator of his material, one who chooses to make himself a character in a story about God.

¹ See previous discussion of Bloomer

Jill Baumgaertner's "'Harmony' in Donne's 'La Corona' and 'Upon the Translation of the Psalms,'" published in 1984, finds meaning for *La Corona* in the Renaissance concept of harmony in literature, music, and theology. Baumgaertner draws on concepts from the sixteenth-century treatise on musical theory, *De Harmonia Mundi*, written by Franciscan friar Francesco Giorgio. For Giorgio, music, spirit, and literature flowed together. The Renaissance sense of harmony is frequently expressed in the figure of a circle, depicting the paradox of completeness and continuation. Baumgaertner uses this concept to explain the working together of words, syntax, meaning, and form in *La Corona*. The figure of a circle had become a familiar metaphor for the sonnet sequence itself² and would continue to be a favorite. The significance of Baumgaertner's argument for this paper is her emphasis on the occurrence of a climax with, paradoxically, a sense of perpetuation in *La Corona*. According to Baumgaertner, Donne managed to balance the two well enough to keep the structure from collapsing and becoming meaningless.

Patrick O'Connell was the first to make what he calls the "value of human activity, and artistic creativity in particular, in the context of man's ultimate destiny" the interpretive key to understanding *La Corona* (11). In his article published in 1986, "'La Corona' Donne's Ars Poetica Sacra," O'Connell emphasized the fact that, at the beginning of the sonnet sequence, the effort of prayer and praise can be seen as unsuccessful because the sequence is "the speaker's journey toward self-discovery," and only "discovery of the real Christ...leads to authentic prayer" (120). Only as the poet turns the focus from himself to Christ is he able to truly pray and praise. O'Connell argued that the resolution of the

² See previous discussion of articles by John Nania and P. J. Klemp, and by Margaret Maurer.

tension between self-attention and God-attention is in sonnet five of the poem, 'Crucifying,' where the poet comes face to face with the saving act of the Messiah. It is O'Connell's interpretation of the sequence as the working of art of sacred poetry that seems to provide the best answers for the questions raised within the sequence. This interpretation provides a coherent narrative for the entire sequence and addresses the spiritual development of the poet from sonnet to sonnet. Although O'Connell acknowledges the cyclical nature of *La Corona*, he does not completely reconcile that with the sense development and climax in the sequence. This issue will be addressed more thoroughly later in this paper.

Two dissertations published in 1989 provide detailed examinations of *La Corona*: Theresa DiPasquale's John Donne's Sacramental Poetics and Jean Strommer's The Twelve-Tone System as a Vehicle for Spiritual Values: *La Corona* (John Donne/Ernst Krenek). DiPasquale interprets the poem according to theological considerations, particularly the sacrament of the Eucharist. According to DiPasquale, *La Corona* is a "celebration in verse of a specifically eucharistic event: the refreshment of the soul by the blood of Christ" and Donne's poetry is an act of inward communion (106). For her, the climax of the sequence is not within a sonnet, but the transition from the fifth sonnet, 'Crucifying', to the sixth, 'Resurrection' (109). In this movement, the poet receives the Sacrament, and, because he is united in Christ's Death and Resurrection, he speaks of those events in terms of his own experience. The first four sonnets of the sequence relate to this climax as the mystery of the Incarnation relates to the mystery of the Eucharist (119). According to DiPasquale, the last sonnet of the sequence, 'Ascension,' points back

to the first by describing Christ's Ascension in terms of the Second Coming, the "last Advent, when everybody will pray to the Judge, 'Oh, with thine owne blood quench thine owne just wrath,'" (DiPasquale 156).

Strommer uses Ernst Krenek's 1941 musical setting for *La Corona* as a filter for the interpretation of the poem itself. Strommer believes both works were "personal statements of belief, credos not only of spiritual beliefs, but also of artistic techniques – Donne's complex imagery and abundant conceits, Krenek's interpretation of the twelve-tone system as it grew out of traditional means" (1). Approaching *La Corona* from a specific, even complex, musical standpoint provides a fresh look, and, as might be expected, explication of the poem includes scansion of most of the lines of the sequence and discussion of meanings of words, phrases and lines as they fall within rhyme, rhythm, and syntactic patterns. Strommer argues, for example, that the accent pattern in line 5 of the first sonnet helps carry the meaning: "The anapest pattern (u u -) accelerates the momentum of the line which is absorbed by the following trochee foot's strong beginning accent (- u) and the concluding spondee foot with two strong stresses (- -)" (5). Strommer goes on to say that these shifting accents "allow Donne the freedom in *La Corona* to explore a wide range of rhythmic combinations which reinforce the intention of his words" (5).

In 1992, John Lucarelli published an article as part of the Selected Proceedings of The Western Pennsylvania Symposium on World Literatures – "John Donne's *La Corona* as Sonnet Sequence". The article is relatively brief, but raises important points in interpretation of the sonnet sequence. Lucarelli argues that *La Corona* has an intellectual

vitality, based in the play of paradoxes within the sonnets. He explains that the disappointment often felt by readers of the sequence is a result of the passive role the poet takes, a reversal of the aggressive stance of the poet in much of Donne's other poetry. Lucarelli also emphasizes the symbol of perfection in the circle Donne creates in his poetic crown. He argues, "Donne views his relationship with God as a potentially complete one" and the sequence is, therefore, less vigorous because "along the strands of that wreath [*La Corona*] and with that vision of spiritual perfection, there is little else to say" (65).

One other publication in 1992 addressed the interpretation of *La Corona* – a dissertation published by Elizabeth Hodgson, "To enter in these bonds": The Gendering of Liminal Space in John Donne's Holy Sonnets, Devotions, and Sermons. The focus of her study is to consider the "images of masculinity and femininity which permeate Donne's particularly self-conscious contemplations of transitional states...focus[ing] in particular on baptism, marriage, and death as key moments in Donne's figurations of self, gender, and divinity" (Hodgson i). Interpretation of *La Corona* is included in the chapter entitled, "The Second Birth." The theological term "second birth" is associated with baptism, but, for Hodgson, also with Donne's attempt to "birth" poetry. As Patrick O'Connell did, Hodgson sees *La Corona* as Donne's *ars poetica sacra*, Donne's declaration of "his right to be initiated into sacred authorship," but Hodgson argues that neither O'Connell nor any other critics have perceived Donne's "profound uncertainty over his own status as a sacred poet, his own anxiety over whether he has been (or can be) 're-begot' as a divine author"(28).

As Hodgson notes, O'Connell did provide an important key to interpretation of *La Corona* but his straightforward reading of the plot of the poem with a resolution in sonnet five does not completely account for the ambiguities and tensions of the sequence. I believe Hodgson is correct in assessing these as evidence of Donne's uncertainty and anxiety about this role as sacred poet, and about whether it was appropriate even to attempt that role. O'Connell resolved problems in the poem by making a clear distinction between two poetic personae – the speaker and the poet. O'Connell sees these personae as completely separate in the first sonnet, with the poet deliberately maintaining a distance and setting the speaker up for a fall. By learning and growing, the speaker changes as he moves through the sequence. The resolution of the tension happens when the speaker comes into harmony with the poet, the one who perceives the true attitude of a supplicant. Margaret Maurer seems to have had a more appropriate view than O'Connell of the cyclical nature of the poem. However, she puts too much weight on the fourth sonnet of the sequence. O'Connell focuses on sonnet five and seems to miss the significance of the cyclical nature altogether, misjudging the poet's moment of epiphany. In contrast to both Maurer and O'Connell, Hodgson sees no resolution of the poet's anxiety at all within the sequence. Hodgson considers the last lines to be the final word of the sequence and deems them too anxiety-ridden and ambiguous to indicate resolution (44-45).

In contrast, I believe the poet has a true spiritual experience – a crucifixion and resurrection – but it comes between sonnet six, 'Resurrection' and sonnet seven, 'Ascension.' This moment, however, is not a climax. The poet has learned that he must follow after, must submit to, Christ's work. He indicates his own wit is nothing when, at

the critical point, he cannot describe his own moment of redemption and salvation, but can only refer to it in the future tense (sonnet six) or in the past tense (sonnet seven). The speaker has a developing awareness not only within the poem but as the poem cycles again and again, in an ascending spiral. In this sense of spiritual experience as “already, but not yet,” Donne has a Protestant eschatological sense of salvation (Fee 133). This is evidenced by the nature of the poem as a spiral – it is an ongoing effort of the poet’s, never completely resolved. The sequence is not the story of one moment, but a glimpse into the cycle of spiritual life. It is possible to have a crisis within the poem that is not contrary to its circular nature. For the speaker of *La Corona*, the crisis does not occur until after sonnet six, in a moment that takes place “off stage.” And the coming back around to sonnet one reveals that this experience has been meaningful, has effected a change, even though in this life the Christian must continually learn the lesson of faith. This is not an endless cycle of the same experience, but an ever-ascending spiral toward the Day when all will come to completion.

II. : Explication

It is necessary to take a close look at *La Corona*, of course, to discover the particular literary and religious stance adopted by the poet, since the blending of those influences is what gives the sequence its subtle power. Donne makes use of religious and literary traditions, forms, and concepts in *La Corona* to create his statement – the story of a Christian poet trying to make his relationship with God meaningful. In order for that story to be coherent, *La Corona* should, first, be considered as a whole, before being considered in lines, phrases, and words.

The appearance of *La Corona* on the page sets up certain expectations. The title of the poem, the names given to individual sonnets, the sonnet form itself, and the repeating lines within the sonnets all work to give the poem a very specific framework and subject. As Hodgson notes, “‘La Corona’ is formally structured to emphasize its own construction, its own made qualities” (29). The title of the poem also evokes particular poetic and religious forms. As Martz noted years ago, Donne’s use of the word “corona” alludes not only to a “corona of our Lord,” an English rosary of thirty-three Aves, but also to the continental poetic practice of linking sonnets or stanzas. These sonnets are called linked because the last line of each sonnet forms the first line of the next and the last line of the whole sequence repeats the line that began it (107). The titles Donne gives individual sonnets in *La Corona* which are theological terms for events in the life of Christ also reinforce the formal, religious nature of the sequence. These titles proclaim a poetic retelling of not just one pericope of the Gospel story but of all significant events in the life

of the Messiah. This is the Gospel itself in sonnet form, shaped to follow a strict rhyme scheme and verse pattern. Donne even chose the specific rhyme scheme of the Italian sonnet, limiting the octave to two rhymes (a b b a, a b b a) which calls for “stricter discipline in shaping expression” than the English rhyme scheme of a b a b c d c d (Strommer 4). All together, the form of the poem is testimony to the fact that the poem, if successful, is either a great feat of human ingenuity or a miracle of God. The question is, can the poem be both.

The difficulty of meshing perfect form and the declared content – prayer and praise to God – is revealed from the first line of the first sonnet. The poet has mastery of form, but the focus seems to be on that mastery and not on the content of the poem – the life of Christ.

Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise,
 Weaved in my low devout melancholy,
 Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury,
 All changing unchanged Ancient of days,
 But do not, with a vile crown of frail bays,
 Reward my muse’s white sincerity,
 But what thy thorny crown gained, that give me,
 A crown of glory, which doth flower always;
 The ends crown our works, but thou crown’st our ends,
 For, at our end begins our endless rest,
 This first last end, now zealously possessed
 With a strong sober thirst, my soul attends.
 ‘Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high,
 Salvation to all that will is nigh.³

³ This sonnet and all following references to *La Corona* come from John Carey’s edition, John Donne, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990

The fact that the pronouns “my” and “me” occur five times within this first sonnet is one indication of the poet’s inability to focus on God. When the poet refers to Deity in lines three and four – “Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury, / All changing unchanged Ancient of days” – there is no sense of relationship, but of remoteness; the poet is granting God His position in the universe but not expressing a personal relationship. The point of view changes in line nine, but only from “me” to “our”: “The ends crown our works, but thou crown’st our ends, / For, at our end begins our endless rest.”⁴ The poet is relating to God as he is part of all humanity to be gathered at the Consummation. Expectations for the content of the sonnet matching impressive form are disappointed; the poet’s expression seems to be mere performance, and, like the Pharisee in the Gospel story, calls attention to his own humbleness (Luke 18). The struggle revealed in this sonnet and others that follow has to do not only with the poet’s authorial position but with his spiritual condition.

Donne begins the sequence with what ought to be the proper word; “deign” is appropriate for addressing higher authority. But it is, at the same time, a petition, a request to God. And with the next two words, “deign at my hands,” the poet manages to bring God down. The poet is not lifting up his gift to God but asking God to bend and receive it. As for the rest of the line, “Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise,” – who has possession of the crown? Is the poet crowning the King of Kings? If the

⁴ In the chapter on Donne in her book The ‘Inward’ Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1983, Anne Ferry attributes this shift in pronouns to the merging of poet into the congregation as the sonnet becomes liturgical, public prayer.

crown is one of true prayer and praise, the gift is appropriate; if the poem proves presumptuous, however, it is practically blasphemous. Human artfulness tends toward pride and, when the subject is God, presumption. When he makes the poem itself the object of attention, he threatens his own spiritual welfare. Although I disagree with the conclusion of Ann Ferry's work, her close reading of some of these lines is insightful. She explains that, by referring to the poem objectively as "this crown," the poet gives his words "a separate existence like an object independent of himself" (Ferry 223). Donne reinforces this objectivity by emphasizing its literariness. He refers to "frail bays" in line five and "my muse" in line six. He calls upon secular literary tradition in order to reveal his spiritual struggle. The problem with combining these traditions lies in the fact that, as Patrick O'Connell points out, "In secular verse, the poet is in complete control of his universe and can create and people a world as close to or as far from the world of reality as he wishes" (119). The poet is the ultimate referent – creator and word. Those who are awarded a crown of bays in secular tradition achieve immortality through the power of their words. The poet himself points up the contrast of this with traditional Christian belief in the use of the phrase, "our end" (10). According to the Christian world view, all things will come to an end, and, when that happens, literary immortality will be just so many pieces of paper burnt in the fire. But the poet tries to make room for the works of this world even while conscious of the end. Line nine, "The ends crown our works, but thou crown'st our ends," carries the implication that, although all the works one accomplishes in this life will be gone, one's intentions in accomplishing those works might have eternal effects. So, if the poet can find just the right attitude – if he can prove his

“white sincerity” – while carrying out this work, he will affect his final outcome. The poet has already “set himself apart from profane poets on the grounds of his sincerity. His distinction from them is not that he praises a sacred subject rather than an idol but that he renders truly in verse what is in his heart” (Ferry 224). Unfortunately, the very words from his mouth betray problematic attitude of the heart. Lines seven and eight provide an insight into the drama at this point: “But what thy thorny crown gained, that give me, / A crown of glory, which doth flower always” (7-8). The poet acknowledges the work of Christ, but his “attempt to give a crown has been transformed into an attempt to receive a crown” without participating in the suffering that comes with it (Hodgson 31). These lines show that, because the poet’s focus is misplaced, there is no harmony between the display of the poet’s skills and the declared content of the poem. He proves his ability to play with words in the juggling act performed with the word “end.” He is still focused on his reward. He shifts to the pronoun “our” and speaks of the end in general terms. The end of his own existence is viewed only as it is part of the end of all things; he is part of the crowd. He is also grasping the eternal by means of the temporal: “The ends crown our works” (line 9). Reward calculated by one’s work. On the surface, he has the proper Christian attitude of living in the face of eternity, but the syntax betrays a desire to pull the last things into the present: “This first last end, now zealously possessed / With a strong sober thirst, my soul attends” (lines 10 and 11). At first reading of line ten, the poet appears to have taken possession of that “last end,” then, with line eleven’s *contre-rejet* comes the realization that what he possesses is merely a thirst for it.

Focusing on others is better than focusing on oneself, but, in this case, should still not be primary subject. In the couplet at the end of the first sonnet the poet is more aware of the crowd than the God he is addressing. These lines are a call to worship, but he has not proven himself a worthy leader to follow. The language in the ‘sermon’ of the last line, “Salvation to all that will is nigh,” is the key to understanding this sonnet and the sequence. As is typical of Donne, the language is porous. On the surface, these are words found on the lips of any minister. Their basis is in Scripture, as expressed in the familiar verse in the Gospel of John, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (KJV). Both expressions give a condition to salvation: in the Gospel, salvation is given to “everyone who believes,” and in the poem, it is given to “all that will.” In one sense, they are the same thing – everyone who chooses to believe will receive salvation (eternal life). But Donne’s use of the word “will” gives this expression, and the poem, a different sense. The emphasis is upon the decision of the individual rather than on God’s gift of forgiveness and grace. Because the motivation of the poet is already in question, use of the word “will” is loaded and a possible indication of a tainted spiritual condition. So far, the work of the poet has proven to be, at best, a distraction, or, at worst, an idol.

The second sonnet of the sequence begins, of course, with the same line that ends the first, but the change from a period to a comma at the end of the line shifts the meaning. The reader is led to what follows, a description of God and the work of Christ.

Salvation to all that will is nigh,
 That all, which always is all everywhere,
 Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,

Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
 Lo, faithful Virgin, yields himself to lie
 In prison, in thy womb; and though he there
 Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet he 'will wear
 Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.

What one was looking for in the first sonnet, and found lacking, is beginning to appear in the second – meditation on God's work of salvation. This is not the first mention of salvation, but the first time the speaker seems to focus on its meaning to mankind. The subject of the sonnet, 'Annunciation,' is introduced, strangely enough, by way of reference to the Crucifixion. "That...which... all sins must bear, which...cannot choose but die" is the one who submits himself to lie in the womb of the Virgin (2-7). Christ's kenosis and choice to come to earth involved not only the decision to die and be buried, but first to submit to the womb. The description of Christ in this sonnet is couched in terms of His choices. He is not described in terms of traditional Biblical attributes, as those from the story of the Annunciation in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke – "the Son of the Highest," the One given the "throne of his father David," who will "reign over the house of Jacob forever." The tradition Donne chooses to follow is that of describing Christ in terms of paradox. The One who is All allows himself to be made small enough for the womb; the One who is sinless takes the sins of mankind upon himself. By choosing this tradition, Donne is able to practice his poetic ability. And the paradoxes Donne uses describe Christ in terms of his choices – One who chooses to yield to the womb, to bear sin, and to die. He continues to speak in paradoxes when he address himself to Mary in these lines:

Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
 Wast in his mind, who is thy son, and brother,
 Whom thou conceiv'st, conceived; yea thou art now
 Thy maker's maker, and thy father's mother,
 Thou hast light in dark; and shutt'st in little room,
 Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

The use of the word "cloistered" in the couplet at the end of the sonnet implies the choice the Son of God made. It indicates a deliberate decision to shut oneself away. It was not merely a matter of the Son becoming subject to the laws of nature once He made the initial choice, but each step is a choice of submission. While the poet is grappling with this aspect of the work of Christ, he continues to struggle with the desire to assert his own power as a poet. The last six lines of the second sonnet are packed with paradoxes. By the end of the sonnet, one begins to admire the poet's ability to manipulate the language and come close to expressing the Inexpressible. Although the poet seems closer to an authentic relationship with Emanuel, "God with us," he continues to display a sinful tendency to bring attention to himself and his work.

The first two lines of the third sonnet reinforce the poet's emphasis on Christ's choices. He is not subject to nature in his birth like others, but he purposely "leaves his well-beloved imprisonment" (line 2). He does this, though, only after he has made himself "weak enough" (line 4).

Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb,
 Now leaves his well-beloved imprisonment,
 There he hath made himself to his intent
 Weak enough, now into our world to come;
 But oh, for thee, for him, hath th' inn no room?
 Yet lay him in this stall, and from the orient,
 Stars, and wisemen will travel to prevent
 Th' effect of Herod's jealous general doom.

See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes, how he
 Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lie?
 Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high,
 That would have need to be pitied by thee?
 Kiss him, and with him into Egypt go,
 With his kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

Christ's choices ultimately make him vulnerable and, for now, silent. Vulnerable to the machinations of King Herod (line 8) and vulnerable to pity. This brings about the first true crisis of the sonnet sequence. When faced with the reality of the risk to which Jesus exposed himself, the poet responds and becomes a part of in the drama – “See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes...” (line 8). These events are no longer mere word-pictures but have become real for the poet; he has become connected to the story, not just a narrator. He has begun to experience the events emotionally, not just relate to them intellectually. The first indication of this is in line five when he bursts out, “But oh, for thee, for him, hath th' inn no room?” His pity, his emotional involvement, has connected him to the story. This is reinforced in lines eleven and twelve, “Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high, / That would have need to be pitied by thee?” But the poet has still not found a way to be a part of the story without taking over the story and putting himself in the spotlight. By the end of the sonnet, there are three actors on stage: the Christ child, Mary, and the poet.

With the first two lines of the fourth sonnet, ‘Temple,’ the poet returns to the Gospel narrative and the appropriate cast of characters: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. The poet is retelling is the story in which Jesus, as a twelve year old, becomes involved in a

theological discussion with teachers at the Temple and is accidentally left behind when his parents leave Jerusalem.

With his kind mother who partakes thy woe,
 Joseph turn back; see where your child doth sit,
 Blowing, yea blowing out those sparks of wit,
 Which himself on those Doctors did bestow;
 The Word but lately could not speak, and lo
 It suddenly speaks wonders, whence comes it,
 That all which was, and all which should be writ,
 A shallow seeming child, should deeply know?
 His godhead was not soul to his manhood,
 Nor had time mellowed him to this ripeness,
 But as for one which hath a long task, 'tis good,
 With the sun to begin his business,
 He in his age's morning thus began
 By miracles exceeding power of man

There has been some discussion among scholars as to why Donne would consider this episode worthy of inclusion in this sonnet sequence of major events in the life of Christ. There are two main reasons for such discussion. One, the sonnet sequences after which *La Corona* is modeled treat sonnet four as the center, the hinge of the sequence. The second reason is that the Biblical story described in this sonnet does not seem as theologically significant as the Annunciation, the Nativity, etc. It is odd that Donne should include it at all, let alone use it as the crux. It seems more logical, for example, to include the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Gardner and Martz argue that Donne included 'Temple' because it relates to the fifth of the Joyful Mysteries of Mary in the Rosary (Gardner xxii, Martz 109). In "The Meaning of the 'Temple' in Donne's *La Corona*," A. B. Chambers defends the importance of this sonnet by citing traditional Biblical commentary which views the story of twelve-year-old Jesus at the Temple as

affirmation of Christ's nature as Man and God, of Christ's entrance into ministry, and as a forecast of his death (351).

Viewing the story of 'Temple' as revelation of Christ's nature as God and Man is particularly relevant to the argument of this paper. Line nine of the sonnet reveals this nature: "His godhead was not soul to his manhood." In order to "show his humanity, Jesus listened humbly to the doctors and returned home with his parents; to demonstrate his divinity, he taught wisely and spoke of his Father's business" (Chambers 350). The emphasis is again on the choices Christ makes at each step in doing the will of the Father. He is not God who pretends to be a man, but Man who chooses to do the God's will. Christ's nature as God and man provides the poet a true example worthy to be followed. The only way for anyone to have relationship with the Father is to follow the Son. The fact that Christ did not function as an automaton dictated to at each step means that, in following Christ, one could believe that one's will is significant in the practice of faith. To be a true follower, one's will must be conformed, not necessarily eradicated.

Corresponding to the issue of the place of one's will in the practice of faith is the place of one's wit – according to the seventeenth century understanding – in relation to faith and Divine will. In this sonnet, Jesus is described as a child, as the One who "blew" the "sparks of wit" at the Doctors in the Temple, and as the One who can extinguish those sparks (lines 3-4). The relation between divine intention and human wit is at the heart of *La Corona*. Interestingly enough, the poet leaves some ambiguity about Jesus' intention, "see where your child doth sit, / Blowing, yea blowing out those sparks of wit." Blowing out a fire usually means to extinguish it. But blowing on sparks can make them glow

brighter or catch fire. The syntax contributes to the impression that the initial action was to bring them to life, since “out” does not occur until halfway through the line. Lines five through eight continue with a theme of wit, “The Word but lately could not speak, and lo, / It suddenly speaks wonders, whence comes it, / That all which was, and all which should be writ, / A shallow seeming child, should deeply know?” Not only is the Son the source of wit but the source of all writing. He, the Originator of talent, confines himself not only to the “little room” of Mary’s womb, but to the “room” of Donne’s stanza. Just as Jesus condescended to sit and converse with the doctors, he condescends to rest within the lines of Donne’s poem. Christ shows his ability to be powerful and humble. Or does the poet have anything to do with it at all – is his work completely predestined? Does the poet’s creation ultimately originate completely outside himself? Can he stamp something of his own will on his creation? If he becomes a true follower of Christ, will his work also find a meaningful place or be lost in the exchange of self-will for God’s will?

In the fourth sonnet, the poet realizes fully the nature of Christ; in sonnet five, he begins to fully realize, and confess, his own unredeemed nature. In this drama of the will, the contrasts created in lines two through four describe the poet’s condition:

By miracles exceeding power of man,
 He faith in some, envy in some begat,
 For, what weak spirits admire, ambitious hate;
 In both affections many to him ran,
 But oh! The worst are most, they will and can,
 Alas, and do, unto the immaculate,
 Whose creature Fate is, now prescribe a fate,
 Measuring self-life’s infinity to a span,
 Nay to an inch. Lo, where condemned he
 Bears his own cross, with pain; yet by and by
 When it bears him, he must bear more and die.

Now thou art lifted up, draw me to thee,
 And at thy death giving such liberal dole,
 Moist, with one drop of thy blood, my dry soul.

The first few lines of this sonnet refer to reactions of various individuals to Christ as recorded in the Gospel stories. Some responded with faith, like the Roman centurion who believed Jesus could heal by saying a word (Matthew 8). Others responded in envy, like the Pharisees who conspired against when he broke the law by healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 12). There is interpretive room, however, to understand these lines as describing conflicting feelings within one person. The poet may be seeing himself as one who has admired and envied Jesus – “In both affections many to him ran.” As the speaker is able to confess his envy and hate, he realizes those made the Crucifixion necessary. In describing the action of those who crucified Christ, the poet uses the verbs, “will,” “can,” “do,” and “prescribe.” It is the corrupted will of man that crucifies Christ. Although Christ is described as a creature of Fate because of his humanity, he still chooses submission, as expressed in the repetition of the word “bear” in lines nine and ten. “Bear” is an active verb expressing a passive attitude. Christ chooses to carry his cross and the pain of its punishment, knowing it will carry him in death. At the end of this sonnet, the poet makes a simple petition, asking for one drop of Christ’s blood to be applied to his soul. He has seen the destructive work of the corrupted will, and knows he can neither purify his own will or produce worthwhile work himself. He presents a sincere and simple petition, presuming upon nothing. This is a contrast to his earlier desire to possess the crown of Christ without the suffering.

The confession and repentance expressed in the fifth sonnet has properly prepared the poet for the saving power of God. In the sixth sonnet of the sequence, “Resurrection,” the poet asks for that work, envisions that work, but knows it is purely the prerogative of God to perform its miracle.

Moist with one drop of thy blood, my dry soul
 Shall (though she now be in extreme degree
 Too stony hard, and yet too fleshly,) be
 Freed by that drop, from being starved, hard, or foul,
 And life, by this death abled, shall control
 Death, whom thy death slew; nor shall to me
 Fear of first or last death, bring misery,
 If in thy little book my name thou enrol,
 Flesh in that long sleep is not putrefied,
 But made that there, of which, and for which ‘twas,
 Nor can by other means be glorified.
 May then sin’s sleep, and death’s soon from me pass,
 That waked from both, I again risen may
 Salute the last, and everlasting day.

He is fully aware that things stand in the way of his righteousness – hardness, the flesh, foulness, fear, and sin. He submits himself to the mercy of God, does not presume upon it, but does refer to it as something that will happen. His status as one of the saved is by no means secured, “If in thy little book my name thou enrol...” (l 8, emphasis added). As Christ humbled himself to Mary’s womb and the stanza of Donne’s poem, Donne petitions to be written into the “little” book of life. The poet has been brought to the point where he is no longer asserting but asking, as expressed in his use of the word “may” in the last three lines of this sonnet. He has learned from the example of Christ and knows the only way to follow is to choose to submit his will to the Greater will. His work, the poem, has

the potential to be more than lines on a page – with God’s blessing, it may truly be a thorny crown of prayer.

If the sixth sonnet is a true crown of thorns, the seventh, ‘Ascension,’ is a true crown of praise. Only from the mouth of one who has confessed and repented can come authentic praise. In spite of his human faults, God has shown him mercy, and he is now free to praise. In contrast with the attempt in the first sonnet of the sequence to set himself up as preacher/prophet, now that he has been chastened and sanctified, it is natural for him to ask all Christendom to join him in praise:

Salute the last and everlasting day,
 Joy at the uprising of this sun, and son,
 Ye whose just tears, or tribulation
 Have purely washed, or burnt your drossy clay; (ll 1-4).

This is the voice of experience, one who has cried the tears and has been refined in the fire. He has not attempted to express the actual moment of his rebirth within his poetic story. In sonnet six he refers to his reconciliation in the future tense; in sonnet seven, he refers to it in the past tense – “washed,” “burnt.” Perhaps he has realized there are some things that are inexpressible, too great for the human mind and ability to grasp and put into words. The key to his change in attitude is expressed in the following lines:

Nor doth he by ascending, show alone,
 But first he, and he first enters the way.
 O strong ram, which has battered heaven for me,
 Mild lamb, which with thy blood, has marked the path;
 Bright torch, which shin’st, that I the way may see,
 Oh, with thine own blood quench thine own just wrath,
 And if thy holy Spirit, my Muse did raise,
 Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise.

He has found his place following Christ, and knows any attempt to batter heaven by his own will is completely futile. The only path is the one made by Christ's footsteps, who himself chose the path of submission. For the poet, this is the miracle. His own vitality, his person, need not be negated but is instead focused and directed. The work of his hands, the poem, has also been validated. Its meaning is, first of all, reckoned according to its source of inspiration, the Holy Spirit. He recognizes that if the inspiration did not come from the holy Spirit, it is meaningless. The poem is justified, secondly, as it is considered an offering, not a work. Although the last line of this last sonnet is the same as the first line of the first sonnet, it resonates completely differently because the poet has been transformed. This crown is no longer a work with which he can negotiate rewards, but is a true gift, given freely.

But the poem does not end with the last line of sonnet seven. The form and structure so prominent in this sequence push the reader back to sonnet one. In this way, the poet has used that form to portray a spiritual reality. The delicate balance he has found between his own desire and will and the will of God is not the experience of a moment to be remembered fondly, but the on-going endeavor of his life. That realization brings him humbly back to the beginning, because even the word "endeavor" – or "effort," "work," "labor," "enterprise" – implies personal labor, not dependence on divine grace. So when we return to the first sonnet, the need of the poet is in some ways even greater, because now he is not stumbling in spiritual darkness but has seen the light.

Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise,
Weaved in my low devout melancholy,
Thou which of good, hast, yea art treasury,

All changing unchanged Ancient of days,
 But do not, with a vile crown of frail bays,
 Reward my muse's white sincerity,
 But what thy thorny crown gained, that give me,
 A crown of glory, which doth flower always;
 The ends crown our works, but thou crown'st our ends,
 For, at our end begins our endless rest,
 This first last end, now zealously possessed
 With a strong sober thirst, my soul attends.
 'Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high,
 Salvation to all that will is nigh.

This time, the supplication seems more sincere – this crown has truly been weaved in a “low devout melancholy.” Because he has experienced the thorny crown in following Christ, his desire for the crown of glory has been sanctified. Yet the contrast between “real” reward – the crown of glory – and the artificial one – crown of bays – is also greater. The poet's need to avoid the crown of bays is more dire because he has learned the futility of relying on his own talent and its earthly reward. A literal return and rereading of the first sonnet of the sequence is viable, not merely a perfunctory exercise, because the tension between his desire to create and his need to submit is never completely resolved. The poet will continue to return, not running in circles, but ascending a spiral in which applies the lesson of faith in new ways. He has adopted a Protestant eschatology in which he may, at one moment, be as spiritually complete as possible, but he continues to look forward to the day when God will complete all things. As long as the religious poet creates poetry, he searches for the balance between his own effort and the intervention of God. The poet of *La Corona* will live in that tension because he has created a poem that never ends.

WORKS CITED

- Baumgaertner, Jill. " 'Harmony' in Donne's 'La Corona' and 'Upon the Translation of the Psalms'" John Donne Journal. 3 (1984): 141-156.
- The Bible, King James Version
- Bloomer, Peggy Ann. "A Re-examination of Donne's 'La Corona'" Essays in Arts & Sciences. 7 (1978): 37-44.
- Carey, John. John Donne. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- . John Donne: Life, Mind and Art. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Chambers, A. B. "La Corona: Philosophic, Sacred, and Poetic Uses of Time" New Essays on Donne. Ed. Gary A. Stringer. Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1977. 140-72.
- . "The Meaning of the 'Temple' in Donne's *La Corona*" Essential Articles for the study of John Donne's Poetry. Ed. John R. Roberts. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1975.
- Coffin, Charles M., ed. The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne. New York: The Modern Library, 1952.
- DiPasquale, Theresa Maria. John Donne's Sacramental Poetics. Diss. U of Virginia, 1989.
- Dubinski, R. R. "Donne's 'La Corona' and Christ's Mediatorial Office" Renaissance and Reformation. 4 (1980):203-208.
- Elsky, Martin. "John Donne's *La Corona*: Spatiality and Mannerist Painting" Modern Language Studies. 13.2 (1983): 3-11.
- Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.
- Ferry, Anne. The 'Inward' Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Gardner, Helen. John Donne: The Divine Poems. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

- Gransden, K. W. John Donne. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1954.
- Grierson, Herbert J. C. The Poems of John Donne. London: Oxford University Press, 1912.
- Hodgson, Elizabeth Mavis Andrea. "To Enter in these bonds": The Gendering of Liminal Space in John Donne's Holy Sonnets, Devotions, and Sermons. Diss. Brandeis U, 1992. 9229467.
- John Donne. Ed. John Carey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Le Comte, Edward. Grace to a Witty Sinner: A Life of Donne. New York: Walker and Company, 1965.
- Lewalski, Barbara Kiefer. Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Louthan, Doniphan. The Poetry of John Donne: A Study in Explication. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1951.
- Lucarelli, John. "John Donne's 'La Corona' as Sonnet Sequence" The Western Pennsylvania Symposium on World Literature, Selected Proceedings: 1974-1991. Eds., Carla E. Lucente and Albert C. Labriola. Greensburg, PA: Eadmer, 1992. 61-65.
- Martz, Louis L. The Poetry of Meditation. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954.
- Maurer, Margaret. "The Circular Argument of Donne's 'La Corona'" 22 (1982):51-68.
- Nania, John and P. J. Klemp. "John Donne's *La Corona*: A Second Structure" Renaissance and Reformation. 2 (1978): 49-54.
- O'Connell, Patrick F. "'La Corona': Donne's Ars Poetica Sacra" The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne. Eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986. 119-130.
- Smith, A. J., ed. John Donne: The Critical Heritage. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.
- Stampfer, Judah. John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970.
- Strommer, Jean Theresa. The Twelve-Tone System as a Vehicle for Spiritual Values: La Corona (John Donne/Ernst Krenek). Diss. U Minnesota, 1989.

White, Helen C. The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience. New York:
Collier Books, 1936.

Karen Knudson was born in Riverside, California, attended elementary school in Ohio, Illinois, and Kansas, and graduated from in Fredericktown High School in Ohio. She graduated with honors with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, Illinois in 1991. Her undergraduate majors were English Education and Biblical Literature. She has lived in Richmond, Virginia since 1991. She received her Master of Arts in English degree from the University of Richmond in May of 1999. She is presently teaching literature and writing to adults and youth in an alternative school.