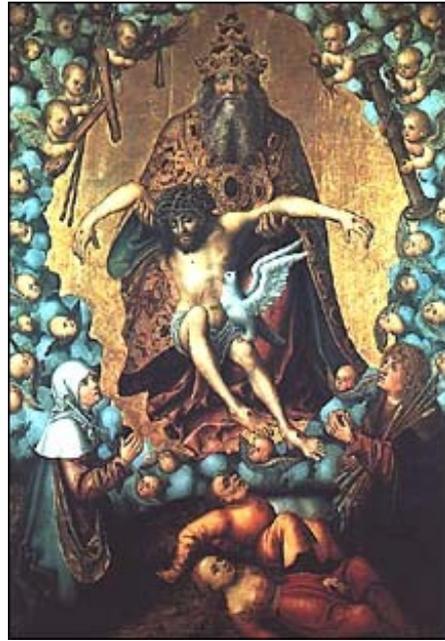


## HOLY SONNETS.

### XIV.

Batter my heart, three-person'd God ; for you  
As yet but knock ; breathe, shine, and seek to mend ;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemy ;  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.



Lucas Cranach, the Elder. The  
Trinity.  
From [CGFA](#).

“Batter” means “Strike repeatedly”

“three-personed God” refers to the Holy Trinity, which refers to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

“as yet” means “so far” [2]

“to seek” means “to try”

“that” stands for “in order that”

“bend your force” means “apply/direct your force”

“to another due” means “that belong to someone other than the usurper”

“labour” means “strive” (in a metaphorical sense “lottare”)

“to admit you” means “to allow you to enter”

“to no end” means “without success”

“is captived” means “has been put in captivity”

“untrue” means “unfaithful/disloyal”

“fain” means “willingly/gladly”

“knot” means “bond”

“enthrall me” means “make a slave of me / make me your prisoner”

“ravish me” means “take me by force / rape me”

### Analysis (language, imagery and symbols)

Lines 1-2

*Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you*

*As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;*

- The speaker begins by asking God (along with Jesus and the Holy Ghost; together, they make up the "three-personed God") to attack his heart as if it were the gates of a fortress town.

- **"batter"** :note that back in medieval times, in order to break down the door of a fortress or castle, you'd have to use a battering ram. It's a huge pole of wood, possibly with a ram carving on the front.

- He asks God to "batter" his heart, as opposed to what God has been doing so far: just **knocking, breathing, shining**, and trying to help the speaker heal. None of these verbs is particularly active or powerful. In line 2 Donne seems to reprimand God for not using stronger measures with him. The **soft consonant sounds** and the long vowels of the verbs in this line stress the gentle methods used by God.

The poet begins with a prayer to God expressed almost in military terms. In using this expression ("batter my heart") Donne asks God to break through the walls of his heart and reach him. To increase the strength of divine force to win over the poet's soul.

Lines 3-4

*That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

- Lines 3-4 continue much like lines 1-2, with the speaker asking God to treat him violently.
- He asks God to "bend your force," which may mean to "make use of your power."
- More importantly, the speaker finally gets to the point of *why* he's telling God to do all this. His goal is to "rise" and "stand" and become "new.". In line 3 Donne introduces a **paradox**: he asks God to overthrow him so that he may rise
- **"make me new"** is probably a reference to the Christian idea that true happiness and salvation come only after death, and that, in order to get into Heaven, earthly life must be a continual act of suffering. That may be why our speaker wants to be abused and broken in the earthly world — so that he will be worthy for the afterlife.
- the word **"o'erthrow"** makes you take a big pause and change the rhythm of your speaking. Notice how violent and intense those **alliterated b-words** are ("break, blow, burn"). These words get a lot of attention verbally, and it's a great example of words' sounds reflecting their meaning. (Onomatopoeia). The **explosive "b" sound** of the three verbs in the final line stress the urgency of the poet's need for God's help. These verbs are in contrast with the verbs in the second line and suggest the stronger methods which God should use with the poet.

He requests, "Batter my heart" (line 1), metaphorically indicating that he wants God to use force to assault his heart, like battering down a door. Thus far, God has only knocked, following the scriptural idea that God knocks and each person must let him in, yet this has not worked sufficiently for the poet. Simply to "mend" or "shine" him up is not drastic enough; instead God should take him by "force, to break, blow, burn" in order to help him "stand" and be made "new" (lines 3-4). This request indicates that the speaker considers his soul or heart too badly damaged or too sinful to be reparable; instead, God must re-create him to make him what he needs to be. The paradox is that he must be overthrown like a town in order to rise stronger.

Lines 5-6

*I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.*

- Here comes the explanation of that "batter" . The speaker compares himself to a town that is **captured or "usurped."**
- The phrase "**to another due**" suggests that the town belongs to someone else. Still, we don't know who this "someone" could be.
- In any case, the speaker wants to let God in, as he's been unsuccessful so far.
- The "**oh**" in line 6 is another linguistic choice worth mentioning. We can read it as the only moment of truly honest self-expression in the poem. In other words, the "oh" is the only word in the poem that isn't actually a word – it's more of a sound, a sigh, or an exclamation. If we read it as a sigh, the speaker seems sad that he can't let God in. At the same time, the "oh" gives the poem a theatrical and overtly dramatic effect

Lines 7-8

*Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.*

- "Reason, my local ruler who works for you, should be defending me, but he was captured, and revealed himself to be weak or unfaithful."
- The whole idea guiding these lines is that God gave us reason (rationality) to defend ourselves from evil, but now the speaker's reason seems to have turned on God (or is just incapable of warding off evil), so the speaker is having trouble showing his faith in God.

In the second stanza Donne compares himself to a usurped town, a town conquered by a usurper (the devil) to whom he is now subdued. Reason itself[, which is God representative in him, has been imprisoned by the devil and has become weak.

This is a **conceit** (which is an especially unusual and intellectual kind of metaphor, where the poet exploits all fields of knowledge for comparison: history, geography, astronomy, alchemy, mathematics, etc.). The speaker tries to let God into the town (into himself) but he fails. **Reason** itself, which is **personified** as an intermediary between God and Donne, should defend him, but it is powerless because it is itself a prisoner of the devil. In spite of his love for God, the poet feels that he is promised in marriage to God's enemy, the devil, from whom he cannot escape

**The besieged town** is the dominant symbol in the poem. The speaker likens himself to a town that has been taken over, but he wants God to attack the town in order to capture it

Lines 9-10

*Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;*

- the ninth line of a sonnet traditionally marks the "turn" in the poem, that is, the problem set up in the first 8 lines begins to move towards a solution. However, this line doesn't make for much of a turn at all. It mainly furthers the development of the speaker's desired relationship with God. The speaker actually hints at no solution, but the line marks a shift in tone. "He's saying "I'd be happy to be loved,"
- another metaphor: he says he's "**betroth'd**," to (engaged to marry), the "enemy."
- This word "enemy" is troublesome, because we don't know who it is. There's no one right answer here, but our speaker may be referring to Satan.
- The question is, why did the speaker choose the metaphor of a wedding engagement? Perhaps an engagement implies that the speaker wasn't forced into this relationship with the enemy. Unlike in lines 5-8, where the speaker blamed Reason for losing touch with God, here he seems to suggest that it is actually his fault, since he agrees to an engagement with the "enemy."

#### Lines 11-12

*Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,*

- Line 11 continues the train of thought in line 10, asking God to help him get out of this close engagement with the enemy. He wants God to help him break the wedding "knot" he tied when he was "betroth'd," and take him away from the enemy.
- What's absolutely key here is the word "**again**" – does it mean this isn't the first time the speaker needed to ask God for help in getting away from the Devil?
- or, "again" could be a reference to the moment in Genesis (in the Old Testament) when God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because they follow Satan's advice. T
- In line 12 (and on into line 13), the speaker seems to bring back the castle siege metaphor one last time with the verb "**imprison**,"

In the third stanza Donne introduces another image, the image of a woman that loves a man but is betrothed to his enemy: he asks God to divorce him, to break that knot again.

#### Lines 13-14

*Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

In the final couplet, the poet gives voice to **the paradox of faith**: the speaker can only be free if he is enthralled by God (line 13), and he can only be chaste and pure if God ravishes him (line 14). The poet uses this dissonance of ideas to point out just how a relationship with God requires being reborn and rebuilt from the ground up..

- The speaker loves paradoxes and double meanings.

- The first can be read as "If you don't excite me, I can't be free." If we read it that way, it's possible that "excite" has sexual connotations, and this makes sense in light of the following line.
- But, we can also read line 13 as, "If you don't enslave me, I can't be free." Back in the day, "enthrall" would also mean "enslave," so we should be aware of that possibility.
- We can read line 14 as, "If you don't fill me with delight, I will never be able to refrain from sex." Like "excite" in line 13, "fill me with delight" in this reading might carry some sexual connotations.
- it seems that the speaker wants better access to God, and having been unsuccessful in the past, demands that God reveal himself forcefully and powerfully.

In the fourth stanza Donne introduces the **two paradoxes** in order to convey the idea of his urgent need for God's help. These paradoxes emphasize the dramatic action that he would like God to perform in order to save him: he asks God to imprison him so that he will be free and to ravish him so that he may be chaste (Donne tells God that he will only be free if He imprisons him and he will only be chaste if he ravishes him).

Finally, since the speaker here suggests being in the female role of betrothal and ravishment (a city too tends to be coded as female), we once again see that the speaker is putting himself in the position of the Christian church generally. In the New Testament, the church is metaphorically said to be married to God. Can it be that, in Donne's eyes, the church still needs to be utterly reformed, even after the Reformation?

## A Sonnet with very irregular iambic pentameter

In his holy sonnets, Donne blends elements of the Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet with the English (Shakespearean) sonnet. Here he begins in the Italian form *abba abba*, but his concluding idea in the third quatrain bleeds over into the rhyming couplet (*cdcd cc*) that completes the poem.

This poem takes the form of a Petrarchan sonnet, with an octet followed by a sestet. Composed of 14 lines, the three quatrains (groups of four lines) followed by a rhyming couplet (two lines) at the end, and the regular rhyme scheme. As for the rhyme scheme, the poem looks like this: ABBA, ABBA, CDCD, EE, with an unusual rhyme at the end of line 12: "enemy" with "I."

The history and tradition of this form are important to this poem. Until Donne writes this sequence, sonnets were almost always about a speaker's love for a woman. Instead of writing a love song to a lady, Donne decides that this would be an appropriate form for speaking to God. – Donne's speaker attempts to address God exactly as if he is telling a woman that he thinks she's beautiful. On one hand, there's an intimacy and genuine affection for God here, but on the other hand, you can also construe this as serious disrespect for God. This tension between an earthly, physical attraction and a more sacred, spiritual form of love, so perfectly represented in the context of the sonnet form, is central to the poem's meaning.

Another different feature is that sonnet tradition dictates that the 9th line is a sharp "turn" in the poem, where the speaker's language, style, or content is expected to change. What's more, it's often the case

that the poem presents a problem before the turn, while the poem works out a solution after the turn. In "batter my heart" line 9 the metaphysical conceit switches from the speaker-as-fortress to a much more personal, less abstract metaphor of a lover who is engaged to someone else.

As far as meter is concerned, the poem is in iambic pentameter (five groups of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). However, this rule is disregarded in the first line for instance: "Batter my heart" starts the poem with a strongly stressed first syllable, where a more regular iambic meter would start unstressed. Here, the idea is that Donne starts with a bang – this poem, like the action that the speaker asks for, is aggressive and unusual.

The normal approach to God tends to show respect and humility. An example of this is the [Lord's Prayer](#): "Our Father, which art in Heaven, Hallowed [holy] be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in Heaven."

But the speaker in Donne's sonnet appears to refuse this approach. He starts with a direct command to God ("Batter my heart"). There's a sense in the whole poem that the speaker thinks he *deserves* God's attention, which has been lacking, and the speaker goes on and on, maintaining this sense of entitlement: "Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend" (line 7). Note the two "me's" back to back there, and then that word "should." Everything in this poem is about what the speaker wants and deserves. What's more, instead of confessing to abandoning God in favor of the enemy, the speaker blames it all on "Reason," this personified mental faculty given by God. But, somehow, he doesn't come off as a totally arrogant. Instead, we think, the speaker seems like someone who has tried for a long time to get God's attention in normal ways with no success.

### Short Commentary

This poem is an appeal to God, pleading with Him not for mercy or clemency or benevolent aid but for a violent, almost brutal overmastering; thus, it implores God to perform actions that would usually be considered extremely sinful—from battering the speaker to actually raping him, which, he says in the final line, is the only way he will ever be chaste. The poem's **metaphors** (the speaker's heart as a captured town, the speaker as a maiden betrothed to God's enemy) work with its extraordinary series of violent and powerful verbs (batter, o'erthrow, bend, break, blow, burn, divorce, untie, break, take, imprison, enthrall, ravish) to create the image of God as an overwhelming, violent conqueror. The bizarre nature of the speaker's plea finds its apotheosis in the **paradoxical final couplet**, in which the speaker claims that only if God takes him prisoner can he be free, and only if God ravishes him can he be chaste.

As is amply illustrated by the contrast between Donne's religious lyrics and his metaphysical love poems, Donne is a poet deeply divided between religious spirituality and a kind of carnal lust for life. Many of his best poems, including "Batter my heart, three-personed God," mix the discourse of the **spiritual and the physical or of the holy and the secular**. In this case, the speaker achieves that mix by claiming that he can only overcome sin and achieve spiritual purity if he is forced by God in the most physical, violent, and carnal terms imaginable.

### traduzione

Crea una breccia nel mio cuore, o Dio uno e in tre persone; poiché tu finora non hai fatto altro che bussare, soffiare, risplendere e cercare di rimediare;

travolgimi in modo che io possa levarmi in piedi di nuovo,  
e usa la tua forza per infrangermi, colpirmi, ardermi e crearmi nuovamente.  
Io come una città usurpata ma che spetta ad un altro,  
mi sforzo di farti entrare (nella mia anima), ma inutilmente,  
la ragione che è il tuo viceré presente in me, mi dovrebbe difendere,  
ma è stata resa prigioniera, e si dimostra debole/infedele e sleale,  
tuttavia io ti amo fortemente, e vorrei essere amato da te,  
ma sono promesso sposo al tuo nemico (Satana),  
divorziami, spezza, o rompi di nuovo quel legame,  
portami da te, imprigionami, poiché io  
non sarò mai libero se tu non mi fai prigioniero  
né sarò mai puro se tu non mi violenti.

## **Themes in Donne's poetry**

### **Lovers as Microcosms**

Donne incorporates the Renaissance notion of the human body as a microcosm into his love poetry. During the Renaissance, many people believed that the microcosmic human body mirrored the macrocosmic physical world. According to this belief, the intellect governs the body, much like a king or queen governs the land. Many of Donne's poems—most notably "The Sun Rising" (1633), "The Good-Morrow" (1633), and "A Valediction: Of Weeping" (1633)—envision a lover or pair of lovers as being entire worlds unto themselves. But rather than use the analogy to imply that the whole world can be compressed into a small space, Donne uses it to show how lovers become so enraptured with each other that they believe they are the only beings in existence. The lovers are so in love that nothing else matters. For example, in "The Sun Rising," the speaker concludes the poem by telling the sun to shine exclusively on himself and his beloved. By doing so, he says, the sun will be shining on the entire world.

### **The Neoplatonic Conception of Love**

Donne draws on the Neoplatonic conception of physical love and religious love as being two manifestations of the same impulse. In the Symposium (ca. third or fourth century B.C.E.), Plato describes physical love as the lowest rung of a ladder. According to the Platonic formulation, we are attracted first to a single beautiful person, then to beautiful people generally, then to beautiful minds, then to beautiful ideas, and, ultimately, to beauty itself, the highest rung of the ladder. Centuries later, Christian Neoplatonists adapted this idea such that the progression of love culminates in a love of God, or spiritual beauty. Naturally, Donne used his religious poetry to idealize the Christian love for God, but the Neoplatonic conception of love also appears in his love poetry, albeit slightly tweaked. For instance, in the bawdy "Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed" (1669), the speaker claims that his love for a naked woman surpasses pictorial representations of biblical scenes. Many love poems assert the superiority of the speakers' love to quotidian, ordinary love by presenting the speakers' love as a manifestation of purer, Neoplatonic feeling, which resembles the sentiment felt for the divine.

### **Religious Enlightenment as Sexual Ecstasy**

Throughout his poetry, Donne imagines **religious enlightenment as a form of sexual ecstasy**. He parallels the sense of fulfillment to be derived from religious worship to the pleasure derived from sexual activity—a shocking, revolutionary comparison, for his time. In **Holy Sonnet 14** (*batter my heart*) (1633), for example, the speaker asks God to rape him, thereby freeing the speaker from worldly concerns. Through the act of rape, paradoxically, the speaker will be rendered chaste. In Holy Sonnet 18 (1899), the speaker draws an analogy between entering the one true church and entering a woman during intercourse. Here, the speaker explains that Christ will be pleased if the speaker sleeps with Christ's wife, who is "embraced and open to most men" (14). Although these poems seem profane, their religious fervor saves them from sacrilege or scandal. Filled with religious passion, people have the potential to be as pleurably sated as they are after sexual activity.

## Spheres

Donne's fascination with spheres rests partly on the perfection of these shapes and partly on the near-infinite associations that can be drawn from them. Like other metaphysical poets, Donne used conceits to extend analogies and to make thematic connections between otherwise dissimilar objects. For instance, in "The Good-Morrow," the speaker, through brilliant metaphorical leaps, uses the motif of spheres to move from a description of the world to a description of globes to a description of his beloved's eyes to a description of their **perfect love**. Rather than simply praise his beloved, the speaker compares her to a faultless shape, the sphere, which contains neither corners nor edges. The comparison to a sphere also emphasizes the way in which his beloved's face has become the world, as far as the speaker is concerned. In "A Valediction: Of Weeping," the speaker uses the spherical shape of tears to draw out associations with pregnancy, globes, the world, and the moon. As the speaker cries, each tear contains a miniature reflection of the beloved, yet another instance in which the sphere demonstrates the idealized personality and physicality of the person being addressed.

## Reflections

Throughout his love poetry, Donne makes reference to the reflections that appear in eyes and tears. With this motif, Donne emphasizes the way in which beloveds and their perfect love might contain one another, forming complete, whole worlds. "A Valediction: Of Weeping" portrays the process of leaving-taking occurring between the two lovers. As the speaker cries, he knows that the image of his beloved is reflected in his tears. And as the tear falls away, so too will the speaker move farther away from his beloved until they are separated at last. The reflections in their eyes indicate the strong bond between the lovers in "The Good-Morrow" and "The Ecstasy" (1633). **The lovers in these poems look into one another's eyes and see themselves contained there, whole and perfect and present.** The act of staring into each other's eyes leads to a profound mingling of souls in "The Ecstasy," as if reflections alone provided the gateway into a person's innermost being.

## Symbols

### Angels

Angels symbolize **the almost-divine status attained by beloveds in Donne's love poetry**. As divine messengers, angels mediate between God and humans, helping humans become closer to the divine. The speaker compares his beloved to an angel in "Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed." Here, the beloved, as well as his love for her, brings the speaker closer to God because with her, he attains paradise on earth. According to Ptolemaic astronomy, angels governed the spheres, which rotated around

the earth, or the center of the universe. In “Air and Angels” (1633), the speaker draws on Ptolemaic concepts to compare his beloved to the aerial form assumed by angels when they appear to humans. Her love governs him, much as angels govern spheres. At the end of the poem, the speaker notes that a slight difference exists between the love a woman feels and the love a man feels, a difference comparable to that between ordinary air and the airy aerial form assumed by angels.

### **The Compass**

Perhaps the most famous conceit in all of metaphysical poetry, the compass symbolizes the relationship between lovers: two separate but joined bodies. The symbol of the compass is another instance of Donne’s using the language of voyage and conquest to describe relationships between and feelings of those in love. Compasses help sailors navigate the sea, and, metaphorically, they help lovers stay linked across physical distances or absences. In “**A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning**,” the speaker compares his soul and the soul of his beloved to a so-called twin compass. Also known as a draftsman’s compass, a twin compass has two legs, one that stays fixed and one that moves. In the poem, the speaker becomes the movable leg, while his beloved becomes the fixed leg. According to the poem, the jointure between them, and the steadiness of the beloved, allows the speaker to trace a perfect circle while he is apart from her. Although the speaker can only trace this circle when the two legs of the compass are separated, the compass can eventually be closed up, and the two legs pressed together again, after the circle has been traced.

### **Blood**

Generally blood symbolizes life, and Donne uses blood to symbolize different experiences in life, from erotic passion to religious devotion. In “The Flea” (1633), a flea crawls over a pair of would-be lovers, biting and drawing blood from both. As the speaker imagines it, the blood of the pair has become intermingled, and thus the two should become sexually involved, since they are already married in the body of the flea. Throughout the Holy Sonnets, blood symbolizes passionate dedication to God and Christ. According to Christian belief, Christ lost blood on the cross and died so that humankind might be pardoned and saved. Begging for guidance, the speaker in Holy Sonnet 7 (1633) asks Christ to teach him to be penitent, such that he will be made worthy of Christ’s blood. Donne’s religious poetry also underscores the Christian relationship between violence, or bloodshed, and purity. For instance, the speaker of Holy Sonnet 9 (1633) pleads that Christ’s blood might wash away the memory of his sin and render him pure again

### ***The Petrarchan Tradition and the Female Object in John Donne's Songs and Sonnets***

In the 1590s, at the time when John Donne produced his Songs and Sonnets, the Petrarchan tradition had already had several centuries of undeniable rule over amorous poetry and literature in general. Donne probably thought this rule should come to an end, for his sonnets rudely, and even cynically changed the concepts concerning love and women. His love poetry is best valued when compared to the very strong at the time Petrarchan concept. The most scandalous of his ideas is probably how he viewed women.

Speaking of Donne's female object and its bonds to the Petrarchan, one should first compare the physical characteristics. For the followers of the courtly love tradition it was necessary to present 'a catalogue of the mistress's physical beauties' [1]. This 'catalogue' had to be filled with learnt by heart phrases, such as

'coral lips', 'pearly teeth', 'alabaster neck', and etc [1]. But not for Donne. He seemed to forget to describe his beloved except for the "bracelet of bright hair" from *The Relic*. And that is all; no 'false compare' and no ridiculous praise.

Another point for comparison would be the female object's inner world. The Petrarchan mistress dominated the poet's heart and thoughts. She was 'disdainful' and by law 'treacherous' [1]. The poet, on the other hand, 'was deeply in love with her' [1]. There was no second opinion on the fact that he was faithful from the moment he saw her to the day of her death [2]. In the case of Petrarch the idolatry continued even some years after her death. Donne, of course, changes all these. First of all, he emphasizes on the fact that neither he, nor his mistress is "true". He shows off his promiscuity. The image of his mistress covers several female characters from the innocent girl, who blushes at the mentioning of her virginity from *The Flea*, to the triumphant woman aware of sexual pleasure as the only means of achieving Love. But it is only rarely that she goes any closer to the 'disdainful mistress'. She is not worshiped, too, in lines like:

Rob me, but bind me not...

Maybe the most significant of his ideas is the construction of the male - female relationships. Where the ideals of courtly love held the woman to be unreachable, Donne has lines such as the following from *The Indifferent*:

I can love her, and her, and you , and you,

I can love any so she be not true.

Far from unreachable, Donne's mistress is now made a commodity, which can easily be replaced. In his sonets Donne abridges the icy distance from which the lady is viewed. Unfortunately from modern perspective this looks very much like misogyny. In some other texts Donne suggests equality of the sexes, like in *The Undertaking*:

And forget the He and She

The strange thing is that although the Petrarchan sonneteers cherished their unattainable mistresses, they never seemed to consider the possibility of relationship rooted in equality. This would destroy the whole framework in which they wrote.

All in all, John Donne managed to step aside from a centuries old tradition in literature that went on even throughout his lifetime. Namely his audacity to violate the conventions, to try something new made a very special place for his works in the English Renaissance. Not only that; to a great extent he foretold the upcoming women's struggle against sexism and more or less set the ground for breaking the rules of the Petrarchan tradition