John Donne's *La Corona*: A Second Structure

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The intricate structure of John Donne's *La Corona* emphasizes the poem's intellectuality and helps to reveal its meaning. In the first sonnet, Donne comments self-consciously on the artistry he displays in the sequence: "*Deigne at my hands this crown of prayer and praise, / Weav'd in my low devout melancholie.*"¹ His poem imitates the entwined branches of Christ's thorny crown by the use of concatenation, by making the last line of each sonnet the first line of the following sonnet. This device also links the final couplet rhyme with the rhyme scheme of the following octave. Moreover, by alternating the rhyme schemes in the sestet of each sonnet (except for sonnet seven), he intensifies the weaving imagery. In addition, the content of each sonnet acts as a microcosm of the structural macrocosm; the poet achieves this effect through the use of paradox and by including phrases from the Advent Office in the Breviary in sonnet one, and phrases from the Hours of the Blessed Virgin in sonnet two:² "But the impulse with which he began "*La Corona*" is clearly visible in the first two sonnets. His 'crowne of prayer and praise' was to be woven from the prayers and praises of the church."³

Donne seems to stumble in his poetic attempt to reflect the weaving metaphor with the inclusion of the seventh sonnet. He could either faithfully continue the alternating pattern and thus have the rhyme scheme in the sestet of sonnet seven match that of sonnet one, or he could make the rhyme scheme of the sestet of sonnet seven mirror that of sonnet six and thus contrast with the rhyme scheme of the first sonnet (see chart on p. 52). Donne chooses the second alternative, thus avoiding the formation of a complete circle in terms of rhyme schemes, while giving the illusion of a circular pattern by repeating the first line of sonnet one as the last line of sonnet seven. In Renaissance literature and art, the circle is an emblem for eternity and a monogram of God in that it represents the perfection of the everlasting God "'who was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.'"⁴ The images of the circle and the crown are relevant to the speaker of *La*

Corona, who seeks salvation by reflecting on the paradoxes of Christianity and on the pattern of Christ's life.

Perhaps Donne might have avoided the problem the seventh sonnet poses by using an even number of sonnets in the sequence, but the number seven in the numerological tradition carries certain meanings that complement the circle imagery and the content of the poem:

Seven is the number of charity, grace, and the Holy Spirit. It was also used by the early writers as the number of completion and perfection. Many instances of this use appear in Biblical writings. . . .there is reference to the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Seven is also the number of the days that God used to create the world and to rest. Donne hints at the parallel between God and poet as makers in the first sonnet, and in the second he calls Mary her "Makers maker" (l. 12). Just as Mary gave birth to Christ, who is her salvation, so the poet creates his poem, which he offers to God with the hope of receiving salvation, or "A crowne of Glory." Each creation, Christ and the poem, has its ultimate source in God, and each creator, Mary and the poet, is the "Makers maker."

The use of seven sonnets also allows Donne to construct a second structure, one which critics have thus far overlooked. An odd number of sonnets creates a situation in which one sonnet is placed in a central or axial position, and this in turn allows the remaining sonnets to balance or answer one another.

Donne's use of time imagery shows how the symmetrical structure of the sequence functions. Sonnet one, an introduction, and sonnet seven, "Ascension," point beyond time; the first sonnet contains an invocation to God in which the poet asks for salvation, while in sonnet seven he celebrates the ascension of Christ, and hence the possibility of joining mankind's Saviour in "*the last, and everlasting day*." Sonnet one stands outside the creation of the world (and the poem), while sonnet seven looks forward to the timelessness that the Last Judgement initiates (and the conclusion of the poem). The "Annunciation" sonnet is concerned with the beginnings of Christ's stay on earth and his imprisonment within Mary's womb. Thus the reference to the creation of time (l. 9) refers to both the creation of the universe and, through the incarnation in Mary's womb, a period in which Christ would reveal to mankind the Word of God. More simply, the line refers to a time when New Testament grace replaces Old Testament law. In the "Resurrection" sonnet, Christ is lifted out of time, and death is slain (l. 6); the gift of grace likewise frees mankind from the bondage of time.

Sonnets two and five focus on the beginning and the end of Christ's life on earth: his birth ("Nativitie") and his death ("Crucyfying"). These

two events bracket the thirty-three years Christ lived in this world, or in other words, the period in which God's time intersected man's time. "Temple," the central sonnet, deals with an event that marks almost the middle year in Christ's life (he was twelve years old at the time, as Luke 2:42 says). Time has not "mellowed him to this ripeness" (1. 10).⁶

There are two other general patterns. The first is that of a movement through the Trinity, from God the Father ("All changing unchang'd Antient of dayes") to God the Son (sonnets 2-6) to God the Holy Spirit, whom the poet hopes "did raise" his Muse. The second pattern exhibits a movement from night to day. Sonnet two speaks of "light in darke" — Christ's imprisonment in Mary's womb, or more generally, Christ disguising himself in the darkness of human flesh. The action of "Nativitie" takes place at night; here the stars are the only source of light. In the central sonnet, light imagery becomes pervasive. The son becomes "the Sunne" (1. 12), and the poet tells us that "He in his ages morning thus began" to instruct mankind (1. 13). The action of sonnet five, "Crucyfying," takes place during the day, while "Resurrection" salutes "*the last, and everlasting day*" (1. 14). Donne employs the son/sun pun again in sonnet seven, and then proclaims that Christ's ascension "Lightens the darke clouds, which hee treads upon" (1. 6).

It is now necessary to show how the sonnets balanced around the central sonnet answer one another. Sonnet one mentions the poet's "strong sober thirst" (1. 12) and his desire to lift high his heart and voice in praise. Donne echoes these images in the last sonnet: Christ's blood quenches his own wrath (1. 12),⁷ while the poet hopes to imitate the movement of Christ's resurrection by having the "holy Spirit" raise his Muse.

In the "Annunciation" sonnet, Donne speaks of how death's force will try Christ's flesh, but in sonnet six we learn that Christ's death slays death itself, and hence "Flesh in that long sleep is not putrified" (1. 9). A second set of images deals with the movement from imprisonment to freedom. Christ is imprisoned in Mary's womb ("and shutst in little roome,/*Immensity cloysterd in thy deare wombe,*" "Annunciation," 11. 13-14); in sonnet six, however, the resurrection marks Christ's freedom from the grave. Sonnets three and five carry on the theme of imprisonment; furthermore, "Nativitie" shows Christ lying in his cradle while "Crucyfying" portrays him "lifted up" (1. 12).

This brings us to the central sonnet. Its content is essential to the patterns described above. It marks the first time in the life of Christ (as Donne narrates it) in which the Saviour moves from a passive to an active role. The poet in turn mirrors Christ instructing the doctors in the temple by actively examining his faith and the paradoxes of religion

in an effort to seek some assurance of salvation. The central lines of the poem are extremely important: "whence comes it," Donne asks,

That all which was, and all which should be writ,
A shallow seeming child, should deeply know?

(11. 7-8)

Christ delivers the Word of God to those who claim to understand. The poet through the process of writing the poem rediscovers the *logos*.

The temple story also foreshadows the three days that contain Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, for Mary and Joseph lose Jesus for a three-day period which concludes with their discovery of him in the temple (Luke 2:43-46).⁸

This central scene is important in still another way. Mary and Joseph find their son "in the midst of the doctors" (Luke 2:46). Not only is sonnet four in the midst of the sequence, but the Latin word *corona* (crown) has a second meaning: an assembly or crowd of men.⁹ Donne may be punning on this second meaning by referring to Christ sitting in the centre of an assembly of doctors. In relation to the rhyme scheme, the "Temple" is also in the midst. Below is a chart that lists the rhyme schemes of each sestet in *La Corona*; the octaves all rhyme *abba abba*.¹⁰

I: <i>cddc ee</i>	VII: <i>cdcd ee</i>
II: <i>cdcd ee</i>	VI: <i>cdcd ee</i>
III: <i>cddc ee</i>	V: <i>cdcc ee</i>
IV: <i>cdcd ee</i>	

Thus the "Temple" sonnet is important because the story carries with it the idea of centrality, foreshadows the resurrection, and concerns itself with the theme of education through the revelation of the Word of God. Donne distinguishes between two crowns in the introductory sonnet: the "crowne of fraile bayes" and the superior "crowne of Glory, which doth flower alwayes." The poet constructs a poetic crown by fashioning his sonnet sequence in the shape of a circle and by weaving lines and rhyme schemes. As the above chart shows, Donne avoids completing the circle of his wreath by having the sestet of sonnet seven mirror, not the sestet of sonnet one, but that of sonnet six. The repetition of the opening line allows Donne to give the illusion that he has completed his crown of verse and returned to his starting point. But when the sestet of the final poem turns back to mirror the sestet of sonnet six, "Resurrection," it transcends the sequence's otherwise circular movement.

Christ defeated death with his death and resurrection, so the poet participates in a celebration of Christ's action by repeating the "Resurrection" sestet, thus focusing on the last two sonnets. The device of concatenation and the crown image call for the repetition of the opening

line at the end. However, the poem as a whole has moved from darkness to light, from imprisonment to freedom, from the Father to the Holy Spirit, and this is reflected in the fact that the sestet of sonnet seven does not merely repeat that of sonnet one.

The poet receives what Christ's "thorny crowne gain'd" by exploring the poetry of faith — that is, by examining and commenting on religious paradoxes through the second structure of *La Corona*. By fulfilling the imagery of the earlier sonnets in the later ones, he discovers both the strength of his faith and the significance of the paradoxes he uses. The "Temple" sonnet, with its emphasis on the Word of God, is thus a microcosm of the whole sequence. Moreover, the reader should recognize that sonnet four is an emblem for each man, who is nothing less than a temple of God:

Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are. (I Corinthians 3:16-17)

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Notes

- 1 John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), *La Corona*, sonnet one, 11. 1-2. All subsequent references to *La Corona* are to this edition.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.
- 3 *Ibid.* See also Louis L. Martz's discussion of *La Corona*, in *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954). pp. 107-12.
- 4 George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 153.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 154
- 6 See A. B. Chambers's article, "The Meaning of the 'Temple' in Donne's *La Corona*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 59 (1960), 212-17. In this article, Chambers cites many glosses from the Church Fathers and statements from Renaissance preachers. This background material, he says, makes it possible to see that

the subject matter of the fourth sonnet looks back to the human frailty of the birth of Jesus, signifies the first manifestation of his divinity, marks his entrance into the ministry, and forecasts the end for which he came. Because this is the case, one final — and by this time obvious — statement can be made: the "Temple" appears in a poem of prayer and praise upon the life of Christ not as an extraneous element but as a thematic part which is in effect a précis of the whole. (p. 217)
- 7 Cf. Revelation 7:16 — "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat."
- 8 See Chambers's comments, "The Meaning of the 'Temple' in Donne's *La Corona*," p. 215.

54 / Renaissance and Reformation

- 9 Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (1879; rev. ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), s.v. *corona*, IIA, p. 471.
- 10 The centre sonnet is set off because sonnets three and five have identical rhyme schemes. Furthermore, sonnets three and five also emphasize sonnet four's centrality by using the same rhyme words in lines 9 and 12 (he:thee), and the same rhymes in lines 10 and 11 (lye:high; by:die).