

to allow use of the 'big dictionary' in a public library and looking up the 'rudest word in the world', mispronounced as 'bastard'. 'What does it mean?' asks Dud. "A child born out of wedlock." "Urgh. What's a wedlock, Pete?" "Well, it's this big metal thing . . .". W, of course, was in a different volume; a new medical certificate would be needed. I lost count long ago of students claiming to have read a text who prove ignorant of primary meanings—even when footnotes provide glossing. I use my *OED* almost every working day, and if it remains an expensive resource, online editions of scores of dictionaries, conveniently linked at sites like RefDesk, mean there is almost no excuse for not finding out what a poet has in lexicographical fact said. For those who don't ignorant misprisions cluster as thickly as comprehension in every poem they read.

Exemplary Poems

1. 'The Flea' (pp. 14–15)

The poem shows Donne's customary vigour and exactitude of diction. The flea-variant of the *carpe diem* topos needs no more excuse than the intimate access fleas enjoy, but Donne knew a particular spice it acquires in French, where *puce* is a flea, *pucelle* a virgin, and *pucelage* maidenhead, which probably influenced his first stanza. There is also the consequence of long-s in "fuck'd" and "fucks" (3): Donne must have been aware of the lurking obscenity and probably meant it, here and in 'Elegie [VIII. The Comparison]' ("Are not your kisses then as filthy, and more, [/] As a worme sucking an invenom'd fore?")—but not every 'suck' hides the pun, initial long-s wasn't always used in handwriting and no autograph MS survives; I have no doubt myself, but those who dislike the idea have half-a-case to make. The metrically necessary "w'are" (14), like all such contractions in 1633, shows the pressure Donne applied to words and his innovative use of apostrophes (sometimes qualifying an interword-space rather than marking elision) to give readers metrical help.

One oddly surprising thing also needs attention—oddly, because Donne's compulsive fusions of sacred and erotic are a standard critical observation but haven't been much noticed in 'The Flea'. They are perhaps more obvious in primarily sacred poems deploying sexual imagery (as, famously, 'Holy Sonnet [XIV]', "Batter my heart, three person'd God", N320), but just as important in primarily erotic poems deploying religious imagery, as 'The Flea' does with increasing intensity. The sacred is explicitly summoned in l. 6 ("finne"), and if taken

seriously the repetition-development of "two bloods" as "one" (ll. 4, 8) suggests Incarnation, divine and mortal bloods mingling in Jesus—a thought picked up in the second stanza: "Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare". 'Three in one' is Trinitarian in any context, and the stanza also has a "marriage bed", "marriage temple", and "cloiftered" (a wicked pun, given the celibate life of the cloistered). The Trinity returns in its closing triplet:

Though ufe make you apt to kill mee,
Let not to that, felfe murder added bee,
And facrilege, three finnes in killing three.

There is a widely remarked pun on "kill", which like 'die' could refer to orgasm, but if that line and "felfe murder" in the next are easily understood from the mixing of his and her blood in the flea, "sacrilege" is less simple: even as blasphemous jest it requires the flea to become in part a figure of Christ—and that is confirmed when the third stanza begins with the flea's death violently shedding its (and his, and her) blood as a prelude to judgement.

It is important to understand exactly what happens to provoke the exclamation "Cruell and fodaine, hast thou since [/] Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?" Fleas are tough: fingertip-pressure cannot kill them, so nails are needed and when a full flea bursts, the blood in its stomach jets out. Sexually, Donne forces in the closing triplet an equation between blood forced from the flea onto a finger-nail and blood that will be forced from the woman's hymen when he deflowers her (with his 'nail' ?); the underlying Christian figure forces an additional comparison, with Christ's blood spilt by iron nails to 'stream in the firmament' (as Marlowe has it in *Doctor Faustus*). The last line—"Will waft, as this flea's death tooke life from thee"—openly invites comparison with the god 'who died that we might live', and retrospectively confirms the religious reading as an integral part of Donne's design.

How one then reads the whole poem is another matter. "Batter my heart" famously ends by imploring God's violently redemptive intervention:

breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chafte, except you ravish mee.

God, that is, must *carpe diem*, seize the day, or Donne's soul will be lost. Syntactically, the "knot" that must be broken binds Donne to his and

Diction

God's enemy, Lucifer, but knots have long been associated with marriage (human and divine) ; Shakespeare's Mariana called maidenhead her "Vntide [. . .] virgin knot"⁴⁴ (*Pericles*, Q1609 G1^v). 'The Flea' projects a similar sacramental desire to be ravished onto the woman, which helps to explain how Donne could achieve judgement of real force in pronouncing that defloration by him will teach her a thing or two she needs to know. But the risk is substantial, and critical reluctance to annotate this reading probably as protective as it is blind—and none the less misguided for that : one either has sympathetic faith with Donne's poetics of the erotic and sacred, trying fully to imagine in what he tried fully to say, or hasn't, finding him intolerably sexist and conceited (as Dr Johnson did and many feminists do). If the latter, fine ; if the former, one must turn to biography, for repeated conjunctions of the erotic and sacred encompass as much as inhabit any individual poem. Either way, individual words first raise the question.