‘Thou Hast Made this Bed Thine Altar’: John Donne’s Sheets

Hester Lees-Jeffries

One of the best-known anecdotes about the poet and preacher John Donne concerns his posing for his own funeral monument.¹ The story is told by Izaak Walton, Donne’s parishioner, friend, and first biographer; he was also by profession a linen draper.² There seems no reason to doubt it:

Dr *Donne* sent for a Carver to make for him in wood the figure of an *Urn*, giving him directions for the compass and height of it; and, to bring with it a board of the height of his body. These being got, then without delay a choice Painter was to be in a readiness to draw his picture, which was taken as followeth. Several Charcole-fires being first made in his large Study, he brought with him into that place his winding-sheet in his hand; and, having put off all his cloaths, had this sheet put on him, and so tyed with knots at his head and feet, and his hands so placed, as dead bodies are usually fitted to be shrowded and put into the grave. Upon this *Urn* he thus stood with his eyes shut, and with so much of the sheet turned aside as might shew his lean, pale, and death-like face; which was purposely turned toward the East, from whence he expected the second coming of his and our Saviour. Thus he was drawn at his just height; and when the picture was fully finished, he caused it to be set by his bed-side, where it continued, and became his hourly object till his death.³

1 Donne did not commission the effigy himself: it was commissioned and largely paid for, anonymously, by Simeon Foxe (1569–1642), son of the martyrologist John Foxe, who was one of Donne’s physicians and his friend.

2 Walton (1593–1683) had been apprenticed to his brother-in-law Thomas Grinsell in 1611, and became a freeman of the Ironmongers’ Company (the guild overseeing linen drapers) in 1618. He was part-owner of a shop in Chancery Lane. It is a tantalizing thought that Walton himself might have supplied the winding-sheet.

3 Walton Izaak, *The lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert* (London, Richard Marriott: 1670) fol. F6r.

FIGURE 13.1 Martin Droeshout, "John Donne in his shroud", engraved frontispiece to Donne's *Deaths Duell* (London, Benjamin Fisher: 1633), fol. [A2v]

Although the sketch itself does not survive, the effigy, carved by Nicholas Stone, does, and the drawing was also used as the basis for the frontispiece for the printed edition of Donne's last sermon, entitled *Deaths Duell*, engraved by Martin Droeshout. Both are familiar in discussions of early modern burial rituals, vividly illustrating the 'Christmas cracker' tying of the shroud that was the norm at this time. The sermon and the drawing preceded Donne's death, on 31 March 1631, by a matter of weeks, but a period of serious illness eight years earlier in the winter of 1623 had occasioned similar impulses of spiritual preparation and self-scrutiny, including the composition of the *Devotions upon emergent occasions* (printed in 1624) and, probably, the 'Hymn to God my

God in my sickness'.⁴ This discussion is focused around a close reading of that poem, set in the context of other devotional texts and early modern material culture, and specifically what might be called the 'early modern textile imaginary'. Beginning her discussion of the specifically humoral nature of Donne's account of the body throughout his writing, Nancy Selleck notes that 'the humoral body suggests a *material embeddedness* of self and surround'.⁵ This essay pauses on some things that might be taken for granted in these texts and their contexts, and brings out others that might remain *implicit*, a word that, like 'material embeddedness', is loaded in the context of the discussion which follows.

In the later engraving of Donne in his shroud and the subsequent stone effigy based on the same image, the winding sheet is unambiguous in its function. Yet in the writings from his earlier period of illness, the unfixed potentialities of the speaker's textile environment (or, to be less lofty, his bed-sheets) form an implicit, and sometimes explicit, part of his meditations. That sheet is not yet a winding sheet, although it unmistakably points towards that functional potential. While Donne's sheet may be a *memento mori*, it also proposes a material connection with the Incarnation and the life of Christ. Although the word 'sheet' doesn't appear in Donne's poem, this essay proposes that the sheet as a textile thing is materially central to its conceits. It explores the special characteristics of the bedchamber as a devotional space by focusing on one of its most central, least remarkable properties, an ordinary, everyday thing which both occasions devotion and can be rendered extraordinary by it.

At a time when coffins were largely the preserve of the rich, the shroud was common to all burials, and it seems most likely that shrouds or winding sheets were just that, an ordinary household sheet, perhaps the one on which the person had died or, more likely, a clean one, perhaps of higher quality, taken from the household linen stores. By the time of Donne's death there is also evidence that shrouds, as such, could be purchased.⁶ Many texts suggest the way in which ordinary sheets anticipated the winding sheet, just as sleep prefigured death, meaning that, as Donne himself put it, 'Euery nights bed is a

4 It has sometimes been suggested that the 'Hymn' was written when Donne was dying, rather than during the earlier period of illness in 1623. As Alison Shell suggests, 'Donne may have returned to it on his deathbed, or Walton may have streamlined events to improve the story, but the possibility of elision and confusion has its origin in Donne's own awareness that one cannot know in advance which illness will be one's last'. "The Death of Donne", in Flynn D. – Hester M.T. – Shami J. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford: 2011) 646–657, here 657.

5 Selleck N., "Donne's Body", *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 41 (2001) 149–174, here 150.

6 Litten J., *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450* (London: 1991) 71–72.

Type of the graue.⁷ Preaching at the funeral of Elizabeth Juxon in 1619, Stephen Denison was even more prescriptive:

[...] vnexpected death is the most bitter and terrible. Therefore let thy bed put thee dayly in minde of thy graue, and thy sleepe of thy death; let the putting off thy garments put thee in minde of laying downe this tabernacle of thy body; yea let thy sheetes put thee in minde of thy winding sheete; and the clothes which couer thee in thy bed, put thee in minde of the earth which shall couer thee in thy graue.⁸

The conceit was a devotional commonplace: in one of the period's spiritual bestsellers, 'A prayer for the Euening' enjoined its reader 'Let my *sleepe* put mee in minde of my *death*, my *bed* of my *grau*e, my *lying downe* of my *buriall*, my *vn*cloathing of putting off this *tabernacle of flesh*, my *rising* againe of my *resurrection*, my *apparelling* of *putting on the Lord Iesu*'.⁹ In a secular context, the prolific and self-promoting John Taylor (the 'Water-Poet') economically enlarged the same point in his long poem *The Praise of cleane linen*:

Cleane Linnen now my verse descends to thee,
Thou that preordinated wert to be,
Our Corps first Couer, at our naked birth:
And our last garment when we turne to Earth.
So that all men *Cleane Linnen* should espie,
As a *memento* of mortalitie:
And that a Sheet vnto the greatest State,
Is th' *Alpha* and *Omega* of his Fate.
As at our Births *Cleane Linnen* doth attend vs;
So doth it all our whole liues Race befriend vs;

7 Donne John, *Devotions vpon emergent occasions and seuerall steps in my sicknes digested into I. Meditations vpon our humane condition, 2. Expostulations, and debatements with God, 3. Prayers, vpon the seuerall occasions, to Him* (London, Thomas Jones: 1624) fol. C10v.

8 Denison Stephen, *The monument or tombe-stone: or, A sermon preached at Laurence Pountnies Church in London, Nouemb. 21. 1619* (London, Richard Field: 1620) fol. F2v. On her death-bed, Juxon had requested that her funeral sermon be preached on Job 7.3–4: 'So am I made to possesse moneths of vanitie, and wearisome nights are appointed to me. When I lie downe, I say, When shall I arise, and the night be gone? and I am full of tossings to and fro, vnto the dawning of the day'.

9 Featley Daniel, *Ancilla pietatis: or, The hand-maid to priuate deuotion* (London, Nicholas Bourne: 1626) fol. G8r. Its eighth edition appeared in 1656.

Abroade, at home, in Church or common-wealth,
At bed, or Boord, in sicknesse and in health.¹⁰

The sheet was a great leveller, both a *memento mori*, as Taylor specifically identifies it, and a signifier of shared humanity, from birth to death, as well as a potent and flexible spiritual conceit.

The way in which sheets furnished a particular connection between birth and death was explored by many other writers, not least because of that connection's reinforcement by high maternal mortality. Ann Donne died aged 33 in August 1617, following the stillbirth of her twelfth child; Donne himself preached her funeral sermon. In *Deaths Duell* (described by Walton as '*his own funeral Sermon*'),¹¹ he baldly stated that 'Our very *birth* and entrance into this life, is *exitus à morte*, an issue from death [...] In the wombe the dead *child* kills the Mother that conceived it, and is a murtherer, nay a *parricide*, even after it is dead', adding 'Wee have a winding sheete in our Mothers wombe [...] and wee come into the world, wound up in that *winding sheet*, for wee come to *seeke a grave*'.¹² In his preface to *The mothers legacie, to her vnborne childe* by Elizabeth Jocelin, printed posthumously in 1624, Thomas Goad reported that when Jocelin's pregnancy was confirmed, 'shee secretly tooke order for the buying a new winding sheet'; she gave birth to a daughter on 12 October 1622, 'whom shortly after, being baptized and brought vnto her, shee blessed, and gaue God thanks that her selfe had liued to see it a Christian: and then instantly called for her winding sheet to bee brought forth and laied vpon her'.¹³ Although Elizabeth Jocelin had purchased a new winding sheet, for others the winding sheet might have been chosen as such for its particular sentimental associations. As Sasha Roberts pointed out in a discussion of beds on the early modern stage,

The bed marked out rites and relationships in men's and women's lives – between husband and wife, father and son, mother and child – and so accrued a ritual and symbolic significance for their owners that no other household object could share.¹⁴

10 Taylor John, *The praise, of cleane linnen With the commendable vse of the laundresse* (London, Henry Gosson: 1624) fol. A8r.

11 Walton, *Lives* fol. F4r.

12 Donne John, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. G.R. Potter – E.M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: 1953–62) vol. 10, no. 11, 231–232, here 233.

13 Jocelin Elizabeth, *The mothers legacie, to her vnborne childe* (London, William Barret: 1624) fol. Agv–Agv.

14 Roberts S., "Let me the curtains draw": the dramatic and symbolic properties of the bed in Shakespearean tragedy", in Gil Harris J. – Korda N. (eds.), *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: 2002) 153–174, here 157.

Considerable stocks of linen were needed for childbirth, and these preparations could be seized on by moralising preachers who were perhaps ignorant of its necessity: in *A present for teeming vvomen* (1663), John Oliver commented sternly that

all these [preparations] may prove miserable comforters, they may perchance need no other linnen shortly but a *winding sheet*, and have no other chamber but a *grave*, no neighbours but *worms*.¹⁵

In John Webster's *The White Devil* (perf. 1612), Cornelia and other women are discovered, '*winding Marcello's Coarse*': Marcello, Cornelia's son, has been murdered by his brother Flamineo, and Cornelia comments that:

This sheet
I have kept this twentie yere, and everie daie
Hallow'd it with my praiers, I did not thinke
Hee should have wore it,¹⁶

the 'twentie yere' suggesting childbed linen, perhaps a winding sheet bought in anticipation of Marcello's own birth. This is the shroud that Cornelia has been keeping for herself. The best-known example of the specific connection between wedding sheets and winding sheet is Desdemona's ominous instruction to Emilia in Shakespeare's *Othello*: 'Prithee tonight | Lay on my bed my wedding sheets [...] If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me | In one of these same sheets'.¹⁷ In a similarly sentimental move, when Sir James Whitelock's wife Elizabeth died in May 1631, their son Bulstrode, the diarist and future parliamentarian, recorded that 'When the servants took out a winding sheet for her dead body, he caused them to lay forth the fellow of that sheet to wrap his own dead body in'.¹⁸ Sheets do not often survive, their absence from the material record evidence of both their use as shrouds and their use and reuse into rags (and, of course, ultimately, into paper). Yet the bed-sheet could be much more than a potential shroud and a *memento mori*. The rest of this essay explores how and why.

15 Oliver John, *A present for teeming vvomen* (London, Mary Rothwell: 1663) fol. A4v.

16 Webster John, *The works of John Webster* vol. 1, ed. D. Gunby – D. Carnegie – A. Hammond (Cambridge: 1995) 5.4.64–67.

17 Shakespeare William, *Othello*, ed. M. Neill (Oxford: 2006) 4.2.104–105, 4.3.22–23.

18 Quoted in Cressy D., *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: 1997) 430. Sir James Whitelock died in June 1632.

Donne's 'Hymn to God my God in my sickness' begins thus:

Since I am coming to that holy room
Where, with thy choir of saints, for evermore
I shall be made thy music, as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think now before.¹⁹

The holy room, here, is a presence chamber; the speaker imagines himself as a musician, summoned to the presence of the king. The instrument is both his body and the poem itself (its five-line stanzas recalling the five lines of the musical staff) as he writes it. The poem's opening establishes its spatial parameters: the space of the presence chamber is metaphorical, but *that* this poem imagines spaces is crucial: as Caitlin Holmes puts it, specifically in relation to the *Devotions*, 'The material and spatial conditions of Donne's confinement acted upon him much in the same way that his sickness did, thereby participating in his composition'.²⁰ The room that the poem is largely imagining and inhabiting, as an anteroom to the presence of God (also, perhaps, an anticipation of the grave) and to astonishing metaphorical effect, is a bed-chamber, and this is worth pausing on.

To think about the spaces of devotion in the early modern household, especially in the Protestant tradition, might first bring to mind the closet, for private prayer, or the hall or parlour, for communal devotions in the godly household.²¹ This is reinforced by Christ's injunction, in Matthew 6.6, that 'when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy doore, pray to thy father which is in secret'.²² 'Closet' in the Authorised Version translates the Greek *tameion*, meaning 'private room', but the Vulgate has *cubiculum*, in which the sense of bedroom is more available, and all English versions of the Bible prior to 1611 translate it as 'chamber'. This might seem rather a nice distinction, but it is a materially important one, even if the two terms can also be used

19 All quotations are taken from *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. R. Robbins (Harlow: 2008). Subsequent references are given in the text.

20 Holmes C., "Claustrophobic Donne: *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* and Early Modern Quarantine", *John Donne Journal* 32 (2013) 149–73, here 155.

21 On household devotions, see Ryrie A., *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: 2013), chapter 14, 'Prayer in the Household', especially 363–389.

22 Although, as Alec Ryrie puts it, 'So much for the theory'. *Being Protestant* 144. My discussion here draws extensively on chapter 8 of *Being Protestant*, 'The Practice of Prayer'. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations have been taken from the 1611 Authorised Version.

interchangeably (in the second Quarto of *Hamlet*, Ophelia has been sewing 'in my closet', in the Folio, 'in my chamber'). A closet was not usually, let alone exclusively, a bed-chamber, although it could be; what defined it was its privacy and, usually, its small size. (Productions of *Hamlet* tend to set 'the closet scene', 3.4, in Gertrude's bedroom: it might look a little different if Hamlet were to confront his mother in her study, or in a private oratory.) On stage, the closet would most likely be evoked by a chair, not a bed.²³

Accordingly, as Tara Hamling has recently put it, 'Any attempt to get to grips with the material environment for spiritual experience in the early modern household must first address the powerful *but illusory* notion of the closet, derived in part from visual depictions showing prayer performed in solitude, located in the confines of a dedicated space'.²⁴ Solitude is further discussed by Alec Ryrie; he notes that it diminished distractions, discouraged hypocrisy and ostentation, and facilitated openness in prayer, but also that solitude and private space were not the same thing.²⁵ Hamling and Ryrie both draw on Lena Cowen Orlin's work which suggests that the closet's 'dominant purpose' in early modern England was secure storage, and that 'the closet as a dedicated study area was not actual but aspirational'.²⁶ The multiple remodellings of domestic spaces over extended periods is another potential source of confusion here, as closets were likely to be constructed with makeshift partitions, particularly in older houses, and even small apparently purpose-built 'closets' are frequently identified as being furnished as bedchambers in early modern sources: 'the material contexts for private devotion were almost certainly more ad hoc and compromised than visual and literary constructions of the closet would allow'.²⁷ The diarist Margaret Hoby (1571–1633), for example, distinguished between her private devotions and the public devotions conducted for her household by her chaplain; her chaplain was among those who read aloud while Lady Hoby and her women sewed. But she prayed and meditated privately in both her

23 See the discussion of domestic space and its staging by Richardson C. in *Shakespeare and Material Culture* (Oxford: 2011) 99–127, and Orlin L.C., "Gertrude's Closet", *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 134 (1998) 44–67; Orlin surveys the different kinds of use to which closets might have been put, including as bed-chambers (63); she notes the Q/F variation for Ophelia's encounter with Hamlet, cited above.

24 Hamling T., "Living with the Bible in post-Reformation England: The Materiality of Text, Image and Object in Domestic Life", *Studies in Church History* 50 (2014) 210–239, here 213 (*my emphasis*).

25 Ryrie, *Being Protestant* 154ff.

26 Orlin L.C., *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: 2007) 301, 311, 324–5, and *passim*.

27 Hamling, "Living with the Bible" 215.

bedchamber and her closet, and also in the garden, and she sewed and read with her women in both closet and chamber.²⁸

The bedchamber was central to the devout Protestant's devotional routine because he or she was enjoined to pray and meditate at the beginning and end of each day: most writers of spiritual manuals included prayers to be said upon waking and especially in the act of rising from bed, prayers which preceded the formal prayers which were then to be said kneeling beside the bed, and 'this continual meditative process is explicitly located within, and responds to, the material environment of the bedchamber', which might be decorated with texts or wall paintings drawn from the Bible.²⁹ All of these private devotions would ideally be followed by the household's communal prayers, held in what the popular devotional writer Lewis Bayly called 'some convenient roome',³⁰ which might be the hall, or a parlour, or another large room, depending on the location, size, status, and configuration of the house. Inventories and other records suggest that such spaces of shared devotions might also be the customary location of a large Bible, as a means of both fostering and displaying the household's piety; bibles and devotional works were also found in chambers and closets.³¹

But Donne's poem *requires* a bed. It sees the bed itself as a devotional space and being in bed as occasioning devotion, and not just because the sheets are a *memento mori*, or as part of a prescribed routine of daily private prayers and meditations, although it undoubtedly draws on such conventions. That it is a *sick-bed* also matters; it is not shared with a bed-fellow.³² There is a rich tradition, especially in the Psalms, of the bed as a place in which to talk to and encounter God. This is not necessarily a comfortable experience: Job laments that 'When I say, My bed shal comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint: Then thou skarest mee with dreames, and terrifiest me through visions' (7.13–14), and the psalmist protests that 'I am weary with my groning, all the night make I my bed to swim: I water my couch with my teares' (6.6). Yet Psalm 41 also promises that 'The Lord will strengthen him vpon the bed of languishing: thou wilt make all his bed in his sicknesse', and the account of the omnipresence

28 On Hoby see, for example, Fox E., "The Diary of an Elizabethan Gentlewoman", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 2 (1908) 153–74. Hoby's diary is British Library MS Egerton 2614, and covers the period 1599–1605.

29 Hamling, "Living with the Bible" 218.

30 Bayly Lewis, *The practice of pietie* (London: 1613) fol. F3r.

31 Hamling, "Living with the Bible" 233–234; Orlin, *Locating Privacy* 320.

32 Ryrie notes that 'the bedchamber was no more private than anywhere else. Beds were commonly shared [...]' (*Being Protestant* 160). He discusses the bed as a space of prayer 160–61.

and omniscience of God in Psalm 139 begins by affirming that ‘Thou knowest my downe sitting, and mine vprising [...] Thou compasses my path, and my lying downe’ and is as confident in its assertion that ‘If I ascend vp into heauen, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there’ as it is in the more breathtakingly phrased claim that ‘If I take the wings of the morning: and dwell in the vttermost parts of the Sea: Euen there shall thy hand leade me: and thy right hand shall hold me’ (139.2, 3, 8, 9–10). (It is not impossible that this particular psalm lies behind Donne’s ‘Hymn’, not least in its dizzying alterations of scale, and its juxtaposition of the bed and the human experience with heaven, hell, and the entire world, all held fast in the hand of God.)

Walton noted that in composing his *Devotions* ‘on his sick-bed’, Donne was ‘herein imitating the Holy Patriarchs, who were wont to build their Altars in that place, where they had received their blessings’.³³ in Donne’s ‘Elegy 19: To his mistress going to bed’, part of the poem’s erotic charge in lines such as ‘Now off with those shoes and then safely tread | In this – Loves hallowed temple – this soft bed!’ (17–18) is derived from its echoing of Exodus 3.5 (‘Put off thy shooes from off thy feete, for the place whereon thou standest, is holy ground’), and its assumption throughout that the bed might legitimately, even ordinarily be a devotional space, and a place of revelation and salvation. As Theresa DiPasquale notes, there is even an evocation of the death-bed, whereby ‘the speaker specifically compares the body’s disrobing for erotic communion with the soul’s disembodiment at the point of death, and he goes on to assert that “As Soules vn bodied, bodyes vn cloth’d must be | To tast whole ioies”’.³⁴ In the *Devotions*, conversely, the idea that the bed might be a place in which to encounter God is something that Donne, for a time, resists, confessing that for him, the bed has hitherto been a place of worldliness and sin:

Whither shall I come to thee? To this bed? I haue this weake and childish frowardnes too, I cannot sit vp, and yet am loth to go to bed; shall I find thee in bed? Oh, haue I alwaies done so? The bed is not ordinarily thy *Scene*, thy *Climate*: *Lord*, dost thou not accuse me, dost thou not reproach to mee, my former sinns, when thou layest mee vpon this bed? Is not this to hang a man at his owne dore, to lay him sicke in his owne bed of wantonnesse?³⁵

33 Walton, *Lives* fol. E2v.

34 DiPasquale T.M., “Donne’s Naked Time”, *John Donne Journal* 29 (2010) 33–44, here 35.

35 Donne, *Devotions* fols. C12v–D1r.

But he arrives, eventually, at an altered understanding:

My God, my God, thou hast made this sick bed thine *Altar*, and I haue no other *Sacrifice* to offer, but my self [...] ³⁶

with the meditation's closing prayer entreating,

Onely be thou euer present to me, O *my God*, and this *bed-chamber*, & thy bed-chamber shall be all one roome, and the closing of these bodily *Eyes* here, and the opening of the *Eyes* of my *Soule*, there, all one *Act*.³⁷

And in a sermon preached on Easter Day 1627, Donne had used very similar metaphors of domestic space, travel, and music, to those he explores more dramatically in the 'Hymn':

if the dead, and we, be not upon one floore, nor under one story, yet we are under one rooffe. We think not a friend lost, because he is gone into another roome, nor because he is gone into another Land [...] the dead, and we, are now all in one Church, and at the resurrection, shall be all in one Quire.³⁸

As Jonathan Goldberg concluded, in an essay on the *Devotions*, 'The *Devotions* does not record the suppression of individuality; rather, the work reveals the continuities between private experience and the human condition',³⁹ and, it could be added, the experience of the divine.

The 'Hymn' is similarly invested in continuity, simultaneity, and elision and especially in these qualities as they might be experienced and apprehended in material terms, for example, in ideas about layering and flatness, the flatness of sheets, and of bodies in bed. In the *Devotions*, Donne comments on this too:

When *God* came to breath into *Man* the breath of life, he found him flat vpon the ground when hee comes to withdraw that breath from him againe, hee prepares him to it, by laying him flat vpon his bed.⁴⁰

36 Donne, *Devotions* fol. P4v.

37 Donne, *Devotions* fols. P9v–P10r.

38 Donne, *Sermons* vol. 7, no. 15, 384.

39 Goldberg J., "The Understanding of Sickness in Donne's *Devotions*", *Renaissance Quarterly* 24 (1971) 507–517, here 517.

40 Donne, *Devotions* fol. C9v.

This is the conceit that takes off in the poem's second stanza, animating and enabling the rest of the poem:

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
 Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
 Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
 That this is my south-west discovery,
Per fretum febris,⁴¹ by these straits to die [...]. (6–10)

In the poem's central geographical and cosmographical metaphor, the bed and the bed-chamber can be lost. This is the stanza in which this essay's eponymous sheet does not, and does appear, for 'flat on this bed' implies both patient and, because of his identification with the map, sheet. The reader is asked to imagine a flat thing on another flat thing, a horizontal thing on a flat surface, a map on a table, a sheet on a bed. A sheet is also a sheet of paper, and Donne has anticipated its paperiness by the punning 'quire' of his opening stanza. Citing the passage from the *Devotions* quoted above, William Ober suggests that:

Donne did not take kindly to being sick in bed; he found the position compromising [...] Being forced by illness to assume the horizontal decubitus violated Donne's image of himself.⁴²

This seems a reductive reading, for, as the 'Hymn' demonstrates (not least in its final line), the experience of illness, and specifically the 'horizontal decubitus' appear for Donne both humbling and enabling.

The flatness of patient, map, and sheet is not their only quality, for the next stanza develops the conceit through an exploration of pliability:

I joy that in these straits I see my West,
 For, though their currents yield return to none,
 What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
 In all flat maps (and I am one) are one;
 So death doth touch the Resurrection. (11–15)

⁴¹ 'Through the difficult and turbulent passage of a fever', 10n.

⁴² Ober W.B., "John Donne as a Patient: *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*", *Literature and Medicine* 9 (1990) 21–37, here 27.

Donne had elaborated this conceit in his preaching, initially in a sermon in the spring of 1623:

In a flat Map, there goes no more, to make West East, though they be distant in an extremity, but to paste that flat Map upon a round body, and then West and East are one,⁴³

and then again very close to his period of illness, in a sermon possibly written for All Saints, that November:

as in the round frame of the World, the farthest West is East, where the West ends, the East begins, So in thee (who art a World too) thy West and thy East shall joyne [...].⁴⁴

The reader of the poem, like the congregation attending to the sermon, is asked to think about things in motion, and the ways in which their actions might be described. In the sermons, the conceit of the globe and map allows time and space, life and death to collapse, their distinctions transcended by God; in the poem, more complex, that which is to be wrapped is also the speaker's own body, literally in his bed-sheets, and proleptically in his winding sheet. In the words of one of Donne's Holy Sonnets, written earlier in his career, he is a 'little world made cunningly',⁴⁵ a microcosm, a term reached for too casually in most contexts. This is also a world that, as in another of the Holy Sonnets, has 'imagined corners',⁴⁶ like the suffering body hovering between states, life and death, two dimensions and three. And four, as the next but one stanza elaborates, in which time and history collapse as space already has:

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place:
Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me:
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace. (21–25)

The conceit of distant limits and disparate points being brought together here becomes one of elision and enfolding. But the essential, parallel play of

43 'Preached upon the Penitentiall Psalmes' [1623], Donne, *Sermons* vol. 6, no. 1, 59.

44 'Preached upon All-Saints Day' [?1623], Donne, *Sermons* vol. 10, no. 1, 52.

45 'I am a little world made cunningly' 1.

46 'At the round world's imagined corners' 1.

surfaces upon surfaces remains: the fevered skin is filmed with sweat, soul lapped with blood.

Both the Incarnation and the *imitatio Christi* might be imagined and meditated upon in textile terms. The life of Christ, his birth and death, his personhood, is framed by cloth, from the swaddling clothes of Luke's gospel (2.7) to the linen of Christ's burial and, notably, resurrection. All the Gospel accounts of Christ's burial note the linen in which he was buried:⁴⁷ in the 1582 Rheims-Douay translation, with which Donne may have been familiar in his Catholic youth, Joseph of Arimathea purchases 'sindon',⁴⁸ now synonymous with Christ's shroud but also a particular kind of fine linen, on which Donne himself, or perhaps one of his friends, punned on the frontispiece to *Deaths Duell*: '*corporis haec animae sit syndon, syndon Jesu*' (may this body's soul's shroud be the shroud of Jesus). That Christ has triumphed over death is initially signalled by 'the linen clothes lying', the folded grave-clothes, and that curiously specific detail, 'the napkin that was about his head, not lying with the linnen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by it selfe' (John 20.5, 7). Donne's specific invocation of 'the first Adam's sweat' (24) recalls another textile object found in narratives of the Resurrection: a sudary or *sudarium* (literally a 'sweat cloth'), used for the cloth with which Veronica wiped Christ's brow on the way to Calvary, but also for 'the napkin that was about his head' and, by extension, for the grave clothes in general: in the York play of the death and burial of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea tells Nicodemus 'A sudarye | Loo here have I; | Wynde hym for-thy, | And sone schalle we grave hym in grounde'.⁴⁹

Early moderns shared these textile contexts and experiences. They too were wrapped in swaddling bands at their birth, and went to their graves in winding sheets of linen, an unremarkable, everyday continuity of experience with the Son of God. They wiped their fevered, sweaty brows with napkins or handkerchiefs. This continuity and awareness is again manifested in Donne's poem by the implicit presence within it of that sheet. Or rather, those sheets, for sheets (in those pre-duvet days) came in pairs, and appear as such in inventories: hence Sir James Whitelock's instruction that 'the fellow' of the sheet used as

47 'And when Ioseph had taken the body, hee wrapped it in a cleane linnen cloth' (Matthew 27.46); 'And hee bought fine linnen, and tooke him downe, and wrapped him in the linnen, and laide him in a sepulchre' (Mark 15.46); 'Then tooke they the body of Iesus, & wound it in linnen clothes, with the spices' (John 19.40).

48 'And Ioseph bying sindon, and taking him dovvn, vwrapped him in the sindon, and laid him in a monument' (Mark 15.46). This transliterates the Latin *sindonis* and the Greek *σινδών*; OED suggests that by the early seventeenth century the term was used specifically to refer to what is now known as the 'Turin shroud'.

49 *English Mystery Plays*, ed. P. Happé (London: 1975) 550.

his wife's shroud should be put aside for his own. That sheets are assumed to be paired further reinforces the patterns of doubling and doubleness – Eden and Calvary, first and second Adam, Man and God, life and death – that animate not just these stanzas, but the whole poem.

Such doubles and pairs might also prompt further scrutiny of the workings of metaphor itself: in the letter to Sir Walter Raleigh printed with the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser had conceded, of his vast, moralizing allegory, that:

To some I know this Methode will seeme displeasaunt, which had rather haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they vse, then thus cloudily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises.⁵⁰

As both poet and preacher, Donne could deliver 'plainly': in a sermon preached at the 'churching' of Lady Doncaster in 1618, he observed that 'Our Mothers conceived us in sin; and being wrapped up in uncleannesse there, can any Man bring a cleane thing out of filthinesse';⁵¹ the sheets here are implicit in the invocation of original sin. But he could also 'enwrap' his precepts, and in fact Donne uses 'enwrap' as his verb of choice to describe density and plurality of meaning and association. Above all, for Donne, the divine must be wrapped up in words: to take one of the many examples from the sermons, 'And this is the first act of his mercy, wrapped up in this word, *Veni, I come* [...] sometimes his Judgments may be plural, complicated, enwrapped in one another'.⁵² In Donne's usage, wrapping connotes multiplicity and plenitude, above all the fullness of God. And in the 'Hymn', this sense of layeredness, of *implication* and enfolding is itself a profound spiritual and doctrinal truth: through the mystery of the Incarnation, the speaker of Donne's poem, and all humanity, are joined with God: wrapped, enfolded, implicated. Again, this was a conceit that Donne had employed already in a sermon, in this case some five years before his illness, in April 1618:

We were all wrapped up in the first *Adam*, all Mankind; and we are wrapped up in the second *Adam*, in Christ, all Mankind too [...].⁵³

50 Spenser Edmund, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow: 2001) 715–716.

51 'Preached at Essex House, at the Churching of the Lady Doncaster' [? December 1618], Donne, *Sermons* vol. 5, no. 8, 171.

52 'Preached on Christmas Day' [?1629], Donne, *Sermons* vol. 9, no. 5, 143, 149.

53 'Preached at Whitehall, 19 April 1618', Donne, *Sermons* vol. 1, no. 8, 293.

'Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me', in this suffering, human body, swaddled in infancy, wound in death, and sick, perhaps dying, in bed, cooed in linen sheets.

In the poem's final stanza, the sheet is once again transformed:

So, in his purple wrapped receive me, Lord;
By these his thorns give me his other crown;
And, as to others' souls I preached thy word,
Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:
'Therefore, that he may raise, the Lord throws down'. (26–30)

Echoing another of Donne's holy sonnets, the blood of Christ can, paradoxically 'dye[] red souls to white',⁵⁴ recalling the 'chrisom cloth', the white garment, signifying innocence, in which children were customarily dressed for baptism.⁵⁵ Donne's conceit in the 'Hymn' perhaps even glances at a bearing cloth, the rich ceremonial blanket or shawl upon which a royal or noble child would be presented for baptism.⁵⁶ There is, in this final stanza, a baptismal context too, of dying to sin and being reborn to new life quite literally in Christ, for the sheet is now empurpled by the blood of Christ, not spotted or stained (for the language of fleshliness and sin is textile too: 'Thou bidst vs *hate the garment, that is spotted with the flesh*. The *flesh* it selfe is the *garment*, and it spotteth it selfe, with it self'),⁵⁷ but richly dyed 'in grain'. Whereas in a sermon on the penitential psalms, Donne had imagined himself 'coffind', and shrowded in that sheet, the righteousness of Christ Jesus,⁵⁸ here the materiality of the poem as it has quite literally unfolded makes the metaphor denser, yet more transubstantial. Albeit still a sign of shared human experience, the shroud-sheet has now *become* Christ's blood. (There is an even more baroque version of this conceit in Richard Crashaw's 'Upon the Crucified Body of our Blessed Lord, Naked and Bloody': 'Thee with thyself they have too richly clad, | Op'ning the purple wardrobe in thy side'.) Whether or not there is a direct borrowing from

54 'Oh my black soul' 14.

55 In the pre-Reformation church, babies were dressed in the garment after their anointing with chrism, hence the name. Babies who died within a month of their birth would be shrouded in their chrisom cloth and could be described as a 'chrisom child'. See Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death* 163, 211.

56 In *The Winter's Tale*, 'the bearing-cloth for a squire's child' found with the baby Perdita by the Old Shepherd is subsequently identified as 'the mantle of Queen Hermione's'. Shakespeare William, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. S. Orgel (Oxford: 1996) 3.3.111, 5.2.32–33.

57 Donne, *Devotions*, fol. P5.

58 'Preached upon the Penitentiall Psalmes', Donne, *Sermons* vol. 5, no. 17, 358.

FIGURE 13.2 Nicholas Stone the elder, "Monument to John Donne" (1631). Effigy of Donne, approximately life-size, wrapped in a shroud, standing on an urn. White marble in black marble niche, total height 305 cm. St Paul's Cathedral, London
IMAGE © THE CHAPTER OF ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

Donne's 'Hymn', the analogous conceit and the shared metaphor of domestic space in Daniel Featley's 'A Prayer for Easter-day' is striking:

The graue by [Christ's] lying in it is turned to a bedde, and a withdrawing roome to retire my selfe a while, to put off this ragged flesh, and attire my selfe with robes of glory.⁵⁹

In Donne's poem, the sheet is not (only) a shroud but a royal robe, and not of mockery, but of triumph: the speaker is now shrouded in, and, like Donne himself, will ultimately be resurrected, through the very blood of Christ.

Izaak Walton recorded that, at the hour of his death, his friend John Donne:

as his soul ascended, and his last breath departed from him, he closed his own eyes; and then, disposed his hands and body into such a posture as required not the least alteration by those that came to shroud him.⁶⁰

Donne's funeral effigy and the way in which he modelled it himself made a profound point about the resurrection of the body. Radically, he was not recumbent in his winding sheet, but caught in the act of arising from his grave, and his bed, on the last day. Yet its notoriety has perhaps obscured some of the more subtle contours of the context from which it emerged, a context in which ordinary domestic textiles, sheets, and the scenes and spaces of ordinary domestic life, could occasion profound meditations, not just on mortality, on the Incarnation, on the humanity of Christ, on the continuity of human experience with the events of Christ's life, from birth to death and resurrection, and of being wrapped, enfolded, held, in the love of God.

Bibliography

- Cressy D., *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: 1997).
- Donne J., *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, Robbins R. (ed.) (Harlow: 2008).
- Donne John, *Devotions vpon emergent occasions and seuerall steps in my sicknes digested into 1. Meditations vpon our humane condition, 2. Expostulations, and debatements with God, 3. Prayers, vpon the seuerall occasions, to Him* (London, Thomas Jones: 1624).

59 Featley, *Ancilla pietatis* fol. L4v.

60 Walton, *Lives* fol. F7v.

- Donne J., *The Sermons of John Donne*, Potter G.R. – E.M. Simpson (eds.), 10 vols. (Berkeley: 1953–62).
- Goldberg J., "The Understanding of Sickness in Donne's *Devotions*", *Renaissance Quarterly* 24 (1971) 507–517.
- Holmes C., "Claustrophobic Donne: *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* and Early Modern Quarantine", *John Donne Journal* 32 (2013) 149–173.
- Litten J., *The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral Since 1450* (London: 1991).
- Orlin L.C., "Gertrude's Closet", *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 134 (1998) 44–67.
- Richardson C., *Shakespeare and Material Culture* (Oxford: 2011).
- Selleck N., "Donne's Body", *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 41 (2001) 149–174.
- Shell A., "The Death of Donne", in Flynn D. – Hester M.T. – Shami J. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* (Oxford: 2011) 646–657.
- Walton Izaak, *The lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert* (London, Richard Marriott: 1670).