"Salvation to All That Will Is Nigh":
Public Meditation in John Donne's
"La Corona"

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Those readers expecting the deeply private and emotional meditations found in John Donne's Holy Sonnets are often disappointed in the impersonal and intellectual meditation of "La Corona." As a result, it is often considered inferior to the other sonnets, with much less attention given to its study. However, criticism of this sonnet sequence may derive from a lack of understanding of its nature. Rather than a private, individual sonnet meditation, "La Corona" demonstrates a more public nature and an interconnectedness among the sonnets that the Holy Sonnets lack. Seven sonnets are intertwined to form one long poem—a corona offered in prayer and praise to God. Together they present a meditation on the life of Christ that is focused on a central theme revealed in the last line of the first sonnet: "Salvation to all that will is nigh" (1.14). For those who choose, salvation is near at hand. The remaining six sonnets, then, show how this salvation is accomplished through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. The reminder of the salvation story is recounted and framed within praise for what has been done. This theme weaves one more strand into the tightly woven corona and emphasizes the public nature of the sequence.

In the past others have also noted the differences in "La Corona." Gardner points out that it is misunderstood and underrated as a poem when compared with the Holy Sonnets "because the difference of intention behind the two sets of sonnets has not been recognized" (xxii). She connects the "La Corona" sonnet sequence to the oral tradition of liturgical
prayer and praise, particularly the Catholic Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary. Martz also discusses the public nature of the sonnet sequence by using the work of the Jesuit Sabin Chambers to show the connection to the "corona of our Lord" (107). Differences between the two sets of sonnets stem from a difference in the kind of meditative tradition that Donne followed: "... poems composed according to the meditative methods of the corona would tend to differ fundamentally from poems developing out of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola" (Martz 110). Low asserts that "La Corona" is a mixture of devotional modes and connects it to a rosary and to public meditation (43). The ordered, objective emotions lend themselves to repetition and share the liturgical qualities of hymns. Taking a more Protestant stance, Lewalski acknowledges the Catholic influence on "La Corona" but maintains Donne used the Psalms and Lord's Prayer to create an emblem of prayer and praise which is superimposed on the tradition (254, 257). Both the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms are used often as vocal devotions and their connection to the sonnet sequence would also lend a public nature. In addition, Lewalski says it is misunderstood as a meditation because of its emblematic rather than emotional nature (257). Finally, A. B. Chambers connects the sequence to the liturgical year in order to explain the liturgical nature of the sonnets and sees that "in both liturgy and poem, moreover, Christ's life is treated as an anticipation of Everyman's life with the world" ("La Corona"164).

Meditations on the life of Christ were highly developed and prevalent in the seventeenth century (Martz 71; Low 4). Any number of treatises gave instructions on how to meditate, most of them reflecting systematic and deliberate thought processes. English treatises on the rosary such as *The Societie of the Rosary* and Sabin Chambers' handbook would have been available in Donne's time (Martz 106). His Catholic upbringing also would have exposed him to both *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola and *Confessions* by St. Augustine. Meditations were designed for the individual to work out his/her personal relationship with God, usually by focusing on some biblical