“OFFENDING WITHOUT WITNES”:
RECUSANCY, EQUIVOCATION,
AND FACE-PAINTING IN
JOHN DONNE’S
EARLY LIFE AND WRITINGS

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DENNIS FLYNN’S RECENT John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility (1995) climaxes a long and fruitful exploration of Donne’s Catholicism. Like John Carey’s emphasis upon Donne’s apostasy in John Donne: Life, Mind and Art, it obliges us to reconsider the role of Donne’s Catholicism in his life and writings—something Donne scholars have “not fully understood,” as Flynn notes:

up to now, we have not appreciated the ways in which Donne’s family background brought him into early association with the ancient Catholic nobility; as a consequence, we have not fully understood the social and political context in which Donne’s personality was formed and his literary work began.

(172, emphasis added)

As one such context, Flynn foregrounds the persecution endured by Donne’s family and friends, arguing that “we should no more separate study of Donne’s life and writings from his and his family’s religious persecution and exile than we would separate study of the writings of Solzhenitsyn or Wiesel from theirs” (176).³ Flynn’s book dramatizes the Donne family’s involvement in the recusant underground, in the process resurrecting a recurring question: what effects might this involvement have had upon his poetics?

Flynn rightly qualifies his claim that Donne scholars have not “fully” understood the impact of Donne’s recusant heritage, for Annabel Patterson broaches this issue in Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England. Studying a variety of writers, she argues that persecutorial conditions compelled them to develop the art of “functional ambiguity” (18)—that is, an ability to create two texts in a single document: a relatively safe, surface-level text designed for general audiences; and a carefully-encoded, subversive subtext targeted at initiated audiences. Writers achieve this double voicing—this rhetorical dissimulation—by exploiting the multivalencies
and ambiguities of language. Patterson devotes some twelve pages to Donne’s rhetorical dissimulation, and she begins her discussion, significantly, by citing Donne’s recusant heritage as a salient factor:

Donne’s early poetry is scarred in places—and in significant places—by the signs of a repressive culture. Raised as a Roman Catholic, Donne was undoubtedly extrasensitive to the potential dangers involved in holding or disseminating the views of a religious minority.

Such background enables him to articulate “with fine insight, the psychological consequences of a repressive culture” (101) in a poem such a Satyre IV, to which we shall return.

Patterson’s analysis, though brief, intimates the potential of this line of inquiry as well as establishes a hermeneutic with which to pursue and explicate it. Confident that both can advance us one modest step towards that “fuller” understanding Flynn seeks, I shall explore Donne’s recusancy in relation to his early life and writings. More specifically, I shall begin by reviewing several retrospective passages in which Donne discusses his Catholicism, underscoring the clues these passages reveal about Donne’s involvement in the Catholic underground. This involvement, I believe it is reasonable to conclude, provided Donne with exposure to if not training in lifestyle and rhetorical dissimulation, which he depicts in the Elegies generally and Satyre IV specifically. Finally, I shall argue that Donne’s Paradox, “That Women Ought to Paint,” most subtly describes and enacts the kinds of dissimulation characteristic of that underground.

CATHOLICISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

What was it like for Donne to grow up as a persecuted Catholic? What effects might it have had upon his outlook and art? Although we can only speculate, such an investigation may begin with a series of autobiographical passages, written many years after the fact, in which Donne himself announces his previous involvement in the Catholic underground. For example, in his “Advertisement to the Reader” in Pseudo-Martyr (1610), he reveals:

As I am a Christian, I haue beene euer kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being deriued from such a stocke and race, as, I beleue, no family, (which is not of farre larger extent, and greater branches,) hath endured and suffered more