To His Mistress Going to Bed

POEM TEXT

Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
Until I labour, I in labour lie.
The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,
Is tir'd with standing though he never fight.
Off with that girdle, like heaven's Zone glistering,
But a far fairer world encompassing.
Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,
That th'eyes of busy fools may be stopped there.
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime,
Tells me from you, that now it is bed time.
Off with that happy busk, which I envy,
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.
Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals,
As when from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals.
Off with that wiry Coronet and shew
The hairy Diadem which on you doth grow:
Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread
In this love's hallow'd temple, this soft bed.
In such white robes, heaven's Angels used to be
Received by men; Thou Angel bringst with thee
A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise; and though
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know,
By this these Angels from an evil sprite,
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.
  Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd,
My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!
To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.
  Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,
As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be,
To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use
Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,
That when a fool's eye lighteth on a Gem,
His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them.
Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made
For lay-men, are all women thus array'd;
Themselves are mystic books, which only we
(Whom their imputed grace will dignify)
Must see reveal'd. Then since that I may know,
As liberally, as to a Midwife, shew
Thy self: cast all, yea, this white linen hence,
There is no penance due to innocence.
  To teach thee, I am naked first; why then
What needst thou have more covering than a man.

SUMMARY

Come here, my lady, I can't fall asleep. Until I have sex, I'm uncomfortable and I can't sleep. Often, a soldier—seeing his enemy—gets tired just standing and waiting for the battle, even though the battle never comes. Take off that belt, which glimmers like the night sky, though it wraps around a world far more beautiful than our own. Take off your bodice, embroidered with stars—which you wear to keep the masses from seeing your body. Undo the laces: you hear your watch chime, telling us that it's time for bed. Take off your corset. I'm jealous of it because it can be so close to you and yet remain still, unperturbed. When your dress comes off, it reveals a beautiful body. It's like when the shadow of a cloud leaves a flowering meadow. Take off the wreath around your brows and show your beautiful crown of hair. Now take off your shoes and climb into bed, which is like a temple to love. The angels, wearing garments as white as our bed clothes, used to meet with human beings. You are an angel, and you bring me into a paradise full of beautiful women. It's true that ghosts also wear white, but it's easy to tell ghosts from angels: ghosts make our hair stand on end, but angels like you give us erections.

Allow my hands to go wherever they want: front, back, between, up, down. Oh, you are like America: a newly discovered country. You are my kingdom—and you are safest when one man rules you. You are a mine of gems, gold, and silver. You are my empire. I am blessed to have discovered you. To be bound to you is to be free. So wherever I put my hand on you, think of it like a seal, that imprints my name on you.

Total nudity! The most joyous state. Just like souls need to be without bodies in order to fully enjoy Heaven, so too bodies should be without clothes in order to fully enjoy sex. The gems that women wear are like the golden apples that Hippomenes threw in front of Atlanta to distract her: fools are distracted by them and want the gems that women wear, not their bodies. For the ordinary guy, all women dressed like that are like paintings or the bright cover of a book. But women are like religious books, which only the enlightened (those that women

deem worthy) should see naked. So that I can read this religious book, let me see you as naked as you would be in front of a doctor. Throw off your underclothes and sheets: there is nothing to be ashamed of.

You should follow my example: I'm already naked. Why would you need to be more covered up than a man?

THEMES

LOVE AND SEX

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is a love poem, but it breaks from the traditions of love poetry in an important way. Most love poets beat around the bush, hiding what they really want behind elaborate euphemisms or clever puns. But the speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is straightforward and direct about his desire: he wants to have sex with his mistress, as soon as possible.

Of course, "To His Mistress Going to Bed" does follow *some* of the traditions of love poetry. For instance, many Renaissance poets wrote poems called "blazons." In a blazon, the speaker praises a woman's body, comparing each part to some beautiful object. Her hair is like a golden net, her checks are like roses, etc. Donne's poem contains a kind of blazon. But instead of praising his mistress's *body*, the speaker focuses on her *clothes*, describing each item of clothing in turn—her "girdle," her "breastplate," her "busk," etc. He compares these items of clothing to beautiful things: her girdle, for instance, is "like heaven's Zone glistering." In other words, with its embroidery shimmering in the candlelight, it looks like the night sky, full of brilliant stars.

The speaker has a good reason for focusing on his mistress's clothes, rather than her body itself—he can't see her body! Or, anyway, he can't see the parts of it he wants to see. As he makes clear early in the poem, his real goal is to get his mistress naked. Thus, even as he praises his mistress's girdle, he also commands her to take it off. And, of course, he also wants to have sex with her: as he says in lines 25-26, he wants his "roving hands" to go all over his mistress's body, "Before, behind, between, above, below."

This marks an important break with most Renaissance love poems. It's safe to assume that other poets are as full of sexual desire as Donne—but they aren't as upfront about it. They don't just come right out and say that they want the women they're praising to get naked and have sex with them. But the speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" has no compunctions about it: he says, directly, what he wants. He uses the traditions of Renaissance love poetry to do so, but he ends up discarding those traditions—with their coyness, their resistance to directly describing the sexual desire that courses through them—in favor of a frank, direct come-on.

There is some evidence that the early readers of the poem found this a bit shocking. For instance, the printer of the first edition of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* (1633) refused to print "To His Mistress Going to Bed," because he felt it was pornographic. The poem wasn't printed until 1699. The poem is so direct and frank about sexual desire that it caused a small scandal among its early readers, used, as they were, to the coy and genteel traditions of Renaissance love poetry—traditions that "To His Mistress Going to Bed" gleefully discards.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

NAKEDNESS AND TRUTH

The speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" spends most of the poem trying to convince his "mistress" to take off her clothes. As he does so, he makes some surprising claims about nakedness. Though he praises the beauty and elegance of his lover's clothing, he argues that such clothing is deceptive and misleading: it hides the deep secrets of her naked body. For the speaker, his mistress's naked body holds important truths that seem almost holy or sacred—and which, the speaker implies, only wise men deserve to see and understand.

From the start, the speaker suggests that his mistress's body is more than just a body. For instance, in lines 5-6, he compares her body to the "world" and the "girdle" that she wears to "heaven's Zone glistering." In other words, her body is a world unto itself and her clothing is like the starry sky above the world. The speaker is playing on Renaissance ideas about something called the microcosm. For many Renaissance thinkers, something small—like a person's body—could stand in for the whole universe. Studying that microcosm would allow someone to discover essential truths about the universe. With his characteristic playfulness and perversity, Donne turns this doctrine upside down. If his mistress's body is a microcosm for the universe, then the speaker should "study" it in detail to learn the essential truths. In other words, he makes it into an excuse to get his mistress naked.

In later parts of the poem, the speaker uses a series of complicated references, metaphors, and similes to drive the point home. Clothes, he says, are like "Atlanta's balls." In Greek myth, the hero Hippomenes threw golden apples in front of the virgin Atlanta to distract her, so that he could beat her in a foot race and take her virginity. Reversing the roles in the myth, the speaker claims that the clothes and gems that women wear distract the "fool's eye." Fools, according to the speaker, lust after gems and clothing, rather than a woman's actual body.

But wise men realize that women are "mystic books"—in other words, they are like religious texts: under their "gay coverings,"

they contain essential, spiritual truths. Fools miss these truths, but "we"—the speaker and other wise men—"must see" them. This a surprising, even blasphemous, comparison: the speaker is saying that seeing a naked woman is like grasping a difficult religious document; he may even be comparing his mistress's body to the Bible itself!

Through these comparisons—shocking as they would have been to Donne's contemporaries—the speaker makes a point that would've been familiar to many Renaissance readers: the exterior of things is deceitful and superfluous; its interior is its essence, the thing that really matters. The speaker thus turns to ideas drawn from religion and philosophy, but he takes them out of their original context and instead uses them to seduce his mistress.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

SEX AND POSSESSION

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is a poem of seduction. In it, the speaker tries to convince his "mistress" to undress, get in bed, and have sex with him. The poem is often funny; its tone is light and comic. But as the speaker makes his case, he makes some serious claims about sex itself. For the speaker, sex is about possession. He wants to control his "mistress" in the same way that an imperial power establishes its power over a colony.

Though the speaker spends the first twenty-odd lines of the poem convincing his mistress to get undressed, that isn't enough for him. As the poem's second stanza opens, he demands "licence"—in other words, permission—to let his "roving hands ... go" all over her body: "before, behind, between, above, below." For the speaker, exploring his mistress's body is like exploring a newly-discovered country. He calls her "my America! my new-found-land ..." At the time the poem was written in the 1590s, America had been recently discovered by Europeans; countries like England, Spain, and France were rushing to colonize it and exploit its resources. The speaker thus compares himself to one of those European powers, eagerly exploring and exploiting a distant, newly discovered country—indeed, he even compares his mistress to a "Mine of precious stones."

This suggests something about the power relationships between the speaker and his mistress: he is the explorer, she is the explored; he is the miner, she is mined. The speaker therefore imagines taking possession over his mistress—ruling her, in much the same way as an empire rules its colonies. Indeed, the speaker even refers to his mistress as "My Empirie." And he imagines his rule over her as a monarchy: she is his "kingdom" and she is best ruled by "one man."

Similarly, the speaker insists that his mistress's naked body is like a "mystic book": it contains deep truths that only the wise and enlightened should see. (For more on the speaker's thinking here, see our coverage of the theme of "Nakedness and Truth" in the poem.) This comparison also imposes certain power dynamics on the mistress. He is the wise man; she is the thing that he knows. She is like a book; he is the one who reads it. In other words, by suggesting that her nakedness conceals essential truths, the speaker turns his mistress into an object—and gives himself power over her.

The speaker's argument—that nakedness contains a kind of spiritual truth—thus isn't just an elaborate and silly conceit. It also conceals real discrepancies in power and agency between the speaker and his mistress—differences that the poem affirms. Similarly, his similes and metaphors comparing her to colonial lands and riches also suggest that she is an object, something to possess. The speaker isn't just interested in seducing his mistress: he also wants to possess her. More precisely, for the speaker, seducing her *involves* possessing her. He doesn't imagine sex as an interaction between equals: instead, for him, it's about establishing and maintaining power over his mistress.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
Until I labour, I in labour lie.
The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,
Is tir'd with standing though he never fight.

The first four lines of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" establish the poem's subject matter and hint at its themes. The speaker directly addresses a woman, whom he calls "Madam." This is the "mistress" of the poem's title. When Donne wrote the poem in the 1590s, the word "mistress" didn't mean what it means now. For Donne, "mistress" was just another word for "woman"—he didn't mean to suggest the speaker was having an extra-marital affair with this woman. However, it quickly becomes clear that the speaker does have an intimate relationship with his "mistress"—and that the poem itself is an elaborate attempt to seduce her.

The speaker begins with a complaint—he can't fall asleep. And in line 2, he explains why: he won't be able to fall asleep until his mistress has sex with him. This is a bit shocking, especially for a Renaissance love poem. Donne's peers probably had the same thing in mind when they sat down to write their love poems: they too wanted to seduce. But they tended to favor somewhat

less explicit come-ons. They disguised their sexual desire with elaborate euphemisms and courtly compliments. Not Donne: from the poem's second line, the speaker is frank and direct about what he wants.

So, from the start, the reader has a good sense that this poem is not going to follow the rules and standards that all those other elegant Renaissance love poems follow. Which is not to say that "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is inelegant. The first line of the poem, for instance, is carefully divided by caesuras. And the second line—though explicit in its content—is rich with poetic devices. The line hinges on antanaclasis, in which the word "labour" is repeated but with different meanings. "Labour" usually means work or toil, especially physical work. It's energetic, demanding—like sex. Thus, when the speaker first uses the word "labour"—"Until I labour"—he's using it as a metaphor for sex. But he uses the word in a totally different sense in the second half of the line, "I in labour lie." Here he's drawing on the difficulty associated with "labour." His mind his working like crazy, his body can't relax. The uses of the word "labour" mean different things. The repetition of the word brings out that difference.

In lines 3-4 the speaker employs another metaphor, this one designed to get his mistress to hurry up. He compares the two of them to soldiers on opposing armies—and notes that soldiers often end up exhausted from watching and waiting, without ever fighting. In other words, he might get tired waiting for her and lose interest in having sex. The speaker's metaphor makes sex into a form of combat between opposing parties—a battle that the speaker wants to win. The metaphor suggests that for the speaker sex involves dominance, even violence. These suggestions will reappear, forcefully, later in the poem.

The poem is written in heroic couplets—rhymed lines of iambic pentameter. This is a surprising choice. This is a light-hearted poem of seduction. Heroic couplets are traditionally used for the most serious subjects: to discuss war, politics, or philosophical disputes. Using this form, Donne creates a tension between his profane, bawdy poem and the traditions associated with its form.

The speaker is in many ways forceful and confident: the strong end-stops in lines 1 and 2 certainly don't leave any room for argument. But the poem's form is often a bit off: the poem is full of metrical variations and questionable rhymes. (Indeed, the meter in Donne's poems is famously irregular.) For instance, the first line of the poem contains an extra stress—and ends up being eleven syllables long, creating a hiccup in the poem's rhythm. Perhaps the speaker's sexual desire is so powerful that he can't quite control his poem—or, for that matter, himself.

LINES 5-10

Off with that girdle, like heaven's Zone glistering,
But a far fairer world encompassing.
Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,
That th'eyes of busy fools may be stopped there.
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime,
Tells me from you, that now it is bed time.

In lines 5-10, the speaker begins his seduction in earnest. He begins by telling his mistress to take off her "girdle" (a kind of belt). And, using a simile, he compares her "girdle" to "heaven's Zone glistering." In other words, in the soft candlelight of their room, her girdle shimmers like the stars in the night sky. The stars are a traditional symbol for hope and guidance. The speaker plays with that symbol here: instead of guiding him to safety, the mistress's "glistering" girdle guides him closer and closer to her naked body. In line 6, he issues a small correction to the simile: the "world" that her girdle "encompass[es]" is "far fairer" than the world that "heaven's Zone" encloses. In other words, the mistress's body is much more beautiful than the world itself. This is an elegant compliment—very much within the traditions of Renaissance love poetry.

In lines 7-10, the speaker issues two more instructions. He wants his mistress to take off her "spangled breastplate"—an embroidered bodice—and he also tells her to "unlace yourself." The speaker works himself up into a steady rhythm here. He uses anaphoric repetitions at the starts of lines 7 and 9, with "**un**pin" and "**un**lace," anchoring the lines. As he issues these fairly straight-forward instructions, he also hints at some of the poem's broader themes. In line 7, he notes that the mistress's "spangled breastplate" stops the "eyes of busy fools." "Fools" is a symbol for the mass of ordinary, unenlightened people. This creates a kind of hierarchy: some men are wise enough to gaze on her naked body; some are not. The speaker will return to and expand on that hierarchy in lines 35-43.

And in lines 9-10, the speaker describes hearing the "harmonious chime" of a clock or watch, ringing to mark the hour. The "harmonious chime" serves as a symbol of mortality and death. It reminds the speaker and his mistress that time is passing and precious—that they should enjoy the pleasures of sex while they still can. The strong end-stop at the end of line 10 reinforces the symbol: it feels as sharp and final as death itself.

As the speaker describes and praises each item of his mistress's clothing, he plays on a key tradition in Renaissance love poetry: the blazon. In a blazon, a male poet praises the parts of a woman's body—her hair, her eyes, her cheeks, etc.—comparing each part to a different, beautiful thing. For instance he might compare her to a golden net, her eyes to sapphires, etc. But here, as is often the case in "To His Mistress Going to Bed," the speaker invokes this tradition to break from it. Instead of describing her body, he describes her clothes—and, as he does so, he asks her to take them off. There's a good reason for this break from tradition: the speaker can't see—yet—the parts of her body that he's really interested in. So he describes what he can see, while at the same time urging her to remove the barriers that separate him from the full beauty of her naked

body.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in heroic couplets—rhyming lines of iambic pentameter. The speaker continues to be fairly casual about the way he uses rhyme and meter: this is not a tightly, controlled, perfectly wrought poem. For instance, the rhyme between "glistering" and "encompassing" in lines 5-6 would traditionally be considered weak: only the final "-ing" rhymes. The speaker's powerful sexual desire overwhelms him, resulting in a poem that always feels on the edge of spinning out of control.

LINES 11-16

Off with that happy busk, which I envy,
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.
Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals,
As when from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals.
Off with that wiry Coronet and shew
The hairy Diadem which on you doth grow:

In lines 11-16, the speaker continues his instructions for his mistress. He wants her to take off her "busk," her "gown," and her "wiry coronet." In other words, the speaker asks her to take off her corset, her dress, and a wire garland or small crown that she's wearing on her head. As he lists each item, the speaker pauses to comment on them. He's jealous of her "busk" because it can be so close to her, and yet be "still": unlike the speaker, the "busk" doesn't tremble with desire and anticipation when it's close to the mistress's body. (The repetition of the word "still" in line 12 is an instance of diacope—one of the speaker's favorite devices.)

Similarly, in lines 13-14, the speaker lingers on the "beauteous state" that his mistress reveals when she does take off her "gown." Using a simile, he says that it's like seeing the clouds lift their "shadow" from a "flowery mead"—a meadow full of flowers. In other words, his mistress is beautiful when she's wearing clothing, but her full beauty and vibrancy is only revealed when she removes the "shadow" of her clothing. Here, the "shadow" symbolizes ignorance and despair; removing her "gown" dispels such ignorance, restores hope and wisdom.

Finally, in lines 15-16, the speaker meditates on his mistress's "hairy Diadem"—the crown of hair concealed beneath her "wiry Coronet." In these lines, then, the speaker continues his unusual blazon, listing items of clothing, asking her to remove them, so that he can finally see the "beauteous" body she keeps concealed beneath them. These instructions are explicit and frank. Unlike many Renaissance love poems, which tend to disguise their sexual desire beneath elaborate euphemisms, the speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" announces his sexual desire freely and directly. That creates some tension between the poem's tone—elevated, courtly—and its almost pornographic content.

The speaker subtly uses alliteration and consonance in this passage to underline that tension. Note the /b/, /s/, and /st/ sounds that the speaker layers through lines 11 and 12:

> Off with that happy busk, which I envy,
> That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.

The lines are full of pleasurable sounds.; they aspire to be as elegant and beautiful as any line of Shakespeare's. There's some irony in that aspiration: the speaker uses this very refined speech to tell his mistress to hurry up and take off her dress.

The force and intensity of the speaker's desire is felt everywhere in the poem—even in its form. Although the poem is written in heroic couplets—rhyming lines of iambic pentameter—its meter and rhymes are often irregular. Line 13 is a good example of the kind of metrical irregularities the reader finds throughout the poem:

> Your gown | going | off, such | beaute- | ous state | reveals

Read like this, the line is 12 syllables long and seems to contain an extra foot, with awkward trochees in its second, third, and fourth feet. Indeed, it might even be interpreted as hardly being in meter at all.

Alternatively, the meter could be read as follows:

> Your gown | going off, | such beau- | teous state | reveals

In this case, the line has the regular five feet, but at least one of them is an anapest ("going off"). However one chooses to interpret the meter here, it's clear the speaker is playing fast and loose with iambic pentameter. In moments like this, it feels like the speaker's sexual desire is so powerful that he can't quite control his own poem.

LINES 17-21

Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread
In this love's hallow'd temple, this soft bed.
In such white robes, heaven's Angels used to be
Received by men; Thou Angel bringst with thee
A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise;

In lines 17-21, the speaker wraps up his instructions to his mistress. He tells her to take off her shoes and climb into their bed. He describes their bed as a metaphorical "temple," consecrated to "love." It's worth noting that unlike some of the speaker's other metaphors—which contain hints of violence and domination—this one is unequivocally sweet and positive. Indeed, by comparing their bed to a "temple," the speaker makes their shared sexuality seem holy, innocent. Instead of being transgressive, sex becomes a kind of religious rite or ritual that they perform together.

Then, in lines 19-21, the speaker describes the linens on the

bed, focusing on how white they are. Indeed, they are so white that they remind the speakers of the "white robes" that angels wear—and that they wore when, in stories from the Bible, they met with human beings. These white robes are symbols of purity and innocence. The symbol thus further contributes to the sense that the bed is not a transgressive or degraded place; and that sex itself is a pure, even holy act. This would've stood in contradiction to many of the religious teachings that were current at the time Donne wrote the poem. For his early readers, it would've been a bit shocking to think of sex as something consecrated, holy, and innocent.

But the speaker thinks he can have it both ways: he can have intense sexual pleasures without engaging in religious transgression. He makes this point in lines 20-21, where he notes that his mistress brings "A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise." This is an allusion to some disputed verses in the Quran, the holy text of Islam. According to some translations, the righteous Muslim is promised forty virgins in heaven. But many scholars dispute these translations; Donne's allusion does not do justice to the complexity of Islamic traditions and religious beliefs. Nonetheless, it is important to the poem: the speaker uses it to express his belief that sexual pleasure and religious piety are not mutually exclusive.

These lines are written in rhyming iambic pentameter couplets, also called heroic couplets. In "To His Mistress Going to Bed," the force of the speaker's sexual desire is often evident even at a microscopic level—in the poem's tortured rhymes and its many metrical variations. In lines 17-21, the reader finds evidence of this overwhelming passion in the enjambments and caesuras that run through the passage. It's not like these enjambments are the result of a long, elegant sentence that crosses many lines. Instead, in these lines, the speaker fires off a bunch of brief, disconnected phrases; they usually end abruptly in the middle of the lines, instead of coming to a firm, strong conclusion at the end of a line. These disorganized lines suggest that the speaker is not fully in control of himself or his poem. Instead, he is desperate to seduce his mistress and shoots off any idea that he comes up with to win her over.

LINES 21-24

and though
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know,
By this these Angels from an evil sprite,
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

The first stanza of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" ends with an elaborate dirty joke. In lines 17-21, the speaker describes the linens on the bed that he shares with his mistress as "white robes." Of course, he notes, ghosts—"ill spirits"—also wear white. But, he reassures the reader, it's easy to tell "Angels"—like his mistress—from ghosts. Ghosts make his hair stand on end; his mistress makes a different part of his body stand "upright." In other words, she gives him an erection.

The joke relies on zeugma, the way that the word "upright" can describe an erection *and* someone's hair standing on end. And, in turn, the structure of the sentence in line 24 is important to setting up this joke. The speaker uses antithesis—with two clauses that have the same grammatical structure, split by a caesura, but saying opposite things—to sharpen the joke. Because the phrases are so grammatically similar, the difference in their meaning stands out all the more clearly—and that difference becomes even funnier.

This dirty joke seems pretty far from the courtly, elevated tone of the earlier parts of the stanza. The speaker started off by playing with some of the traditions of Renaissance love poetry—like the blazon—but he's not above getting a little dirty and a little silly. Indeed, as the poem goes on, it becomes less and less recognizable in terms of those traditions: it becomes more explicit, even borderline pornographic. Perhaps this can be explained through the power and force of the speaker's desire—he wants to have sex so badly that he eventually gives up on the usual modes of poetic seduction, striking out on his own into bold and explicit territory.

The force of the speaker's sexual desire is often evident in the poem's form. Although the poem is written in heroic couplets—rhyming lines of iambic pentameter—the speaker is irregular in his use of rhyme and meter; the poem is full of metrical substitutions and strained rhymes. In these lines—like lines 17-21—the disruptive force of the speaker's desire can be felt in their awkward enjambments, like the enjambment in line 21.

LINES 25-26

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, between, above, below.

The second stanza of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" begins with a direct and sexually explicit request. The speaker wants to put his hands all over his mistress's body—"before, behind, between, above, below"—and he asks her permission to do so. The force of the speaker's sexual desire for his mistress is evident in the alliterative and consonant /b/ sound that runs through line 26:

Before, behind, between, above and below.

The hardness of the sound gives the reader a sense of how insistent, demanding, even violent, the speaker's desire is. Though this is a poem of seduction, the tone sometimes becomes harsh and discordant.

This is perhaps the most sexually explicit moment in the poem, and it marks a turn, or change, in the speaker's focus. He seems to have convinced his mistress to take off her clothes and get in bed with him; now he wants to move on to sex itself. From here forward, the speaker's interest in his mistress's clothing will disappear: he will focus instead on the sexual dynamics

between them, the forms of power and domination that inflect their relationship, and the sacred, mystical truths that his mistress's naked body contains.

As the poem makes this transition in its content, however, its form remains unchanged. The poem continues to be written in heroic couplets: each line is written in iambic pentameter; they rhyme with each other in an *AABB…etc.* pattern. Lines 25-26 have a strong rhyme and they're both written in pretty steady iambic pentameter. But this is a rarity—the speaker often fails to live up to this standard. The force of his sexual desire is evidently so strong that he can't keep his poem under control: it tends to slip, to hiccup, to break down, as he struggles to master himself.

LINES 27-30

O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd,
My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!

In lines 27-30, the speaker describes what it feels like to explore his mistress's body with his "roving hands." He compares her metaphorically to "America." At the time the poem was written, America had only recently been discovered by Europeans. Countries like Spain and, later, France and England, rushed to colonize it and to exploit its natural resources. So the speaker's metaphor contains some complicated dynamics. It suggests that the speaker wants to dominate his mistress, to possess her and rule over her—even to exploit her.

Over the course of lines 27-30, the speaker makes those suggestions explicit. In lines 28 and 29, the speaker calls his mistress "My kingdom" and "My Empirie"—as though she were a country that he rules over. And he imagines his rule over her to be absolute. He notes that his kingdom is safest when it is "with one man mann'd." In other words, he wants to be sole ruler over her, a kind of king. And he also wants to be able to exploit her for his pleasure: he calls her "My Mine of precious stones." She is like a gold or silver mine in the Americas, stripped bare by a colonial power. And there's a play on words here too: the reader might hear "My Mine" as a statement of possession. The mistress is the speaker's "Mine," the thing he possesses.

Lines 27-30 thus suggest that the speaker's relationship with his mistress is inflected with serious, potentially disturbing, power dynamics. He holds power over her. He is an explorer and colonizer; she is the land that he discovers. He is the ruler; she is the country that he rules. He holds all the power and agency in their relationship. These power dynamics reflect a broader understanding of the power dynamics between men and women. In other words, the speaker seems to believe that men always do—and should—hold power over women. Note, for instance, his use of polyptoton in line 28: the way he repeats a variation of the word "man": "with one man mann'd." To be "mann'd" is to be ruled—a use of the word that Donne seems to have invented for the poem. It suggests that ruling is simply what men do; further, it suggests that women cannot rule.

The harsh, even violent power dynamics the speaker describes here are matched by the harsh sound of the lines. Lines 27-30 are dominated by an alliterative and consonant /m/ sound:

> O my America! my new-found-land,
> My kingdom, safelist when with one man mann'd,
> My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie…

The /m/ sound is key to understanding the nature of the speaker's desire: after all, it connects words like "my" and "Mine," to "America," "Empirie," "man mann'd." Consonance thus helps to reinforce the troubling dynamics of the speaker's desire: the way it contains an implicit urge to dominate and rule his mistress.

These lines are written in heroic couplets: rhyming lines of iambic pentameter. Note that each line in this passage is end-stopped, which contributes to the sense of force and power behind them: these are definite, strong statements. The speaker sometimes uses end-stop this way, slipping into long runs without any enjambments at all—then he switches back and starts using enjambment again. This inconsistency seems like another reflection of the power of his sexual desire: instead of establishing a strong pattern, the speaker follows its whims wherever they take him.

LINES 31-32

To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.

In lines 27-30, the speaker describes the relationship between himself and his mistress as one of possession and domination: he rules over her in the same way that a country like Spain or England rules over its colonies. In other words, he has power—absolute power—over her. Lines 31-32 both complicate and confirm that power dynamic. Indeed, the two lines point in different directions; they supply different implications about the speaker's relationship with his mistress.

In line 31, the speaker meditates on what it means to commit to his relationship with his mistress. He is entering into "bonds"—shackles or restraints. In other words, he is giving up some of his freedom. The phrase suggests that she has power over him, not the other way around. But the speaker doesn't particularly mind: he experiences this loss of freedom as its own kind of liberty. His relationship with his mistress is so satisfying that he doesn't mind giving up some freedom to enjoy it.

In line 32, however, the speaker uses a metaphor that once again suggests that he holds all the power in this relationship. Wherever he puts his hand on his mistress's body, he claims, "[his] seal shall be." At the time the poem was written, people

would seal letters with hot wax and, while the wax was still soft, imprint it with a special stamp, called a "seal." Everyone had their own seal, with a special, individual design on it. The seal thus served to assure the security of the letter until it reached its intended recipient: one would have to break the wax to read the letter. And it also served as a mark of ownership, identity. So when the speaker imprints his "seal" on his mistress, he is asserting his ownership over her.

Lines 31-32 are both written in iambic pentameter and they rhyme with each other. In other words, they form a heroic couplet—the form the poem uses throughout. They are among the more formally accomplished lines in the poem: the rhyme is direct and effective; the meter is strong, unblemished by substitutions or variations. Note, however, that the speaker uses the same rhyme sounds in lines 31-32 as he did in lines 29-30. Indeed, lines 29-34 all rhyme with each other. This, again, might be considered a bit sloppy: poets are usually supposed to show off their skill by continually deploying interesting rhymes. The form of the poem is once again rough—perhaps in response to the speaker's difficulty controlling his own desire.

LINES 33-35

Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,
As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be,
To taste whole joys.

The second stanza of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" focused on the power dynamics between mistress and speaker. The third stanza takes a more philosophical approach, focusing on what the speaker calls "full nakedness." As the stanza progresses, the speaker invests his mistress's naked body with religious and philosophical significance—as though she contains sacred truths that only wise men deserve to see.

The speaker sets the stage for this philosophical inquiry in lines 33-35. He begins with a bold claim: "full nakedness" is the pinnacle of all joys, the most pleasurable thing someone can enjoy. He reinforces this claim with a complex simile. Just like souls experience unparalleled pleasure, "whole joys," after they've been freed from their bodies in heaven, so too bodies experience unparalleled joys once they're free of their clothes.

The simile plays on some ideas drawn from religion and philosophy. In the Christian tradition, for instance, a person can be divided into two parts: their body, which includes their physical, mortal being, and their soul, which is immortal and not physical. The soul goes to the afterlife after death while the body remains on earth. In these traditions, the body is often treated as a kind of prison for the soul, from which it is finally liberated after death. The speaker imagines clothing as a similar kind of prison and nudity as a similar kind of freedom. The comparison is thus a little bit sacrilegious: it compares being naked to going to heaven. The speaker is willing to run that risk: for him nakedness is as significant and as serious as heaven itself. Or, at least, he's willing to say so in order to seduce his mistress.

These lines are written in rhyming iambic pentameter couplets—heroic couplets, a form the speaker uses throughout the poem. The poem is often ragged and irregular—with rough meter and awkward rhymes, and these lines display some of that roughness. Line 35 has a spondee in the middle of it ("whole joys"). And lines 33-34 end a run of six lines that all rhyme with each other—as if the speaker ran out of ideas for new rhymes. The roughness of the poem's form perhaps reflects the force of the speaker's desire: it overwhelms him—and, as a result, he can't keep his poem tightly controlled.

LINES 35-38

Gems which you women use
Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,
That when a fool's eye lighteth on a Gem,
His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them.

In lines 35-38, the speaker continues his philosophical meditation. Here he focuses on clothing itself—the "gems" and decorations that women wear—arguing that such "gems" disguise and protect women. Indeed, these "gems" are symbols of deception, as the speaker makes clear in an elaborate allusion to a Greek myth, which runs through lines 35-38.

The speaker argues that such "gems" are "like Atlanta's balls." In the myth, Atlanta—a young girl—refuses to marry anyone who can't beat her in a foot race. She's too fast for all her suitors, except Hippomenes. When they race, he throws golden apples in her path as she runs and she stops to pick them up. That allows him to beat her; she has to marry him. As the speaker invokes the myth, he turns it on his head. In his account, women deceive men—not the other way around—by "cast[ing]" their "gems" "in men's views."

In the speaker's reworking of the myth, men are the victims of deceptive, crafty women: they end up falling in love with women's clothing and jewels, instead of seeking the "whole joys" of the naked body. Or, at least, some men do: the speaker specifies that "fool[s]" fall for these tricks; wise men, by contrast, know what really matters. Just like in line 8, the "fool[s]" here are symbols for the uneducated, unenlightened masses. The speaker's position is thus a touch elitist: he doesn't think ordinary people are smart enough to understand or see the full pleasures of nudity.

These lines are written in iambic pentameter and they rhyme in an *AABB* pattern. In other words, they are heroic couplets, a form the speaker uses throughout the poem. They are relatively smooth—relative, that is, to the rough rhymes and meter that often crop up in the poem.

But, as is often the case in "To His Mistress Going to Bed," even when the form works well, there's still a hint of dissonance between form and content. Heroic couplets are usually used

for very serious subjects. And these lines, with their allusion to a Greek myth, do have a certain gravity. The allusion probably comes from the Latin poet Ovid—he tells the same story in his epic poem, *The Metamorphoses*. This text was particularly popular during the 1590s among poets writing about love and sex. However, Donne is using the allusion almost as a joke, making an argument for why nudity is superior to being clothed. In other words, the content of the poem is light, erotic, even a bit frivolous, but its form is heavy, intense, and serious.

LINES 39-43

Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made
For lay-men, are all women thus array'd;
Themselves are mystic books, which only we
(Whom their imputed grace will dignify)
Must see reveal'd.

In lines 39-43, the speaker renews his criticisms of women's clothing—and continues his argument for the philosophical importance of nudity. He begins with a simile: women are dressed up like "pictures" or like the gaudy "coverings" of books, which seize the eyes of "lay-men." Like the "fool" in line 37, these "lay men" fail to recognize that the beauty of women's clothing is all surface, not substance: the stuff that really matters is what lies within the book, under its covers.

Indeed, the speaker argues, women are "mystic books." In other words, they are like religious texts, rich with sacred truths, philosophical insights. For the speaker, then, nudity is not simply or exclusively sexual: instead it is a form of truth. At least, the speaker's willing to say so to seduce his mistress. Indeed, this position seems awfully convenient for him. If nudity is a form of religious truth, then his own voracious sexual appetite is dignified and important: a kind of truth-seeking that makes him the peer of the most dedicated scholars.

However, only wise men are capable of understanding these truths—indeed, only wise men even look beyond the "gay coverings" of the books. The speaker's position thus remains elitist, distinguishing the few who are capable of understanding the true significance of nakedness from the masses—who are too stupid or uneducated to get the deep truths that the mistress's nakedness reveals.

These few who are capable of understanding are chosen by women; women "dignify" these wise men with their "imputed grace." Here, Donne uses the word "imputed" in a theological sense. Roughly speaking: in Christianity, Christ's righteousness is *imputed*, or transferred, to his faithful followers, thereby saving them in the eyes of God. In the poem, then, the speaker argues that men who are faithful to their mistresses are similarly rewarded (by getting to see their ladies naked).

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in heroic couplets—rhyming lines of iambic pentameter. And like the rest of the poem, these lines have some hiccups. Even given the differences in pronunciation between Renaissance and contemporary English, the rhyme between "we" and "dignify" is a stretch—more likely a slant rhyme than a perfect rhyme. As usual, this kind of formal imperfection is not simply evidence of sloppiness on the part of the poet; instead, it reflects the speaker's overpowering sexual desire—so powerful that he can't quite control his poem. Even when he's discussing matters of philosophical and religious seriousness, that desire pops up, expressing itself in these formal hiccups and blemishes.

LINES 43-48

Then since that I may know,
As liberally, as to a Midwife, shew
Thy self: cast all, yea, this white linen hence,
There is no penance due to innocence.
To teach thee, I am naked first; why then
What needst thou have more covering than a man.

In lines 43-46, the speaker finally gets to the point of his long philosophical digression: he needs to "know" the "mystic" truths of his mistress's naked body. So, she should cast off all the bed clothes, the "white linen" in which she's hiding. Indeed, the speaker says that she should display herself as "liberally"—freely—as she would to a midwife. Midwives help women through childbirth. They are thus very intimate with women's bodies. And they are also trusted figures, who offer support through a dangerous, difficult process. The simile thus transforms the speaker: making him into someone trusted, safe, and non-threatening.

The speaker ends the poem's third stanza with a final little nudge. If the mistress is so shy and innocent, then she doesn't have to do any "penance." In other words, she hasn't committed any sins—and she won't commit any by getting naked—so she doesn't need to fear the consequences of doing so.

The poem's final stanza, lines 47-48, is just two lines long. It serves as a kind of punch line for the poem. The speaker reveals that he is "naked first." In other words, the whole time he's been urging his mistress to get naked, he's already been naked. And since he's already naked, she should do the same—she doesn't need any more covering than he has. This is intended to be funny. It brings the poem to a close on a light, whimsical note—though, for some readers, it will not be enough to erase the darker dynamics that have crept into the poem, and that inflect the speaker's relationship with his mistress.

The final six lines of the poem are written in rhyming iambic pentameter couplets. These are also called heroic couplets—a form usually reserved for serious topics. The lighthearted tone of these lines is hardly the kind of thing that poets usually use the form for. There's thus a tension that runs through the poem between its form and its content. This tension is intentional, and it comes at the speaker's expense. He, evidently, thinks that his sexual desire is deadly serious—as serious as war, politics, or religion. But the reader has the sense throughout that there's something faintly ridiculous about this self-serious

attitude—that the speaker takes himself and his desire altogether too seriously.

SYMBOLS

HEAVEN'S ZONE

"Heaven's Zone" is a symbol of hope and guidance. Literally, "heaven's Zone" is the night sky, filled with shining stars. In line 5, the speaker sees the embroidery on his mistress's "girdle," or belt, catch the candle light and glimmer. He thinks it looks like the night sky full of stars. This associates it with navigation: during the period the poem was written, sailors used the stars to help them navigate. Measuring their position against the stars, they could guide themselves through dark, uncharted waters.

So, for the speaker, the mistress's "girdle" guides and orients him, helping him get to where he's going—or where he wants to go. In other words, it guides him toward his mistress's naked body. As is often the case in John Donne's poetry, he takes a traditional symbol and pushes it to its limit, turning it into an elaborate, sexual joke.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "heaven's Zone"

HARMONIOUS CHIME

The "harmonious chime" that the speaker and his mistress hear in line 9 is a symbol for time—and thus of death, mortality, and the limitations that shape human experience. The "harmonious chime" comes from a watch or clock striking the hour. It may be "harmonious"—a sweet sound, pleasant to hear—but it reminds the speaker (and maybe his mistress too) that time is passing: it's getting late. And their time together is limited: soon it will be morning and they'll have to return to their busy lives.

More broadly, the chime reminds the speaker that he is mortal, that he will die—perhaps soon—and that therefore he shouldn't wait around to enjoy things like sex. As a symbol for the passing of time, the "harmonious chime" helps the speaker convince his mistress to get undressed and have sex with him. He argues that she shouldn't be coy, shouldn't dally around, shouldn't delay, since life is short and time is flying by.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "harmonious chime"

SHADOW

The "shadow" that appears in line 15 serves as a complex symbol. It symbolizes ignorance and despair. It's made all the more complex by the context in which it appears: as part of an elaborate simile. The speaker says that watching his mistress take off her "gown" is like watching the shadow of a cloud retreating from a beautiful meadow. So, the mistress's body is like a meadow and the gown is like a shadow that covers it up, diminishing its brightness and beauty. When she takes off her gown, that's like the moment when the sun comes out on a cloudy day and fills the meadow with light.

The "shadow" is thus wrapped up with a bunch of other things, some of which the speaker only implicitly brings into the line. Light, for instance, is traditionally a symbol of hope and truth. The speaker doesn't explicitly mention light, but the reader should imagine it bursting onto the meadow. The "shadow" should be understood in contrast with this implicit burst of light. In other words, whereas light symbolizes truth and hope, "shadow" symbolizes ignorance, error, and despair. As the mistress takes off her gown, she banishes these bad things and makes space for truth and hope.

The symbol thus anticipates some of the speaker's claims later in the poem—as in line 41, where he claims that women's bodies are "mystic books" which conceal essential, semi-religious truths. And it contributes to the speaker's (questionable) suggestion that his sexual desire is important and noble: it's about pursuing truth, not just sex.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "shadow"

WHITE ROBES

In line 19, the speaker imagines "Angels" wearing "white robes"—"white robes" that are like the sheets and blankets on the bed that the speaker shares with his mistress. These "white robes" are symbols of purity and innocence. Indeed, the color "white" has a long association with sexual purity. Imagining "Angels" wearing the color only deepens the association. Since "Angels" are the messengers and servants of God, the colors they wear are closely linked to God Himself.

The speaker uses the symbol to help convince his mistress to climb in bed and have sex with him. By describing the bedclothes as angelic "white robes," he suggests that the bed is a pure and innocent place—and that sex itself is innocent. It is not sinful, but sanctioned by God Himself. The symbol thus applies not only to the bed—which the speaker suggests is pure and holy—but to the act of sex itself, suggesting that it too is a blameless, innocent act.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "white robes"

GEMS

"Gems"—which appear in lines 35 and 37—are symbols of deception. The speaker uses this symbol to describe how women dress in fancy, beautiful clothing to deceive and mislead foolish men. They may wear literal gems, like diamonds or rubies. But more broadly, the "gems" refer to beautiful, ornate items of clothing—beautiful dresses, corsets, and ruffs. They wear these "gems" so that men will "covet" them.

In other words, foolish men will be overcome by the beauty of the clothes and jewels that women wear. They will desire those clothes and jewels, instead of trying to see what's underneath them, the naked body beneath—which, for the speaker, is what really matters. In other words, women use "gems" to protect themselves from the prying eyes of men, to distract them, and to deceive them about what really matters, what's really valuable. "Gems" thus symbolize this deception, and the means that women use to make it happen: the beautiful clothes and jewels they wear to distract and deceive.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 35:** "Gems"
- **Line 37:** "Gem"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

The speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is full of passion and desire, so it makes a certain kind of sense that the poem doesn't follow a lot of rules—and the rules it does have, it follows sporadically. The speaker's desire is so powerful that it overflows poetic customs. Much the same is true of the poem's use of end-stop and enjambment: the speaker uses both frequently, but he doesn't follow any pattern or plan. Instead, he follows the whims of his passion, using end-stop and enjambment where his desire indicates that he should.

For example, the speaker uses end-stop in both of the poem's first two lines:

> Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
> Until I labour, I in labour lie.

These lines are definite, unequivocal, strong. The speaker doesn't admit any doubt: there's no suggestion that the mistress might talk him down. Instead, she has to pay attention to his demands—now. The use of end-stop thus helps communicate the force and power of the speaker's desire.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses end-stop to underline his argument. For instance, take a look at the end-stops in lines 9 and 10:

> Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime,
> Tells me from you, that now it is bed time.

The speaker is making an—apparently—simple point: he hears a clock chiming, so he knows it's time to go to bed. But the "harmonious chime" is a symbol for time itself. It serves as a reminder that time is passing, that speaker and mistress are both mortal, and that they should therefore enjoy sexual pleasure while they still can. This simple detail carries a great deal of rhetorical force. And the end-stop at the end of line 10 reinforces it. It is sharp, definite—like death itself. It conveys the underlying seriousness of the speaker's argument: that he and his mistress shouldn't waste any time, because death is coming for them.

The speaker's irregular use of end-stop is thus often full of meaning: when it appears, it helps him underline the force of his desire; similarly, it reinforces his arguments for why his mistress should sleep with him.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "defy,"
- **Lines 2-2:** "lie / ."
- **Line 4:** "fight."
- **Line 5:** "glistering,"
- **Line 6:** "encompassing."
- **Line 7:** "wear,"
- **Line 8:** "there."
- **Line 10:** "time."
- **Line 11:** "envy,"
- **Line 12:** "nigh."
- **Line 14:** "steals."
- **Line 16:** "grow:"
- **Line 18:** "bed."
- **Line 23:** "sprite,"
- **Line 24:** "upright."
- **Line 26:** "below."
- **Line 27:** "land,"
- **Line 28:** "mann'd,"
- **Line 29:** "Empirie,"
- **Line 30:** "thee!"
- **Line 31:** "free;"
- **Line 32:** "be."
- **Line 33:** "thee,"
- **Line 34:** "be,"
- **Line 36:** "views,"
- **Line 38:** "them."

- **Line 40:** "array'd;"
- **Line 45:** "hence,"
- **Line 46:** " innocence."
- **Line 48:** "man."

ENJAMBMENT

The speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" uses enjambment in unpredictable ways. He never establishes a pattern or scheme for when he uses it and when he doesn't. Sometimes, as 19-22, he uses enjambment repeatedly, piling up enjambment after enjambment. Sometimes he abstains from using it altogether, as in lines 26-34, which contain no enjambments at all. This unpredictable use of enjambment isn't that surprising, coming from this speaker. After all, the speaker of the poem is overwhelmed by sexual desire, barely able to contain himself—let alone organize his poem around strict rules. The irregular, unplanned use of enjambment conveys the power of the speaker's sexual desire.

One can see this in lines 19-22, where the speaker uses enjambment repeatedly:

> In such white robes, heaven's Angels used to be
> Received by men; Thou Angel brings with thee
> A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise; and though
> Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know,
> by this these Angels from an evil sprite,

The first four quoted lines are all enjambed. (The last, line 23, is end-stopped). That might be surprising when the reader takes a closer look at them. After all, it's not like there's one long, elegant sentence snaking through these lines. In fact, just the opposite is true: the passage is composed of three complete thoughts. The semi-colons in this passage could just as well be periods.

Furthermore, the three parts of this passage don't necessarily follow each other logically. Rather, the speaker's argument progresses by association—he fires off ideas and compliments as they come into his head, trying to see which one will convince his mistress to get undressed and get in bed with him. The enjambments, awkwardly positioned in the middle of these short sentences, thus reflect the pressure and force of the speaker's desire—which results in a disconnected, discombobulated argument.

Also note that, especially for older poems like this, punctuation isn't necessarily the best indicator of enjambment because it has so often been tweaked over the years by editors and publications; as such, we've marked some punctuated lines as being enjambed because that is likely how the reader will *experience* those lines.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "sight, / Is"
- **Lines 9-10:** "chime, / Tells"
- **Lines 13-14:** "reveals, / As"
- **Lines 15-16:** "shew / The"
- **Lines 17-18:** "tread / In"
- **Lines 19-20:** "be / Received"
- **Lines 20-21:** "thee / A"
- **Lines 21-22:** "though / Ill"
- **Lines 22-23:** "know, / By"
- **Lines 35-36:** "use / Are"
- **Lines 39-40:** "made / For"
- **Lines 41-42:** "we / (Whom"
- **Lines 42-43:** "dignify) / Must"
- **Lines 44-45:** "shew / Thy"
- **Lines 47-48:** "then / What"

CAESURA

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" employs caesura throughout the poem. The device plays a variety of roles. Sometimes, it simply separates the commands and instructions that the speaker issues to his mistress from the rest of the line, as in line 1:

> Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy...

Here, the caesuras neatly bracket the line, separating it into two sections—one in which the speaker issues a command to his mistress, "Come," and another in which he describes his condition: he can't fall asleep—"all rest my powers defy."

In other instances, caesura compensates for the poem's enjambments. Note, for instance, that the run of enjambed lines between lines 19-22 all contain caesuras. Often these caesuras mark the ends of disconnected phrases and sentences. In this way, the caesuras capture the force of the speaker's desire—so powerful that he can't quite control his poem. The speaker doesn't consistently align his sentences and his lines to create end-stops; instead, sentences and phrases end awkwardly and unexpectedly in the middle of lines.

The speaker also often uses caesura to divide his ideas, producing neat cuts in the line that balance one idea against another. For instance, take a look at line 24:

> Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

The line is an elaborate joke. The speaker is explaining how to tell the difference between ghosts—"ill spirits"—and angelic figures like his mistress. After all, both wear white. Ghosts make his hair stand on end with fright—but his mistress makes his "flesh" stand upright. In other words, she gives him an erection.

The caesura creates an opposition, a contrast, in this line. In

other words, by balancing and dividing the line, the caesura contributes significantly to the line's humor. It's funny in part because the speaker draws such a clever distinction between ghosts and angels, playing on the similarities and the differences between their effects on his body. This is an example of a role caesura often plays in the poem: it divides ideas, emphasizing their similarities and differences, allowing the speaker to draw the humorous possibilities out of those similarities and differences.

Caesura thus plays a variety of important roles in the poem, emphasizing the speaker's sexual desire, his commands to his mistress, and his humorous comparisons.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", " ", " ", "
- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 5:** ", "
- **Line 9:** ", "
- **Line 10:** ", "
- **Line 11:** ", "
- **Line 12:** ", "
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 17:** ", "
- **Line 18:** ", "
- **Line 19:** ", "
- **Line 20:** "; "
- **Line 21:** "; "
- **Line 22:** ", "
- **Line 24:** ", "
- **Line 25:** ", "
- **Line 26:** ", " ", " ", " ", " ", "
- **Line 27:** "! "
- **Line 28:** ", "
- **Line 29:** ", "
- **Line 31:** ", "
- **Line 32:** ", "
- **Line 33:** "! "
- **Line 34:** ", "
- **Line 35:** ". "
- **Line 36:** ", "
- **Line 38:** ", "
- **Line 39:** ", "
- **Line 40:** ", "
- **Line 41:** ", "
- **Line 43:** ". "
- **Line 44:** ", "
- **Line 45:** ": " ", " ", " ", "
- **Line 47:** ", " ";"

ALLITERATION

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" uses alliteration throughout the poem. Alliteration—especially a lot of alliteration—can make a poem feel artificial and literary. "To His Mistress Going to Bed" plays with this. After all, the speaker wants his mistress to feel like she's receiving an elegant and thoughtful series of compliments. Similarly, the speaker wants to work within the highly literary and artificial traditions of Renaissance love poetry—even as he disrupts those traditions.

Thus, the poem often contains thick runs of alliteration, as in lines 11-12:

> Off with that happy **b**usk, which I envy,
> That **st**ill **c**an **b**e, and **st**ill **c**an **st**and so nigh.

The passage plays with /b/, /s/ (and /st/), and /k/ sounds, layering them on top of each other. The lines are thus very musical, full of pleasurable repeating sounds. They aspire to the highest level of literary accomplishment: they want to be as elegant and beautiful as any line of Shakespeare's or Sir Phillip Sidney's. Of course, that makes them—intentionally—ironic, even funny. After all, the speaker is using this very courtly, polished, literary speech to tell his mistress to hurry up and take off her dress. The speaker is playing with the tension between the way the lines sound—courtly and elegant—and the things that they actually say—which are borderline pornographic.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses alliteration to emphasize the force of his sexual desire. Note, for instance, the /b/ sound that pops up in line 26:

> Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
> **B**efore, **b**ehind, **b**etween, above and **b**elow.

The speaker's getting pretty explicit here—asking his mistress if he can have the freedom to run his hands over her body. But his tone is not exactly sensual or caressing. Instead, he uses a hard, alliterative sound, the /b/ sound that appears in "Before, behind, between … and below." The hardness of the sound, its explosive force, and its persistence—running through the whole line—gives the reader a sense of what the speaker's sexual desire is actually like. It is insistent, demanding, even violent. It exerts an enormous pressure on the speaker, which expresses itself in lines like this, which bristle with energy and aggression.

The poem thus uses alliteration for a variety of different reasons—sometimes for its irony (pairing beautiful, courtly runs of alliteration with pornographic invitations), sometimes to convey the force and pressure of the speaker's sexual desire.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "C," "M," "c," "m"
- **Line 2:** "I," "I," "I," "I," "I"
- **Line 3:** "f," "f," "s"

- **Line 4:** “s,” “f”
- **Line 5:** “g,” “g”
- **Line 6:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 7:** “b,” “wh,” “w”
- **Line 8:** “Th,” “th,” “b,” “th”
- **Line 10:** “T,” “t”
- **Line 11:** “b”
- **Line 12:** “s,” “c,” “b,” “s,” “c,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 13:** “g,” “g,” “s,” “b,” “s”
- **Line 14:** “f,” “f,” “s”
- **Line 15:** “w,” “w”
- **Line 16:** “D,” “d”
- **Line 17:** “t”
- **Line 18:** “th,” “h,” “t,” “th,” “s”
- **Line 19:** “s,” “h,” “b”
- **Line 20:** “b,” “Th,” “b,” “th”
- **Line 21:** “th”
- **Line 22:** “w,” “wh,” “w”
- **Line 23:** “th,” “th,” “s”
- **Line 24:** “Th,” “s,” “ou,” “th,” “ou”
- **Line 25:** “L,” “l”
- **Line 26:** “B,” “b,” “b,” “b”
- **Line 27:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 28:** “M,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 29:** “M,” “M,” “M”
- **Line 30:** “b,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 31:** “T,” “b,” “t,” “b”
- **Line 32:** “m,” “s,” “m,” “s”
- **Line 34:** “u,” “b,” “u,” “b”
- **Line 35:** “T,” “t,” “j,” “G,” “wh,” “w”
- **Line 38:** “th,” “th”
- **Line 39:** “L,” “l,” “m”
- **Line 40:** “m,” “th”
- **Line 41:** “Th,” “m,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 43:** “M,” “s,” “Th,” “s,” “th,” “m”
- **Line 44:** “A,” “a”
- **Line 45:** “Th,” “th”
- **Line 46:** “Th”
- **Line 47:** “T,” “t,” “th,” “n,” “th”
- **Line 48:** “n,” “th,” “m,” “th,” “m”

ASSONANCE

“To His Mistress Going to Bed” uses assonance frequently, albeit inconsistently. Sometimes the poem engages in long runs of assonance; sometimes it abstains from the device for several lines.

The reader can hear one of these runs with the long and short /o/ sounds and the long /ee/ sound that appear in lines 34-35:

> As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth’d must be,
> To taste whole joys.

The /ee/ sound appears in “unbodied,” “bodies,” and “be.” Meanwhile, the long /o/ sound links “souls,” “uncloth’d” and “whole,” the short /o/ repeats in “unbodied” and “bodies.” It’s easy just to sit back and absorb the sound of the lines, so rich with soft assonant sounds.

In moments like this, the poem sounds great—as accomplished as anything by Donne’s contemporaries, like Shakespeare or Sir Philip Sidney. But it’s important not to miss an important tension between what the poem sounds like and what it says. It *sounds* elegant and refined. But it says something very risqué, even pornographic. After all, the speaker is saying that people need to be naked in order to fully enjoy the pleasures of sex—a not so subtle hint for his mistress to hurry up and take off her clothes. The poem thus employs assonance to create tension: between its elegant, traditional sound and its provocative content.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “o,” “a,” “o,” “y,” “y”
- **Line 2:** “l,” “a,” “l,” “a,” “ie”
- **Line 3:** “oe,” “i,” “oe,” “i”
- **Line 4:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 5:** “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 9:** “ou,” “o”
- **Line 11:** “a,” “a,” “y”
- **Line 12:** “i,” “a,” “e,” “a,” “i,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 13:** “e,” “e,” “ea”
- **Line 14:** “ea,” “ea”
- **Line 15:** “i”
- **Line 16:** “i,” “o”
- **Line 17:** “o,” “e,” “ea”
- **Line 18:** “e,” “e”
- **Line 19:** “ea,” “e”
- **Line 20:** “e,” “ei,” “e,” “i,” “ee”
- **Line 22:** “i,” “e,” “y”
- **Line 23:** “e,” “i”
- **Line 24:** “e,” “e,” “i”
- **Line 25:** “i,” “o,” “a,” “a,” “e,” “e,” “o”
- **Line 26:** “e,” “e,” “e,” “ee,” “o”
- **Line 27:** “O,” “y,” “y,” “a”
- **Line 28:** “y,” “o,” “o,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 29:** “y,” “i”
- **Line 30:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “ee”
- **Line 31:** “e,” “e,” “e,” “ee”
- **Line 32:** “e,” “e,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 33:** “ee”
- **Line 34:** “ou,” “o,” “o,” “ie,” “o,” “e”
- **Line 35:** “o,” “ou,” “u”
- **Line 36:** “A,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 37:** “a,” “e,” “i”
- **Line 39:** “i,” “i,” “ay,” “a”
- **Line 40:** “ay,” “ay”

- **Line 41:** "e," "e," "y," "i"
- **Line 42:** "i," "i"
- **Line 43:** "ee," "e," "ea," "ow"
- **Line 44:** "i," "ew"
- **Line 45:** "y," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 46:** "ue," "o"
- **Line 47:** "ea," "ee," "I," "y"
- **Line 48:** "a," "ee," "o," "a," "a"

CONSONANCE

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is full of consonance throughout. Sometimes that stream of consonance swells, and the poem's lines become thick, even glutted, with shared sounds. These sounds are chewy, harsh, and tough—not exactly what the reader might expect in a love poem or a poem of seduction. The poem *does* contain some soft, soothing assonant sounds, but those soft sounds are sometimes obscured by the poem's consonance. The reader should understand this as an echo of the speaker's intense sexual desire. As much as the speaker wants to be calm and seductive, his sexual desire is like a painful tension—a tension that expresses itself in the harsh sounds that run through the poem.

The poem's use of consonance thus tends to emphasize the force of the speaker's desire—and it also brings out some of its less savory dynamics, like the speaker's desire to possess his mistress. Pay attention, for instance, to the consonant and alliterative /m/ sound in lines 27-29:

> O my America! my new-found-land,
> My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd,
> My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie …

The /m/ sound is the dominant sound in the passage, in part because of the insistent repetition of the word "my." That insistent "my" emphasizes the speaker's desire: he wants to possess his mistress, to own her, to make her "mine." The /m/ sounds running through this passage also link the word "my" to a series of other words and phrases—"America," "Empirie," "man mann'd." These words are key to understanding the nature of the speaker's desire. He doesn't just want to possess his mistress: he wants to rule her, as a monarch rules his empire and his colonies.

Consonance thus helps to clarify not only the force of the speaker's desire, but also its troubling dynamics: the way it contains an implicit desire to dominate and rule his mistress.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "C," "m," "M," "m," "c," "m," "r," "m," "r"
- **Line 2:** "l," "l," "b," "r," "l," "b," "r," "l"
- **Line 3:** "f," "f," "t," "t," "f," "s," "t"
- **Line 4:** "t," "th," "s," "t," "th," "fi," "t"
- **Line 5:** "g," "l," "l," "n," "n," "g," "l," "s," "r"
- **Line 6:** "f," "f," "r," "r," "r," "ss"
- **Line 7:** "n," "n," "t," "l," "r," "t," "l," "t," "w," "w," "r"
- **Line 8:** "Th," "th," "b," "s," "s," "th"
- **Line 9:** "l," "r," "l," "f," "f," "r," "r," "m," "m"
- **Line 10:** "T," "m," "m," "t," "m"
- **Line 11:** "th," "th," "b"
- **Line 12:** "st," "ll," "c," "n," "b," "n," "st," "ll," "c," "n," "st," "n," "s," "n"
- **Line 13:** "g," "g," "s," "t," "s," "st," "t," "ls"
- **Line 14:** "f," "r," "f," "l," "r," "d," "ll," "sh," "d," "st," "ls"
- **Line 15:** "t," "r," "r," "t"
- **Line 16:** "r," "D," "d," "d," "r"
- **Line 17:** "ff," "th," "th," "th," "f," "t," "d"
- **Line 18:** "s," "l," "s," "ll," "t," "l," "s," "s," "f," "t," "d"
- **Line 19:** "s," "t," "b," "n," "s," "n," "s," "s," "t," "b"
- **Line 20:** "R," "b," "n," "Th," "n," "b," "r," "th"
- **Line 21:** "h," "h"
- **Line 22:** "ll," "s," "t," "s," "w," "l," "w," "t," "w," "s," "l"
- **Line 23:** "th," "s," "th," "s," "l," "s," "l," "s," "t"
- **Line 24:** "Th," "s," "s," "r," "r," "s," "th," "s," "r," "r"
- **Line 25:** "L," "c," "c," "m," "n," "d," "n," "d," "l," "m"
- **Line 26:** "B," "b," "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 27:** "m," "m," "m," "nd," "nd"
- **Line 28:** "M," "m," "wh," "n," "w," "n," "m," "n," "m," "nn"
- **Line 29:** "M," "M," "n," "p," "s," "s," "n," "s," "M," "m," "p"
- **Line 30:** "b," "s," "th," "s," "s," "th"
- **Line 31:** "T," "t," "r," "s," "b," "s," "s," "t," "b," "r"
- **Line 32:** "n," "n," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 33:** "ll," "n," "d," "n," "ll," "d"
- **Line 34:** "s," "s," "s," "nb," "d," "d," "b," "d," "s," "n," "d," "s," "b"
- **Line 35:** "T," "t," "t," "j," "G," "m," "y," "m," "u"
- **Line 36:** "l," "t," "l," "n," "t," "s," "ll," "s," "s," "t," "n," "n," "s," "s"
- **Line 37:** "t," "n," "l," "l," "n"
- **Line 38:** "r," "th," "l," "l," "th," "r," "th"
- **Line 39:** "L," "r," "r," "l," "r," "m"
- **Line 40:** "l," "m," "r," "ll," "m," "th," "rr"
- **Line 41:** "Th," "m," "s," "s," "m," "s," "c," "k," "s," "wh," "w"
- **Line 42:** "m," "r," "m," "g," "r," "g"
- **Line 43:** "M," "s," "s," "Th," "s," "th"
- **Line 44:** "l," "ll"
- **Line 45:** "Th," "s," "s," "ll," "th," "s," "l," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 46:** "Th," "n," "n," "n," "nn," "n"
- **Line 47:** "T," "t," "th," "n," "wh," "th," "n"
- **Line 48:** "Wh," "t," "n," "t," "th," "v," "m," "r," "v," "r," "th," "n," "m," "n"

SIMILE

The speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" uses similes throughout the poem. His similes can be divided into two broad groups. First, he uses similes to describe his mistress's beauty and the beauty of her clothing. Second, he uses similes to

convince his mistress to take off her clothes and have sex with him. That said, there's a lot of crossover between these two groups. In fact, the similes that characterize the mistress's beauty contain implicit hints that she should undress.

In the first stanza of the poem the speaker's similes fall into the first group. The reader can find a good example of this in lines 13-14:

> Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals,
> As when from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals.

Here, the speaker describes what it looks like when his mistress takes off her dress. To the speaker, she's like a "flowery mead": a meadow full of blossoming flowers. When she removes her "gown," it's like the moment when the skies clear: the clouds—and the shadow they cast—retreat, the sun bursting across the meadow. The speaker compares his mistress to something very beautiful, a meadow full of flowers. But, he says, when she takes off her clothes she is even more beautiful. The simile thus not only describes how beautiful she is. It also subtly suggests that she should take off her clothes.

In the second half of the poem, the speaker becomes much more explicit in his similes. The subtext of the earlier similes becomes text: instead of using simile to praise his mistress's beauty, the speaker uses simile to argue that she should take off her clothes and have sex with him. Note, for instance, the simile in 43-44:

> ... Then since that I may know,
> As liberally, as to a Midwife, shew
> Thy self ...

This simile comes as the culmination of a long argument. The speaker has argued that women's bodies are like "mystic books"—they contain sacred, semi-religious truths that only wise men should see or know. Therefore, the speaker insists (somewhat facetiously), she should take off her clothes so that he "may know" these truths.

Indeed, he suggests that she should display her naked body "as liberally"—that is, as freely—as she would to a "midwife," someone who helps women give birth. The simile does two things at once. First, it insists that the mistress should take off her clothes. And second, it compares the speaker to a midwife. He becomes a safe figure—not a voraciously sexual man, but a woman trusted with the intimate and dangerous act of childbirth. Nudity and sex become less threatening.

The speaker's similes thus move between different roles. At times they praise the mistress's beauty; at times they—implicitly or explicitly—make a case that she should get undressed and have sex with the speaker.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "that girdle, like heaven's Zone glistering,"
- **Line 6:** "But a far fairer world encompassing."
- **Lines 13-14:** "Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals, / As when from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals."
- **Lines 20-21:** "Thou Angel bringst with thee / A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise"
- **Lines 33-35:** "All joys are due to thee, / As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be, / To taste whole joys."
- **Lines 35-36:** "Gems which you women use / Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,"
- **Lines 39-40:** "Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made / For lay-men, are all women thus array'd;"
- **Line 43:** "Then since that I may know,"
- **Lines 44-45:** "As liberally, as to a Midwife, shew / Thy self"

METAPHOR

The speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" uses metaphor often—and his metaphors are important to establishing the poem's themes. The speaker's metaphors often hint that the poem's project—seducing the speaker's mistress—is not entirely innocent. Instead, it involves possession, domination, and even violence.

For instance, in lines 3-4, the speaker compares himself and his mistress to enemy soldiers, preparing to fight a battle:

> The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,
> Is tir'd with standing though he never fight.

The metaphor is a bit complicated, so it's worth breaking it down. The speaker starts the metaphor by comparing himself and his mistress to two "foe[s]": in other words, they are enemy soldiers. They can see each other—they have "the foe in sight." They are preparing to fight. The metaphor thus not only suggests that the speaker and his mistress are enemies. It also implies that sex is a form of combat, a battle between them—a battle that the speaker wants to win. In line 4, the speaker extends the metaphor further. Often, he notes, soldiers end up exhausted just from waiting and watching, even though they never actually engage in battle. This is a kind of warning to his mistress: she shouldn't be coy, shouldn't wait too long; he might end up exhausted from the long delay and lose interest in sex.

The metaphor in lines 3-4 thus subtly suggests that there are some dark dynamics at work in the relationship between speaker and mistress: sexuality, for the speaker, is a form of combat, involving victory, domination, even violence. These suggestions become much stronger in the second half of the poem, where the speaker calls his mistress "My America! My

new-found-land…" and describes her as "My Empirie." In other words, his mistress is like America: a continent that Europeans had just discovered, full of resources. At the time the poem was written, European powers were rushing to colonize and exploit it. The speaker's desire, then, is to rule the mistress, to make her part of his "Empirie"—his empire. He wants to make her into a "Mine of precious stones," a source of riches and material wealth.

Not all the speaker's metaphors are quite so dark—in line 18, for instance, he compares the bed that he and his mistress share to a "hallow'd temple" dedicated to "love." In other words, their bed is a holy space, sanctified to love. This metaphor is much sweeter: it even suggests that their love might be sacred, holy. The reader should balance these moments of sweetness against the darker metaphors that run through the poem—suggesting that the "love" the speaker has in mind involves both domination and a kind of sacred respect.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Until I labour, I in labour lie. / The foe oft-times having the foe in sight, / Is tir'd with standing though he never fight."
- **Line 7:** "spangled breastplate"
- **Line 16:** "hairy Diadem"
- **Lines 17-18:** "and then safely tread / In this love's hallow'd temple, this soft bed."
- **Lines 19-20:** "In such white robes, heaven's Angels used to be / Received by men"
- **Lines 27-30:** "O my America! my new-found-land, / My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd, / My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie, / How blest am I in this discovering thee!"
- **Line 32:** "Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be."
- **Lines 41-43:** "Themselves are mystic books, which only we / (Whom their imputed grace will dignify) / Must see reveal'd."

REPETITION

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" uses a lot of repetition. One of the most basic ways the speaker uses repetition is through diacope, when a word is repeated in close succession. For instance, in line 3, the word "foe" is repeated: "The foe oft-times having the foe in sight." Here, the repetition of foe captures the way that sexual dynamics depends on *two* people being present, in the same way that a battle involves two armies facing off.

The speaker also makes regular use of parallelism and antithesis, as in line 24:

> Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

Here, the speaker is explaining how to tell the difference between angelic figures like his mistress and terrifying ghosts. (After all, they both "walk in white," so someone might get confused.) Fortunately, the speaker announces, it's easy to tell the two apart. Ghosts make his hair stand on end from fear, but his mistress gives him an erection—she makes his "flesh" stand "upright."

The speaker uses antithesis to draw this opposition, carefully splitting the line into two parts. These two parts of the line almost exactly repeat each other; they have exactly the same grammatical structure (and so are also an instance of parallelism). This repetition makes the speaker's joke work. It establishes a similarity between what ghosts and the speaker's mistress do to his body—they both make part of it stand "upright." And it also makes the difference between ghosts and his mistress all the sharper and funnier.

The speaker often uses parallelism and antithesis in this way, playing on the meanings of words to establish effective contrasts. In doing so, he uses other kinds of repetition, like antanaclasis (when a word is repeated but with different meanings). There's an example of this in line 2:

> Until I labour, I in labour lie.

Here the speaker is saying that he won't be able to fall asleep until he has sex with his mistress. When he says "I labour" he's using the word as a metaphor for having sex; when he says "I in labour lie" he means that he can't settle down and go to sleep. So even though the speaker uses the same word twice in the same line, he uses it in different senses each time. The use of antanaclasis establishes a contrast that emphasizes the speaker's sexual desire—and helps him seduce his mistress.

Alongside diacope, antanaclasis, parallelism, and antithesis, the speaker also uses anaphora—as in the repetition of "un-" in "unpin" and "unlace" at the start of line 7 and 9. That anaphora creates a sense of rhythm, the speaker asking insistently for the mistress to take off article after article of clothing—and in that way it communicates that he won't be satisfied until she's fully undressed.

Finally, the speaker also uses polyptoton, as in line 28, where the speaker declares his mistress:

> My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd…

Here the speaker not only compares his mistress to a "kingdom"—something to be ruled—he also suggests that the best way to rule her is through monarchy, the rule of "one man." The speaker coins a new word "mann'd" to express this idea: here it means "ruled." The repetition of the word "man" in these different forms underlines the gender dynamics of their relationship: men rule and women are ruled.

The speaker thus uses a wide variety of different kinds of

repetition for very different purposes. But whether the speaker is using antithesis to set up a joke or anaphora to build a sense of the rhythm and intensity of his desire, repetition consistently works to help the speaker as he tries to seduce—and rule over—his mistress.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Come, Madam, come, "
- **Line 2:** "Until I labour, I in labour lie."
- **Line 3:** "The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,"
- **Line 7:** "Unpin"
- **Line 9:** "Unlace"
- **Line 12:** "That still can be, and still can stand so nigh."
- **Line 24:** "Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright."
- **Line 26:** "Before, behind, between, above, below."
- **Line 28:** "one man mann'd"
- **Line 34:** "As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be,"

ALLUSION

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" contains a couple of allusions. These allusions play an important role in the poem, helping the speaker describe his mistress's beauty—and, at the same time, helping him to establish his argument that her clothing conceals sacred truths, truths he needs to learn.

The first allusion falls in lines 20-21:

> ... Thou Angel brings with thee
> A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise ...

These lines refer to some contested verses in the Quran, the holy text of Islam. According to some translations, these verses promise that righteous Muslims will be rewarded in Heaven with forty virgins. However, many Islamic scholars dispute these translations. Islamic tradition is much more complicated than the speaker's allusion admits. In these simple, reductive terms, the speaker suggests that the mistress brings blissful sexual pleasure—pleasure so intense that the speaker imagines it's as good as anything in heaven.

Later in the poem, the speaker alludes to the Greek myth of Atlanta and Hippomenes. According to the myth, Atlanta—a virgin—refused to marry anyone unless they could beat her at a foot race. She was too fast for all her suitors, except Hippomenes, who threw golden apples on the path. Atlanta was distracted by the apples and lost the race—and, as a result, had to marry Hippomenes. In his allusion to the myth, the speaker switches things around. In his version, women are the one throwing up distractions—the clothes and gems they wear—which foolish men pursue, neglecting the things that really matter: the "mystic" truths that women's clothing conceals.

This allusion thus helps make the speaker's argument: he doesn't want to be like these fools, he needs to see the real thing. Donne probably knew the myth from its telling in the Roman poet Ovid's epic poem *The Metamorphoses*—an important source for Renaissance love poetry. Its appearance here thus strengthens the sense that Donne is both playing with and against the conventions of such love poetry.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 20-21:** "Thou Angel bringst with thee / A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise"
- **Lines 35-38:** "Gems which you women use / Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views, / That when a fool's eye lighteth on a Gem, / His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them."

VOCABULARY

Rest (Line 1) - Sleep. The speaker's saying that, until he and his mistress have sex, he can't fall asleep.

Defy (Line 1) - Refuse or prevent. The syntax here is a little scrambled—unscrambled it would read, "my powers defy all rest." The speaker is saying that he can't fall asleep.

Labour (Line 2) - "Labour" means hard work or toil. The speaker doesn't use the word literally either time he uses it line 2. The first time, "labour" means to have sex. The second time, the uses it as a metaphor: he's in "labour" because he can't fall asleep.

Oft-times (Line 3) - Often, sometimes.

Tir'd (Line 4) - A poetic spelling of *tired* that ensures it's pronounced as one syllable.

Standing (Line 4) - Waiting, watching. The soldier is prepared for a battle that doesn't come.

Girdle (Line 5) - A belt, which the mistress wears around her waist.

Heaven's Zone (Line 5) - The starry sky.

Glistering (Line 5) - Glimmering or shimmering. The embroidery on the mistress's belt glimmers in the candlelight of their bedroom and reminds the speaker of the sky above.

Unpin (Line 7) - Take off: to remove the pins that hold the mistress's bodice up.

Spangled Breastplate (Line 7) - An embroidered bodice or corset.

Th'eyes (Line 8) - *The eyes*, written to be read as one syllable (pronounced like "thighs" but with a voiced /th/, as in the word "the"). In other words, the glances of unworthy men.

Harmonious Chime (Line 9) - The ringing of a clock or watch to mark the time.

Busk (Line 11) - A piece of wood, whalebone, or metal attached to the front of a corset to make it tighter and stiffer. The word sometimes refers to the corset itself—and that's most likely the way the speaker is using it here.

Nigh (Line 12) - Near, close, intimate.

Beauteous (Line 13) - Beautiful, dazzling.

State (Line 13) - Appearance or condition.

Meads (Line 14) - Meadows or fields.

Th'Hill's Shadow (Line 14) - The shadow of the hill. "Th'hill" (i.e. "the hill") is written to be read as one syllable to preserved the meter (pronounced "thill") .

Steals (Line 14) - Quietly retreats.

Wiry Coronet (Line 15) - A small crown or garland, worn on women's heads.

Shew (Line 15) - To show or display.

Hairy Diadem (Line 16) - A crown of hair; the hair on the top of the mistress' head.

Doth (Line 16) - An archaic form of the word *does*.

Tread (Line 17) - Walk. Without her shoes on, the mistress can "safely" climb into bed.

Love's Hallow'd Temple (Line 18) - Love's sacred space. The speaker is saying that the bed he and his mistress share is like a church or sanctuary for love.

Received (Line 20) - Greeted, hosted, entertained.

Thou (Line 20, Line 48) - You. An obsolete and informal version of the word.

Bringst (Line 20) - An archaic spelling of *bring*.

Thee (Line 20, Line 30, Line 33, Line 47) - You. An obsolete word—when it was in use, it was more intimate and casual than "you."

Mahomet's Paradise (Line 21) - The Heaven promised in Islam—as the speaker understands it. In some traditions, a righteous Muslim is rewarded with virgins in Heaven. The speaker's understanding of Islam is stereotypical at best and does not reflect the full complexity of the religion.

Ill spirits (Line 22) - Ghosts or ghouls.

Evil Sprite (Line 23) - A ghost or ghoul.

Upright (Line 24) - The speaker is saying that his mistress makes his "flesh" stand "upright"—in other words, she gives him an erection.

Licence (Line 25) - Allow, permit.

Roving (Line 25) - Roaming. The speaker's hands are going all over his mistress' body.

America (Line 27) - North and South America, recently discovered at the time the poem was written and in the process of being colonized by Spain, England, and other European countries.

Safeliest (Line 28) - Safest, most secure.

Mann'd (Line 28) - Ruled, controlled. In other words, if the mistress is a colony, it's best if she's ruled by one man—as in a monarchy.

Empirie (Line 29) - Empire, the domains that the speaker rules.

Blest (Line 30) - Blessed, rewarded.

Bonds (Line 31) - Obligations or commitments. Literally, a *bond* is a form of restraint—like handcuffs or shackles—but the word is often used to refer to religious and sexual commitments that people make to each other, i.e. the "bonds of marriage." The speaker is playing on both senses: to be bound to his mistress is to be set free.

Seal (Line 32) - Imprint or signature. In the Renaissance, people would seal letters with hot wax and, while it was still soft, imprint it with a special stamp. This was a way of indicating who the letter was from. And it also helped assure the security of the letter, since one would have to break the seal to read it. The speaker is saying, then, that he is marking his mistress as his own, imprinting her with his "seal."

Unbodied (Line 34) - Without a body. In other words, a soul would have to be freed from its body to fully enjoy the pleasures of heaven.

Taste (Line 35) - To enjoy or experience.

Atlanta's Balls (Line 36) - In Greek myth, the virgin Atlanta rejected all suitors unless they could beat her in a foot race. One of her suitors, Hippomenes, came up with a clever solution: he dropped golden apples along the trail during the race, and Atlanta stopped to pick them up. That distraction allowed him to beat her and win her hand in marriage. "Atlanta's balls" are thus the apples thrown in her path to distract her.

Lighteth (Line 37) - Discovers, happens on.

Gay Coverings (Line 39) - Beautiful or bright covers for a book.

Array'd (Line 40) - Dressed, covered.

Mystic Books (Line 41) - Religious or holy books, like the Bible.

Imputed Grace (Line 42) - In Christian theology, *imputed grace* refers to how Christ's righteousness can save those who have faith in him; his righteousness becomes theirs. Here, the speaker adapts that concept to suggest that those who are faithful to their mistresses are rewarded by getting to see them naked.

Reveal'd (Line 43) - Naked; unadorned, unhidden.

Liberally (Line 44) - Freely: without shame or reticence.

Midwife (Line 44) - A woman who helps with birth. Thus, someone who would be very close to and intimate with a woman's body, albeit for medical reasons.

Thy (Line 45) - An obsolete and informal version of "yours."

Yea (Line 45) - Yes; indeed.

White Linen (Line 45) - Bedclothes or undergarments.

Penance (Line 46) - Shame, guilt.

Needst (Line 48) - An archaic form of "need."

Covering (Line 48) - Clothing or covers to hide the mistress's naked body.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is a 48-line poem, divided into 4 stanzas. The stanzas are uneven in length: the first is 24 lines long (meaning it makes up half the poem), the second is 8, the third is 14, and the final stanza is just 2 lines. The poem doesn't follow a set arrangement for the number of lines in each stanza. Instead, it follows the speaker's inclination—the stanzas swelling and subsiding in response to his passion and enthusiasm.

However, the speaker does use some of the elements of formal verse. The poem is written in iambic pentameter—though its meter is often rough. And it is generally in rhyming couplets, though at times the speaker uses the same rhyme for several couplets in a row. The poem is thus written in heroic couplets, a form generally reserved for stately, important, and dignified topics. That Donne would use such a form for a poem like this—funny and seductive—is part of the joke. Using a form like this, the speaker suggests that his erotic desire is as important as a heroic deed or a great battle.

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is also sometimes titled "Elegy II." This reflects a change in the meaning of the word "elegy" over the history of poetry. Nowadays, an elegy is a poem of mourning for someone who has died. But in Ancient Greek and Roman poetry, the "elegy" wasn't associated with death or mourning. Instead, it was associated with a specific kind of meter: elegiac meter.

In his elegies, Donne attempts to imitate that meter—and the classical poets who used it. This was a popular pursuit in the 1580s and 1590s, when Donne likely wrote the poem: poets and scholars like Edmund Spenser, Gabriel Harvey, and Thomas Campion expended considerable energy trying to adapt Greek and Roman meters to the English language. Here, though, Donne seems less interested in reviving classical meters and more interested in channeling the bawdy spirit of Roman poets like Catullus.

METER

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter has a da DUM rhythm, with five stressed beats per line. Readers can hear this rhythm in line 9:

Unlace | yourself, | for that | harmon- | ious chime

Donne is famous for what some consider his bad meter. His contemporary, the poet and playwright Ben Jonson, complained, "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging." In other words, Jonson was so offended by Donne's meter that he thought he should be executed!

Jonson—who always had a flair for the dramatic—was probably just being hyperbolic. In fact, many readers have found something enticing about Donne's unusual use of meter. However one feels about it, "To His Mistress Going to Bed" contains plenty of examples of Donne's loose, rough meter. Its lines are full of unexpected and disruptive metrical substitutions. For example, the first line of the poem starts with a spondee (stressed-stressed) and ends with an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed):

Come, Mad- | am, come, | all rest | my pow- | ers defy.

In other words, the line has an extra stress: there are six stressed syllables in the line, instead of the five a reader expects in a line of iambic pentameter. And the line has an extra syllable—it's eleven syllables long, not ten. Note, however, that some of this could be smoothed over by reading "powers" as one syllable:

all rest | my powers | defy.

This returns the line to 10 syllables.

Donne's language can be frustrating to readers with strict expectations about meter. This is partly due to his syntax—his sentences can sound a bit contorted:

Until | I la- | bour, I | in la- | bour lie.

The line is a good line of iambic pentameter. Notice, however, how the meter emphasizes the second "I" but not the first. On one hand, this might throw a reader off balance. On the other, this is an elegant use of meter that captures what it feels like to lie awake at night—until he has sex ("labour") the speaker is painfully focused on himself, stressing the "I."

Donne's meter can sometimes be distractingly unusual. But it also reflects the speaker's state of mind—so passionate and excited that he can barely keep his poem in control.

RHYME SCHEME

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is written in rhyming iambic pentameter couplets—also known as heroic couplets. Its rhyme scheme is thus, generally:

AABBCCDD ...etc.

Donne's poems can famously seem a bit sloppy in matters of

meter and rhyme—though many readers interpret this as an enjoyable, roughhewn quality. Many of the rhymes in "To His Mistress Going to Bed" reflect that quality.

Many of the poem's rhymes *are* strong and direct. But the poem also uses some rhymes that could be considered less effective—as in lines 5 and 6, where the speaker rhymes "glister**ing**" and "encompass**ing**." That's traditionally considered a weak rhyme: only the "-ing" at the end of each word rhymes; otherwise the words don't rhyme at all.

At one point, the speaker uses the same rhyme sound in back-to-back-to-back couplets, in lines 29-34. This creates an intense run-on effect, as if the speaker has gotten caught up in one particular line of argument.

And some of the poem's rhymes can be considered slant rhymes, despite the differences between the pronunciations of Renaissance and modern English. This happens in lines 41-42, with their rhyme between "we" and "dignify." All of this reflects a kind of sloppiness with the rhyme: the speaker isn't particularly interested in tightly controlling the poem's rhymes. He's focused on other things—like his intense erotic desire for his mistress. In other words, the poem's rhyme scheme reflects the intensity and passion of the speaker's desire: he's so overpowered by it that he doesn't worry about controlling the details of his poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is a man. He spends the poem speaking directly to a woman, his "mistress." The speaker follows some of the conventions of Renaissance love poetry—he offers a series of elegant compliments to his mistress, praising her beauty and the elegance of her clothing. But it becomes clear pretty quickly that he has more on his mind than a few innocent compliments. In fact, he is unusually frank and direct about his desires: he wants his mistress to get undressed and have sex with him.

At the center of the poem, then, is the speaker's intense erotic longing and desire—which expresses itself in his urgent and inventive language. The speaker keeps finding new ways to try and convince his mistress to have sex with him, employing new poetic devices to make his case. As a result—regardless what the reader thinks of the speaker or the poem's gender politics more broadly—the result is a dynamic, inventive, and engaging speaker. He always keeps the reader on their toes; the reader is never quite sure what will come next in the poem.

SETTING

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" is set in a bedroom—a warm, intimate domestic space that the speaker and his "mistress" share. It's a place where they get dressed and undressed, sleep, and have sex. The speaker doesn't tell the reader much about the room—the reader never learns how it's decorated or what kind of furniture they have. (Having a private room at all, however, was a considerable luxury during the period the poem was written, so the reader should imagine the speaker and his mistress as well-to-do, if not aristocratic).

When the poem occurs, it's nighttime and the lights are dim. The reader should imagine the space lit by candlelight, so the mistress's garments, her "glistering" girdle and her "spangled breastplate" catch the light from the candles and glimmer in the half-dark. All of this contributes to a sense of intimacy. Though the speaker is full of jokes and specious arguments as to why his mistress should have sex with him, he makes these jokes in an intimate domestic space that they share. As a result, these jokes feel different than if he was making them in, say, a crowded tavern. The jokes are part of the dynamic of their relationship: the reader might imagine them as part of a steady back and forth between speaker and mistress.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" was most likely written between 1593-1596, when John Donne was a young man. His early poems are often energetic and full of erotic desire, while his later poems focus on religious issues (though they too have plenty of sexual tension in them). At the time that Donne wrote "To His Mistress Going to Bed," English poetry was in the midst of a fad for love poetry. Poets like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare were all writing long sequences of love sonnets.

These poems had a lot of common features: they were all written by male poets and had male speakers; they were often about distant, inaccessible, and very beautiful women, whom the poets praised in excessive terms. For instance, these poets often wrote blazons: poems that praised individual parts of a woman's body, comparing them to different beautiful things. (Her eyes are like sapphires, her teeth are like pearls, etc.) And, finally, these poets often drew on classical models—particularly the Roman poet Ovid and his epic poem, *The Metamorphoses*. These classical texts gave the poets myths to work with and adapt—and they also gave them models for writing poems about sexual desire.

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" has a lot in common with the poems written by Spenser, Shakespeare, and Sidney. Like their poems, it performs a kind of blazon—albeit, one focused on the mistress's clothing. The speaker describes each article of clothing in detail as he asks her to take it off. And the poem shares some of the gender dynamics of other Renaissance love poems: it too features a male speaker addressing a coy, inaccessible woman—after all, the speaker needs to convince

her to take off her clothes! (And it also draws freely on Ovidian models: the reference to "Atlanta's balls" in line 36 is likely derived from *The Metamorphoses*.)

But the poem also diverges from its contemporaries in an important way: it is much more honest about the speaker's sexual desire. While most Renaissance poems beat around the bush, using euphemisms to avoid saying directly what the speaker really wants, "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is direct and frank: the speaker is open and unguarded as he expresses his sexual desire. In turn, that reflects John Donne's position as the leader of a group of poets called the *metaphysical poets*. The metaphysicals took existing tropes and clichés and extended and expanded them, sometimes to absurd degrees. Here, Donne takes the usual moves of the Renaissance love poet and exposes the intense sexual desire barely concealed beneath.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"To His Mistress Going to Bed" was written in England during the 1590s. The 1590s were a complicated time in English history and English literature. The decade is often considered the golden period of Elizabethan literature—with plays like *Romeo and Juliet* first performed and major poems like *The Faerie Queene* first published.

Politically, it was also a time of relative peace and prosperity. In 1588, Queen Elizabeth defeated a huge Spanish fleet, the Spanish Armada. That gave the country some safety and security from foreign threats. But it also exposed the country to internal insecurities. After all, Queen Elizabeth was aging and unmarried: she had ruled the country successfully for many years, but she hadn't produced an heir. So as the decade progressed, there were serious questions about who would rule England after her death.

The reprieve after the Spanish Armada was defeated allowed poets to turn inward, to focus on matters of the heart. But the anxieties about what would happen after Queen Elizabeth's death were never far from their minds—and created serious questions about female sexuality, independence, and political power. These questions often show up in the poetry of the period—even poems that are not directly related to English politics.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of John Donne — A detailed biography of John Donne from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)
- John Donne's Erotica — An article on John Donne's erotic poetry by Carolyn Kormann. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/john-donnes-erotica)
- A Brief Guide to the Metaphysical Poets — An introduction to the movement of Renaissance poets called "the metaphysicals," from the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-metaphysical-poets)
- 1633 Edition of Donne's Songs and Sonnets — Images of the first published edition of John Donne's poems—with some background about why "To His Mistress Going to Bed" wasn't included in the original edition. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-john-donnes-poems-1633)
- "To His Mistress Going to Bed" Read Aloud — Tom O'Bedlam recites a portion of "To His Mistress Going to Bed." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RLXJIO-Hn4)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- Death, be not proud
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising

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