



"I haue often such a sickly inclination": Biography and the Critical Interpretation of Donne's Suicide Tract, *Biathanatos*

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1. As we live in an age that accepts, and at times embraces, the notion that the personal is political and that personal politics are professional politics, it is odd that Donne's *Biathanatos* (written 1607-8, printed 1647) -- a tract that Evelyn Simpson found to be "an exercise in casuistry on the subject of suicide" -- is not seen by most as a document indicative of the personal condition of its author at the time it was written. Views on this aspect of the work do range rather widely, from Ernest Sullivan's contention that "neither [Donne's] personal life nor the text validate reading *Biathanatos* as autobiographical introspection" to John Carey's assertion that *Biathanatos* "constituted a giant suicide note, always ready for use."^[1] But the tract in which Donne argues "that Self-homicide is not so naturally Sinne, that it may neuer be otherwise" is, when not elided or lightly treated, a work that is more consistently disconnected from the author's own concerns at the time of its writing than it is associated with them. Indeed, of the critical images of *Biathanatos* that have emerged of late, the most coherent is that which considers it in light of the earlier paradoxes and satires, and treats it largely as a detached, impersonal, and scholastic (if parodic) engagement of his subject -- a work in keeping with Donne's theological and legal interests at the time of its composition and falling well within the boundaries of acceptable casuistry, an examination of the moral implications of an action. Even so, such an image is largely composite.^[2]
2. Clearly, it is not the case that the modern reader's primary interest in *Biathanatos* is its biographical implications.^[3] With several notable exceptions, when we give serious treatment to *Biathanatos* today we tend to resist the biographical reading. Perhaps we dissociate the situation of Donne's life from the matter of *Biathanatos* because of the conjectural and, at times, uncomfortable conclusions that some have drawn in the past about Donne's contemplation of suicide; perhaps, like Donne's Victorian biographer Augustus Jessopp and others, we wish to emphasise the religious character of the Dean of St. Paul's, and do not wish to focus on the fact that Donne would have, at some point in his life, considered suicide in a serious and personal way;^[4] perhaps, alternatively (and in keeping with some approaches to Donne's work that focus on his earlier career), we wish to embrace the idea of Donne as a lover and as a wit, not as a melancholic; perhaps, also, we have witnessed the excesses that biographical readings have produced in the consideration of several other authors roughly contemporary to Donne, and we thus

overcompensate with conservatism when we consider *Biathanatos*.

3. Certainly there are further reasons for dissociating Donne's personal situation and the matter of his suicide tract, chief among them the fact that approaching *Biathanatos* as a dispassionate exercise does have considerable critical rewards. This said, it should be more evident to us that, in divorcing *Biathanatos* from Donne's own experience at the time of its writing, we ignore what is its chief shaping element: the deep melancholy that pervaded the period of Donne's life in which he wrote it. *Biathanatos* is already seen as a work of intellect and detachment; so, too, should it be more thoroughly explored as a document that bears marks of Donne's personal condition at the time of its composition. To this end, my contribution reviews the evidence of that melancholic condition, and approaches that condition as evinced (and as perceived by others to have been evinced) therein in terms that relate to the intimate nature of *Biathanatos*, with specific reference to the implications of Donne's practice of casuistry and, further, to the distinct and personal image of Christ that the reader finds put forward as the model of the perfect suicide.

i. Life, Letters, and Work at Mitcham, ca. 1608; Critical Tendencies

4. *Biathanatos* is a product of the middle years of Donne's life, bordered on one side by his marriage and the resultant dismissal from Egerton's service in 1602, and on the other by his taking orders in 1615. It was written at Mitcham, a place Donne characterized as his prison, dungeon, and hospital. While *Biathanatos* was completed by ca. July 1608, it reveals, in addition to evidence of Donne's current melancholy, the cumulation of his previous interests and studies. At Lincoln's Inn (1592-6), Donne had read law and examined in detail the differences between the Church of Rome and the Church of England before his conversion. Later, while living at Pyrford (1602-5), Walton notes that Donne "studied the Civil and Canon Laws; in which he acquired such a perfection, as was judged to hold proportion with many who had made that study the employment of their whole life"; during this time and after, when Donne was trying to obtain a court position, he found some preferment by working with Thomas Morton to convert the recusants "by weight of reason, and not by rigour of law."[\[5\]](#)
5. In his time at Mitcham, and well beyond, Donne regarded friendship seriously, as his "second religion," and correspondence with friends of the time gives a clear insight into his troubled state of mind. Donne had engaged the topic of suicide -- and, to a lesser degree, melancholy -- in earlier works; consider, for example, the rather lighthearted treatment of suicide in his first paradox "That all Things Kill Themselves" and also in "That Only Cowards Dare Die," as well as that found in "The Legacie" (where the lover kills himself whenever he must leave his lady's company) and in "The Flea" (where Donne urges that the lady has committed murder and then suicide by killing the flea).[\[6\]](#) In his letters from Mitcham, though, we find a much more serious engagement. In these, Donne presents his life at times in terms of dying and death, which itself is approached with a certain embrace and compassion.[\[7\]](#) While Donne's fortunes were not so ill that he was unable to travel with Chute to visit Wotton in France, or to receive friends at his London room and "some rewards for his better substinance" (Walton 25), his mood was

characterised by deep depression. In a letter to Henry Goodyer in the spring of 1608, he speaks of illness, both sicknesses of the soul and diseases of the mind, as he chronicles the thoughts that have led to his depression: ". . . I hang leads at my heels, and reduce to my thoughts my fortunes, my years, the duties of a man, of a friend, of a husband, of a father, and all the incumbencies of a family" (Gosse 1:184). In his immediately-following letter to Goodyer, Donne continues in this vein, employing a stock theme: "Everything refreshes, and I wither, and I grow older and not better, my strength diminishes, and my load grows" (Gosse 1:185). This melancholy was the kernel out of which grew Donne's propensity toward thoughts of death and suicide; one finds this made explicit in a letter to Goodyer of 7 September 1608 (written shortly after the completion of *Biathanatos*): ". . . I have often suspected myself to be overtaken . . . with a desire of the next life; which though I know it is not merely out of a weariness of this, because I had the same desires when I went with the tide, and enjoyed fairer hopes than now . . ." [8]

6. As one might expect, the personal concerns dominating this period of Donne's life, as expressed in his letters, had considerable influence on his creative efforts of the time, efforts which were themselves highly personal in nature. *La Corona* (1608/9) was composed in the same "low devout melancholy" (1. 2) as was *Biathanatos*; in *La Corona*, the poet longs for the "endless rest" (1.10) upon which his "soul attends" (1.12). More directly, the first poem of *A Litanie* (ca. 1609) presents a suicidal image of the poet's heart, "by self-murder, red" (l. 6), as part of a plea for re-creation. [9] The preface to *Biathanatos*, though, remains among the strongest proofs of Donne's state of mind at the time; in keeping with what we find in the letters and shorter works, he discusses his attraction to suicide: "I haue often such a sickly inclination. And . . . whensoever my affliction assayles me, me thinks I haue the keyes of my prison in myne owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine owne sword" (29). As Donne notes, it is his own thoughts that have led him into "Meditation of this" (29).

7. Weighing such evidence, a number of commentators have, indeed, found biographical circumstances to be of some importance to the work itself. Certainly even those most reluctant to accept that Donne considered suicide in a serious way must at the least acknowledge, as one critic has stated, that "No one expends so much logic and learning as are deployed in *Biathanatos* . . . unless there are compelling personal reasons." [10] But acknowledgement of these personal reasons can come in many forms; for example, the chief thrust of the tradition that views the treatise as representative of Donne's situation handles *Biathanatos* largely as a work needing to be explained away in some manner, as if it were perhaps an embarrassment. [11] Consider the argument of Edmund Gosse, whose nineteenth-century *Life and Letters* provides one of the best narratives of Donne's personal and professional life, that *Biathanatos* is a work in which Donne persuades himself "that if he did some day yield to this weakness, and in a moment of despair throw off the intolerable load of life, he would yet have not committed a mortal sin" (1:263). With equal conjecture and in a similar vein, though with more restraint in his conclusion, Donne's modern biographer R.C. Bald finds that while "in the main, Donne seems to have kept such thoughts to himself . . . *Biathanatos* itself is proof of their persistence and of the need to find some such way of exorcizing them" (231); Bald comments, further, that Donne's motivation in writing was to overcome the temptation, "not by trying to banish it altogether from the mind, but by giving it full place there and at the same time rendering it innocuous by transferring it from the plane of action to that of learned investigation and

contemplation" (157-58) -- a more polished rendering, perhaps, of a notion expressed also by Le Comte, that Donne wrote of suicide to avoid it by being busy, just as Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, "write[s] of Melancholy, by being busie to avoid Melancholy."[\[12\]](#)

8. To read *Biathanatos* purely as autobiography, or as an extended suicide note, may overstate the biographical context's importance. Indeed, arguments akin to those put forward by Bald and Gosse urge very explicit connections between Donne's subject and his own concerns; they often do so, however, with considerable conjecture and, perhaps, less supporting evidence. A biographical consideration of *Biathanatos* need not involve so much conjecture, nor need it only assume such a firm association of Donne's own resolve and the focus of his intellectual contemplation.
9. With that firm association lost, though, there seems to be little critical middle-ground to be had -- even in consideration of the evidence provided by Donne's letters and other related works of the time. Some find that extant evidence provides only an occasional glimpse of Donne's melancholy, and that it is unlikely that an occasional mood could perpetuate an extended autobiographical thread in a work as complex as *Biathanatos*. Such a view, however, does not take into consideration the fact that autobiographical introspection can, and does, often take many forms.[\[13\]](#) Moreover, it is not at all clear that Donne's moods of melancholy were occasional; the matter and tone of his poetry and correspondence while at Mitcham suggest quite the opposite. Donne's interest in suicide was itself neither occasional nor fleeting, as is evidenced by the earlier *Paradoxes* and poems and by its being carried forward much further into his later work. Donne would subsequently, for example, argue against suicide, as in the Easter sermon preached at St. Paul's (1624) on the resurrection, but more often he would express his thoughts on death, and suicide, as he does in his final sermon, in which he declares "How much worse a death than death is this life, which so good men would so often change for death?" (X.11.235), and in the *Devotions*, in which he comments that "If man knew the gain of death, the ease of death, he would solicit, he would provoke death to assist him by any hand which he might use" (Meditation 16).[\[14\]](#)
10. The critic's tendency to see *Biathanatos* in a context wholly outside of that which considers Donne's overwhelming personal concerns is, however, strong -- and yet, also, rather incomplete. This tendency has its roots in an approach that sees *Biathanatos* situated (implicitly or explicitly) in light of Donne's earlier work, especially several of the poems and *Paradoxes*, and it is manifested in the treatment of *Biathanatos* as an exercise (serious or otherwise) founded in the tradition of casuistical treatise.[\[15\]](#) Donne's treatment of suicide as a subject in *Biathanatos* may, of course, be read in light of his earlier, more lighthearted approaches to the subject, but the best examples of a critical approach to a subject engaged by Donne at several points throughout his career will take into account the full development and complete progress of his thoughts on that subject. It is unusual, therefore, that Donne's early treatments of suicide -- especially in the context of a critical approach to *Biathanatos* -- are not afforded this consideration, for these early treatments are best viewed as the beginnings of his interest in the subject rather than final statements in themselves; they are the first stages of an evolution of thought that runs its course fully through Donne's entire career and includes those thoughts expressed in *Biathanatos*.[\[16\]](#)

Moreover, those more closely contemporary to Donne than we are today -- those who would recognize, perhaps, the differences (at times very subtle) between a well-wrought paradox, a whimsical parody, and a genuine scholarly tract -- did not approach *Biathanatos* as one might embrace his earlier paradoxes but, rather, reacted to the work quite seriously once it was printed in 1647, finding its arguments worth scholarly engagement.^[17]

11. It has, indeed, been rightly noted that approaches divorcing *Biathanatos* from the casuistical tradition are mistaken.^[18] Even so, Donne's casuistry cannot be seen as an end in itself when interpreting *Biathanatos*. While it is essential to an understanding of the work, to privilege the casuistical approach solely is to deny much. Donne had considerable choice in the matter upon which he wrote; the fact that he chose a topic which had lain heavily on his mind for some time, and one that would remain in his thoughts for some time to come, suggests strongly that the document had a personal importance to him beyond that of *Biathanatos*' method of exposition -- beyond that of his casuistical approach, or that of his early paradoxes. In consideration of this, and this combined with the context of Donne's personal life and the manifestation of this topic in other works of the time, if *Biathanatos* is to be approached at all accurately it cannot be approached solely as an intellectual exercise.

ii. The Casuist Treatise: Audience, Form, and Notions of "Public" and "Private"

12. Evidence of the importance to Donne of his own treatment of the subject of suicide in *Biathanatos* is found in the document itself, with regard both to its contents and to the history surrounding the manuscript. *Biathanatos*, first and foremost, was a private work, not intended to be circulated publicly. Though some are inclined to see the work as a discourse intended for a reading public, Donne clearly stated that he neither wished nor intended *Biathanatos* to be published.^[19] In a letter of 1608, Donne responds to Goodyer's request for what has been accepted to be the manuscript of *Biathanatos* and denies that he had intended to print it:

it is impossible for me to give you a copy so soon, for it is not of much less than three hundred pages. If I die, it shall come to you in that fashion that your letter desires it. If I warm again . . . you and I shall speak together of that before it be too late to serve you in that commandment. At this time I only assure you, that I have not appointed it upon any person, nor ever purposed to print it, which, later, perchance you thought, and grounded your request thereupon. (Gosse 1:196)

Neither might he, at that point, have considered printing many of his poems; but in 1614 Donne had expressed to Goodyer that he would, with some hesitation, allow his poems to be printed. *Biathanatos*, however, would never be accorded the same consideration. As Donne notes in a letter sent before Donne's trip to Germany in 1619, Donne entrusted the original to Robert Ker with specific instructions that it not be printed:^[20]

I have always gone so near suppressing it, as that it is only not burnt; no hand hath passed upon it to copy it, nor many eyes to read it; only to some

particular friends in both universities, then when I writ it, I did communicate it . . . Keep it, I pray, with the same jealousy . . . Reserve it for me if I live, and if I die I only forbid it the press, and the fire; publish it not, but yet burn it not, and between those do what you will with it. (Gosse 2:124-5)

There was a very personal audience for *Biathanatos* outside of Donne himself, for the manuscript circulated among Donne's close friends, including William Cavendish and Gervase Clifton as well as Edward Herbert, Robert Ker, and, likely, Henry Goodyer, to whom Donne promised it in 1608; but that audience was not a public one until Donne's son went against the wishes of his father and brought it out in print in 1647.

13. The existence of *Biathanatos* as a document intentionally kept private, to himself and a very few friends, during Donne's life speaks clearly to the perceived personal and intimate nature of its content, but the way in which the content itself is suggestive of *Biathanatos*' private nature is less obvious, becoming evident only with due consideration of others of Donne's works at the time. Because the preface shows Donne very much involved in addressing what appears to be a reading public, some assume that larger public to have been Donne's intended audience as he wrote the treatise[21] -- a view overlooking the possibility that, while Donne may appear to address such an audience, he need not have intended to offer the work up to that audience. *Biathanatos*, it is clear, was intended for Donne's private sphere; what is less immediately clear is how and why it takes a shape and form more suggestive of the public sphere.

14. Clues regarding the notion of public and private spheres of intended circulation, as they relate to *Biathanatos*, are found more apparent in his other works of this time. Chief among these are *La Corona* and *A Litanie*, in which Donne was engaging his exclusive group of intended readers with personal concerns in forms that gestured toward much larger audiences. By adopting the formal pattern of the rosary in *La Corona*, for example, Donne places his personal concerns into the larger, more universal and public context that the rosary gestures towards. The form and matter of *A Litanie*, moreover, suggests Donne's awareness of the larger audience that litanies would typically address; but, though its title and content suggest that the concerns therein were shared by a large group, *A Litanie* is extremely self-focussed, suited only to the concerns of the author himself.[22] *La Corona* and *A Litanie*, thus, both depict an implicit awareness of the perceived relation of form and intended audience, of how a work's form can suggest an audience much greater than that actually intended. To this must also be added Donne's demonstration of his awareness of this relation in more explicit terms, which is found in his letter to Goodyer in which Donne promises him a copy of *A Litanie*; here, Donne notes that, although his is a litany in form and nature, unlike the litanies commanded for public worship, his is intended for "lesser chapels, which are my friends" (Gosse 1:196).

15. Both *La Corona* and *A Litanie* are extremely personal in nature, and yet each strives to represent individual concerns in forms that are suggestive of more communal concerns, and to address a personal audience in forms that suggest an audience that is more universal, more public; in *Biathanatos* Donne adopts a similar strategy, treating concerns of personal import in a casuist treatise. The intention of *Biathanatos* to be an intimate work intended for private circulation among a small group need not, then, preclude its being in a

form akin to that one might initially expect to be more public than private, nor preclude its making gestures toward an audience suggested by that form, though the actual though the actual intended audience be much smaller than that to which is being gestured; nor does it prevent its author from engaging the ideas of others on his topic and, in doing so, placing those private and personal thoughts within a larger, more public, frame of reference.

16. The public form of the casuist treatise -- which suggests a more public and universal forum -- provides a vehicle in which Donne can situate his private thoughts for his small group of intended readers in a larger, more public context. Although the subject of suicide is also addressed by Donne in verse and in letter, the form of the prose treatise in the casuist tradition allows him a latitude of expression less common in other forms. Neither verse nor letter permits him to "roil the waters" of a taboo topic, suicide, as he is able to do in *Biathanatos*.^[23] In a way that he cannot do as poet or correspondent, as casuist Donne can "present and obiect" his argument "without any disguising, or curious and libellous concealing" (31); embracing this style of "intemperate malice," he can write about that which he wishes to be kept secret ("Nouum Malitiae genus est, et intemperantis, scribere quod occultes" [31]).

iii. Casuistry, Voluntarism, and Personal Control: Influential Exempla

17. The manner in which Donne chooses to engage his subject also carries with it a notable subtext, one quite suitable both to his treatment of the matter and to his own state of mind at the time. *Biathanatos* is very much a defence of suicide and, in the form that it is, acts also very much as an assertion of the Protestant casuist doctrine that "each person is responsible for judging the relation of general laws to particular circumstances according to the dictates of conscience and reason."^[24] Responsibility for and control over one's own life are significant elements in *Biathanatos*, and these concerns do not remain merely implicit. By way of example, Donne directs attention in one of his proofs to the church, centering his argument on the act of confession:

in the Church of *England*, When auricular confession is not vnder precept, nor much in practise . . . Who is Iudge of Sinne, against which no Ciuill Law prouides, or of which there is no Euidence? May I not accuse, and condemne my selfe to my selfe, and inflict what penance I will, for punishing the past, and auoyding like occasion of Sinne? (80)

18. The argument ultimately urges dominion over one's self and, with this dominion, advances that man must necessarily understand for himself the nature of sin, its penance, and the measures for its future avoidance. Later, noting in his conclusion the divergence he has made between "poynts of our free Will, and of Gods Destiny" (144), Donne reinforces the fact that man has an independent will; while it should lead man to act in accordance with divine destiny in matters of God's determination (such as death), he asserts that man has the ability and, thus, the self-control to act outside of them.

19. This concern for dominion over one's self, for personal control, is reflected strongly in

Donne's thoughts on his own circumstances. In Donne's thoughts, these concerns manifest themselves as ruminations on choice, and it is most notable by Donne's marked perception of its absence in his life. Most pointed in this regard is the letter to Goodyer of 7 September 1608, noted earlier, in which Donne confesses his own disposition to suicide, shows his desire for corporateness and laments the lack of control he has over his fortunes: "For to choose is to do," he writes, "but to be no part of any body is to be nothing"; he continues, "At most, the greatest persons are but great wens and excrescences . . . except they be so incorporated into the body of the world that they contribute something to the sustenation of the whole" (Gosse 1:191). In 1608, Donne was without that corporateness he so desperately sought, and had little control over those external forces that kept him from it. "To choose" may very well be "to do," but Donne's current state was something over which he had little choice, little control. Nor did he believe that he had control over his future, that he held the keys to that future in his own hands; rather, he felt only, as noted in his preface, that he held the keys to his prison (29). Itself an act of control over life, suicide presented to him a release from this situation, as his letters attest. And, in *Biathanatos*, Donne explores suicide in these terms, arguing against those laws -- natural, civil, and, especially, divine -- that deny him control of that aspect of his life (his death) over which he might most easily exercise such control.

20. In arguing for that paradoxical control over life by force of death, Donne's approach is one that consistently employs models, engages existing arguments, and uses exempla.^[25] From the first word of *Biathanatos* ("Beza") -- and notable also later in his discussion of Samson (who would concern Milton after Donne's son brought *Biathanatos* to print)^[26] and Job -- prominent among these exempla are the human figures he employs to strengthen his argument and to move one to a charitable interpretation of the action for which he argues. In considering the author's own circumstances while writing, one might expect Donne to sympathize with Job, yet this is not the case. Though Donne does propose that his inclination to suicide may be the result of his being tested by the Devil,^[27] his thoughts in *Biathanatos* do not focus on the torment of the suicide; rather, his argument centres on supporting the action of suicide under very specific conditions, and "onely, when the Honor of God may be promou'd by that way and no other" (136). While it was contemporary opinion that Job would have killed himself if it had been lawful to do so, Donne argues that Job did not commit suicide because, in doing so, he could propose nothing but his own ease (113).
21. Instead of looking in *Biathanatos* to one who exemplifies only the suffering he felt -- for this, perhaps, Job would have sufficed -- Donne turned to one who possessed the control he sought. He found this in the figure of Christ, whom Donne presents as the ultimate example of the proper suicide, one who satisfies the very particular circumstances in which such action is tolerable; "our Example is *Christ*" (133), he notes, and he argues that the good suicide will follow Him:

so it is generally sayd by Christ *That the good sheapheard doth giue his Life for his sheepe* Which is a iustifying, and approbation of our inclination thereunto: for to say, The good do it, is to say, They which do it are good. . . . we must remember, that we are commanded to do it also as *Christ* did it.

and, further:

A Christian Nature rests not in knowing thus much, That we may do it, That Charity Makes it good, That the good do it, and That we must allwayes promise, that is Incline to do it, and do something towards it, but will haue the present fullnesse of doing it in the resolution and doctrine, and example of our *B: Sauior*. Who says *De Facto, I lay downe my Life for my sheepe*. (127-8)

This is truly not suicide in the commonly-accepted sense, but a valid instance of the giving up of one's own life, of exercising that control over one's life by force of death. It is this notion that is fundamental to Donne's argument.

22. Employing Christ as a model is, perhaps, not so remarkable, yet Donne's use of Christ in *Biathanatos* attests further to the personal nature of the document itself, for Donne's sense of the importance of Christ to his own work, and to himself, is very remarkable. The beginning of Donne's tendency toward identification with Christ is seen in earlier poems such as "The Cross," wherein he speaks of becoming his own cross -- "Who can deny me power, and liberty / To stretch mine arms, and mine own cross be" (17-18) -- and in the departure scenes of "The Apparition" and "A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window," both of which suggestively place the poet in the role of Christ at the Ascension.^[28] That Donne felt a close personal affinity with Christ is demonstrated in works ranging from earlier poems through to the later sermons.^[29] and Donne's work at the time of *Biathanatos* especially reinforces this connection; they depict him not only casting himself in Christ's image but (in some part due to the nature of his meditations at the time) participating in, or wishing to participate in, Christ's experiences firsthand. The resurrection in *La Corona*, for example, is not Christ's but, rather, Donne's own; while not necessarily supplanting Christ's experience, we read Donne's experience through that of Christ. In *A Litanie's* "The Son," as well, Donne brings together the images of Christ's crucifixion and his own, as he entreats "O be thou nailed unto my heart / And crucified again" (14-15).^[30] Notably, upon taking orders some half dozen years after writing these lines and after writing *Biathanatos*, Donne would adopt an image of Christ as his personal seal.^[31]
23. *Biathanatos*, too, sees Donne focussing on the figure of Christ, although in a differing fashion. Here, Donne does not draw parallels as explicit as those in the poetry but, rather, Christ and Donne become associated at the level of a concern of Donne's that is engineered for them both; that is, in *Biathanatos* Donne manipulates the perception of Christ's experience to fit with his own concerns, presenting Christ as a figure who possesses that which he lacks -- displacing the prominence generally given to the mystery of Christ's resurrection,^[32] and instead focusing on the element of control which Christ has over His death:

And therefore as himselfe sayd *No man can take away my soule And I haue power to lay it downe* So without doubt, no man did, nor was there any other then his owne Will, the cause of his dying at that tyme . . . *His Soule sayth St. Aug: did not leaue his body constraýnd, but because he would, and when he would, and how he would*. (129)

These thoughts on the exact nature of Christ's death and their allusions to Christ's control over His death are echoed later throughout the sermons, as in that preached before the

Lords when the King lay sick at Newmarket, where Donne comments that "Christ dyed because he would dye . . . His soule did not leave his body by force, but because he would, and when he would . . . Christ did not dye naturally, nor violently, as all others do, but only voluntarily" (II.9.208). They appear, moreover, in the last sections of his final sermon, *Death's Duell*, in which Donne urges, similarly, adherence to Christ's example and reminds us of the "new way" to death which Christ found, a "voluntary emission" of His soul to the Lord (X.11.245, 248). Donne's thoughts on the suicidal nature of Christ's death, brought to a fullness of conclusion in *Death's Duell*, are very much the same as those expressed in *Biathanatos*, where they see their first clear articulation;[\[33\]](#) notably, "Through thy submitting all" (the twentieth sonnet of *A Litanie*), in which Donne writes

And through thy gallant humbleness
Which thou in death didst show,
Dying before thy soul they could express . . . (176-78)

sees their first repetition.

24. Christ's death, as expressed in *Biathanatos*, glorifies the power and control He demonstrates in yielding up His life, the very control that Donne lacks -- both *over* his life and *in* his life. While Donne's technique in the poetry is to project himself upon the figure of Christ, in *Biathanatos* he projects a particular view of Christ Himself: one adhering, in death, to Donne's immediate and personal concerns. Donne revels in the knowledge that Christ was able to choose the moment of his death, that Christ died a martyr, and that He died properly, deliberately -- much as Donne, it has been accepted, wished for himself and sought to emulate.[\[34\]](#)

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25. Discussing the "one tension that seems to have had a special importance" in Donne's early works, L.C. Knights has commented upon "the conflict between his sense of the enormous importance of his own immediate experience and the sense of his own inadequacy and unimportance, whether as John Donne or as representative member of the human race: the immoderate and hydroptic thirst for 'all' . . . clashing with the feeling of being 'nothing'" (109). Donne's ideas in *Biathanatos* very much reflect the thoughts of his life at the time in which it was written and, as Knights found, there are good grounds therein for an exploration of that sense of personal nothingness that Donne so clearly felt. *Biathanatos* provided for those of his close contemporaries familiar with his letters and poems -- much as it provides, today, for us -- further evidence of Donne's thoughts *on* and *of* suicide; moreover, it assists in demonstrating what was a concern that moved among the realms of solely intellectual contemplation and that governed his personal letters and most introspective poetry as well.

26. Even so, *Biathanatos* need not be considered Donne's ready suicide note, nor need it stand as something to be explained away as an embarrassment. As it manifests itself in *Biathanatos*, the rich biographical context that might well lead to such treatment should, rather, be more completely and fully explored, for it is an essential guide to the rightful

consideration of the work. In what was doubtlessly a document not intended for eyes beyond an immediate few, though in a form that gestured towards a much larger and more public audience, Donne's decision to explore in *Biathanatos* the nature of the proper suicide through a figure he employed in his poetry of the time to explore himself is remarkable. It asserts Donne's projection of personal concerns into the matter of *Biathanatos* in a way far more profoundly than any critical engagement of casuistical rhetoric, or parodic engagement, or paradoxical logic, by itself might reveal.

Notes

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1. See Simpson (144). The summary of *Biathanatos*' argument is taken from the title page of *Biathanatos*. All quotations are from Ernest W. Sullivan's edition; poetry is quoted from Carey's *Oxford Authors* edition of Donne's works.

Donne's *Biathanatos* is available to us in three recent editions, those edited by Sullivan, by Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin, and by William A. Clebsch; from here forward, all reference to materials in these editions will cite its editor(s). For a comparative review of recent editions, see W. Speed Hill's "John Donne's *Biathanatos*: Authenticity, Authority, and Context in Three Editions."

For these disparate views, see Sullivan (x) Carey presents one of the more comprehensive views of *Biathanatos* in its literary and biographical context (204-16; quotation from 209).

2. The comprehensive introduction found in Sullivan's 1984 edition of this work does much to situate *Biathanatos* in this manner. Brief and useful overviews of critical opinion are given by Sullivan, in his introduction, by Rudick and Battin (xviii-xxi) and, with reference to the disparate nature of such opinion, by Meg Lota Brown (153-4); see also "*Biathanatos*: Moral Relativism and Moral Authority," 76-83 in her *Donne and the Politics of Conscience in Early Modern England* (76-7), George F. Butler (201-202), and Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy (91-2).

3. Warnke notes this in his *John Donne* (90). Warnke also refers to *Biathanatos* as "highly personal and deeply disturbing" (8) and "revealing in the extreme" (89).

4. See Jessopp.

5. For Donne's characterisation of Mitcham, see his letters of 1607-08 to Lucy, Gerrard, and Goodyer (Gosse 1:177, 1:189, 1:194). For his comparative study of the Churches of England and Rome, see Bald (53); see also *Pseudo-Martyr*, where Donne discusses this study (B2^v-3^r).

See Walton (25). Regarding work with Morton, see Leishman (33); though the exact nature of his work with Morton has been disputed (Bald 202-12), there is support for his involvement; see Gosse (1:150 ff.).

6. Donne expresses this view of friendship in his letter to Henry Goodyer, July 1607 (Gosse 1:170). In addition to his paradoxical uses of suicide in early works, Donne had also discussed melancholy but, again, with what appear to be less serious concerns: see the verse letters to T.W. and R.W., "At once, from hence" (line 7) and "If, as mine is" (line 10).

7. As Leishman notes, Donne "often suggests that he regards his life since 1602 as a kind of prolonged dying from which death would be a merciful release" (39).

8. Gosse (1:191); see also Gosse (1:173), and Roberts' discussion of the letters which express this sentiment (959). In 1609, Donne also wrote that he had "tried how I can induce to be my own grave" (*Letters to Several Personages of Honour* 19) and much later, in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, that he was voluntarily his own executioner (78) and that he brought "that execution upon himself" (8).

9. In responding to Goodyer's request for *Biathanatos*, Donne writes promising to send *A Litanie* to him: "Since imprisonment in my bed, I have made a meditation in verse, which I call a Litany . . . and though a copy of it were due to you now, yet I am so unable to serve myself with writing it for you at this time . . . that I must intreat you to take a promise that you shall have the first, for a testimony of that duty which I owe to your love" (Gosse 1:196).

10. See Knights (111); see also below, n. 12.

11. As Larson notes, for many biographical critics--chiefly the early ones, but evident to this day--*Biathanatos* was an embarrassment "to be somehow explained away" (55).

12. Le Comte (109). Burton (1:6). This view is also embraced by Rose who comments that

It is essential, to understand the message of Donne the preacher, to experience, as far as possible, the terrible catharsis which he underwent. This is narrated by Gosse, who gives us Donne's own words on the protracted melancholy and dejection which descended upon him when he was poor, often unwell, thwarted and near to despair. These were the days when he wrote *Biathanatos*, a mitigation, to some degree, of suicide; . . . but this casuistical exercise was itself positive creation enough to check his self-despair, and the means whereby, stating a position, he disentangled himself from it . . . (10-11)

For other works which embrace the biographical approach, see Roberts, Knights (109-16) and Allinson (31-46) who, in addition to Carey and others, have also noted the importance of the biographical context to *Biathanatos*.

13. Relying in part on Bald's statement, that "Only occasionally in the letters are

there glimpses of the mood out of which *Biathanatos* grew" (231), Sullivan argues that

It seems unlikely that an occasional mood could sustain creation of the long and complex *Biathanatos*. Donne's misfortunes and melancholy may have indeed led him to contemplate suicide and sympathize with suicides; however, neither his personal life nor the text validate reading *Biathanatos* as autobiographical introspection. (x)

14. Other examples are provided above; also Carey, in his *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art*, more fully contextualises this theme (214-19). Moreover, in the Easter sermon, Donne states as follows:

If thou desire . . . To be dissolved, and to be with Christ, go Christ's way to that also. He desired that glory that thou doest; and could have laid down his soul when he would; but staid his houre, sayes the Gospel. He could have ascended immediately, immediately in time, yet he staid to descend into hell first; and he could have ascended immediately of himself, by going up, yet he staid till he was taken up. Thou hast no such power of thine own soul and life, not for the time, not for the means of coming to this first resurrection by death. Stay therefore patiently, stay chearfully Gods leisure till he call; but not so over-chearfully as to be loath to go when he calls. (*The Sermons of John Donne* 7.2.79).

Regarding the sentiment of Meditation 16 of the *Devotions*, see also Roberts (959).

15. Noting that the work is a "mocking disquisition on suicide," wherein the comedy of it "is in building an awesome machine that doesn't work," Hughes points out that "*Biathanatos* has affinities with the *Paradoxes and Problems* of the earlier years" and notes that "there may even have been no appreciable lapse between those short equivocations" (57, 149, 147); Colie notes that "Donne's early images of suicide in his poems are syntactical and logical paradoxes, self-cancellations, pointed to the paradoxes of love and living" (496); Le Comte notes a similar progression from the paradoxes to *Biathanatos*, though comments on *Biathanatos*' larger scale (107, 109); Slights finds it to be a parody of the casuistry Donne employs in pursuit of his argument (141); and, more recently, Strier's article on Donne's "Satire III" presents *Biathanatos* as its best guide (283-322).

As noted by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, casuistry is "that part of Ethics which resolves cases of conscience, applying the general rules of religion and morality to particular instances in which 'circumstances alter cases,' or in which there appears to be a conflict of duties." The topic is discussed and treated in detail by Slights (137-49) and Malloch (51-76), among others, and Clebsch (ix ff.) and Sullivan (xii) urge this course of interpretation in the introductions to their editions.

16. See Roberts, who comments that these early works "contain the first clear enunciation of a theory of nature that partakes of an impulse toward suicide" (966).

17. See Sullivan for an excellent overview of the critical reception (xxviii-xxvi). As

he chronicles, once published in 1647, *Biathanatos* was noted often, and given serious treatment, in related works. William Denny, in his *Pelecanicidium or the Christian Adviser against Self-Murder* (1653), worries that some may find the authority to kill themselves in "some late published paradoxes," probably Donne's. Charles Blount, in his *Two First Books of Philostratus* (1680), finds *Biathanatos* to be a successful defence of suicide; he refers the reader to "that excellent Treatise entitled [*Biathanatos*] and written by that eminent poet and divine, Dr. Donn[e], the Dean of Pauls; wherein, with no weak Arguments, he endeavours to justifie out of Scripture, the Legality of self-Homicide." *Biathanatos* was also mentioned in the serious contexts of Thomas Philipot's *Self-homicide-murder* (1674) and Ezra Pierce's *Discourse of Self-Murder* (1692). In John Cockburn's *Discourse of Self-Murder* (1716), it is called "the most Imprudent as well as most Dangerous Book that was ever publish'd." *Biathanatos* is examined as well in the year of its second edition (1700) by J. Adams in his *Essay Concerning Self-Murder . . . With Some Considerations upon What is pretended . . . by the Author of a Treatise, intituled, Biathanatos*.

18. It is so, specifically, because it can lead to a mistaken notion of what Donne's work asserts about the nature of the individual; as noted by Brown, "Critics who divorce *Biathanatos* from the casuistical tradition misconstrue the work as an assertion of radical individualism" ("Interpretive Authority," 158).

19. In the introduction to their edition, Rudick and Battin view *Biathanatos* not as a "private work with a private application and import" but, rather, as a discourse "addressed to a public" (xiii).

In his *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*, Harold Love employs *Biathanatos* as an example of a certain type of publication in the scribal medium (39-41), noting also that it is clear that Donne regarded *Biathanatos*, as with other of his works, to be "remaining in the private sphere" (51). See also Miller, who addresses the concerns of audience (9-11).

20. Regarding his letter to Goodyer of 20 December 1614, Donne writes of his concern that "I am brought to a necessity of printing my Poems" (*Letters to Several Personages of Honour*, no. 65).

Sometime between his travels to Germany and 1629, Donne gave a manuscript -- which is not in his autograph but does contain revisions in his hand -- to Edward Herbert; this is the only manuscript extant (Bodleian Library MS e Musaeo 131). In the accompanying letter, Donne does not refer to his desire that it not be published, but does elaborate on the possible reaction to its matter; referring to the book's place on Herbert's bookshelf, Donne writes that "If any . . . suspect it of new or dangerous doctrine, you who know us all can best moderate" (Gosse 2:125). Simpson suggests that, at the time Donne gave the manuscript to Ker, Herbert's copy had already been made and that Donne had forgotten about it (148).

Note: See also Peter Beale's "'It shall not therefore kill itself; that is, not bury itself': Donne's *Biathanatos* and its Text" (31-57 in his *In Praise of Scribes* [Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998]) which came out at the time of this paper's going to press.

21. Rudick and Battin, for example, comment that Donne imagined "a wider audience, in fact a community limited only by the English language" (xv) in writing the treatise. Simpson further conjectures that "his intention at the time of writing the preface was to publish the book, though he was aware that it might scandalize some" (154). Possibly this is the case, yet this suggestion contradicts Donne's intentions expressed shortly after finishing the treatise, as well as in his later correspondence about it.

22. As Hughes comments, *A Litanie* is evidence of "Donne's attempt . . . to create a communion with others, at least to imagine a corporateness he had earlier disdained" (138, 157). On the personal nature of *A Litanie*, see Helen Gardner's edition of *The Divine Poems* (xxviii).

23. See the motto on *Biathanatos*' title page which, as Brown translates, reads as follows: "I do not profess everything to be true. But I will roil the waters for the readers' profit" ("Interpretive Authority," 155).

24. Quoted from Brown ("Interpretive Authority," 152). Colie, too, finds this element of voluntarism largely as a result of the form Donne chooses; she notes that "the whole *Biathanatos* is an argument, not so much for suicide, as for voluntarism, for the responsibility of each man to make conscious decisions about his life and therefore about his death" (504). Strier also discusses briefly the work's "assertion of the authority of the individual" (306). See also Malloch, and Williamson's "The Libertine Donne" (276-91).

25. The casuist model, for example, affords him a vessel well-suited to his intentions for the subject; in his accommodation of the Thomist model of sin, Donne gains the larger three-part structure of his argument (see Sullivan, xxvii); and the great thinkers of the past provide him with arguments against (and upon) which he must model his own.

26. With regard to Milton and Donne's treatment, see Butler and, also, Goekjian.

27. Donne writes that he may be considering suicide because "the common Enemy find that dore worst lockd against him, in mee" (29).

28. Of "The Apparition," Robert G. Collmer finds Donne's departure akin to that of Christ: "As Christ informed his disciples about His imminent departure and return . . . so Donne predicts his demise and reappearance" (37). As well, Gary Stringer finds that "A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window" "identifies the lover [Donne] with Christ, the mistress with a disciple (or the Church), and generally recalls Christ's parting from His disciples at the Ascension" (228). Carey also provides further instances (214 ff.).

29. His sermons show his interest in relating himself and his experience to Christ's, and also suggest that he derives strength in doing so. At Lincoln's Inn, speaking about the burdens of man, Donne says:

Though *mine iniquities be got over my head*, as a wall of separation, yet
 . . . *In Christ I can doe all things*; Mine iniquities are got *over my head*;

but my *head is Christ*; and in *him* I can doe whatsoever *hee* hath done,
by applying his sufferings to my soule for all . . . (II.5.143)

Traditional thought, perhaps, but thought to which Donne subscribed. Later, speaking about the rest that death brings with it, he says

. . . we depart, when we depart from sin, and we rise, when we raise ourselves to a conformity with Christ and not onely after his *example*, but after his *person*, that is, to hasten thither, whither he is gone to prepare us a room. (V.10.213)

30. See Smith (516), who also comments of *La Corona* that "Donne himself, and not Christ, has become the subject of the poem" (517).

One finds similar instances in later poems, also. Of the later poems, consider, for example, the "*Holy Sonnet* Spit in my face"; in others of the *Holy Sonnets*, Donne strives to "replace Christ at their centre by drawing attention to his own sin and consequent suffering" (Smith 516). The *Divine Poems* on the whole can also be seen, as Almon Altizer does, as depicting "Donne's expressed need to find his own identity with respect not only to God and Christ, but also to the Anglican Church" (70). *La Corona* and *A Litanie* reflect the very early stages of this process.

31. Noted in Gardner (139).

32. For discussion of this, see Allinson (38-9).

33. For other examples of this in the sermons, see II.5.141, V.5.121, and VI.2.79, among others. Of Donne's last days, see Judith Anderson's "Life Lived and Life Written: Donne's Final Word or Last Character" (252-6).

34. Of martyrdom, Donne notes that one of the reasons he may have written *Biathanatos* is that his "first breeding, and conversation with Men of a suppressd and afflicted Religion, accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of an imagin'd Martyrdome" (29) has influenced him. He devotes much energy to a discussion of that "new way of profusing . . . Life" (53; 53-62) which is martyrdom, and refers to it in his poetry as well. See, for example, *A Litanie*, "The Martyrs," wherein he states "for oh, to some / Not to be martyrs, is a martyrdom" (lines 89-90); he had also previously approached martyrdom in "The Funeral," where he envisions himself as "Love's martyr" (line 19).

Smith discusses Donne's identification with Christ in the sermons, particularly *Death's Duell*: "Perhaps Donne saw this power as an integral part of Christ's victory over death. Perhaps, through the complete conformity with Christ in his death which he preached, he hoped that in the hour of his own death he might have the same choice" (524).

Donne's actual death, indeed, is noteworthy for the degree of control he apparently had. Although Walton compares Donne to St. Stephen, who looked at heaven and then chose to die, Walton presents Donne's death as akin to the *type of Christ* pattern; as Walton notes, "he did, as St. Stephen, look steadfastly into [the illumination of heaven], till he saw the Son of man, standing at the right hand of

God his father . . ." (76; Samson is later mentioned in a similar context in *Death's Duell* [X.11.241], and in *Biathanatos*, Donne assigns Jonah [134] and Samson [137] to the *type of Christ* pattern; also discussed as suicides are Saul [137-8], Judas [139], and Achitophel [139-40], but not as types of Christ). Walton furthermore, appears to depict the dying poet exercising the same degree of control over death that Donne himself had shown of Christ; he writes that Donne "closed his own eyes; and then disposed his hands and body into such a posture as required not the least alteration by those that came to shroud him" (76), much as if Donne deliberately yielded his soul. There is an element of intention also in Donne's actions preceding his death, such as the pose for his final portrait, which suggests death more than old age--he appears gaunt, eyes closed and shrouded, as if dead--and that "he took a solemn and deliberate farewell" of his friends (75).

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