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Catholic Conversion and Incest in Dryden's "Don Sebastian"

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John Dryden's decision to end his 1689 tragedy, *Don Sebastian*, with the discovery of an act of incest has persistently puzzled the play's readers. The historical Sebastian almost certainly died in the battle which immediately precedes the events of the play; a slightly delayed death would therefore have been a logical conclusion to the play. Or, Dryden could have followed the traditions of romance and legend, which took hope from the fact that Sebastian's body had never been found. These stories, which grew up among the Portuguese after they had been conquered by Spain in 1580, held that Sebastian had survived and would one day return to rule Portugal. Such legends no doubt played a role in Dryden's decision to make Sebastian the subject of his first post-Glorious Revolution play. Dryden and other supporters of the recently exiled James II hoped that their lost sovereign would return to the throne someday.

Dryden, however, denies Sebastian an honorable death (or a dishonorable one, for that matter), and he denies him the option of one day returning to rule. In the play's final scene, Sebastian and his Moorish wife, Almeyda, discover that they are half-siblings. The characters are stunned to find their moment of triumph transformed into tragedy. Sebastian is so stricken by the horror of his crime that he renounces his kingship, lest his incest "pollute the Throne" (5.1.538).[1] There will be no restoration of this exiled king. Dryden thus not only rewrites both history and romance, but does so in such a way as to undermine the Jacobite implications of Sebastian's legend. Moreover, in the preface that was printed with the play in 1690, Dryden admits that he has "*no right to blast his* [Sebastian's] *memory with such a crime*" and requests that his readers "*think it no longer true, than while they are seeing it represented*" (15: 68). When a playwright acknowledges that his most significant original contribution to his play is an act of slander, we may reasonably ask why he believed his fabrications were so important to the story he wished to tell.

I believe hints to an answer appear earlier in the same scene. Sebastian and Almeyda's agonizing separation is preceded by the joyous reunion of the play's comedic heroes, An-

tonio and Morayma. Although the fates of these two couples could not be more different, Antonio and Morayma's dialogue—in which they tease each other about their irrepressible sexuality and lack of religious devotion—foreshadows the coming revelations of sexual sin and providential punishment. Morayma claims that in Portugal, churches serve primarily as places for men and women to rendezvous for affairs. Antonio affirms this is true, and adds,

> I hear the Protestants an't much reform'd in that point neither; for their Sectaries call their Churches by the naturall name of Meeting-houses. Therefore I warn thee in good time, not more of devotion than needs must, good future Spowse; and allways in a veile; for those eyes of thine are damn'd enemies to mortification. (5.1.102-107)

To which Morayma replies,

> The best thing I have heard of Christendom, is that we women are allow'd the priviledge of having Souls; and I assure you, I shall make bold to bestow mine, upon some Lover, when ever you begin to go astray, and, if I find no Convenience in a Church, a private Chamber will serve the turn. (5.1.108-12)

The irreverent wit with which they discuss their relationship contrasts sharply with the tragic seriousness of Sebastian and Almeyda's marriage. Yet Morayma's impending conversion will expose her to new sexual temptations in Portugal, just as Almeyda's recent conversion made possible her marriage to Sebastian and the incestuous crime they have committed.

As we shall soon see, this is not the first time in the play that Antonio and Morayma have used the terminology of religion to discuss sexual affairs, or vice versa. In fact, the play often associates courtship and marriage with religious choice, particularly in the development of Antonio and Morayma's relationship. And *choice* is clearly at the heart of this exchange. Dryden takes this moment, just before the play's tragic revelations, to highlight the divisions within Christianity. Thus far, the play has (ostensibly) portrayed a conflict between Christian Europe and Islamic North Africa. Now, Antonio and Morayma acknowledge that Portugal's church is not the only church in Europe, that "Protestants," "sectaries," and "reform'd" churches are also part of "Christendom." Morayma is not simply becoming a "Christian" like the virtuous Moors in Dryden's earlier *Conquest of Granada* plays; she is becoming a Catholic.

Furthermore, by joking about the covert nature of love affairs, Antonio and Morayma treat religious worship as a clandestine practice. Morayma will go veiled to church; she will make a secret of where she bestows her soul; and if the public church does not "serve [her] turn," she will find a "private Chamber" for her devotions. In a play written by an English Catholic convert in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, at a time when Catholics were

forced to abandon the public worship they enjoyed under James II's brief reign for the refuge of their closet shrines and private chapels, this is suggestive language. And again, it foreshadows the coming revelations, which lead Sebastian and Almeyda to abandon their thrones and secretly seclude themselves in penitential religious retirement. Sebastian and Almeyda's tragedy darkly reflects Dryden's, whose conversion to Catholicism had forced him out of his laureateship and the circles of public authority monopolized by the Church of England.

This is not to say that *Don Sebastian*'s tragic plot is an allegory for the state of English Catholicism in 1689, of course; such a claim would fall apart under even casual scrutiny. I am merely noting that Catholics could easily have identified with the fate of Sebastian and Almeyda, and, more importantly, that Dryden's language often encourages them to do so. This essay seeks to explore such language, and its implications for understanding the play, particularly its conclusion in a discovery of incest.

This essay is divided into four parts. The first briefly discusses previous readings of the role of incest in *Don Sebastian*, and makes a case for taking the play's engagement with religious subjects as seriously as its engagement with political subjects. The second part examines the play's portrayal of its numerous religious converts, suggesting that the emphasis on the physicality of these converts and the physical needs which drive their conversions taps into a religious discourse which associated physicality of worship and sacrament with Catholicism. This is especially true of language evocative of transubstantiation. The third part looks closely at how Dryden associates Sebastian and Almeyda with the Eucharistic sacrament throughout the play. The final part argues that Sebastian and Almeyda's discovery of their incestuous crime may be read as a traumatic conversion experience, one which reflects the personal sacrifices necessary to become Catholic in 1680s England, or to remain Catholic after the Glorious Revolution. By associating Catholic conversion with the discovery of a terrible but unintentional crime, the play seeks to elicit sympathy and understanding for the plight of the Catholic community.

Reading *Don Sebastian*

Arguments about Dryden's rationale for making Sebastian guilty of incest have been offered by a number of scholars. Derek Hughes and Hugh MacCallum, who have both written on the play's Christian piety and criticism of heroic ideals, view the incest plot as a further attempt to critique those ideals. In these readings, the tragedy which befalls Sebastian is, at least to an extent, deserved.[2] Howard Erskine-Hill, on the other hand, suggests that "the theme of unknowing incest works as a metaphor for the inexplicable defeat of truth and right within a providential vision of history" (249). The tragedy is thus Dryden's effort to make sense of the disaster that has befallen his political and religious communities. Yet none of these readings offer a very satisfying explanation of why Dryden chose to end the play as he did. Killing Sebastian could potentially have accomplished these goals while hewing closer to history.

Still, Erskine-Hill's interpretation of the incest plot is the most compelling of those

which focus on the play's response to the events of the Glorious Revolution. Indeed, even the best work of this kind usually has little to say about the play's central tragedy. David Bywaters waves away the act of incest as a mere necessity of the tragic plot, noting only that James II's troubles, like Sebastian's, stem from the sexual crimes of an ancestor, Henry VIII (355-56). And Steven Zwicker, in his excellent reading of the "unsteady system of analogies and parallels, proximities and disparities" which veil *Don Sebastian*'s political content, suggests that Dryden may have intentionally chosen to implicate Sebastian in a crime with no application to James II or William III in order to pass the play off as nonpolitical (186).[3] While this is a reasonable suggestion, sneaking a pro-Jacobite play past the censors by giving it a conclusion in which its James-like hero abdicates his throne seems somewhat self-defeating.

These readings either focus on the play's expressions of generically "Christian" piety or its allusions to contemporary politics. To date, there has been no sustained effort to read the play's incest plot in light of contemporary concerns specific to the English Catholic community.[4] This strikes me as odd, given that, as noted above, the play itself calls attention to the divisions within Christendom shortly before its principal protagonists leave the stage with the intention of taking Catholic religious orders and spending the rest of their lives trying to "expiate" their sin by doing "pennance" (5.1.514, 676). Aside from observing that the play codes its persecuting Moors as Protestant bigots, most scholars seem to agree with Dryden when, in the prologue, he insists that "*a Play's of no Religion*" (15: 74, line 16). Yet even the act of apologizing for his heresy inevitably calls attention to it. We should therefore understand Dryden's plea for mercy and acceptance from Protestants as simultaneously a declaration of commitment to his Catholic faith. Certainly many of the play's earliest readers would have done so.

And I use the term "readers" advisedly. The version of *Don Sebastian* which we read today is not the version that was performed for London audiences in 1689. Dryden's comments in the preface about the play's development make this clear:

> WHETHER *it happen'd through a long disuse of Writing, that I forgot the usual compass of a Play; or that by crowding it, with Characters and Incidents, I put a necessity upon my self of lengthning the main Action, I know not; but the first days Audience sufficiently convinc'd me of my error; and that the Poem was insupportably too long.* (15: 65)

Save for this first night, the play was only acted with "[*a*]*bove twelve hunder'd lines*" cut from it, almost a third of its total length (15: 66). When the play was printed the following year, these lines were restored. As we have no way of knowing which portions of the play were acted and which were not, it makes sense to approach the play today as a closet drama rather than as a stage drama.

Moreover, Dryden asks us to approach the text as readers, elevating the closet reading of his work over its stage performance. It is in the closet, he suggests, that his tragedy's beauties and meanings will emerge—for the right reader. "[*T*]*here is a vast difference betwixt a publick entertainment on the Theatre, and a private reading in the Closet,*" he

observes; in a closet, the reader can "*find out those beauties of propriety, in thought and writing, which escap'd him in the tumult and hurry of representing.*" Encouraging such careful readings, he claims that "*there may be some secret Beauties in the decorum of parts, and uniformity of design, which my puny judges will not easily find out,*" and that there is a moral "*couch'd under every one of the principal Parts and Characters, which a judicious Critick will observe*" (15: 66-67, 71). Dryden draws a curtain of privacy across the entire play, creating a boundary between "*publick entertainment*" and "*private reading,*" between "*Theatre*" and "*Closet,*" between "*puny judges*" and the "*judicious Critick.*"

Now, it must be said that Dryden's thinking about drama had begun migrating toward a preference for reading over performance well before he wrote *Don Sebastian*.[5] Yet it seems significant that Dryden should preface the play that marked his return to the stage after an absence of seven years with such a strong endorsement of closet reading. And it is even more significant that the play itself was clearly written for the closet rather than the stage. After all, we cannot take seriously Dryden's excuse that the play's inordinate length is the product of absentmindedness. Dryden must have known that he was writing a play that was too long for performance. And his preface goes beyond celebrating the aesthetic pleasures of a private reading; it effectively dares the reader to search the play for occulted meanings (those "*secret Beauties*" and "*couch'd*" morals).

I am not suggesting that Dryden's privileging of the thoughtful private reader over the inattentive public spectator should be read as a covert expression of his continued allegiance to a Catholic community once again forced to practice its religion in private spaces. Rather, I am suggesting that it *could* be read as such, and Dryden's insistence on reminding the reader about his religious convictions in his prologue increases the likelihood that some of his readers would have done so. Catholic readers in particular may have been motivated to find evidence of the ex-laureate's solidarity with their community.

The Physicality of Conversion and Sacrament

Given the history of Dryden's relationship with Catholicism, one aspect of the play's design that may have caught his readers' attention is its conversion theme. Each of the first four acts portrays at least one character revealing, performing, or announcing their intention to perform, a religious conversion. In the first act, we learn that Dorax, once a Portuguese lord named Alonzo, is now a Muslim; in the second, Almeyda reveals that she has converted to Christianity; in the third, Morayma announces her intention to run away with Antonio, marry him, and convert to his religion; and in the fourth, the play's heroic action climaxes with Dorax's re-conversion to Christianity.

The seriousness with which the play approaches the issue of conversion becomes evident, ironically enough, in its first comic episode. Near the end of the first scene, a group of recently defeated and enslaved Portuguese soldiers are bought and sold at a North African slave market. It was well known that Europeans enslaved in North Africa often converted to Islam to obtain better treatment, a danger to which readers would have been sensitive, having recently learned that Dorax is a Portuguese renegade. The threat

only grows when Antonio is beaten by his master. Submitting to the whipping, Antonio says, "I obey thee chearfully," and then adds, "I see the Doctrine of Non-Resistance is never practis'd thoroughly but when a Man can't help himself" (1.1.520-22). Antonio's remark recalls the Church of England's abandonment of its doctrine of non-resistance to the monarch when James II's pro-Catholic policies appeared to threaten its existence.[6] But if the joke is at the expense of the disobedient Anglicans, Antonio's ultimate submission raises a concern more relevant to Catholics in 1689. In the oppressive post-Revolution climate, a number of Catholics converted to Anglicanism. If Antonio could sacrifice one doctrine to save himself, he might sacrifice them all. Indeed, he later admits as much. When the Mufti's libidinous wife, Johayma, threatens to accuse Antonio of rape if he does not return her sexual advances, he feigns desire for her. This behavior, in turn, upsets Morayma. "[W]as that like a Cavalier of honour?" she asks. But Antonio is unashamed of his willingness to compromise for his life. He tells her that his behavior is "[n]ot very heroick; but self preservation is a point above Honour and Religion too." (3.2.233-34). Survival trumps all other considerations, including religion. Antonio's spiritual danger is given even blunter demonstration when the Mufti, suspecting Antonio of designs upon his wife, threatens to take a pruning knife to his genitals. Conflating castration with circumcision, Antonio responds, "Thank you for that; but I am in no such hast to be made a Musulman" (2.2.65-66). One violent blow, it seems, could transform this Christian into an infidel.

The vulgarity of this last joke actually highlights a central characteristic of the play's treatment of conversion. The play has little interest in conversion as an intellectual process; rather, religious identity is linked to converts' physical and social circumstances. In Antonio's case, his faith is endangered by physical abuse, but also by his poorly controlled libido. The play's other converts likewise find their change of religion catalyzed by their sexuality. Almeyda presumably converts out of love for Sebastian, and the revelation of her conversion is followed shortly by their marriage and its consummation. And the link between sex and conversion is even clearer in Alonzo/Dorax's changes of faith. He renounces Christianity in bitterness after Sebastian gives the hand of his beloved Violante to a hated rival; he returns to the faith upon learning that Sebastian was never able to "[e]ffect the Consummation" between them (4.3.643). Sebastian assures Dorax, "[S]he pines for thee, / A Widdow and a Maid" (4.3.644-45). Dorax's "Circumcision" marks him as a Muslim (4.3.422), while the prospect of piercing a hymen brings him back to Christianity.

We have already noted the association of religious and sexual choice in Antonio and Morayma's banter in the final scene. That association is prominent throughout their conversion experiences (for Antonio, too, ultimately undergoes a kind of conversion, leaving behind his libertine ways for respectable marriage), and it is stressed by the repetition of the words *flesh* and *blood* in their scenes in the Mufti's garden. At first, these words have purely sexual connotations. An aroused Antonio, mistaking a disguised Johayma for Morayma, refers to her as "a true She-devil of Flesh and Blood" (3.2.23-24). When he realizes his mistake, his attempts to disentangle himself from an affair with her inspire an argument over his virility. "I am true flesh and blood," Antonio insists, to which the spurned Johayma caustically responds, "Flesh without blood I think thou art" (3.2.112-

114). These words then reappear in a later garden scene, but with new connotations. Upon catching Morayma fleeing to Antonio with the family's casket of jewels, her father, the avaricious Mufti, reproaches her. "[T]hou art but my flesh and blood," he tells his daughter, "but these [the jewels] are my Life and Soul." Morayma replies, "Then let me follow my flesh and blood, and keep to your self your Life and Soul" (4.2.178-81). In this confrontation, the phrase "flesh and blood," while still carrying echoes of its earlier sexual use, now also refers to kinship, and begins to have religious implications as well. Their exchange suggests that the truer flesh and blood relationship is not between father and daughter, but between Morayma and her future husband. These words, and the garden setting, recall the Christian tradition that marriage transforms husband and wife into one flesh, a belief derived from the story of Eve's creation out of Adam's flesh in the Garden of Eden.[7] Morayma sees in Antonio not just a sexual companion, but the guide to her new religious life—the kind of guide that her father failed to be.[8]

The words *flesh* and *blood* are not limited to Morayma and Antonio's courtship scenes. Both words are used with unusual frequency in the play. In fact, *flesh* appears more often in *Don Sebastian* than in any other of Dryden's dramatic works.[9] The play's language reinforces the action's emphasis on the physicality and sexuality of these characters, treating conversion as a visceral rather than a rational experience, one motivated by human relationships, desires, hopes, and fears. In *Don Sebastian*, passion, not reason, is the key to conversion.[10]

While intriguing in its own right, the play's emphasis on its converts' physicality takes on greater significance when we consider the theological implications of this melding of the physical with the spiritual. As Arthur F. Marotti observes in his study of early modern religious discourse, Protestants "contrast[ed] the devotional and sacramental practices of the Roman church (which relied on the physical mediation of the spiritual) with the supposedly more spiritual orientation of Protestant text- and language-based religion" (36-37). Indeed, Catholics themselves acknowledged the greater physicality of their religion; they simply perceived that physicality as a divine and salutary gift rather than as an idolatrous corruption. Sectarian disagreement about the place of physical mediation in sacrament is most prominently displayed in the theological controversy over the doctrine of transubstantiation. Not incidentally, this dispute turned upon the same question as Morayma's dispute with her father—the question of what is referred to by the words *flesh* and *blood*.

The doctrine, a frequent target of anti-Catholic polemic in the Restoration, affirms that during the sacrament of the Eucharist, the bread and wine take on the actual substance of Christ's flesh and blood. The Church of England and other Protestant sects rejected the doctrine as a medieval innovation, preferring to understand the bread and wine as symbols of the sacrifice of Jesus's flesh and blood, rather than as a miraculous recreation of that sacrifice.[11] Dryden's treatment of the doctrine in his poetry, first as a Protestant and then as a Catholic, is fairly typical in either case. In *Absalom and Achitophel*, a Protestant Dryden attempts to make Catholics (who, in the poem's conceit, are the Jebusites) appear pagan and ridiculous by noting their belief in transubstantiation:

> Th' *Egyptian* Rites the *Jebusites* imbrac'd;
> Where Gods were recommended by their Tast;
> Such savory Deities must needs be good,
> As serv'd at once for Worship and for Food. (2: 9, lines 118-21)

For Dryden and other Protestants, transubstantiation represented Catholic superstition, irrationality, and idolatry. That Catholics venerated physical objects during mass and believed they physically consumed God during their sacrament of communion struck Protestants as either amusing or horrifying. Yet only six years later, Dryden found himself arguing against his own satire. In *The Hind and the Panther*, he equates the mystery of Christ's flesh and blood in the Eucharist with the mystery of Christ's flesh and blood in the Incarnation:

> Can I my reason to my faith compell,
> And shall my sight, and touch, and taste rebell?
> . . . . . .
> Could He his god-head veil with flesh and bloud
> And not veil these again to be our food?
> . . . . . .
> And if he can, why all this frantick pain
> To construe what his clearest words contain,
> And make a riddle what He made so plain? (1.85-86, 134-35, 138-40)

The poem is characteristic of the Catholic position, with its appeal to mystery, God's omnipotence, and Jesus's "plain" words at the Last Supper: "This is my body." Catholics perceived Protestants as impious for judging divine revelation by fallible human senses and reason, and blasphemous for seeming to doubt God's omnipotence.[12]

While the repetition of *flesh* and *blood* by Antonio and Morayma most directly refers to their impending marriage and consummation, their words are also intriguingly evocative of this other Catholic religious mystery.[13] When Morayma tells her father, "Then let me follow my flesh and blood," she looks forward (consciously or not) to both her marriage and to the sacrament of the Eucharist that she will need to participate in as a condition of that marriage. She will have to accept Christ's flesh and blood before she can enjoy Antonio's. Dryden is working within a long tradition of religious and erotic poetry which exploits the parallels between the language of sacrament and that of sexual union. Perhaps the most significant English works of this kind are John Donne's erotic lyrics, which, in the words of one scholar, "appropriate the lexicon of the current doctrinal war" over transubstantiation and the presence of God in the Eucharist (Hester 373).[14] A similar appropriation takes place in *Don Sebastian*. Conflating religious and erotic language, Dryden inextricably entangles sexuality and sacrament in the play's portrayal of conversion, suggesting a physical mediation of spiritual blessings more consonant with a Catholic than a Protestant worldview.

Sacrament and Incest

The act of incest is the knottiest point of this entanglement, and to unravel it, we must closely examine the language in which Sebastian and Almeyda's relationship is described in the play. Although their union is (unknown to them) an incestuous one, it is still discussed in terms that recall the controversy over transubstantiation. When Almeyda appears reluctant to go through with their plan to wed, Sebastian insists that she will be perjured if she dies without fulfilling her vows of love through marriage and consummation. "The tye of Minds are but imperfect Bonds," he argues, "Unless the Bodies joyn to seal the Contract" (2.1.543-44). In a later scene, Sebastian's sentiment is echoed comically by Morayma, who first demands that Antonio not force himself upon her before their marriage—and then chastises him when he obeys her: "You shou'd have made me seal, as well as sign" (3.2.325), she complains. Catholics similarly attacked Protestants for celebrating an imperfect communion with God. A contemporary Catholic theologian, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, writes of the Eucharistic sacrament,

> This very flesh then, eaten by the Faithful, not only renews in us the memory of his immolation, but confirms also to us the reality of it.[...]
>
> Must Christians under pretence of celebrating in the Lords Supper, the memory of the Passion of our Saviour, deprive this Pious Commemoration of what it has most efficacious and tender in it? (Bossuet 25)

For Bossuet, the physicality of the Catholic sacrament makes it "Pious," "efficacious and tender." It is thus superior to Protestantism's sacrament, which is merely a sign of Christ's sacrifice, lacking the seal which confirms it: the incorporation of God's body into the bodies of the faithful. The Eucharist, like matrimony, is a sacrament whose perfection requires the joining of flesh.

Sebastian and Almeyda's matrimonial sacrament soon takes on another characteristic of the sacrament of the Eucharist: it becomes the subject of a theological controversy. When the Emperor of the Moors learns of their marriage, he commands the Mufti to separate them and marry Almeyda to him instead. The Mufti, however, cannot help him; the scriptures clearly prohibit marriage between Christians and Muslims. "Why, verily the Law is monstrous plain," he says. "There's not one doubtful Text in all the Alchoran, / Which can be wrench'd in favor to your Project" (3.1.69-71). Notably, the Mufti's word to describe the Islamic scriptures on matrimony, *plain*, is the same used in *The Hind and the Panther* to describe Christian scripture on the revelation of the doctrine of transubstantiation at the Last Supper ("what He made so plain"). When the Emperor demands that the Mufti alter the scriptures, the Mufti raises the specter of popular revolt. "Matrimony," he insists, is

> the dearest point
> Of Law, the People have it all by heart:
> A Cheat on Procreation will not pass. (3.1.74-77)

The zeal of Dryden's Moors in the defense of the sacrament of matrimony parallels English zealotry over the nature of the Eucharistic sacrament.

There are further Eucharistic allusions in the acts of veiling and sacrifice that Sebastian and Almeyda perform in the play. Again, *veil* appears in Dryden's lines on transubstantiation in *The Hind and the Panther*, referring to the bread and wine which hide Christ's flesh and blood from human senses. Sebastian and Almeyda first appear on stage in veils of one sort or another. Sebastian arrives "*in mean habit*," enslaved following his army's defeat, while Almeyda's face is "*veil'd with a* Barnus" (s.d. 1.1.238+). When Sebastian reveals his identity, the Emperor exclaims,

> *Sebastian!* ha! it must be he; no other
> Cou'd represent such suff'ring Majesty:
> I saw him, as he terms himself, a Sun
> Strugling in dark Eclipse, and shooting day
> On either side of the black Orb that veil'd him. (1.1.342-46)

Sebastian is an example of "suff'ring Majesty," a sun in eclipse, a king veiled in mean garb. The allusions to Christ and the sacrifice commemorated in the Eucharist are not subtle. Indeed, both Sebastian and Almeyda offer themselves as sacrifices. In this opening scene, the Emperor plans to make a "Sacrifice / Of Christian Slaves" to celebrate his victory (1.1.167-68). When the lot falls to Sebastian, he welcomes the chance to die alone and thus spare the rest of the Portuguese slaves. Later in the play, when Almeyda is in danger of being ravished by the Emperor's chief minister, she asks a mob of Moors to protect her from this insult by allowing her to "dye your sacrifice" instead (4.3.267).

As the couple's incest is revealed in the final act, the play associates another suggestive word with the spouses. In Christian religious contexts, *mystery* is often used as a synonym for the sacraments, particularly the Eucharistic sacrament.[15] And in this scene (where the word appears more often than in the entirety of any of Dryden's other dramatic works[16]), it refers to Sebastian and Almeyda's parents' adultery and their own incestuous relationship. These secrets are belatedly revealed by Alvarez, Sebastian's ancient advisor. Pointing out that both of them were told by their parents to always aid each other, Alvarez asks them, "can you finde / No mistery, couch'd in this excess of kindness?" (5.1.293-94). He then asks them about the rings that were given to each of them by their parents. Almeyda recalls that when her mother delivered it to her, she said it was "a pledge of Love; / And hid a Mistery of great Importance" (5.1.408-409). Alvarez responds, "Mark me now, / While I disclose that fatall Mistery" (5.1.409-10), and then demonstrates that the rings join together, proving that their parents were lovers and, consequently, that they are half-siblings. The emotional and spiritual crises with which the play concludes result from this revelation of a mystery of flesh and blood.

Sebastian and Almeyda's wedding ceremony is the only point in the play when a Catholic sacrament is actually performed by the characters. Protestants did not consider matrimony a sacrament, however, and Dryden excludes his (mostly Protestant) readers from its celebration.[17] The secrecy and obscurity which characterize the description of the

ceremony place a boundary between believers and misbelievers—and Dryden leaves his readers on the misbelievers' side of that division:[18]

> Close wrap'd he [a friar] bore some secret Instrument
> Of Christian Superstition in his hand:
> My servant follow'd fast, and through a chink,
> Perceiv'd the Royal Captives hand in hand:
> And heard the hooded Father mumbling charms,
> That make those Misbelievers Man and Wife.
> Which done, the Spouses kiss'd with such a fervour,
> And gave such furious earnest of their flames,
> That their eyes sparkled, and their mantling blood
> Flew flushing o'er their faces. (3.1.36-45)

Dryden separates us from this sacrament by several removes. The ceremony is described by a treacherous Moor with an interest in painting it in a negative light, who in turn was informed of the event by a spy, to whom we are never introduced. And the spy can only observe the event "through a chink," and certainly does not understand the language of the priest's "charms." Protestants prided themselves on their ability to see past material surfaces, to discern spiritual signs in the world around them, and to pierce the beautiful outer veil of Catholicism to perceive the rotten core beneath it.[19] Here, Protestant-coded Moors (who are, of course, supposed to be the true "Misbelievers" in this scene) think that they are piercing that veil, but the lack of comprehension evident in the description makes them appear almost blind instead. Barriers and veils are everywhere in the description of this ceremony, with its "[c]lose wrap'd [. . .] secret Instrument," the "hooded Father mumbling charms," and the "mantling blood." The anti-Catholic attacks on the participants' superstition and hypersexuality are, then, not evidence of insight, but mere tropes, referenced in lieu of actual observation.[20]

If the sacrament taking place is, on a literal level, that of matrimony, these veils—and particularly the "mantling blood" that covers the couple's faces—recall a different sacrament, one in which God's blood is mantled by the appearance of wine. Again alluding to the Eucharist through matrimony, Dryden places the most perfect sacrament at one further remove from the misbelieving Moors, and from the readers whom he forces to adopt the Moors' perspective. The play draws a curtain across this ceremony with Protestants' own anti-Catholic rhetoric, and leaves them on the outside of both the room and the sacramental mystery, struggling to peek in. To recall Dryden's comments in the preface, this is a case of "*puny judges*" attempting to understand something that requires the insight of a "*judicious Critick*." Indeed, most readers probably did not grasp Dryden's subtle critique of Protestant bigotry in this episode. But some readers—especially those sensitive to the passage's anti-Catholic language—would have found meaning in this closeted sacrament.

The Trauma of Conversion

Now, it must be said that if the play associates the two captive monarchs with Catholic sacrament, it also associates Sebastian with the biblical Adam, and with James II. I would no sooner suggest that Sebastian represents a consistent allegory for Catholic sacrament than I would suggest that he is a consistent allegory for either of these men. No such cohesive system of symbolism exists in *Don Sebastian*. Rather, the play contains a series of allusions to a shared religious discourse which associates physicality with Catholic sacrament and belief. Through these allusions, the play creates a Catholic context for its action, and particularly for the conversions it portrays.

These include the comic and romantic conversions of the first four acts, but also the tragic conversion of the fifth act. For the experience which Sebastian and Almeyda undergo as they discover that they are one flesh and blood, not only by the sacramental power of marriage, but also by the physical reality of their birth, is, effectively, a conversion experience. They feel anguish, horror, and shame for past deeds as they slowly come to accept a previously unperceived truth about their state of sin. Recognition of this truth alters their understanding of their relationship with God, demands a radical reorientation of their beliefs and behavior, and separates them from their families, friends, and even their kingdoms.

The suggestion that Dryden, a Catholic convert, would associate the conversion experience with something as terrible as incest must seem absurd at first glance (a fact which no doubt helped protect Dryden and his play). But the temporal and eternal consequences of any religious conversion would hold terrors for anyone who takes them seriously. John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, for instance, testifies at length to the mental distress produced by a spiritual awakening. For English Protestants drawn to Catholicism in the 1680s, those terrors were multiplied by painful social and political consequences. Conversion to Catholicism in late seventeenth-century England could be a traumatic experience.

Moreover, from a Protestant perspective (the perspective the play forces us to adopt when describing Sebastian and Almeyda's union), converting to Catholicism could appear as unnatural an act as incest. English dramatists from John Webster to Elkanah Settle had associated Catholicism with horrific crimes such as incest, rapes, and poisonings.[21] Just as Sebastian believes his crime will make him the greatest of Africa's "Monsters" (5.1.551), prospective converts knew that they risked becoming monsters in the eyes of many of their countrymen, friends, and family members. Dryden himself summed up the social costs of Catholic conversion in his defense of the conversion of Anne Hyde, James II's first wife: "The loss of Friends, of worldly Honours and Esteem, the Defamation of ill Tongues, and the Reproach of the Cross, all these, though not without the struglings of Flesh and Blood, were surmounted by her" (17: 291). Of course, Dryden knew of these trials from personal experience. As he writes in *The Hind and the Panther*, his own conversion demanded that he "welcome infamy and publick shame," and doing so cost him some "sharp convulsive pangs of agonizing pride" (3.283, 287).

Yet *The Hind and the Panther* is a celebration of Dryden's conversion, an expression of his confidence that he had finally settled in the one true Church. The last act of *Don Se-*

bastian presents its converts in a highly unsettled state, reflecting the shaken confidence of the Catholic community after the Glorious Revolution. In the year since James II fled the throne, prominent Catholics had been charged with treason, forced into exile, or hounded by anti-Catholic mobs. Indeed, James Winn has suggested that Dryden may have moved to a new home that year out of fear of such mobs.[22] Dryden's only immediate prospect for a better future lay in civil war—or in a return to conformity with the Church of England. Under such circumstances, we should not wonder that in *Don Sebastian*, Catholic conversion is likened to the tragic discovery of having unintentionally committed a terrible crime. Nor should we be surprised that Sebastian and Almeyda wish their crime undone. Dryden would have been in good company if he had returned to the Church of England after the revolution.

And yet, for all its horror and tragedy, the play does not end in a complete rejection of the crime committed. Sebastian and Almeyda separate, but they love each other as strongly as ever. Nor does the play end in death—a fact which Dryden is careful to point out in the preface. Of Sebastian's journey into exile, he writes that

> *an involuntary sin deserves not death; from whence it follows, that to divorce himself from the beloved object, to retire into a desart, and deprive himself of a Throne, was the utmost punishment, which a Poet cou'd inflict, as it was also the utmost reparation, which* Sebastian *cou'd make.* (15: 69).

These lines cannot be read politically. Dryden did not think that James II was making a just reparation to anyone by depriving himself of his throne; James deserved his throne, and in 1689, Dryden could still hope that he might get it back. But these lines can certainly apply to Catholics—from a Protestant point of view. Belief is not subject to reason, a fact which the play has been at pains to demonstrate through its characters' passionate, unintellectual conversions. Therefore, heresy (which Protestants considered Catholicism to be) is an "*involuntary sin*." Sebastian laments that he "cannot chuse but love" (5.1.600); likewise, a Catholic cannot choose but believe. And where there is no act of will, a measure of mercy is necessary. Thus Dryden rejects tragic convention and spares his hero's life. Here, then, we find a compelling reason why Dryden would choose to veil conversion under a criminal act: it allows him to model the mercy for which he pleaded to his readers in the prologue. Catholics' criminal beliefs had deprived them of a throne, of political power, and in some cases, of their homeland. This, *Don Sebastian* urges, is the "*utmost punishment*" that Protestants can justly inflict on Catholics. As Sebastian and Almeyda are allowed to step off the stage alive, still loving each other in spite of the criminality of their love, so must Protestants allow Catholics to retreat unmolested to the private practice of their criminal faith.

It is impossible to say how much of *Don Sebastian*'s Catholic subtext (of which this essay has explored only a fraction) an average, or even an attentive reader would have detected in 1690. Yet whatever else they did or did not notice, I suspect that the implications of the heroes' penitential retreat in this final scene would have been recognized by many readers, and even many playgoers, as being about more than politics and the loss

of a throne. Dryden's Catholicism inevitably informed their reception of the play—as it should inform our readings of it today.

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Notes

[1] All citations to Dryden's works are to the California Dryden Series. References are by volume and page number, with the exceptions that references to *Don Sebastian* (volume 15) are by act, scene, and line number, and to *The Hind and the Panther* (volume 3) by part and line number.

[2] See Hughes 82 and MacCallum 47. For another valuable investigation of the play's religious interest, see King.

[3] Also worth noting is Anne Barbeau Gardiner's suggestion that Dryden thematizes incest in his late works as a strategy for exploring the natural and unnatural kingships of, respectively, James and William ("*Love Triumphant*" 164). However, it is difficult to see how the incest perpetrated by Sebastian would reflect negatively upon William's reign, when the play commonly associates its titular character with James.

[4] A few critics have performed studies of *Don Sebastian* which take Dryden's concerns as a Catholic seriously. Geraldo U. de Sousa has argued that Sebastian's choice of self-sacrifice over self-interest in abandoning the throne reflects Dryden's choice to remain Catholic in Williamite England (361-63). John Clyde Loftis also gives more weight to Dryden's Catholicism than most scholars, yet he makes few claims about the text that depend on the specific conditions of the English Catholic community or doctrines unique to their religion (232-48).

[5] In the 1681 dedication to the *The Spanish Fryar*, Dryden claims that the "false Beauties of the Stage are no more lasting than a Rainbow," and that to be read "is the more lasting and the nobler Design" (16: 100, 102).

[6] Other scholars have commented on this reference to non-resistance. Moore reads

this line as an attack on Church of England clergy who deserted James II (40), while Bywaters reads it as more directly an attack on disloyal Tories (350). In either case, it is assumed that Antonio's comment is about political rather than religious inconstancy.

[7] As MacCallum, Hughes, and many other scholars have noted, *Don Sebastian* contains many allusions to *Paradise Lost*.

[8] I disagree with J. Douglas Canfield, who, noting this conflation of sexual and religious matters in Antonio and Morayma's courtship, reads it as "a parody of religious language" and a sign of the lovers' debauched nature (258). Certainly, no character in this play is a paragon of Christian piety, and Dorax's rejection of Christianity warns of what may come from fixating on the things of the physical world at the expense of those of the spiritual world. But such flaws and failures in the play's heroes are precisely why *Don Sebastian* is such a compelling play, and Dryden seems to treat all of his heroes' passions and desires—even Dorax's—with sympathy and understanding. Indeed, the play may suggest that the characters get themselves into trouble when they fail to acknowledge how important their bodies are to their spiritual wellbeing. Benducar notes upon first seeing Sebastian that he "scorns his brittle Corps, and seems asham'd / He's not all spirit" (1.1.315-16). His experiences at the end of the play force him to acknowledge that his proud soul resides in a very real body, and that one cannot be properly cared for without looking after the other.

[9] *Flesh* appears eleven times in *Don Sebastian*, compared to seven in the runner-up, *The Assignation*. No other play has more than five instances of the word. *Blood*, *bloody*, *bleed*, and *bleeding* appear twenty-nine times in this play. Only *Oedipus*, *The Duke of Guise*, and the two-part *Conquest of Granada* have bloodier language. The claims that appear in this essay about word frequency in Dryden's plays are based upon searches of the Early English Books Online Text Creation Project database, which were performed on June 26, 2012. These searches included variant spellings, but disregarded words that appeared in prologues, epilogues, stage directions, and attached prose materials.

[10] This portrayal of conversion is quite different from that in Dryden's *Tyrannick Love* (1669), in which St. Catharine gains her converts chiefly by means of dispassionate, rational arguments for the superiority of Christianity over paganism. It also may lend some support to contemporary rumors that Dryden's decision to convert was influenced by the conversions of his loved ones. His wife and sons appear to have embraced Catholicism before he did. See Winn 415-16.

[11] As those familiar with the religious polemic of the period are aware, there was a variety of opinions among Protestants about what exactly happens during the sacrament of the Eucharist, which I am greatly simplifying here. However, Protestants were generally agreed that there was no transformation of the substance of the bread and wine.

[12] Noting that *The Hind and the Panther* focuses on transubstantiation in some of its most personal passages (1.128-49, 3.281-97), Anne Barbeau Gardiner suggests that accepting this doctrine was an important milestone in Dryden's own conversion process. See *Ancient Faith*, especially 96-110.

[13] Indeed, Catholic theology links the sacrament of matrimony to that of the Eucharist, which is a figure for Christ's marriage to his church. See Aquinas pt. 3, qu. 65, art. 3.

[14] Donne makes his most ingenious use of this lexicon in "The Flea," in which the lovers' "two bloods mingled" in the flea's "living walls of Jet" become a signal for (among other things) Christ's living presence within the Eucharist (Hester 377-82). As a convert to Anglicanism whose poetry suggests an ambivalent attraction to Catholic theology, Donne may well have been a figure of particular interest to Dryden during his change of faith in the 1680s.

[15] *Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition*, s.v. "mystery, n.1," def. I.3. Web.

[16] *Mystery* appears four times in the play, *mysterious*, once. The only other Dryden play with more than a single instance of these words is, again, *The Assignation*, which has one instance of each. A similar increase in Dryden's use of this word may be found in his post-conversion poetry. *Mysterious* appears in *The Hind and the Panther* three times, while *mystery* and *mysterious* only appear three times in all of his earlier poetic works combined. See the entries for these words in Montgomery and Hubbard's *Concordance to the Poetical Works of John Dryden*.

[17] Again, we can find an analog to Dryden's strategy here in Donne's poetry. According to Hester, in Donne's "The Relic," "an outsider or 'spy' from beyond the private borders of the lover's amatory 'engrav[ing]' is allowed to 'break ope[n]' the devotional practice that he does not understand, about which he then informs 'the Bishops, and the King,' which then results in that interpretative community's reading of the lovers as violators of the 'late law'" (376, brackets in the original). The actual circumstances of the short poem differ greatly from this episode in *Don Sebastian* (the space broken into is the lover's grave), but the implications are very similar.

[18] Several scholars have recently written about motifs of obscurity and disguise in *The Hind and the Panther*. See, for instance, Augustine and Cotterill.

[19] For discussion of the Protestant mode of perception and unveiling, see Shell 23-55.

[20] Bywaters also observes that Dryden parodies the Protestant view of Catholicism in this marriage ceremony (353).

[21] For analysis of the anti-Catholic ideology of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedy, see Shell 23-55. *Don Sebastian* gestures toward this theatrical history through its allusions to the Shakespearean play most obsessed with flesh and blood, *The Merchant of Venice*. As Miner notes, many of the details of Antonio and Morayma's courtship are lifted from that of Lorenzo and Jessica, Shylock's daughter (15: 444, n. 291-308). While Morayma's cheerful conversion imitates that of Jessica, Sebastian and Almeyda's experiences have more in common with Shylock's traumatic forced conversion.

[22] See Winn 434-37. Details about Dryden's activities during 1689 are scarce, likely indicating that Dryden was trying to keep a low profile.