

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



“No tombe but throne”: Robert Southwell and the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin.

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On 21 February 1595, the crowds flocked to Tyburn to witness the brutal theatrical spectacle of a man being hanged, drawn and quartered. The man on the scaffold was a Jesuit priest; he was dying for love, both of his Saviour and of the Catholic faith. His mildness and dignity are said to have moved the crowd, and when the hangman finally held up his severed head, it was reported that many signed themselves with the cross.¹ The man was Robert Southwell, who had landed on England’s shores from Rome in 1586 and, prior to his capture in 1591, had been a driving force behind London’s underground Catholic movement. Southwell was a poet as well as a priest, and by the time of his death his verse had already caught the attention of the University Wits (Devlin 223). But although he spent much of his time in the houses of rich and influential recusant families, Southwell was no gentleman love poet. For him, the roles of priest and poet combined, and he wrote only sacred verse, displaying an exemplary post-Tridentine view of art’s didactic and sacred purpose. He also took a vehement stance against the love poetry of the age, claiming that poets who make “the follies and feyninges of love the customary subject of their base endeavors” were guilty of abusing both their talents and poetry itself.²

¹ An account of Southwell’s death is given in “Leake’s Relation of the Martyrdom of Father Southwell”, Stonyhurst MSS. Anglia vi: 125-128, reproduced in Hungerford 333–37. See also Caraman 113 and Devlin 323.

² The claim was made in Southwell’s *Epistle* from “The Sequence of Poems from the “Waldegrave” Manuscript”, an editorial title for poems preserved in Stonyhurst MS A.v.27, reproduced in *St Robert Southwell, Collected Poems*, ed. Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney 1. All other references to Southwell’s poetry, and translations of his Latin verse, will be taken from this edition, hereafter cited as Davidson and Sweeney.

Before the cart was driven away to leave Robert Southwell hanging by the neck, it is reported that he uttered a prayer to the Virgin Mary.³ This essay will explore how the Virgin is represented in Southwell's poetry through an analysis that focuses on his poetic representation of the Virgin's own triumph over death via her Assumption and Coronation. It will outline the historical and theological context of this most evocative and most contentious aspect of Mariology, and after a brief exploration of one of Southwell's early works, the Latin "Poema de Assumptione BVM", will focus on a single poem "The Assumption of our Lady". Through a contextualised close reading of this work, I aim to reveal not only how Southwell's devotion to the Virgin formed an integral part of his call to arms against secular love poetry, but also how he used Marian imagery — particularly the image of the Virgin's Assumption — in both a politicized and polemical way.

On the eve of his departure from Rome to England in July 1586, Southwell expressed the following fears for the future:

I am sent indeed into the midst of wolves, would that it was as a sheep to be led to the slaughter, in the name of and for Him Who sends.⁴

He was indeed being sent "into the midst of wolves", as England at this time was a dangerous place for a Catholic to be. An Act of 1581 meant that to convert from Protestantism to Catholicism, or to reconcile to Catholicism, was deemed treason, and enormous penalties were imposed by the state for non-attendance at church. Under the statute of 1585, to be a seminary priest or a Jesuit in England, or even to assist a priest in any way, became a treasonous offence.⁵ The secularization of Catholic dissidence by the state was an attempt to erode the spirituality of the Catholic cause via associations with treason, duplicity and regicide. Five years before Southwell's arrival, the Jesuit priest Edmund Campion had been executed after a highly-public trial at which the state had branded him a traitor. As Alice Dailey has observed, the state's shifting of emphasis from "martyr" to "traitor" at Campion's trial represented a pervasive and invidious threat to the Jesuit mission.⁶ On the Continent, however, a powerful propaganda machine was at work, overturning the Protestant official spectacle of the scaffold into the scene of triumph for the Catholic martyr (Dillon 113).

³ Devlin reports the prayer as "Blessed Mary, ever a Virgin, and all you Angels and Saints assist me". For a more detailed account, and a list of sources used see Devlin 323, 358. For the transition from oral accounts of executions to manuscript circulation see Dillon 77.

⁴ The letter was written to John Dekkers, whom Southwell had met at Douai and who was an intimate companion. See Hood 14 and Devlin 30–34.

⁵ For an overview of state sanctions towards Jesuits and recusants see Hutchinson 53–144 and Dailey 68.

⁶ This argument forms the basis of Dailey's analysis. For a discussion of the lines between treason and religion see also Lake and Questier 233.

With the reality of his own death looming large, one of Southwell's very real fears was of arrest as a political traitor before he had had the chance to prove his mettle as a priest. But although the odds seemed stacked against him, Southwell did manage to avoid the pursuivants for six years, and, in doing so, was able to leave the legacy of the writing that was so integral to his mission. Southwell's poetry, particularly the lyric poems, was, in the main, circulated in manuscript, copied and passed from household to household (Pollard Brown, *Paperchase* 120–143, Davidson and Sweeney xii–xiii). From a secret press he and his friend and Jesuit superior, Henry Garnet, were also able to circulate a body of prose works, including Southwell's own *An Epistle of Comfort*, to English Catholics. Southwell's body of work, and the importance of poetry to his mission, provide further evidence of the vital importance of the written word in post-Reformation England where the Catholic Church had no churches and very few priests (Walsham 80, Sullivan 29). His readership extended beyond the recusant community, however, as after his death censored printed versions of his poetry were widely circulated (Davidson and Sweeney, xii). In *Catholicism, Controversy and the Literary Imagination*, Alison Shell shows how Southwell's poetry profoundly affected both Protestant and Catholic writers, including Thomas Lodge, Edmund Spenser and John Donne (70–80). He had, as Brownlow has observed, an “audience of writers”(x).

Shell's persuasive argument for Southwell's canonical importance is part of a significant upsurge in interest in the Jesuit poet, whose work has for a long time languished in the literary shadows.⁷ Following on from Louis Martz's profoundly influential *The Poetry of Meditation*, scholars including Anthony Raspa, Joseph Scallon and Peter Davidson have positioned Southwell as a prime exponent of a Counter Reformation Baroque aesthetic in England, while recent years have seen the publication of two monographs on Southwell, and a scholarly but approachable edition of his Latin and English verse.⁸ Interest has also been sparked by a debate on Southwell's relationship with his distant cousin Shakespeare, and scholars including Richard Wilson and John Klause have discussed conceptual and imagistic links between the two writers. In Southwell's complaint on the frivolity of the secular poet, “still finest wits are stilling Venus' rose”, do we find an allusion to Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*?⁹ In her most recent monograph, Shell raises doubts about the validity of reading in such links; however, she does not dismiss entirely the notion that Southwell was criticizing

⁷ Scott R. Pilarz observes that most literary histories written before 1900 omit any reference to Southwell xxi.

⁸ Pilarz (2004) was followed by Sweeney (2006) and Davidson and Sweeney (2007).

⁹ Richard Wilson argues that this line is a direct reference to Shakespeare, whose *Venus and Adonis* Southwell had read in manuscript (126). John Klause, however, concludes that there is no direct evidence to support this view (19).

Shakespeare (*Shakespeare and Religion* 256 n.33). The jury may be out, but what is certain is that the debate has helped to inch Southwell a little more towards the mainstream.¹⁰ An awareness of Southwell's influence adds an illuminating sense of *gravitas* to his call to arms to the frivolously secular poet. His poetry can be viewed not only as a reflection of the zeal and claustrophobia of the recusant world, but also as a body of work which mounts a credible critique of the fashionable Petrarchan love poetry of the courtier poet.

The Polemics of the Assumption

In writing poetry about the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin Mary, Southwell was focusing on one of the most beloved — and contentious — aspects of Mariology. As the Gospels give no indication of the death of Mary, a tradition grew from the accretion of a complex web of apocryphal accounts which, by medieval times, had unified into a narrative of the Virgin's bodily Assumption into heaven. There, she is crowned Queen by Christ and rules alongside him.¹¹ The feast of the Assumption, celebrated on 15 August, was recognised throughout the Christian World from the sixth century. By the Middle Ages it had become, in the words of Stephen Shoemaker, "perhaps the single most important Marian feast" (141). Celebrations of the feast were lavish (Kessler and Zacharias 66, Belting 327). Mapped onto the narrative of the Assumption of the Virgin is the language of love as well as death. It became associated with the Song of Songs, the Bible's most lyrical of love poems, whose bride and bridegroom were read as typological representations of Mary and Christ. The bridegroom's invitation "Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come" thus becomes Christ the bridegroom's invitation to the Virgin, to rise to meet him and reign triumphantly by his side as heaven's Queen.¹²

In the context of the Reformation's privileging of the scriptural word, the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin, extrascriptural in origin, shift from beloved aspects of Mariology to highly contentious sites of resistance. In 1601, the Puritan theologian, William Perkins, was to liken the doctrine of the Assumption to "the Idolatrie of our times", commenting with a perhaps unconscious pun that "there is no certaine in historie to proue this assumption" (174). Reformers sought to eradicate any Marian traces in texts which had traditionally been seen to refer to the Assumption and

¹⁰ The line appears in verses from "The Author to the Reader" at the opening of Southwell's extended poem "saint Peters Complaynt" (Davidson and Sweeney, 63).

¹¹ For the complexity of ancient traditions see Shoemaker chapter 1 and Warner 81.

¹² Song of Songs 2.10, from Rheims-Douai Bible. All Biblical references will be to this edition. For the relationship between the Song of Songs and the Assumption see Warner 121–133.

Coronation. In the glossings of The Geneva Bible there are no Marian references in the Song of Songs; instead, the bride is refigured as a representation of the Church. An important focus of the iconography surrounding the Virgin's Assumption and Coronation had been the "*veni coronaberis*" of the Vulgate Song of Songs, translated by Gregory Martin in the Rheims-Douai Old Testament as "come: thou shalt be crowned" (Song of Songs 4.8). However, the Englishing of "*veni coronaberis*" is omitted entirely from the Geneva Bible; instead of being crowned from the top of Amanah, there is an invitation to the spouse to come and "loke from the top of Amanah", which is glossed as "Christ promiseth his Church" (281, note d). For evidence of the turning tide against the Feast of the Assumption in England, one turns to the rhythm of the liturgical year. The Prayer Books of 1549 and 1552 greatly simplified the calendar and eradicated many Marian feasts, with Cranmer retaining only the Annunciation and Purification. In 1561, however, the Conception of the Blessed Virgin, Nativity and Visitation were all reinstated. The Feast of the Assumption was, as Paul Williams observes, "the one, conspicuous, continuing omission" (253).

The concept of the Virgin as Queen of Heaven may have been expunged from the liturgy by the time Southwell reached England, but there is evidence to suggest that it had not left the public arena. Protestant polemic of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries reveals a deep-seated anxiety about the worship of Mary as Queen of Heaven in particular. Many polemicists turned to the Book of Jeremiah, where the prophet rails against the women of Pathros, who make sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 44.15–19). An example of a use of this reference can be found in the sermon preached by James Bisse at the very public venue of St Paul's Cross in January 1580, where he likened "the Papists" to the "Iewes in the dayes of Ieremy" stating:

....and to whome would they offer their sacrifice? not to God, but as the Papistes doe, to the Queene of heauen. (128)

Bisse is here making a direct correlation between the women of Pathros and Catholic forms of worship, and in his invective we find the Protestant fear of the dangerous and disorderly Catholic woman so convincingly explored by Frances Dolan in *Whores of Babylon*.¹³

It is perhaps unsurprising that Southwell chose to write poetry about the Virgin's Assumption and Coronation, as his Jesuit training had imbued him with an acute awareness of militant Marian apologetics. Whilst in Rome, he was a prefect of the

¹³ Dolan's introduction clearly sets out this theme, which underpins her later explorations of seventeenth-century Catholic women.

Sodality of the Virgin, an elite group which stressed the centrality of Mary's role in aiding souls to salvation. Described by Anthony Raspa as "a kind of Marian youth corps" (54), members made an act of consecration to the Virgin which had a strong proselytizing and militaristic flavour, with many Sodalists pledging to defend Marian doctrines to the point of death (Villaret 13). How did Southwell translate this zeal into his verse? He was writing with English Catholics in mind, a beleaguered community for whom outward shows of devotion to the Virgin were forbidden. Proselytizing zeal therefore often finds expression via a polemical poetic voice.

This acute sense of the polemical can be seen in an early Latin poem, "Poema de Assumptione BVM", which is a spirited engagement with the polemics of the Virgin's Assumption and Coronation (Davidson and Sweeney 88).¹⁴ It depicts the fury and bewilderment of Death, personified as a foul and disease-ridden hag, at the fact that the pure and perfect Virgin has overcome her retinue. Death calls her nobles together, fearing that her realm is in danger. She succeeds in stirring up fury in her subjects, but they are persuaded by Old Age that to fight God would be useless; instead they should appeal to his sense of justice. The poem then becomes a mock-court case, with a just God presiding. Death acts as counsel for the prosecution, and Gabriel is counsel for the defence, speaking on behalf of a mute Virgin Mary.

During this court case, we see Southwell subscribing to the Tridentine exemption of Mary from original sin (Warner 245). Death's prosecution is that, as Mary was born mortal, God has no right to exempt her from laws that have been in place since Adam's fall. Gabriel then speaks on the Virgin's behalf, protesting Mary's pure innocence:

Id Christi genetricis erat sponsaeque tonantis,
Ut pura infectos transiret sola per artus,
Communique carens culpa, mala debita culpa
Haud ferret. Nullis Deus est nisi sontibus ultor.
(202-205)

(It is in the nature of the mother of Christ and bride of the Thunderer that she alone should pass through an imperfect body while lacking the common guilt, and that she should not endure the evil dues of his guilt. God is not a punisher of anyone but the guilty.)

¹⁴ Southwell's Latin poetry, edited most recently by Davidson and Sweeney, is preserved in the "Autograph" manuscript at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire (Stonyhurst MS A.v.4). The Latin poetry is on the whole less quotidian than the English and was, as Davidson and Sweeney observe, "written for a different reading community which Southwell could assume shared his post-Tridentine theology"(xi).

The speeches of the prosecution and defence concluded, God pronounces his unequivocal verdict, that the spirit of the Virgin should rise up to the stars. The poem ends swiftly and in a blaze of glory; Mary is assumed into heaven and takes her seat as its Queen. Death, showing all the impotent fury of the overcome, takes flight. It is not frailty of human flesh, disease and putrefaction that are the agents of the Virgin's flight from earthly life, but divine love: "non mortis sed amore ope" (209). Southwell's theatricalized use of the mock court case in this poem reflects, as Davidson and Sweeney observe, the "controversialist tone and linguistic virtuosity" of the Jesuit productions of his youth (xv). By transplanting theology into the court, Southwell is also vividly and explicitly representing the polemical debate that surrounded the Virgin's Assumption in the wake of the Reformation.

Southwell's "sequence" on the Virgin and Christ

Southwell's later representation of the Virgin's Assumption and Coronation is, on the surface, a less polemical work. "The Assumption of Our Lady" is the final poem of a sequence of fourteen on the intertwined lives of the Virgin Mary and Christ. There are, as Louis Martz has observed, echoes of the rosary in this sequence (101). These echoes intensify when one considers that the end of the sixteenth century saw increasing interest in the rosary amongst recusant worshippers (Sullivan 12–21). As a solitary, private mode of devotion, the rosary was ideally suited to the "darksome corner[s]" of the recusant world.¹⁵ Southwell's superior and friend, Henry Garnet, set a great deal of store by its power. His book *The Sodalitie of the Rosarie* was written during Southwell's lifetime — probably whilst the two men were staying together — and was reprinted several times over the course of the 1590s and early 1600s (Caraman 68). Although Southwell's sequence is not exactly a rosary prayer, it can be seen as a complementary, devotional aid to Garnet's work, and further evidence of the didactic and practical nature of the Jesuit poet's verse.¹⁶

Our understanding of Southwell's "sequence of poems on the Virgin Mary and Christ" is greatly illuminated by an awareness of his antipathy towards secular love poetry. Southwell's call to arms against amorous verse was delivered with great integrity: he did not just criticize the frivolity of the courtier poet, he provided an alternative. The

¹⁵ *The Faerie Queene*, I.iii.13.5. Spenser is here referring to the blind Corceca, a transparent representation of Catholicism, whose rosary beads are a metonym for the superstition and ignorance of the old faith.

¹⁶ For a more detailed exploration of the complementary nature of Garnet and Southwell's work see Sweeney 109.

“sequence” can be read as his way of demonstrating to the courtier poet that one could put one’s poetic wit to sacred use. The poems abound in the paradoxes, conceits and aphorisms of the secular epigram.¹⁷ A reading of “The Assumption of Our Lady” demonstrates this. This three-stanza poem condenses the final two mysteries of the rosary, the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin, and like the others in the “sequence”, it is a self-consciously rhetorical work.

If sinne be captive grace must finde release
From curse of synne the innocente is free
Tombe prison is for sinners that decease
No tombe but throne to guiltles doth agree
Though thralles of sinne lye lingring in their grave
Yet faultles cors with soule rewarde must have.

The daseled eye doth dymmed light require
And dying sightes repose in shrowdinge shades
But Eagles eyes to brightest light aspire
And living lookes delite in loftye glades
Faynte winged foule by ground doth fayntly flye
Our Princely Eagle mountes unto the skye.

Gemm to her worth spouse to her love ascendes
Prince to her throne Queene to her heavenly kinge
Whose court with solemne pompe on her attends
And Quires of Saintes with greeting notes do singe
Earth rendreth upp her undeserved praye
Heaven claymes the right and beares the prize awaye.
(Davidson and Sweeney 11)

The first two stanzas of this poem are a series of antitheses which juxtapose the Virgin’s sinless body, rising to heaven, with the heavy, sluggish body of concupiscent man. In the poem’s opening lines, Southwell’s antitheses force the reader to dart back and forth, from “sinne” to “grace”, “tombe” to “throne”, “sinners” to “guiltless” in a manner which recalls stichomythia. The stichomythic effect continues in the second stanza. Here, concupiscent man is represented in the first two lines using the synecdoche of the “daseled eye” and imagery of light and darkness — “dymmed light”, and ‘shrowdinge shades’. The eyes of sinful man are here shown to be as frail and feeble as his body, and

¹⁷ Scallion gives a detailed exploration of the epigrammatic nature of the ‘sequence’ as a whole (100).

too weak for the dazzling light of God's love. This is a Southwellian commonplace: images of mists and shadows in his poetry reveal that the eyes of the fallen man are unable to encounter external representations of God's brightness. In "The prodigall chylds soule wracke", for example, Southwell's sinful speaker bewails the inadequacy of his "dazeled eyes" (Davidson and Sweeney 38:45).

In Southwell's "Assumption of Our Lady", man's feeble eyes and the darkness of his existence are juxtaposed in the second stanza to eyes of the Virgin who is metaphorically represented as an eagle: "But Eagles eyes to brightest light aspire" (9). Southwell's use of the eagle metaphor condenses a number of associations. It both anticipates Mary's regality as Queen of Heaven, seen in the image of "Our princely Eagle" (12), and foregrounds her sinless state: compared with sinful man, her vision is strong, pure and clear. It was believed that the eagle could look at the sun without blinking; Nancy Pollard Brown and James H. McDonald gloss the phrase "lofitye glades" as "beams of the clear light of heaven", commenting that the word "glades" had, at the time, associations with flashes of lightning and tails from comets (123). The Virgin's eyes are, thus, set in direct contrast to the dazzled eyes of sinful man. The use of the eagle is also an allusion to another Biblical text traditionally associated with the Assumption — that of the vision of the Woman Clothed with the Sun of the Book of Revelation who, in escaping from a dragon, is transformed:

And there were given to the woman two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the desert. (Revelation 12.14)¹⁸

The Woman Clothed with the Sun was associated with the Virgin from as early as the fifth century (Warner 121–133). Like the bride in the Song of Songs, the image was redesignated by the Protestant Church to represent Christ's church — and was also used in relation to Godly Protestant women such as Anne Askew, Lady Jane Grey and Queen Elizabeth (Hackett 70). There is a sense overall in Southwell's poem of the Virgin being lifted out of a world of concupiscence; a very similar effect is created by the escape from the dragon in Revelation. The submerged allusion to the Woman Clothed with the Sun in Southwell's eagle metaphor could therefore be read as a Catholic reclamation of this complex vision in Revelation.

The use of the metaphor of the eagle also anticipates the swiftness and lightness of Mary's Assumption into heaven. This occurs in the third and final stanza of the poem, where the poem becomes lush, lyrical and beautiful:

¹⁸ I am grateful to Dr Monika Smialkowska for alerting me to this allusion.

Gemm to her worth spouse to her love ascendes
Prince to her throne Queene to her heavenly kinge. (13–14)

Gary Waller has recently argued that in writing poems to the Virgin, Southwell was re-directing Petrarchan rhetoric of the court from a secular to a sacred love object (170). Although Southwell's Assumption poem is not on the surface about love, the allusion to the Song of Songs in "spouse to her love ascendes" links the imagery of this stanza with the Bible's most evocative of love poems. The duality in this stanza is not one of opposition, between the Virgin and concupiscent man, but one of congruence between the Virgin, variously represented as "gemm", "spouse", "prince" and "Queene", and the heavenly treasures that await her: "worth", "love", "throne" and "kinge". The imagery is that of a love poem, and in the swiftness and lightness of tone one is reminded of the Virgin's Assumption into heaven in Southwell's earlier Latin poem, where there is a sense of beauty and dignity to the way in which the Virgin, aided by divine love, rises above Death's foaming hysteria and is swiftly assumed into heaven.

At this point, the poem can be viewed as owing a debt to the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, which were fundamental to Southwell's Jesuit training.¹⁹ Loyola's *Exercises* are a series of meditations and prayers which privilege the inner eye. The meditator is instructed in the art of 'seeing the place', envisaging an aspect of scriptural narrative with the mind's eye, and then placing themselves in the scene (Miola 291). The *Exercises* were of paramount importance to Catholic priests working underground in England, who used them as a spiritual and didactic aid.²⁰ In his Assumption poem, Southwell's evocative imagery has placed the reader in an extrascriptural scene. Up until this point in the poem we have been witnessing Mary's Assumption and the swiftness of movement of the poem has meant we have been, to a certain extent, travelling with her. But in the final couplet, the perspective of the poem shifts, and we are left behind:

Earth rendreth upp her undeserved praye
Heaven claymes the right and beares the prize awaye. (17–18)

The image of the Virgin as the personified earth's "undeserved praye" who is born away into heaven strikes an uneasy, almost predatory note, particularly after the lush

¹⁹ Links between Southwell's poetic method and the *Exercises* form the backbone of Martz's analysis, though Sweeney has warned that this approach should be treated with a degree of caution (chapter 2).

²⁰ John Gerard's *Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, a first-hand account of life as a Jesuit priest, makes constant reference to the practical use of the *Exercises*.

beauty of the lines which have preceded it. Southwell is asking the reader to meditate on man's unworthiness compared with the Virgin here, but he is also commenting on the dark ages of the end of the sixteenth century, a time in which such images of the Virgin's Assumption and Coronation had been ripped out of the liturgy. It is the Virgin's triumph, but is it ours? We remain on the dark ground, shut off from the blazing light of heaven. Noting the overall celebratory tone of the poem, Waller observes Southwell's triumphalist stance against a Protestant universe that had "been emptied of superstition" (119). But the end of the poem is also about loss, as Southwell does not allow the reader to share in this triumph.

Anne Sweeney's research has shown that the poem can be seen as a representation of paintings by the Jesuit Giuseppe Valeriano in the Madonna Chapel of the Gesu (*Snow in Arcadia* 47). The poem thus becomes a pure form of *ut pictura poesis*, and read in this way, the polemical nature of Southwell's work is foregrounded. He is using his verse to create for the inner eye a vision that the iconoclast had destroyed.²¹ In these final two lines, however, poem and painting part ways, for in Southwell's verse the Virgin disappears. The poem commenced with a conditional "if"; from the start, Southwell is showing his awareness that the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin represents a contentious subject, an argument to be won. The absence of the Virgin at the end of the poem sharpens the politicized subtext of her representation, and its last two lines have all the resonance of recusant verse of exile and tears. On the surface, this poem is far less polemical than the Latin "Poema de Assumptione BVM", but beneath the surface, we find an equally acute awareness of the contentious nature of the image of the Virgin's Assumption.

The Virgin's "faultles cors"

In this poem, Southwell's representation of the Virgin's body at the point of her Assumption into heaven is a highly significant one:

Though thralles of sinne lye lingring in their grave
Yet faultles cors with soule rewarde must have. (5–6)

These lines encapsulate the movement of the whole poem — the swift flight of the Virgin's Assumption and the sluggish torpor of the sinful reader, who is ultimately left to "lye lingring in their grave". In the image of the Virgin's "faultless cors" lies also the

²¹ A paradox in the Reformation assault on images was the human ability to create mental pictures, thus laying man open to idolatry of the mind. See Aston 452–66 and Hill 162–172.

belief that not only is Mary's body free from sin, but that it also has not been polluted or penetrated by disease or wounds. This purity of the Virgin's flesh can be set in stark contrast to a constant motif of fragile and vulnerable flesh running through Southwell's poetry, which again and again returns to the image of the body of Christ, mutilated and broken by his crucifixion.

This is best demonstrated through analysis of a single poem. One of the ways in which Southwell's "sequence" departs so radically from the Dominican Rosary is that the crucifixion of Christ is not included within it. Instead, the vulnerability of Christ's human flesh is represented in a poem entitled "The Circumsision" (Davidson and Sweeney 7). In this poem, rather in the manner of the *pentimento* in painting, the reader is encouraged to look through images of the baby Christ's body, wounded in a Jewish ritual, to the crucifixion of Christ the Son of Man. The Virgin thus shifts from the concerned mother of her baby son to the *Mater Dolorosa* who experiences her son's pain with a synaesthetic intensity:

With weeping eyes his mother reu'd his smart
If bloode from him, teares rann from her as fast
The knife that cutt his fleshe did perce her hart
The payne that Jesus felt did Marye tast. (12–15)

The image of the knife cutting Mary's heart alludes to the Lucan gospel, where the ageing Simeon prophesies that Mary herself will become a martyr with the words "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce" (Luke 2:35). The Augustinian view of this was that the sword represented Mary's grief as she watched her son die (Graef 75).

In the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux connected this prophecy with the bitter laments of Mary as *Mater Dolorosa*, grieving at the foot of her son's cross, and exhorted worshippers to emulate Mary's spiritual martyrdom (De Visscher 182). Through the juxtaposition of Mary's tears with Christ's blood in Southwell's poem comes a proleptic glimpse of the blood and water which mingled when Christ's side was opened at his crucifixion. The image also encapsulates the contrast between the Virgin and Christ. The knife that cuts Christ's flesh is here real, but it pierces the Virgin's heart metaphorically. Whilst the son's martyred body is broken, penetrated and frail, the mother's remains pure and intact, leaking only tears, which have cleansing and purifying properties. Southwell's representation of Mary's physical flesh as unscarred by wounds or disease is made all the more powerful by its marked contrast to the fragile flesh of her son, mutilated first by his circumcision and ultimately by his brutal death.

Within Southwell's repeated motif of Christ's broken and vulnerable human flesh it is also possible to see the image of the poet's own body, mutilated at Tyburn. In acknowledging this, one is not simply instilling the text with our own macabre mental image of Southwell's execution: Southwell's awareness of his own likely martyrdom frequently breaks through his works. In his prose work *An Epistle of Comfort*, for example, he delivers a heady paean to martyrdom, with descriptions that are alive with contemporaneous language of torture and execution:

Let our adversaries, therefore, load us with the infamous titles of traitors and rebels; let them draw us upon hurdles, hang us, embowel us alive, mangle us, and set our quarters upon their gates, to be meat for the birds of the air. (174)

The virtuosic poem "Christ's bloody sweat" finds Southwell's speaker exhorting God to make him a martyr, asking for a fire of sacred love to 'shewe thy force on me' (Davidson and Sweeney 17). It is a poem in which, as Davidson observes, Southwell in *imitatio Christi* both accepts and anticipates his own death (177). Linking the Catholic martyr with the crucified Christ takes us down a well-trodden path. Geoffrey Hill comments that the "object contemplated" for Southwell in Ignatian meditational practice "was most frequently and formally the Passion of Christ; but there can be little doubt that for Southwell it was also his own "almost inevitable martyrdom""(19). The execution of an Elizabethan priest was a knowingly theatrical affair, and for one martyred for his faith it carried with it, in Brownlow's words, "a reenactment of the passion and crucifixion of Christ, complete with bystanders, apostles, soldiers and faithful women" (32). Southwell's acute awareness of the physical vulnerability of human flesh led to a sharper awareness of the perfection of the flesh in its second casting in heaven; in his *Epistle of Comfort*, Southwell describes the body in heaven as "healthful, without any weakness ; always in youth, and in the flower and prime of their force" (191).²² In Southwell's depiction of the Virgin's "faultles cors" at her Assumption, we find Mary's body presented as needing no second casting: instead, she rises to heaven inviolate. This in itself is not new, but the contrast between this and Southwell's repeated motif of fragile and mutilated flesh of her son is a marked one.

I began this essay with Southwell's death because his is a story told in reverse. He landed on England's shores in 1586 in the almost certain knowledge that his mission would end in martyrdom; like his Saviour, he would die brutally for love. Students at the English College in Rome where Southwell studied were instructed not to seek immediate martyrdom in a manner that could be deemed suicidal. Effectively

²² For a discussion of Southwell's meditations on the body's second casting, see Caraman, *Friendship* 11.

functioning priests were an integral part of the future of Catholicism in England, as Southwell's own six-year, practical mission shows.²³ But there is a delicate balance between this and the highly-charged atmosphere of the college itself, where students went about their daily business surrounded by the violent martyr murals painted by Circignani, and where news of the death of friends and contemporaries was a regular occurrence (Dillon 225). The knowledge of the anticipated violence of his own death breathes through Southwell's poetry in images of fragile human flesh, mutilated and broken. The Elizabethan traitor's death of hanging, drawing and quartering represented an appalling violation of the human body, which was emasculated, disembowelled and, ultimately, dismembered. Nothing could be further from the perfection and beauty of the Virgin's "faultles cors" as she is assumed into heaven. Southwell powerfully represents this contrast in "The Assumption of our Lady", a poem which sees him martial the rhetorical skills of the courtier poet to provide us with a series of condensed antitheses, juxtaposing the sinless Virgin with sinful man. His representation of the Virgin is haunted ultimately by a sense of absence which can be read as a politicized acknowledgement of the Catholic church's loss of one of its most beloved feasts. But the poem also contains imagery of great lyrical beauty, and is thus a sacred alternative to the secular love poetry of the courtier poet. It is Southwell's sacred love poem to the Virgin Mary whose earthly flesh remained pure and unviolated and whose triumph over death – swift, beautiful and too pure for the eyes of sinful man – was so radically different from his own.

²³ For importance of priests see Dillon 112. Biographers comment on the outward and practical nature of Southwell's mission. See for example Devlin 131 and Brownlow 10.

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