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John Donne's *A Litany* and *The Book of Common Prayer*

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Yu, Jie-Ae. "John Donne's *A Litany* and *The Book of Common Prayer*." *Studies in English Language & Literature*. 40.4 (2014): 201-213. In accordance with Christian rituals, a litany is a collection of prayers and supplications which are included in *The Book of Common Prayer* used in Anglican Churches from the mid sixteenth century. Donne creatively adopts these traditional hymns in the light of his personal and literary concerns in one of his divine poems—*A Litany*. The writer's reuse of *The Book of Common Prayer* in *A Litany* propounds his own experiences of bodily pain, mental and spiritual reflections. Unlike in *The Book of Common Prayer*, Donne's *A Litany* endorses his sincere requests and longings for the improvement of his troubled mind. This paper investigates the procedure of engaging his internalized and close relationship with God. It scrutinizes the author's strenuous and persistent aspirations to search for his intimate connection with the Almighty, through elaborating his multifarious religious susceptibilities. (Changwon National University)

Key Words: Donne, *Litany*, *The Book of Common Prayer*, God, supplication

I.

When he composed *A Litany* in the winter of 1608/1609, John Donne was confined to bed with a ruthless attack of neuritis. In his letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, written during his illness, he depicted in detail how the physical pain has given him "so much of a continual cramp" in his sinews and mouth (169).¹ His suffering from this bodily ordeal caused him to feel

devastated for "it is not like to be cured" in spite of his eagerness for having its "hasty" palliation (169). In the same correspondence, Donne discloses to one of his intimate acquaintances how he had carried "weary soul" dominated by the great influence of "ceaseless grave pain" on his body (170). This personal experience of the author at the time of composition of the work draws the readers' attention to an intriguing connection between the perceptions of his physical disease and the literary embodiment of his internal attitude.

It is in *A Litany* where, unlike in *An Anatomy of the World*, Donne focuses more on his microcosmic approach to his unrelenting interest in the diverse mental and spiritual contemplations on his physical infirmity. The despondent ordeal certainly leads Donne to reflect on the internal alertness to the physical affliction throughout the work. Taking the poetic adaptation of the ritual song included in *The Book of Common Prayer*, Donne accentuates the vigorous procedure of meditating the constant burden of the uneasy heart caused by his corporeal wriggling.

Regarding modern critical receptions of *A Litany*, most commentators have analyzed this divine writing in the light of the following viewpoints: "Donne's reference to the structural pattern of the Catholic Latin Litany of the Saints" (Patterson 40-41), "the adoption of the common voice of the liturgical poem" (Targoff 97), "the similarity of language between *Litany* and *The Book of Common Prayer*" (Wellington 177), and "evoking the communion of saints and expressing pious hopes" (Shell 655). One of the common interests of these articles is to show comparative points between Donne's *Litany* and the traditional working of the church service using *The Book of Common Prayer*. The reviewers have primarily focused on Donne's deferential stance toward the ritual

¹ All the primary sources including Donne's poetry and prose are taken from John Donne, *The Oxford Authors: John Donne*, ed., John Carey (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).

procedure of the Anglican Church. Unlike these critical positions, Jeanne Shami has raised a challenging view of Donne's reaction to the conventional liturgy, arguing that he urged "interpretive independence" from the authority of the church" ("The Sermon" 318), Despite this provocative suggestion, Shami does not expanded her remark in detail during the rest of her paper about Donne's sermons.

My article intends to examine Donne's unique and particular understanding and attitude toward the conventional liturgy utilized by the contemporary Church of England. It aims to scrutinize how *A Litany* reflects his vibrant perceptions of bodily pain and how the writer tries to incorporate such a vexatious human condition into his poetic work. In dealing with this matter, the paper also considers the obstructions and hazards carried out within his mind in the course of availing himself with devout sensibilities.

II.

In John Donne's time, the litany was a ritual song which had been used during Mass in the Anglican Church since 1544. Included in *The Book of Common Prayer* from 1549, it was either sung or said after Morning Prayer on Sundays and Wednesdays. Donne, who had been the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral since 1621 and maintained a strong sense of Christian identity throughout his literary career, was inspired by the authentic revelation of human wretchedness, limitation, and suffering inherent within a diverse range of human lives. The contents of the litany primarily constitute sincere prayers of church participants, which come from their consciousness of various human afflictions and the reasons for these adversities. While beseeching God to hear their

petitions during the Church service, people draw upon the suffering of Jesus and strive to overcome their distress by being united with the Passion of Christ. The litany is also made up of numerous supplications through which the attendants of the Mass request God to deliver them from all sorts of sinfulness, difficulties, or temptations through His forgiveness, mercy and grace.

Both prayers and supplications placed in *The Book of Common Prayer* are founded upon the general human experiences which they tend to share in encountering a number of unexpected misfortunes and gloomy affairs. A modern critic, P. M. Oliver usefully annotates the significance of participating in the ritual service, which Donne was aware of (95). Oliver finds that the Anglican litany asks God to enlighten various groups of people including "all bishops, pastors, and ministers of the church with the true knowledge and understanding of His word" (95). However, Donne's reworking of the religious songs in *A Litany* is, I would argue, more concentrates on the precise prayers and requests which originate from his own personal domains than common human experiences. Kirsten Stirling mentioned this "private nature" of the author briefly in his article of 2011 (236), but we need to investigate how such a "private" articulation is closely related to Donne's manifestations of his own particular experiences during his religious career. I would suggest that the author does not pass over the petitions of the general people, but a large number of the lines in *A Litany* are certainly imbued with his unique experiences caused by his unhealthy physical problems. This work is construed by "his feeling for the depth and penetrability of body" which gave him a "particular interest in comprehending its hidden message or wisdom of life" behind the corporeal distress (Carey 144).

In comparison with Donne's affinity with God in *La Corona* and *Holy*

Sonnets, A Litany is much more distinctive in revealing his struggle with the adverse fortune of the physical ailment. His frustration is expressed through a paradox involving the human condition of his existence – created by God but simultaneously destroyed eventually, at least in his physical entity:

Thou mad'st, and govern'st ever, come
 And re-create me, now grown ruinous:
 My heart is by dejections, clay,
 And by self-murder, red.
 From his red earth, O Father, purge away
 All vicious tinctures, that new fashioned
 I may rise up from death, before I am dead. (1-8)

Donne's strong wish to "rise up from death" implies his fear of the spiritual decline accompanied with his physical demise. His "dejected" heart condition worries him because he anticipates the loss of his faith in God amidst the physical hardship. This anxiety about his spiritual crisis is well connected with "low devout melancholy" in *La Corona* (2) and "black soul" in *Holy Sonnets* numbered 2. In accordance with Helen Gardner's summary of the main features of Donne's thematic concerns, one of his literary mottos is to unravel the interior gloom which disrupts his closeness to God (39-40). It is one of Donne's unique ideas that the spiritual darkness is propounded by his contemplation of wrongdoing as he reveals his recurrent treatment of man's sinful nature in his numerous writings such as *An Anatomy of the World*, *The Lamentation of Jeremy*, *Holy Sonnets*, and *Death's Duel*. Donne's unique perception of death, whether physical or spiritual, is that it is thought to be necessitated by sins committed in one's past:

O Son of God, who seeing two things,
 Sin and death crept in, which were never made,
 By bearing one, tried'st with what stings
 The other could thine heritage invade;
 O be thou nailed unto my heart,
 And crucified again,
 Part not from it, though it from thee would part,
 But let it be by applying so thy pain,
 Drowned in thy blood, and in thy passion slain. (10-18)

Donne's understanding of "final death" is certainly entwined with his deeply ingrained notion of man's "corruption" (Nelson 238). Just as Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of and redemption by God, so Donne intends to "nail" his guilty heart on the cross within his heart by way of imaging the similar act of Christ's crucifixion. The litany in *The Book of Common Prayer* illustrates with the "precious blood" of Christ and the people's "deeming" with it (75). In contrast, Donne's *A Litany* endorses his personal reaction to the cross in more intimate way, which differentiates from the general account of the common pain of people in the litany of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The aspect of internal frustration is related to the similar facet in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* composed in 1623, toward the end of Donne's life. He wrote this prose while enduring further suffering from fever and typhus. As *Meditation IV*, contained within this work, indicates, Donne's contemplation on the bondage of bodily "disease" persists in his later literary career. In *A Litany*, he prefigures the unremitting fear of the afterworld on account of his incapability to cope with the physical illness. He continues his deploration at the introspective discomfort necessitated by the bodily entrapment later on in *Meditation IV*: "O miserable abundance, O beggarly riches! How much

do we lack of having remedies for every disease" (337).

Donne's prayer intensifies the revelation of his struggle with being relieved from the psychological burden which has become entangled with his physical problem. He believes that it is urgent to ask God to deliver him from "tempting Satan," and "from neglecting to choke sin's spawn, vanity" (*A Litany* XVII, 145-48). He is concerned about the possibility of falling into "indiscreet humility," whereby bringing about a "reproach on Christianity." This presentiment about Donne's religious weakness dismantles his heart because he recognizes that his weakness tends to succumb to the evil spirit within it. However, it is this unstable and fragile moment that ironically propels him to set out his supplication to God for bringing in his spiritual integrity. The "private" aspect of the author (Stirling 236) is represented here, through preventing himself from being dissociated with the Almighty:

From being anxious, or secure,
 Dead clods of sadness, or light squibs of mirth,
 From thinking, that great courts immure
 All, or no happiness, or that this earth
 Is only for our prison framed,
 Or that thou art covetous
 To them whom thou lov'st or that they are maimed
 From reaching this world's sweet. (XVI 136-44)

Donne's apprehension about the redemption of his soul in the afterworld develops into its opposite direction through his defiant morale destined to recover his strong relationship with God. Donne's *A Litany* emphasizes the double sides of his religious faith, for while struggling with his gloomy soul, he does not wish to be hurled into the spiritual disruption. The author somewhat vigorously lifts up his heart to God,

and this determined response sustains his devout commitment to God. Donne's intention to "remain in his religious faith" (Carey 243) has been treated fairly well in *A Litany* as well as other religious writings such as numerous *Holy Sonnets*, devotional poems, and sermons including his finally preached text, *Death's Duel* of 1631. The dual aspect of his religious tendency becomes one of Donne's relentless concern in prose and poetry written, particularly after 1620 when he suffered from his frequent physical illness.

A Litany does imbed the "paradoxical formulation" of Donne's religious selfhood (Shami "Donne's Decision to Take Orders" 527) expanded in the later works, particularly *Holy Sonnets* numbered 2, 10, and 13. Donne's *A Litany* accentuates the power of his spirit in confronting the depressing human circumstances particularly through his sincere supplication to the Trinity of God, His Son, and the Holy Spirit:

O Blessed glorious Trinity,
 Bones to Philosophy, but milk to faith,
 Which, as wise serpents, diversely
 Most slipperiness, yet most entanglings hath,
 As you distinguished undistinct
 By power, love, knowledge be,
 Give me such self different instinct,
 Of these let all me elemented be,
 Of Power, to love, to know,
 You unnumbered three. (28-37)

Donne's attempt to exert his vigor is not a simple action, but embeds a vigorous challenge from blind bodily senses which pursues his pride and results in the lack of religious connection with God. Donne raises the ironic consequence of man's material sensitivity which, he believes, certainly ruins his effort to flourish the invisible and intangible domain of

faith. John Carey comments that Donne plays up the "vehemence of reason" (243), but I would argue that he has a limitation of fighting against such an uncontrollable power of mental temptation. Human reason is thought to provide an obstacle to exerting his fidelity to God. Donne's earnest solicitation definitely goes for God's deliverance of him from his corporeal entities which have constrained his body and mind beyond his freedom of choice:

And through that bitter agony,
Which is still the agony of pious wits,
Disputing what distorted thee,
And interrupted evenness, with fits,
And through thy free confession
Though thereby they were then
Made blind, so that thou mightest from them have gone,
Good Lord deliver us, and teach us when
We may not, and we may blind unjust men. (163-71)

From stanza 23 to 28 (the last) of *A Litany*, Donne perseveres his supplication for God's intercession into human affairs. Like in the ritual song, Donne urges Him to behold human misery and suffering which, he discerns, have been caused by the consequences of man's previous depravities. He repeats the word "hear" six times in one stanza consisting of 9 lines, which indicates his enduring pursuit of God's care about the irresistible adversities of human beings as well as his own tribulation: "hear us, or hear us Lord; to thee / A sinner is more music, when he prays, / Than spheres, or angels' praises be" (199-201). In interpreting this authentic passage, Kirsten Stirling's comment is a piece of insightful critical approach. She finds that Donne "transforms his litany into prayer" (236). Donne's earnest entreaty is natural for him to

hold on, because the recollection of original sin and his past wrongdoing have obviously led him to feel wretched and helpless. The correlation between the church song and Donne's own created piece has been mentioned by Wellington (177), but my suggestion is that Donne puts much greater emphasis on the word "hearing," which implicates the serious level of his engrossment about being emancipated from the recurrent sense of woe and impotence.

Donne maximizes the way by which he expresses grief and requires God's reaction to it by illustrating with the case of Job, one of the most miserable figures in the *Old Testament*. Donne certainly reverberates the genuine voice of Job, who has lost everything invaluable and requested God to look over his bleak condition and give him great mercy. In the litany of *The Book of Common Prayer* Job does not appear at all, but Donne creatively incorporates this tragic biblical character into his poem. When introducing this figure, he repeats the word of petition, "hear," while bringing forth Job's heartfelt pleas: "hear us, for till thou hear us, Lord / We know not what to say, / Thine ear to our signs, tears, thoughts gives voice and word" (203-205).

The "formal structure" of Donne's "repetitive" entreaty (Stirling 240) is basically founded upon his turn to God's promises to liberate human beings from their internal afflictions. Donne's reworking of Job's deplorable and earnest articulation clearly augments his own helpless but simultaneously hopeful attitude toward seeking God's intervention to his urgent situation:

That we may change to evenness
 This intermitting anguish piety,
 That snatching cramps of wickedness
 And apoplexies of fast sin, may die;
 That music of thy promises,

Not threats in thunder may
Awaken us to our just offices;
What in thy book, thou dost, or creatures say,
That we may hear, Lord hear us, when we pray. (208-216)

Donne's *Litany* reaches the utmost level of supplication at which he perceives the divine grace and mercy upon it. The term "cramps of wickedness" is reminiscent of those aforementioned in his letter to Sir Henry Goodyer (169). Donne's creative poetic device of paradox is deployed again to effectuate the complex facet of his religious experience. He vigorously reacts to his own "cramps," going back to "unquestioning faith" in the providence of God (Carey 144) and His divine grace upon man's limitation. This new vision is, in a sense, a development from his previous works such as *Of the Progress of the Soul* in which he searches for the "unrestrained state of mind and body" from the bounds of human adversity (Yu 168). In *A Litany*, Donne's positive point of view is magnified through his reliance on God's redemption of man's deficiencies and infirmities in the afterlife as well as in this world: "O Lamb of God, which took'st our sin / Which could not stick to thee" (244-49). Indeed, Unlike in *The Book of Common Prayer*, Donne's *A Litany* more vigorously enacts an enlightening domain of individual life which abides by the territory of God's domination and benediction.

III.

We have seen how Donne's adoption of *The Book of Common Prayer* rears up his intimate and personalized relationship with God, Jesus, and

the Holy Spirit in *A Litany*. One of the main findings of this paper is that Donne reuses *The Book of Common Prayer* in order to feature his own implorations and requests according to his literary purposes. Whereas personal pronouns such as "I" and "me" do not appear in the litany of *The Book of Common Prayer*, Donne's *Litany* does, on numerous occasions, use these terms which certainly manifest the individualized articulations of his own life affairs. In this unique ambiance of the poetic form, he unveils the bottom of his heart imposed by his distress and limitations.

Another discovery of this article is that Donne's efforts in confronting the adverse moments in *A Litany* embodies the complication of his spiritual condition both positively and negatively. In one sense, Donne is so determined to grapple with the provocative circumstance by means of his religious alertness but he, in another way, comes to be shrouded in his unstable mind. Donne's *A Litany* is characterized by his sincere articulations of both his drawback and courage in coping with the physical hardship. Unlike in other divine writings, *A Litany* is a unique piece of writing which is entwined, in a grand scale, with the author's reaction to his internal subtlety. Donne's own acts of prayers and entreaties enable him to be affirmative of the benevolent power of the Almighty.

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litany.pdf. pray&thanks.pdf. collects.pdf.Â The Book of Common Prayer, as printed by John Baskerville. This document is intended to exactly reproduce The 1662 Book of Common Prayer as printed by John Baskerville in 1762. This particular printing appears in David Griffiths' "Bibliography of the Book of Common Prayer" as 1762/4; and is #19 in Phillip Gaskell's bibliography of Baskerville's works. The font used is John Baskerville, from Storm Foundries, which is very close to the original and includes all the characters used in this book. The original pages are slightly larger than half of an 8½ x 11" piece of paper, so Share this poem: John Donne. John Donne (24 January 1572 - 31 March 1631 / London, England). #57 on top 500 poets. John Donne Poet Page.Â As her deeds were Our helps, so are her prayers ; nor can she sue In vain, who hath such titles unto you. VI. THE ANGELS.Â The sacred academy above Of Doctors, whose pains have unclasp'd, and taught Both books of life to us"for love To know Thy scriptures tells us, we are wrote In Thy other book"pray for us there, That what they have misdome Or missaid, we to that may not adhere. Their zeal may be our sin. Lord, let us run Mean ways, and call them stars, but not the sun.