

# Religion and the Body as a Site in Renaissance

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Renaissance as a period entails the burgeoning of several artists and their respective artistic traditions. Writers, painters, sculptors and poets and their artistic ability is a defining characteristic of the era. As it is expressive of any time period, the art and literature of the time depict the contemporary attitudes relating to socio-political, religious, psychological aspects of society at the time. Renaissance, which, literally translates to 'rebirth' was a term coined in Italian and it first appears in Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, originally published in 1500. It is traditionally understood as revival of the classics, Latin and Greek. However, a study of the arts and literature of the time reveals the need for a more nuanced and complicated assessment.

In an attempt to look at the same period from a divergent perspective, Renaissance can be understood as a time when communication regarding religion and philosophy to the general population began. Renaissance art had the power to communicate to a largely illiterate population. Creating a space wherein religion as an idea could be explored, Renaissance art placed a very strong focus on Christianity. It emerged as a form of storytelling, making religious ideas seem more real and vivid.<sup>1</sup> Writing in this period also made its way to larger sections of the population. With the invention of printing press, translations of the Bible reached more people, giving them access to understand religion with their own perspective.

When seen from this lens, it can be stated that one of the primary themes of Renaissance is religion and variations in understanding the same. Focus on the Bible shaped the way church and religion were understood. Religion, in popular imagination, underwent a variation. Earlier, God was considered to be the ultimate center of the universe, with all forms of art paying primary focus to the divine. Majority of depictions were of God and were meant to be viewed by God. However, the Renaissance period brought a shift in this worldview. With writers like Mirandola, Erasmus and More propagating the idea that man was in fact created to be at the

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<sup>1</sup>Januszczak, Waldemar. *Renaissance Unchained*, BBC. (March, 2016)

center of the universe, the primary object of art shifted from God to man (read human). Man now became the object and viewer of art. It is in bringing the human form to the forefront, that the body and the bodily become a subject of art.

Religion and the body are intricately connected in the way the former interprets the latter. Long-standing Christian tradition formed a sense of distrust in its discourse with body and sexuality. The body as a site was generally believed to be degenerating and corrupt. In traditional Christian thought a distinction exists between *agape*, which is the divine love that God has for man and *eros*, which can be understood as human sexual desire, self-centered and unlike the prior, inconstant.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, religion stands separated from body and sexuality, as it draws man away from God. However, if one were to combine the two, it would be a particularly Neo-Platonic understanding, wherein the body is used as a means of achieving the divine.

Renaissance as a period had an increasing focus on Neo-Platonism and this shaped the dominant conceptions of love at the time. Marsilio Ficino, in his revival of Platonic theory, tried to harmonize Platonic ideas with Christian ones. According to him, love is that which uses cognitive virtue to desire the ideal form and not merely a desire of the matter or material. This discourse between religion and the place of the body within it is remarkably depicted in the works of some celebrated Renaissance artists, both painters and poets alike. In this paper, I analyze the influence of religion in the works of the painter Sandro Botticelli and poet John Donne and the significance of the body therein. The attempt here is to elucidate a major conceptual and aesthetic pattern of the Renaissance.

In this pursuit, I shall compare two celebrated Renaissance men by looking at certain similarities and contrasts between them, trying to form a trajectory of their life and work. John Donne, an English poet had a reputation of being a Metaphysical poet, a term coined by Samuel Johnson. His verses are amorous and have a philosophical endeavour attached to them, hence entering the realm of metaphysics. This style of poetry was very uncommon at the time and might explain why it was not until the end of the 1800s that Donne's poetry was eagerly taken up.<sup>3</sup> However, it was read only by a selected few avant-garde readers using the medium of a circulated manuscript. Therefore, his work largely remained private and exclusive at the time. Unlike him, Botticelli was a celebrated artist during his lifetime, summoned to decorate the Sistine

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<sup>2</sup>Guibbory, Achshah. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.

<sup>3</sup>Biography, John Donne, Poetry Foundation.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/john-donne>)

Chapel. However, his most acclaimed work came into being because he drew a lot of attention from the Medici family of Italy.<sup>4</sup> Their patronage is a significant feature in his work. Due to this, the most famous works he produced were commissioned by the Medici and were made to remain for an exclusive audience, much like Donne's poetry.

The most indispensable themes in both Donne and Botticelli's work are indeed religion and the body in terms of sexuality and desire. Although, Botticelli's paintings depict the body itself, Donne's poetry is more of the bodily experiences. However, both the artists combine religion and the site of the body to create their work. They place the body and the bodily in religion itself, amalgamating both the entities. This harmonization of generally distinct notions goes further. Donne was born into Catholicism but converted to Protestantism later in his life and became the Dean of St. Paul's church. Regardless of his allegiance to different sects of Christianity at different points in his life, he tends to principally maintain the idea that Christianity should be deemed one. This is to say, that confessional labels of "Catholic" and "Protestant" did not hinder his religious position as being defined by a single word "Christian".<sup>5</sup> His disregard of various sects of Christianity is evident in one of his earlier poems, *Satire III* (1593-95), wherein he scornfully describes several sects of religion and advocates for not following one blindly. Instead, he advises enquiring wisely and searching for the real truth by oneself.

Botticelli, in his *Primavera* (1477-82), which contains a cast of mythological figures, depicts the Roman goddess, Venus with a bloated stomach. Contemporary Florentine aesthetics were inclined to this style of painting figures and this is regarded as the reason for Venus being so.<sup>6</sup> However, another reason considered for this deliberate bloated stomach of Venus is that it is Botticelli's way of comparing her to the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, in the painting Venus's hand posture is such that it reminds one of the popular depictions of Madonna. In this manner, Botticelli aspires to harmonize the Classical and the Christian. However, it is important to note now that both the artists carry on their task of harmonizing in distinct ways. For Donne, Christianity held an absolute monopoly and was not considered merely as a part of religion but formed the whole of it.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Botticelli's work places primary focus on the traditional Italian Renaissance aspiration of reviving the classics.

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<sup>4</sup> Introduction, Sandro Botticelli, Artble. ([http://www.artble.com/artists/sandro\\_botticelli](http://www.artble.com/artists/sandro_botticelli))

<sup>5</sup> Guibbory, Achsah. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print. Page no: 67.

<sup>6</sup> La Primavera by Botticelli: <sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> Interpretation, Analysis of Early Renaissance Allegorical Painting, Art Encyclopedia. (<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/famous-paintings/primavera.htm>)

<sup>7</sup> Guibbory, Achsah. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print. Page no: 65.



Primavera (1477-1482)

Primavera is also known as the Allegory of Springs and is said to be created for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco on the occasion of his marriage, to be placed in his marital bedroom.<sup>8</sup> It portrays Gods and Goddess virtually naked and the figures are floating, and their pale skin and golden-haired faces giving them an angelic quality. Apart from Venus who occupies a privileged position in the painting, to the left are three figures known as Three Graces and they symbolize feminine virtues of chastity, beauty and love.<sup>9</sup> All of these characteristics point to romance. Their clothes, painted in lace and a very light, translucent fabric illustrate Botticelli's skill and desire to accentuate the female body. The depiction of springtime and flowers is seen as a symbol of fertility. The presence of the Cupid and his act of targeting the pure Three Graces with his arrow takes on a particular meaning in the light of conjugal love.<sup>10</sup> This painting is Neo-Platonic in the sense that the entire context of it is based on physical love as a means of achieving divine love, due to presence of God and Goddess.

In depicting the body, Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1484-86) is monumental. Unlike the *Primavera*, Venus is painted in the nude here. This painting represents Botticelli's mastery in treating the human body as Venus is depicted as born in a markedly

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<sup>8</sup> *La Primavera by Botticelli*. Uffizi.org: Guide to Uffizi Gallery Museum.

(<http://www.uffizi.org/artworks/la-primavera-allegory-of-spring-by-sandro-botticelli/>)

<sup>9</sup> *Botticelli's Primavera*. Italian Renaissance.org: Analysis of the Art of Renaissance Italy.

(<http://www.italianrenaissance.org/a-closer-look-botticellis-primavera/>)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

womanly body. A recurring subject in Botticelli's mythology paintings, Venus, not only reflects Botticelli's admiration and appreciation of antiquity, but also shows his zeal for Neo-Platonism. In Platonism, Venus symbolizes intellectual love and a source of human desire.<sup>11</sup> This painting of Venus and the unmistakable emphasis on the body shows beauty as sensual, physical, erotic and simultaneously points towards the notion of divine beauty.



The Birth of Venus (1484-1486)

Much like Botticelli, there is place for the body in Donne's work. Donne, through his poetry communicates a sense of passion and compromises on the regular iambic feet for the same.<sup>12</sup> *Eros* for Donne was a driving force and he does not segregate the spiritual from the sexual in understanding desire.<sup>13</sup> In his poem *Ecstasy*, the title itself makes one ambivalent on the question of whether the 'ecstasy' referred to here is sexual or spiritual. Throughout the poem, Donne acknowledges Neo-Platonic love and this is evident from the lines:

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<sup>11</sup>How does Botticelli's work reflect the values of the early Renaissance? – Humanism in Botticelli's work. X-Ronghao. Wordpress.com. (<https://xuronghao.wordpress.com/2015/03/09/how-does-botticellis-work-reflect-the-values-of-the-early-renaissance-humanism-in-botticellis-work/>)

<sup>12</sup>Guibbory, Achsah. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print. Page no: 133.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

“Our souls (which to advance their state  
Were gone out) hung ‘twixt her and me.  
And whilst our souls negotiate there,  
We like sepulchral statues lay;  
All day, the same our postures were,  
And we said nothing, all the day.”

Here, he makes it evident that he regards the body, as a means to the soul and that there is passion of the soul and not the body. Body and sex become the medium

for the union of the souls.<sup>14</sup> Although, an uncertainty arises as they are lying together all day, which indicates lingering physical love. However, later on in the poem, Donne challenges this Neo-Platonic idea of body and soul dualism, by stating that “So soul into the soul may flow, though it to body first repair...”. This is to say that the body is indeed important. He goes further through the lines: “Which sense may reach and apprehend, Else a great prince in prison lies...”. In saying so, he is being a sensualist as he places crucial focus on the body as a way to express the soul, without which the soul lies imprisoned.

In addition to this, in another poem titled *Canonization*(1663), the lovers are compared to saints, wherein the beloved is canonized and made holy. Donne’s figurative language makes sexual love sacred.<sup>15</sup> He glorifies the lovers by making them martyrs who “at our own cost die”. There is constant reference to God in the poem however the poem itself is a love sonnet, making the entire endeavour one of spiritual love. He says that:

“Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still  
Litigious men, which quarrels move,  
Though she and I do love.”

Here, he is essentially stating that everyone has their own business and the lover’s is to love.

In this poem *The Flea*(1633), Donne suggests that only in erotic love can there be a

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<sup>14</sup>Guibbory, Achsah. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print. Page no: 142.

<sup>15</sup>Guibbory, Achsah. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print. Page no: 143.

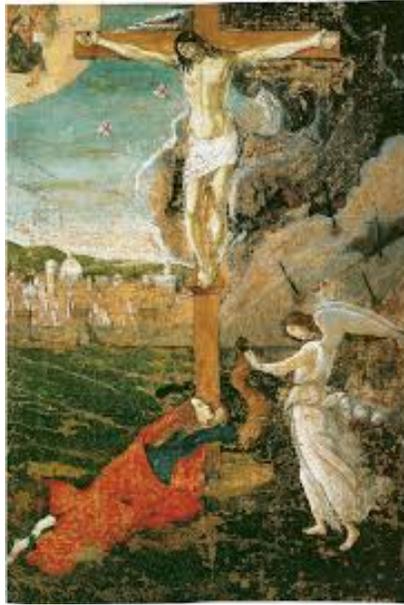
site of peace and unity<sup>16</sup>, by stating that “This flea is you and I, and this our marriage bed, and the marriage temple is...”. The reference to “temple” proves how he tries to connect love with religion. Some of his more distinctly sexual poetry, like *To His Mistress Going to Bed*(1654), makes more explicit references to the body which is evident from lines such as: “Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals...” and “Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee, as souls unbodied, bodies uncloth’d must be...”. Here, Donne overtly celebrates erotic love and the body itself and therefore becomes particularly anti-institutional when the dominant boundaries placed on sex and sexuality by religion are considered. In an even severe manner, in the *Essays in Divinity* (1651), Donne discusses some of the main arguments against the authority of the Bible and expresses some amount of doubt. In a similar manner, Botticelli challenges dominant notions by painting a Goddess life size and in the nude. In other words, Venus’s very nude existence challenges established religious beliefs.

Nonetheless, a glaring contrast is observed in both their works in the later stages. It is mentioned by Vasari in *The Lives of the Artists*(1500), that Botticelli came under the religious influence of a Dominican friar named Savonarola who preached fire and brimstone.<sup>17</sup> He is said to have started the Bonfire of Vanities, wherein all of the art that was considered obscene and opposed to their religious values was burned. Some of Botticelli’s work was lost in this way. However, an interesting belief to note is that Savonarola was a major influence in Botticelli’s own life and he was in fact Savonarola’s follower. Therefore, he adopted a similar stance towards art and is said to have destroyed some of his own art, as a result. Following the influence of Savonarola, Botticelli’s work takes a sharp turn.

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<sup>16</sup>Guibbory, Achsah. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print. Page no: 144.

<sup>17</sup>Vasari, Giorgio. *The Lives of the Artists*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1991. Ebook. Page: 228.



Mystic Crucifixion (1500's)

The above painting is an example of the later stages of his work. It can be observed that it is neo-medieval, flat, with no details and no attempt to represent a human figure under the drapery. The mood is somber and the warmer colors have disappeared. This work when compared to his earlier work is starkly dissimilar and shows the influence of a particular kind of religion on his work.

In the same way, Donne's poetry after the reformation, i.e., his religious poetry has minimal references to the bodily aspects. For example, in *Good Friday*(1613), is a description of events of a particular day and is dedicated completely to Christ. There is not much doubt in this poem, unlike his earlier ones. In fact, the doubt is markedly shifted towards the ability of man, which is very unlike the celebrated works of Renaissance. This is evident from the lines: "Could I behold those hands which span the Poles, and tune all spheares at once peirc'd with those holes?" Moreover, in the poems from an even later stage in his life such as *Holy Sonnets: This is my play's last scene*(1635), the body and the bodily which he so exuberantly celebrated, becomes unwelcome. The reference is mainly to the decay of the body and he refers to the "flesh" as the "devil".

In this manner, it can be noticed how these two artists showcase how they were meeting the end of Renaissance itself. Both Botticelli and Donne begin with works, which have the amalgamation of the physical and the spiritual in a Neo-Platonic

sense. The place of the body in religion is one of celebration and significance. However, the positive body takes a negative turn in the end, as the influence of religion itself takes over the importance of the body. This establishes the eminence of religion over the body. The understanding of the body becomes conventionally restrictive and it is once again shunned and rejected. There is a seizure of doubt or the disposition towards doubt that is seen in earlier works. The trajectory of both the artists and their works tends to prove the notion that the body remains at the mercy of religion.

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