

Zeitschrift:	SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber:	Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band:	34 (2017)
Artikel:	"Where there is a frequent preaching, there is no necessity of pictures" : the fluid images of John Donne's preaching as substitutes for visual representation
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-737579

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“Where there is a frequent preaching, there is *no necessity* of pictures”:¹ The Fluid Images of John Donne’s Preaching as Substitutes for Visual Representations

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This essay explores John Donne’s (1572-1631) attitude to images, which contrasts with the mainstream view of the Protestant Church that all types of images are potentially idolatrous, be they physical representations or mental pictures. Both these types of illustrations impact Man’s perception of the divine through the senses. At the time in which Donne preached, sight and hearing were universally seen as the two predominant senses, acting as vessels between the body and the external world. Donne, following most of his contemporaries, gives precedence to the sense of hearing. For him, hearing, preaching and the divine are intricately linked, and he chooses the extremely visual metaphor of fluidity to stage moving water as the element connecting Man and God through preaching and hearing. The mutable and moving quality of Donne’s fluid metaphors not only demonstrates their importance in the sermons (which has been widely overlooked academically), but also their ultimate goal to *move* the believers to apply the Word of God to their lives in order to reach salvation.

¹ Donne, “Preached at St. Paul’s Cross, May 6, 1627” (VII: 432).

The post-Reformation period in England gave birth to a kaleidoscopic variety of views regarding the use – or avoidance – of images in worship.² The two main and competing senses in the conveyance of the Word of God were sight and hearing, with hearing usually given precedence by the Protestant Church. John Donne (1572-1631), who was ordained in 1615 and appointed Dean of St Paul's Cathedral by King James in 1621, had a clear idea of the role of both sight and hearing. In his 1628 Easter sermon preached at St Paul's, he states that

the eye is the devils doore, before the eare: for, though he doe enter at the eare, by wanton discourse, yet he was at the eye before; we see, before we talke dangerously. But the eare is the Holy Ghosts first doore, He assists us with Rituall and Ceremoniall things, which we see in the Church; but Ceremonies have their right use, when their right use hath first beene taught by preaching. (VIII: 228)

For him, therefore, both senses act as metaphorical doors allowing immaterial powers to penetrate the believer's body. While his association of the eye with the devil's door shows his suspicion of the sense of sight, he reiterates his preference for hearing. The ability of the Holy Ghost to teach the "right use" of ceremonies seen in the church highlights the primacy of preaching. In his sermons, Donne recurrently uses liquid imagery to depict the conveyance of God's Word. These fluid metaphors are closely linked to the two Sacraments of the Protestant Church, namely the Eucharist and Baptism, which had blood and water at their centre. Donne's representation of preaching through fluid imagery thus creates powerful mental images in the mind of the congregation. The fluid imagery depicting the transmission of the Word of God underlines Donne's will, on the one hand, to blend the realms of sight and hearing together, and on the other, to bridge the provinces of the human and the divine.

Fluidity in Donne's sermons unsurprisingly has no single, fixed meaning, but rather cascades in several directions. It is simultaneously linked to both the sacraments through their use of liquids, but it also carries the notions of constant change, renewal and refreshment, which illustrate both the unstable religious period in which Donne preached, but also the beneficial effect of God's grace on the faithful. Donne's

² See Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing*, for a discussion of attitudes to images in the Protestant Church, esp. chapter 1.

fascination for watery images is not restricted to his sermons, but can be encountered in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. In this instance, however, it tends to represent water in more negative terms, that is, as affliction, tears, sickness. Although some examples of this negative aspect of water can also be found in the sermons, Donne tends to focus on the positive side in order to edify the congregation. In Donne's preaching, images of fluidity are often self-referential in that they are not bound to a single type of representation, but flow from one to another. They can be verbs denoting a fluid movement, entire metaphors running throughout a sermon, sometimes even across different sermons, or simply clear mentions of liquids, such as water, blood, tears or sea. This essay focuses on metaphors of water that illustrate the act and effect of preaching on the believers. As Donne himself states in a Christening sermon: "the water here [in the sermons], must not be so much as water; but a metaphoricall, and figurative water" (V: 146), underlining the importance of verbal images to illustrate God's impact on his believers. One of the main qualities of Donne's fluid imagery is its representation of preaching as an essential component of a divine, cyclical movement that should bring the faithful to salvation.

Scholars have routinely disregarded the importance of Donne's fluid images. Although some academics have mentioned these images in their work, they were neither fully pursued nor given enough credit. Winfried Schleiner, whose monograph *The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons* (1970) is the most recent – as well as the only – book to be published specifically on the imagery of Donne's sermons, has for example argued that "a metaphor like 'his words flowed' is hardly very striking. Metaphors like this one, which [...] link the spiritual and the material, are so common that we have to make a deliberate effort if we want to avoid them" (Schleiner 9). Given the fact that Donne's fluid metaphors are frequently related to language and thereby inform his conception of preaching, they play a crucial role in the sermons. They create an intimate space of encounter between God and Man by metaphorically staging the penetration of the human body by the Holy Ghost through the ear. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is characteristically described in both scripture and liturgy with moving elements such as wind or water. Donne's sermons perpetuate this imagery, but overwhelmingly display the use of liquid elements rather than any other. Indeed, the essence of fluidity as well as of God's Spirit is to be continuously moving and evolving, and the depiction of God's action through fluid images indicates not only that he was continually active in his Church and untiringly working on

his disciples' souls, but also that he was indeed not to be fixed in any sort of concrete representation.

As a first step into Donne's connection between the physical world and the spiritual one, he repeatedly employs images staging the body as an empty container that has to be filled by the fluid grace of God.³ Before benefiting from God's grace, the human body is pictured by Donne as being filled with sin or "concupiscencies" (IV: 286) that pour out of the body through the doors of our senses. It is through these same doors that grace will later penetrate. These images display a constant movement fluctuating between the two extremes of being either entirely full of sin or, on the contrary, filled with grace. The fluctuation Donne willingly pictures through his fluid imagery denotes the impossibility of attaining either damnation or salvation during Man's earthly life, and is congruent with the idea that judgement occurs after this cyclical motion stops, that is, after death. Both tropes of liquidity and of the body as a container run throughout several of Donne's Christmas sermons. In the sermon preached on Christmas Day 1622 at St. Paul's Cathedral on Colossians 1:19-20,⁴ he explains that

for our parts [bodily parts, the parts that compose man], as when a River swels, at first it will finde out all the channels, or lower parts of the bank, and enter there, but after a while it covers, and overflows the whole field, and all is water without distinction; so, though we be naturally channels of concupiscencies, (for there sin begins, and as water runs naturally in the veines and bowels of the earth, so run concupiscencies naturally in our bowels) [. . .] Then, (as it did there) it induces a flood, a deluge, our concupiscence swells above all channels, and actually overflows all; It hath found an issue at the eare, we delight in the defamation of others; and an issue at the eye, *If we see a thiefe, we run with him*; we concurre in the plots of supplanting and destroying other men; It hath found an issue in the tongue, *Our lips are our owne, who is Lord over us?* We speak freely; seditious speeches against superiours, obscene and scurile speeches against one another, prophane and blasphemous speeches against God himselfe, are growne to be good jests, and marks of wit, and arguments of spirit. (IV: 286)

³ The perception of God's grace as fluid is not typical of a specific corpus of sermons, but runs throughout Donne's religious prose.

⁴ "For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven." (King James Version; all biblical citations in this essay are from the King James Version).

Donne transforms the entire body into a channel through which “concupiscencies” flow. He makes clear that they run “naturally in our bowels,” but explains that in some cases concupiscence is comparable to “a flood,” “a deluge” that causes an overflowing of “all.” The first parenthesis in the passage, which illustrates concupiscence as water and the physical body as the earth being composed of “bowels” and “veins” is not only the logical development of the metaphor of blood Donne already employed in the *divisio* of the sermon, but it also adds a more concrete level to it. Donne’s comparison of the “concupiscencies” running in our bowels with water running “naturally in the veins and bowels of the earth” strikingly resonates with a passage from Pliny’s *Natural History*, which we can assume Donne had read.⁵ In this passage, Pliny explains this phenomenon in nearly identical words, stating that the “earth open[s] her bosom and water penetrat[es] her entire frame by means of a network of veins radiating within and without” (Pliny, II.166, trans. Rackham, in Dickson 15). This type of resonance between biblical exegesis and classical writings is recurrent in Donne’s sermons, and has been noted by Peter McCullough in his chapter “Donne as Preacher,” where he writes that “Donne [. . .] responds creatively to non-scriptural evidence,” as well as that “the huge range that [he] allows for himself in *inventio* distinguishes him from other prominent preachers of his day” (170). The metaphor of concupiscence as water running through our body therefore is more than a simple poetic image: it opens a door to a form of unification between non-scriptural and scriptural texts in the minds of Donne’s readers, blending the physical world with that of the divine.

After the first parenthesis of the quote, Donne comes back to images taken directly from the Bible. He links his own, original approach of liquid concupiscence to the words “flood” and “deluge,” both negatively connoted and obviously referring to the episode of the Flood. They make our concupiscence “swell above all channels” and overflow the boundaries of the physical body. The concupiscence then becomes visible to others, as it “hath found an issue” at the ear, at the eye and in the tongue, allowing “prophane and blasphemous speeches against God” to flow from one’s mouth into the world.

⁵ Donne makes numerous references to Pliny in the sermons. Among them, one is through a certain “Aristomachum Solensem” who spent “threescore years in the contemplation of Bees” (III: 232-33). This comes from Book XI, chapter 4 of Pliny’s *Natural History*. Donne also quotes Pliny in Latin (III: 233-34; III: 277). Donne quotes a passage from *Natural History* Book V chapter 17 in Latin as well (IV:15). He also quotes Book XI, chapter 116 (VII: 185; IX: 366).

This metaphor of the body-container runs through this specific sermon, where it displays the body of man as unable to be emptied of spirituality, be it sin or grace. Rather, the body is designed to be constantly filled by spiritual liquids, echoing the continuity of the relationship between Man and God. A page later in the sermon, Donne uses an identical image to picture the body of Christ as a container. However, because of Christ's heterogeneous nature, his body is not only pictured as being deserted by sin, but also as being more full of grace than Man's. In a passage in which Donne uses the generic "I," he states that

I shall be as full as St. *Paul*, in heaven; I shall have as full a vessel, but not so full a Cellar; I shall be as full, but I shall not have so much to fill. Christ onely hath an infinite content, and capacity, an infinite roome and receipt, and then an infinite fulnesse; *omnem capacitatem*, and *omnem plenitudinem*; He would receive as much as could be infused, and there was as much infused, as he could receive. (IV: 287)

One cannot rival the "infinite content" Christ experiences. Although both Christ and Man can be full, the difference lies in Donne's representation of the capacity of their bodies. In the passage quoted above, human beings "shall not have so much to fill" while Christ "hath an infinite content, and capacity, an infinite roome and receipt, and [...] an infinite fulnesse." There is a perfect balance between Christ's physical and spiritual existence, as Donne illustrates in an image where even his words are balanced and form a chiasmus. Christ "would receive as much as could be infused, and there was as much infused, as he could receive." What causes Christ to be full is the Holy Ghost, as the preacher attests when he explains that "The Holy Ghost hath dwelt in holy men, but not thus; [...] but in *Christo*, in *plenitudine*, in Christ, in all fulnesse" (IV: 289). Of course, the infinite fullness of Christ is not only contained in his physical body, as it is the case for regular human beings. Rather, the fact that "in this person dwelleth all the fulnesse of the Godhead bodily" (IV: 288) makes his fullness overflow his physical body. However, contrary to Man, Christ's fullness is beneficial to humanity, provided that it is brought to the faithful by a mediator. As Donne mentions,

there is a third fulnesse [after that of Man and God], the Church, (which is his body, the fulnesse of him, that filleth all in all) perfitt God, there is the fulnesse of his dignity; perfitt man, there is the fulnesse of his passibility; and a perfitt Church, there is the fulnesse of the distribution of his mercies, and merits to us. (IV: 288)

This latter image of the Church as Christ's body being full and able to fill "all in all" word for word comes from Ephesians 1:23. Donne concludes his imagery of Man and Christ's fullness with a biblical image underlining the role of the Church as the medium through which Christ's fullness is distributed to the faithful through the preaching of the Word. This notion of Christ's fullness in his humanity contrasts with the Eastern Christological notion of *kenosis* (self-emptying), which posits that through the Incarnation, Christ renounced, or "emptied" part of his divine nature. Although it is not clear if Donne was familiar with this concept, the contrast is interesting – even more so when Donne starts mentioning the emptying of one's conscience in order to fill it with divine will.

In his sermon preached to the Earl of Carlisle (tentatively assigned by Potter and Simpson to 1622) Donne slightly changes his metaphor of the container and applies it to the immaterial conscience, which invites his audience to embrace a more personal, intimate approach. This time, the imagery presents the believer as acting on his own conscience, and the preacher as providing his audience with practical advice on how they should fill their conscience with grace. Donne states that

as long as thy conscience is foule, it is but an illusion to apprehend any peace, or any comfort in any sentence of the Scripture, in any promise of the Gospell: search thy conscience, empty that, and then search the Scriptures, and thou shalt finde abundantly enough to fill it with peace and consolation. (V: 264)

The Word of God, it is made clear, should be the source of peace and consolation, and reading it should entitle believers to be filled with grace when they are not exposed to the preaching of a sermon.

These liquid images staging the body as a container to be filled by God's grace are indeed cyclical. At the same time, however, they are fixed, being confined to the physical limits of the body. The chiasmus Donne used to illustrate Christ's fullness is not only a manner of expressing the perfect balance between the amount of grace that is given and received by Christ, but it also restricts the fluid grace of God in an internal cycle that is not directly profitable to the faithful. Donne breaks this closed cycle and adapts his imagery to the fact that preaching is, for him, the most prominent vehicle to convey the Word of God to the world. Representations of grace flowing from the preacher – who was divinely inspired by the Spirit – to the audience are therefore central in Donne's imagery and suggest God's omnipresence and continual action on his believers.

The metaphorical links between language and the body in relation to beliefs can be traced to the Bible. The Gospel of John, for example, describes the person of Christ as the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14). Indeed, his Incarnation was the physical representation of God’s word. Thus, Christ’s body was perceived as a spiritual source similar to the written Word of God. Donne metaphorically transforms Christ’s body into fluid words that are diffused in the audience by the preacher. In his 1622 Christmas sermon – centred on Christ’s body – Donne first explains that what makes Christ divine is the fact that the Holy Ghost dwells in him, “*in plenitidine, [. . .] in all fulnesse,*” and not just in the spirit of wisdom, meekness, or chastity, as he did in prophets (IV: 289). The fact that the Spirit dwells *in* Christ in *all fullness* presents his body as a container filled with liquid grace, and is the starting point of the flowing metaphor. As Donne himself explains:

So that this is Christ’s fulnesse, that he is in a continuall administration of his Church; in which he flowes over upon his Ministers; (for, *of this fulnesse have all we received, and grace for grace:* that is, power by his grace, to derive grace upon the Congregation;) And so, of his fulnesse, all the Congregation receives too. (IV: 289)

The liquefaction of Christ’s body into grace is visible in Donne’s choice of the verb “flow” that illustrates the action of Christ on both “his Minister” and the congregation. Donne also clearly links the idea of fullness with grace and insists on the fact that grace is available to every congregant, that “we have all received” it. The fluid movement operated by grace places the preacher at the centre of its diffusion, entrusting him with an essential role of mediator between God and Man. According to Donne’s images, the ministers, empowered by God, are able to “derive grace upon the Congregation,” so that every member of the audience receives a portion of divine grace through preaching. In other words, the presence of movement emphasises the diffusion of grace, which flows from a single head represented by Christ to various branches, his ministers, to finally reach the ocean, the congregation.

Following the movement of grace, Donne focuses on the role of the preacher, and stages his own body as a vessel through which God’s grace is distributed to the congregation. In a sermon preached to King Charles I at Whitehall in 1627, he explains that God’s

Ordinance of preaching batters the soule, and by that breach, the Spirit enters; His Ministers [. . .] are as the fall of waters, and carry with them whole Congregations; [. . .] Therefore what Christ tels us in the darke, he bids us

speake in the light; and what he saies in our eare, he bids us preach on the house top. Nothing is Gospell, not *Evangelium*, good message, if it be not put into a Messengers mouth, and delivered by him; nothing is conducible to his end, nor available to our salvation, except it be avowable doctrine, doctrine that may be spoke alowd. (VII: 396)

Donne describes the ordinance of preaching in rather violent terms in this passage, which reminds us of his holy sonnet "Batter my Heart" where the Trinitarian God is asked by the speaker to "batter [his] heart" in order to enter the "usurp'd town" of his body and to mend him. However, the sonnet has no mention of liquid metaphors, while this passage underlines the power of the ministers of God as falls of waters, which are strong enough to "carry with them whole Congregations." The waterfall image, however, comes directly from the *Devotions*, in which Donne states that "Thou hast called thy *servants*, who are to work upon us in thine *Ordinance*, by all these loud *Names* – *Winds*, and *Chariots*, and *falls of waters*; where thou wouldest be heard, thou *wilt bee heard*" (XXI. Expostulation 129). In the quote from the sermon, the vocabulary is also powerful, facilitating God to "bee heard." Donne illustrates the act of preaching as a mediation between "what Christ tels us in the darke" and what he "preach[es] on the house top," underlining that guiding his audience to salvation requires the doctrine to be "put into a Messengers mouth" by God, so that it may be "spoke alowd" and "delivered" to the congregation. Both speech and preaching are central to secure the faithful's access to salvation. Subsequent to the liquefaction of Christ pictured earlier, it is the preacher's body that becomes liquid as grace departs from it in the form of words.

The image of the waterfall exists elsewhere in the sermons, and Donne also applies it to both Man and the Holy Ghost. Despite the fact that this specific image does not come from the Bible, Donne thought it fit to include it in his fluid metaphors. Man, who is unable to access the divine without benefiting from spiritual edification becomes a destructive waterfall in Donne's imagery. In his 1624 Easter Day sermon preached at St. Paul's on the resurrection, he states that "Man falls, as a fall of waters, that throwes downe, and corrupts all that it embraces" (VI: 70). The power of the waterfall – that is, the power of Man – is destructive and "corrupts all that it embraces," because it is guided neither by the minister nor by the Spirit. In opposition, God's ministers are portrayed "as a fall of water" edifying them to access salvation. Similarly, in the undated Whitsunday sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn commemorating the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the Apostles, Donne compares the Spirit with a waterfall, and states that "the Holy

Ghost is said to have fallen, which denotes [. . .] a pouring out of himself, upon those, upon whom he falls: He falls as a fall of waters, that covers that it falls upon [. . .]; it desires and it will possesse that it falls upon" (V: 49). This movement of the fall is directly related to the conveyance of the Word of God through preaching. In the same sermon, Donne explains that the Spirit of God "does not lie in those round drops in which it falls, but diffuses, and spreads and inlarges it self" in order to fall "upon all" (V: 36). The movement from the outside world to the inside of the audience is visible in the quote discussed above, in which Donne explains that preaching is the ordinance of God that "batters the soule" and creates a breach by which the Spirit enters. However, since the Christian perception of the soul locates it inside the physical body, the grace of God can only enter the believers' soul after it has penetrated their body.

To represent the penetration of grace in the souls of the congregants, Donne follows his fluid metaphors and depicts the act of preaching as something fluid that would diffuse the grace of God in the audience in an edifying, healing, and nourishing way. In his first Christmas sermon preached at St. Paul's in 1621, he mentions that "every word that falleth from the preachers lips shall be a drop of the *dew of heaven*, [. . .] to wash away that sinne, so presented by thee to be so sacrificed by him" (III: 364). The preacher's words therefore have a healing power. Not only that, but they also have a nourishing ability. As the preacher Richard Carpenter, one of Donne's contemporaries, explains, the duty of the preacher is to be

as conduit pipes of grace to convey to the thirsty soules of our hearers, the living water of Gods word, and to be as the mesaraicall veynes in the body naturall, through which the spiritual foode must passe, whereby the members of Christs body mysticall are to be nourished up unto everlasting life. This is our worke. (Hunt 9)

As Hunt puts it, this metaphor displays "that a regular supply of preaching was as basic and necessary [. . .] as the supply of food and drink to the body" (9). Indeed, just like food and drink, the words preached had to make their way inside the body to nourish one's soul. In accordance with his perception of the body as a container, Donne uses images of the ears and of flowing water to create the conduits that would allow the word preached to enter the believer's body and soul. In the Lincoln's Inn Whitsunday sermon mentioned earlier, Donne asserts that "the Eares are the Aqueducts of the water of life" (V: 55), underlining one

more time the importance of the sense of hearing to allow the Holy Ghost to enter one's body.

Donne confirms the importance of hearing sermons to access salvation in his sermon preached on Easter Monday 1622 at "the Spittle," in which fluid grace spreads not only to a congregation, but expands physically through the creation of new places of preaching. Furthermore, his imagery hints at King James' efforts to introduce more frequent preaching. The King, therefore, appears as the mediator between Man and God's grace, providing his people with more occasions to encounter God. As Donne expresses, God

hath opened our Ears to him, and his to hear you in the publick Congregation: and as he that waters his Garden, pours in water into that Vessel at one place, and pours it out again at an hundred; God, who as he hath wall'd this Island with a wall of water, the Sea; so he waters this Garden with the waters of Paradise: the Word of Life hath pour'd in this water, into that great, and Royal Vessel, the Understanding, and the love of his truth, into the large and religious heart of our Sovereign, and he pours it out in 100, in 1000 spouts, in a more plentiful preaching thereof, then ever your Fathers had it; in both the ways of plenty; plentiful in the frequency, plentiful in the learned manner of preaching. (IV: 107)

Here again, the physical body of the King is pictured as a container of the "water" poured by God, his grace. God is depicted as pouring water into the King's understanding, which Donne names the "Royal Vessel." According to the preacher, the Sovereign had a "religious heart" that acts as a mediator between God and his believers, and he used his power to provide his people with the frequent, edifying preaching they needed in order to reach salvation. The grace of God then was poured out by the King's will "in 100, in 1000 spouts," in a more abundant way "then ever your Fathers had it." By comparing both the number of places and the frequency of preaching with a garden that needs to be watered, Donne pursues his fluid metaphors illustrating the relationship between Man and God. The proliferation of the spouts in this quote echoes the idea that the Holy Spirit is not simply "falling upon" the congregation, but that he is indeed spreading, diffusing through the more numerous places of worship, as well as through a more frequent preaching.

The last aspect of the cyclical imagery of fluidity is the effect preaching has on the believers. The penetration of the water of life into the body through the ears, combined with the increased supply of preaching, creates an everlasting source of grace inside the believers. In an un-

dated Christening sermon, Donne uses a passage from the Gospel of John to illustrate this effect directly through the voice of God, and states that “*the water that I shall give, shall be in him, a well of water, springing up unto everlasting life*” (V: 109). This metaphor of the “well of water” comes from Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, which took place by an actual well, that of Jacob, according to Saint John (John 4:6-14). It is from this object that Jesus derives the image of the well containing the water of life. In the metaphor, the source of grace springing in the receptacle that is Man’s body replaces the fullness of sin and its destructive effect on both the external world and his soul. Preaching, through a set of liquid images has conducted the faithful to be in constant contact with God, not only through the sacraments, which are his external signs, but most importantly through a continual preaching and a sustained use of a particular type of metaphor.

Donne’s metaphorical language describes the cycle of fluid grace, without representing God and his actions on the world in fixed or immutable images. Rather than harshly condemning the use of images in worship, either mental or physical, he focused on verbal images as a means both to avoid the risk of idolatry and to bring them closer to God. By transforming images that were prominent in the Bible, Donne manages to create an original set of images to illustrate God’s grace while not fixing it in a way that would not be acceptable for the Protestant Church. As Jeffrey Johnson puts it: “in addition to the tangible representations that fill the eye, Donne is equally aware of the power that images created in the spoken and written word have on the mind’s eye” (63). The fluid metaphors Donne uses throughout his sermons overflow the boundaries, combining images with hearing, the human with the divine, and the physical with the immaterial. The preacher’s imagery of fluidity constantly flows, transforms and adapts in order to bring God’s Word to the congregations, “*moving them to apply that doctrine to their lives – to live in conformity with Christ*” (Shami 321). In other words, liquid representations not only serve as mental representation of divine action, but are, in their essence, an edification of the faithful. It is no surprise, then, that Donne mentions in a Christening sermon that “*water hath still been a subject, and instrument of Gods conversation with Man*” (V: 146-47).

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