If we revisit the genre of lyrical poetry where we left it several weeks ago, we must recall that we talked about Petrarchan conventions and how they were embraced and developed on English soil by Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare. To quickly remember some of these conventions: thematically, amatory lyrics dealt mostly with the pangs and sorrows of love, the pain of rejection, the incomparable beauty of the lady and her unwavering cruelty; stylistically, this is expressed through a series of recurring images, such as warfare or hunting; antitheses, such as fire and ice; allusions to Venus and Cupid, Cynthia and Apollo, Diana and Actaeon; abstractions, such as Love and Fortune, Beauty and Disdain; mythical creatures, such as the Phoenix and the Basilisk, etc. We have paid attention to some of the innovations of English poets: Wyatt’s allegorical adaptation of Petrarch’s sonnet Una candida cerva to the historical reality at the court of Henry VIII; Surrey’s astute sense of prosody and rhythm; Sidney’s learned imagery and conceits in Astrophel and Stella; Spenser’s formal precision and formal experimentation in Amoretti; Shakespeare’s rethinking of the Platonic mode in his sonnets addressed to the fair youth (“O thou, my lovely boy”), and his revolt against conventions in his sonnets addressed to the dark lady (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”), as well as in his longer poems. However, it is generally accepted by critics that the poet who challenged and transformed the Petrarchan tradition in England was Jon Donne.

The label with which Donne is associated in the history of English literature is “metaphysical poetry” and he is regarded as the first of the “metaphysical poets”:
METAPHYSICAL POETS, the name given to a diverse group of 17th-century English poets whose work is notable for its ingenious use of intellectual and theological concepts in surprising conceits, strange paradoxes, and far-fetched imagery. The leading metaphysical poet was John Donne, whose colloquial, argumentative abruptness of rhythm and tone distinguishes his style from the conventions of Elizabethan love-lyrics. Other poets to whom the label is applied include Andrew Marvell, Abraham Cowley, John Cleveland, and the predominantly religious poets George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and Richard Crashaw. In the 20th century, T. S. Eliot and others revived their reputation, stressing their quality of wit, in the sense of intellectual strenuousness and flexibility rather than smart humour. The term metaphysical poetry usually refers to the works of these poets, but it can sometimes denote any poetry that discusses metaphysics, that is, the philosophy of knowledge and existence. (Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms)
John Donne belongs to the second generation of Elizabethan writers: the generation of Shakespeare and Jonson who reached their maturity in the 1590s and the first decade of the 17th century. So, from a strictly temporal point of view Donne’s work is both Elizabethan and Jacobean. However, it is important to bear in mind that although they were widely circulating in manuscript (even to the point of becoming collectible “wondrous relics”) very few of Donne’s poems were published in his lifetime. Most of them were published posthumously in two subsequent editions in 1633 and 1635.

Just like the lives of Shakespeare and Jonson, that of Donne provides an amazing record of the turbulent times in which he lived and which shaped his literary taste:

1572 Donne was born in the 1572 in a London middle-class family. His father, John, was a prosperous ironmonger (iron merchant) and his mother, Elizabeth, was daughter to playwright John Heywood and descendent of Thomas More – the outstanding humanist, Lord Chancellor of England, who died refusing to give up the Roman Catholic faith. Donne’s family were also Roman Catholic and they were increasingly finding it difficult to accommodate their religion to the less and less
tolerant policy of the Elizabethan state.

1576 Although Donne’s father died in 1576, the money he had earned bought John and his younger brother Henry excellent education. They were taught at home by private tutors and at the age of 11 they went to study at Heart Hall, Oxford. Later Donne moved to Cambridge, but left both universities without taking a degree because he refused to take the required Oath of Allegiance and Oath of Supremacy – which meant to renounce Catholicism. He continued his education as a law student at Thavies Inn and Lincoln’s Inn in London.

1593 In 1593, when an outbreak of the plague was ravaging London, his brother Henry was arrested on charges of harbouring a Catholic priest. He was put in Newgate prison and died in jail:

“Most of the inmates, however, found themselves packed together in chains, untried and convicted alike, regardless of the class of crime for which they had been arraigned. Grubby candles had to burn all day, and no fresh air got in. In the gaol’s basement, ‘swarming with vermin and creeping things’, prisoners lay ‘like swine upon the ground, one upon another’. The spread of plague was unstoppable in such conditions. An infected prisoner would feel the sweat and ache, then discover the bubonic swellings and ulcerous blotches on the neck, under his arms and in his groin; and know it was all over. It was a matter of days.” (John Stubbs, John Donne: The Reformed Soul)

This is probably the time when he wrote his five poetic Satires. Satires 1 and 2 record Donne’s reaction to the rise of capitalism and the vanity of the times, while Satires 4 and 5 his resentment of authoritarian practices of the government. Satire 3 is usually regarded as the most interesting of the five. It deals with the clash between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and demonstrates Donne’s thoughtful criticism of both:

Keep the truth which thou hast found; men do not stand
In so ill case, that God hath with his hand
Sign'd kings' blank charters to kill whom they hate;
Nor are they vicars, but hangmen to fate.
Fool and wretch, wilt thou let thy soul be tied
To man's laws, by which she shall not be tried
At the last day? Oh, will it then boot thee
To say a Philip, or a Gregory,
A Harry, or a Martin, taught thee this?
Is not this excuse for mere contraries
Equally strong? Cannot both sides say so? (Satire 3)
1596 As Donne was growing disappointed with the government and the religious opposition in his native England, and as his inheritance from his dead father was running out, new potentially lucrative opportunities for travelling abroad appeared on the horizon.

“In 1595 Sir Walter Ralegh, the soldier, poet and favourite of the Queen, had led a colonial expedition to South America. He was fascinated by the vast spaces that were still just appearing in partial outline in the European consciousness. Ralegh’s account of the ‘Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana’ revealed a land with a wholly new spectrum, ‘birds of all colours, some carnation, some crimson, orange tawny, purple, green... it was unto us a great good passing of the time to behold them.’ It had an unspoilt lushness: Ralegh claimed it was ‘the most beautiful country that ever mine eyes beheld... plains of twenty miles in length, the grasses short and green, and in divers parts groves of trees by themselves, as if they had been by all the art and labour in the world so made of purpose.’ There was one other massive attraction: wealth. This was a country of gold as well as green. The emperor of Guiana, it was reported, possessed ‘hollow statues of gold which seemed giants, and the figures in proportion and bigness of all the beasts, birds, trees and herbs, that the earth bringeth forth.’ (John Stubbs, *John Donne: The Reformed Soul*)

Donne failed to enlist with Ralegh, but in 1596 enlisted with Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, who lead a pre-emptive naval attack on Cadiz against the Spanish – who were building a new armada to launch against England. The campaign was successful and in 1597 Donne enlisted again – this time with Ralegh and the expedition was targeting the town of Ferrol and the Azores.

Although Donne never sailed to America, his experience from these expeditions found expression in his poetry:

Her swelling lips; to which when we are come,
We anchor there, and think ourselves at home,
For they seem all: there sirens’ songs, and there
Wise Delphic oracles do fill the ear;
There in a creek where chosen pearls do swell,
The remora, her cleaving tongue doth dwell.
These, and the glorious promontory, her chin
O’erpast; and the strait Hellespont between
The Sestos and Abydos of her breasts,
(Not of two lovers, but two loves the nests)
Succeeds a boundless sea, but that thine eye
Some island moles may scattered there descry;
And sailing towards her India, in that way
Shall at her fair Atlantic navel stay;
Though thence the current be thy pilot made,
Yet ere thou be where thou wouldst be embayed,
Thou shalt upon another forest set,
Where some do shipwreck, and no further get.
When thou art there, consider what this chase
Misspent by thy beginning at the face. (From Elegy XVIII: Love’s Progress)

Donne’s love poetry penned in the 1590s supports the image created for him by
Richard Baker, one of his old friends from Lincoln’s Inn: “very neat, not dissolute; a
great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of playes, a great writer of conceited verses”. Here is some more:

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann’d,
My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!
To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be. (From Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed)

1598 The fact that Donne had joined the side of the English Protestants and fought
against Catholic Spain had contributed to the advancement of his career. On of his
comrades from the Azores expedition was Sir Thomas Egerton – a former Lincoln’s
Inn man. His father, Sir Thomas Egerton, the elder, was one of the Queen’s most
influential councilors, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal – the top-lawyer of the
kingdom. It is with the latter that Donne found employment in 1598. The job was
lucrative and placed on an excellent career track.

1601 Donne stayed with the Egertons at York House in London and this is where he
met Sir Thomas’ teenage niece Anne More, who was sent there to learn the ways of
the capital:

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers’ den?
’Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one. (From The Good-Morrow)

By 1601 she was housed with her despotic father Sir George More, an ambitious squire, who was looking for an advantageous match for her. The year was full of turbulence, Essex’s Rebellion, his subsequent execution, etc., and two weeks before Christmas John Donne and Anne More married secretly. As the anecdote that emerged from this story had it:

“Doctor Donne after he was married to a Maid, whose name was Anne, in a frolick (on his Wedding day) chalkt this on the back-side of his Kitchin-door, John Donne, Anne Donne, Undone.”

Nevertheless, John and Anne spent the holidays separately and kept their marriage a secret until February the following year. When Donne finally wrote to Sir George to break the news, his whole life was blown to pieces – the immediately lost his job with Sir Thomas Egerton and was thrown into Fleet prison – a place very similar to Newgate where his brother Henry perished.

For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout,
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honor, or his grace,
Or the king’s real, or his stampèd face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?
What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?
Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
When did the heats which my veins fill
Add one more to the plaguy bill?
Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.
The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us; we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for Love. (From The Canonization)

After some time and much pleading, as well as a judicial decision, he was released
and allowed to join Anne and they moved to a house at Pyrford in Surrey, lent to
them by Anne’s teenage cousin Francis Wolley. These were lean years but, at least in
the beginning, they were content to have each other:

Dear love, for nothing less than thee
Would I have broke this happy dream;
It was a theme
For reason, much too strong for fantasy,
Therefore thou wak'd'st me wisely; yet
My dream thou brok'st not, but continued'st it.
Thou art so true that thoughts of thee suffice
To make dreams truths, and fables histories;
Enter these arms, for since thou thought'st it best,
Not to dream all my dream, let's act the rest (From The Dream)
Battle of Cadiz Bay by Aert Anthonisz
During the following years the Donnes were constantly struggling to maintain their household and move back to the city. In 15 years of marriage they had 12 children, of whom 7 survived infancy. Donne was getting older and suffered from illnesses. His financial situation improved only after he converted to Protestantism and was ordained priest of the Church of England in 1615. In 1616 he became reader (lecturer) in divinity in Lincoln’s Inn. He was conferred honorary degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford. And just as his situation seemed to improve his wife died in childbirth in 1617.

This is when he started writing *The Holy Sonnets*:

**Sonnet V**

I am a little world made cunningly  
Of elements, and an angelic sprite ;  
But black sin hath betray'd to endless night  
My world's both parts, and, O, both parts must die.  
You which beyond that heaven which was most high  
Have found new spheres, and of new land can write,  
Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might  
Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,  
Or wash it if it must be drown'd no more.
But O, it must be burnt; alas! the fire
Of lust and envy burnt it heretofore,
And made it fouler; let their flames retire,
And burn me, O Lord, with a fiery zeal
Of Thee and Thy house, which doth in eating heal.
1621 In 1621 Donne was appointed Dean of Saint Paul’s Cathedral, a post he kept until his death. He was at last financially secure. Donne’s private meditations, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* were published in 1624. The most famous of these is certainly Meditation 17:

“PERCHANCE he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God’s hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness. There was a contention as far as a suit (in which both piety and dignity, religion and estimation, were mingled), which of the religious orders should ring to prayers first in
the morning; and it was determined, that they should ring first that rose earliest. If we understand aright the dignity of this bell that tolls for our evening prayer, we would be glad to make it ours by rising early, in that application, that it might be ours as well as his, whose indeed it is. The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God. Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? but who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee. Neither can we call this a begging of misery, or a borrowing of misery, as though we were not miserable enough of ourselves, but must fetch in more from the next house, in taking upon us the misery of our neighbours. Truly it were an excusable covetousness if we did, for affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by and made fit for God by that affliction. If a man carry treasure in bullion, or in a wedge of gold, and have none coined into current money, his treasure will not defray him as he travels. Tribulation is treasure in the nature of it, but it is not current money in the use of it, except we get nearer and nearer our home, heaven, by it. Another man may be sick too, and sick to death, and this affliction may lie in his bowels, as gold in a mine, and be of no use to him; but this bell, that tells me of his affliction, digs out and applies that gold to me: if by this consideration of another's danger I take mine own into contemplation, and so secure myself, by making my recourse to my God, who is our only security”

1631 Obsessed with the idea of death Donne posed in a shroud: the engraving above is based on the sketch but also a funeral effigy was made based on it which is still in Saint Paul’s Cathedral. A few weeks before he died he also delivered his last sermon, which was published as *Death's Duell, or A Consolation to the Soul, against the dying Life and the living Death of the Body*:

“Unto God the Lord belong the issues of death [Psa. 68. vers. 20], that is, the disposition and manner of our death: what kind of issue and transmigration wee shall have out of this world, whether prepared or sudden, whether violent or naturall, whether in our perfect senses of shaken and disordered by sicknes, there is no condemnation to bee argued out of that, no Judgement to bee made upon that, for howsoever they dye, precious in his sight is the death of his saints, and with him are the issues of death, the ways of ourdeparting out of this like are in his hands.
And so in this sense of the words, this exitus mortis, the issue of death, is liberatio in morte, A deliverance in death; Not that God will deliver us from dying, but that hee will have a care of us in the houre of death, of what kinde soever our passage be. And this sense and acceptation of the words, the naturall frame and contexture doth well and pregnantly administer unto us. And then lastly the contignation and knitting of this building, that hee that is our God is the God of all salvation.”
From the point of view of our survey course in the history of English literature, it is possible to categorize Donne’s work into two major types: secular and religious. The secular period includes four major groups of poems: satires, epigrams, songs and sonnets, the amorous elegies. The religious period includes: the philosophical anniversaries, the holy sonnets and other divine poems, as well as Donne’s published sermons and meditations in prose.

In the seminar classes we will take a closer look on Donne’s “metaphysical conceits” and his poetic innovations. A fantastic analysis of Donne’s style is to be found in Alexander Shurbanov’s chapter “Donne’s Reform of Poetic Imagery” in The Poetics of the English Renaissance, pp 327-431.