



“Batter His Art, Three-Personed Author-Gods”: Misreading John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 14” for a Sympathetic Stage and Screen Adaptation of J. Robert Oppenheimer in John Adams’ and Peter Sellars’ *Doctor Atomic*

**“GLORY BE TO THE BOMB; AND TO THE HOLY
FALLOUT: AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING, IS NOW AND
EVER SHALL BE. AMEN.”
(BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES)**

At the end of Act I of *Doctor Atomic* (2005), John Adams’ opera on nuclear physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and the first atomic bomb test, the protagonist, Oppie (baritone Gerald Finley), sings the signature aria, “Batter My Heart.” In Peter Sellars’ libretto, the aria is adapted from the seventeenth-century Anglican priest John Donne’s sonnet “[Holy Sonnet] 14” (1633). Informing Sellars’ use of this material was a 1962 letter from Oppenheimer to the General of the Manhattan Project, in which he cites the sonnet’s opening line—“Batter my heart, three-personed God...”—as an influence in his suggestion to name the test “Trinity” (Rhodes 571-2; The Metropolitan Opera International Radio Broadcast Information Centre 1).

However, while Donne’s “three-personed God” obviously refers to the Trinity of Christian mythology, Oppenheimer’s letter does not suggest so unequivocal or simple a connection between “14” as a whole and his thoughts behind the name. He cites the poetry as part of what appears to have been a greater number of “thoughts...in my mind;”

moreover, it is not “14” but Donne’s “Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness” that Oppenheimer mentions first, introducing it explicitly and adding that he “know[s] and love[s]” it (Rhodes 571-2). He also cites from the latter poem three full lines, as opposed to the mere three-quarters of one line from “14.” Sellars thus already makes a large assumption in drawing from the test’s codename the entirety of “14” and presenting it as a map of Oppenheimer’s mind. Nonetheless, this is an assumption virtually all reviewers, interviewers, and critics accept at face value. This includes includes Robert Warren

Distracted by the minor connection between the “three-personed god” line and the name of the Trinity Test, and by the dramatic sounds of “14,” Sellars neglects to closely consider the sonnet’s content and context, leading to a misrepresentation echoed by Adams’ unvaryingly sympathetic musical setting.

Lintott's first scholarly study on the opera (the present article appears to be the second). Lintott's musical analysis focuses on how *Doctor Atomic* constructs different perceptions of time, yet is uncritical of the Donne adaptation (e.g., 31ff). It also ignores a crucial way in which the opera constructs time: by excluding the Japanese timeline, presenting only American scenes (and largely as embodied by one highly privileged white male American).

By contrast, a close reading of "14" reveals many contradictions to Adams' and Sellars' sympathetic adaptation. My reading also suggests that the subject of the other poem cited in Oppenheimer's letter, "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness," is more relevant and less one-sided with regard to the atomic bomb and its consequences. Distracted by the minor connection between the "three-personed god" line and the name of the Trinity Test, and by the dramatic sounds of "14," Sellars neglects to closely consider the sonnet's content and context, leading to a misrepresentation echoed by Adams' unvaryingly sympathetic musical setting.

Adams' and Sellars' preoccupation with the first line of "14" is most immediately evident in their use of repetition. They set "14" verbatim, with the notable exception of repeating lines 1-4, in whole or part, enough times to form a new stanza, which itself is repeated twice before leading into the rest of the poem (lines 5-14). Thus, the first four lines of Donne's sonnet read:

*Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new*

But stanzas 1 and 2 from Sellars' libretto both read:

*Batter my heart, three person'd God; For, you
As yet but knock, breathe, knock, breathe, knock,
breathe
Shine, and seek to mend;
Batter my heart, three person'd God;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, break, blow, break, blow
burn and make me new* (Sellars 19)

Repeating the verbs of Donne's lines 2 and 4 in trinities of binaries (e.g., "knock, breathe" ×3) sonically enacts the exact "battering" the speaker is imploring God to inflict. This battering is

echoed by the characteristically minimalist Adams' orchestral interludes of layered repetitive phrases dominated by bursts of brass and timpani: "a frenetic, brass-heavy ritornello" (Lintott 44). Adams and Sellars exploit the forceful, bludgeoning sounds already inherent in Donne's accented, alliterative strings of plosive-laden, monosyllabic action verbs, to great sonic effect.

But this repetition elevates Donne's first four lines over and above the rest of the poem. Reduplicating these four lines into fourteen lines—the total length of the original sonnet—is in itself already enough to render them the locus of the aria, their ratio to the remaining content shifting from 4:10 to 14:10. However, the fact that the repetition also enacts the meaning of the words themselves also batters the subtlety of the remainder of the poem, as well as the meaning and function of the first four lines. In lines 1 and 2, Donne's speaker is beseeching God to batter—in the manner of a battering ram, as the "usurped town" conceit later suggests—his heart, rather than "but knock" on its gates politely, timidly, or coyly, or to "breathe" or "shine" upon it gently in hopes of "mend[ing]" him. Therefore "knock" and "breathe," despite both containing some bludgeoning, plosive sounds,[1] are semantically, within the binary contrastive structure established in the first four lines, as gentle, plaintive, or in general insufficiently violent as the non-plosive "shine" and the relatively non-plosive "mend." The speaker is setting these—God's gentle prods—up for contrast with the more violent or masochistic interventions that he desires, in a self-flagellating sense, and on which he elaborates in lines 3 and 4: "o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn...". Here, a real onslaught of plosives emerges, for now the speaker actually describes how he wishes the Lord should batter him—rather than merely "but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend." Nonetheless, in *Doctor Atomic*'s "Batter My Heart" aria, Donne's lines 2 and 4 are phrased, accentuated, and pitched almost identically. The first verb (e.g., "knock") of each verb pair in each respective trifold cycle receives a fierce accent, whereas the second verb (e.g., "breathe") does not, thereby significantly shifting the binary contrastive structure established by Donne. Likewise, the plosives of both lines, even terminal ones not typically pronounced in everyday speech (e.g., the [d] in line 2's "mend," which Finley renders "mend-DUH") are—even by the bombastic standards of opera—very distinctly enunciated and accentuated, thus again very

deliberately enacting that “battering” sound. As Lintott puts it, “Oppenheimer’s vocal line in ‘Batter My Heart’...is dominated by sixteenth/dotted-eighth figures, which lend a percussive aspect to the singing, as if Oppenheimer is spitting out the words rather than intoning them” (49). Likewise, the conflation of “knock” (gentle) and “break” (violent) is reflected by John Adams’ own description of the aria’s orchestration: “we hear the orchestra bending and breaking and banging and knocking. It’s really knocking like this [rapidly pounds fist on open palm]” (qtd. Lintott 43). Tellingly, the poem itself is renamed “Batter My Heart.”

Though Adams makes no significant contrast between Donne’s set of gentle verbs in line 2 and set of violent verbs in lines 4 and 3 (i.e. libretto lines 2-3/9-10 and 6-7/13-14 [Sellars]), he does do so between pairs of verbs within each line. In the aria, for Donne’s line 2, every “knock” receives forceful emphasis whilst “breathe,” which is lower in register, gets pronounced more softly and smoothly. Likewise, for Donne’s line 4, every “break” receives forceful emphasis whilst “blow,” which is lower in register, does not. In other words, in the aria the “knock” is treated as though it were a violent, battering “knock,” whereas in the poem it is an inadequately gentle or even polite knock (“Batter my heart...For, you / As yet but knock,” *italics mine*). Likewise, the “blow” of line 4 is treated as gently as the “breathe” of line 2, when it is actually the “blow” of a raging wind as contrasted with the softness of a breath, and whose semantic strength as a bludgeoning and raging “blow” of wind or “blow” to the head—as opposed to the soft “blow” of, say, blowing out a candle—is therefore in large part dependent on that relative contrast (see TABLE).

TABLE: Patterns of Emphasis in Donne vs. Sellars/Adams/Finley

Metaphorical Vehicle	Line 2 (gentle manifestation)	Line 4 (violent manifestation)
Door/Gate	knock	break
Wind	breathe	blow
Sun	shine	burn
Healing/Renewal	seek to mend [i.e., self maintenance]	make me new [i.e., self destruction]

Boldface indicates words that Sellars/Adams/Finley, in contrast to Donne, manifest as violent; plain-faced, gentle.

This pattern of articulation is especially prominent in the live and televised performances, and Finley’s physical gestures make it even more so (see Adams and Sellars [B] and especially [C]). At every forceful “knock” or “break,” Finley dramatically contracts himself into a cowering crouch, lowering his head and curling his right hand to his heart (presumably “battering” or “knocking” it) or even shielding his head with his hands defensively as though God were striking him; at every mellifluous “breathe” or “blow,” he raises himself back up airily—only to be “battered,” “knocked,” or “broken” down again. The televised production also has Finley staring up at the camera, which as a result symbolically occupies the position of God. This position perpetuates the illusion that there is some higher moral authority (“Big Other”) capable of justifying devastating human actions and places the audience in the flattering position of that authority, further encouraging spectators to authorize the spectacle as an authority on its subject matter. Whereas in the sonnet, Donne’s speaker was asking to have violence done to himself alone as a form of penance, here God becomes an authority figure capable of justifying violent “God-like” acts. The camera also zooms in and out to emphasize this effect, sometimes alternating in God-like accordance with the (misplaced) rhythm of Finley’s emphatic heart-battering gestures, illustrating how the process of adaptation leads to a proliferation of seemingly self-reinforcing misrepresentations across various media.



Such facets of Finley's and the camera's performance illuminate how what might seem a small decision of poetic emphasis, repetition, and vocal articulation carries over into an overarching articulation of Oppie's character. As the TABLE illustrates, Donne has carefully assigned each verb in line 2 its contrasting verb in line 4. The former verbs empower the latter through contrast, without which Donne's speaker's request to be battered is meaningless: the point is to be battered instead of knocked, etc. The speaker is neither a shameful boy dutifully submitting to reproof nor, like Oppie, a man in moral turmoil, but a spiritual masochist avidly despairing for a deeper connection and reconciliation with a God figure, manifesting as violence to his person. However, Adams' and Sellars' realignment of Donne's contrastive structure conveys the plight of a morally despairing man invoking God's mercy, or sympathy. The battering repetitions of both vocal lines and orchestral lines, coupled with the misplaced accentuation of words, the performer's consequently misplaced physical accentuation, and the repetition of the content itself (especially the trinity repetitions), convey the sense that the "three-personed God"—the Christian Trinity, "The Gadget" of the Trinity Test Site, and also perhaps Oppie himself—is battering Oppenheimer in a punitive sense, and has battered him before. The aria thus invokes pity and sympathy for Oppie/Oppenheimer and his conflict of conscience, the musical setting masking the sly complexity of Donne's seventeenth-century exploration of the painful and also somewhat blasphemous irony of a devout man's relationship with God which remains unrequited because such devoutness, no matter how extreme, whether violent or sexual, can never obtain the object of its affection. The *Doctor Atomic* aria conveys only Oppie's despair of being battered, and of seeking justification for his own violent "God-like" acts. As a result, if Adams' and Sellars' adaptation conveys a moral conflict, then it reduces the conflict of the American-Japanese war into one man. All sympathy centres around Oppie, the creator himself—his heart is the one being repeatedly battered by "God." Sympathy is not directed towards the source of his moral despair, namely what he and his colleagues, wielding seemingly God-like power themselves, will batter: hundreds of thousands of civilian Japanese hearts—and a battering which is not just figurative or emotional but literal and bodily.

Thus, not only does the musical setting

misrepresent the libretto, the libretto misrepresents the poem, the "knocking" performer misrepresents the libretto, and the camera (with its alternating zooms) echos the misrepresentations of that performance, but the recontextualized poem itself more generally misrepresents both the biographical and historical situation to which it has been assigned. Even if Adams and Sellars had preserved the meaning of Donne's first four lines and foregone hyperbolizing Donne's content with their abundant trinity repetitions, their choice of found content itself would still remain problematic. Like much of Donne's poetry, "[Holy Sonnet] 14" is deeply personal; no wonder, then, that Adams and Sellars' musical setting reflects a similarly personal level of moral interest in Oppie. But Adams and Sellars ignore the specific kind of moral misdeeds to be found in Donne's poems. Famously, Donne's misdeeds are almost always sexual, despite his theological language or devotional disposition; according to Abrams et al., "[t]heological language abounds in his love poetry, and daringly erotic images occur in his religious verse" (1262). This is explicit in "14," in which Donne's speaker describes his "relationship with God in terms of marriage and adultery" (1298n2). He compares himself to "an usurped town" of the Devil ("your enemy") (lines 5 and 10), inviting comparison between the sexually suggestive "heart" upon which he wishes God to "batter" and that bodily town's assumed gate—i.e., a sexual orifice, which "never shall be free, / [n]or ever chaste, except you ravish me" (13-14). By weaving theological and erotic imagery together, Donne conveys the irony that, as suggested by his paradoxes ("enthrall" to "be free"; "ravish" to be "chaste;" "rise and stand"—another sexual metaphor—to be "o'erthrown"; and, of course, his comparing himself to potentially female



sexuality with the gate metaphor [lines 13, 14, 3]), his very acts of repentance are charged with sexual transgressions. Genocide, on the other hand, Oppie's anticipated misdeed, is categorically more serious than recreational or extramarital un-Christian sex.

Consequently, the effect of the more literal meanings of lines 5-14, which take residence in the aria's third and final stanza, are even more egregious. Oppie likens his inner turmoil to a "usurped town", despite the fact that it is he who is about to usurp a "town"—namely, Hiroshima. Comparing his inner turmoil to a "usurped town" of the Devil reads like a way of avoiding admitting that he himself may be more Devil than usurped "town"—which also grossly understates Hiroshima and Nagasaki as not one but two massive cities. In the context of Donne's poem, Oppie's comparison becomes nonsensical, ridiculous, megalomaniacal, as though he is attempting to internalize all the pain he is about to cause, as though his own personal moral turmoil could possibly approach the reality of genocidal pain. In this way, the composer and librettist, from the vantage of hindsight, superimpose post-Hiroshima/Nagasaki guilt onto pre-Hiroshima/Nagasaki Oppenheimer, thereby heightening sympathy for him by making him seem repentant and hyper-empathetic before the fact. *Doctor Atomic* thus appropriates that pain as inherently his own—as though his unleashing pain onto Japan were only to relieve his own. In reality, according to one eye-witness account, "tremendous relief" of his "very heavy burden" was exactly Oppenheimer's emotion after Trinity went off successfully (Szasz 88).

Even the Amsterdam stage's set for the "Batter My Heart" aria—a curtain backlit with the silhouette of the bomb—conveys the message that there exists only the soliloquizing Doctor Atomic and his creation and no victims of his destruction

The focus on Japanese people's pain as Oppie's pain is further emphasized by the trajectory of the opera: its

climax is the successful and awesome explosion, not the devastating effects of that explosion. Tellingly, Adams describes his more recent symphonic adaptation of the opera this way: "it itself is kind of explosive as if it were Oppenheimer's plutonium sphere just about to go super-critical and explode" (Earbox - John Adams Composer). The opera's structure thus subordinates the ineffable massive pain of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Oppenheimer's pains of deciding whether or not to create the pain of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Under a veneer of battering self-pity, the opera indulges in the isolated, immediate glory of the Trinity's exploding "progressive" scientific "success," while ignoring its devastating effects. Even the Amsterdam stage's set for the "Batter My Heart" aria—a curtain backlit with the silhouette of the bomb—conveys the message that there exists only the soliloquizing Doctor Atomic and his creation and no victims of his destruction. It is the American exceptionalist equivalent of a German making a film about the Holocaust by excluding the Jews or a film about the invasion of Poland by excluding the Poles and focusing instead on the inner turmoil of Hitler of whether or not to exterminate the Jews, whether or not to devastate the Poles. At the end of the opera, Adams' and Sellars' cutely nicknamed Oppie is even denied the line from the Bhagavad Gita for which he is most famous for uttering upon witnessing that first explosion: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." Absent, in other words, is an acknowledgement of what he has already destroyed and will destroy; by the final scene, with the exception of some "voices of Japanese people...heard in an eerie foreshadowing of the consequences of the test" (Lintott 24), there is only acknowledgement of what the Romantic author-god, the man of science, has "created."



This is especially ironic considering the other Donne poem, “Hymn,” of which Oppenheimer cited these lines in his letter: “[a]s West and East / [i]n all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / [s]o death doth touch the resurrection” (Donne, “Hymn” lines 13-15). These lines alone, with their striking conflation of West and East, as well as death and resurrection, already seems more relevant than “14” to Oppenheimer’s West-and-East, life-and-death concerns during the Manhattan Project. Everything considered—the weight placed on the first four lines, the misinterpretation of Donne’s binary contrasts, the gap between form and content—it appears that Adams and Sellars were misled by the tantalizing nominal connection between “three-person’d God” and the Trinity test site. Oppenheimer’s letter, and the vastly differing content of the two cited poems, strongly suggests that Oppenheimer intended “Trinity” neither in primarily the Christian sense, nor, consequently, in the sense of Donne’s “[Holy Sonnet] 14,” but in a more general sense: multiple things separate yet at the same time all inextricably connected—East and West, allies and axis, life and death. As Abrams et al. explain in reference to the cited passage from “Hymn,” “[i]f a flat map is pasted on a round globe, west and east meet” (1301n5). If Adams and Sellars had paid attention to this telling insight in Donne’s “Hymn,” then perhaps they would have melted away their cloying mask of battering sympathy in favour of a more nuanced and critical adaptation of Oppenheimer’s life. But what self-respecting opera-goer would want to endure the sound and fury of a Concerto for A-Bomb in Hiroshima-Flat Minor? Instead, one three-personed North American Author-God (Adams, Sellars, Finley) shakes hands and exchanges respects with another by singing his glories and follies above the racket of the sound barrier’s breaking to the tune of the atom’s splitting. Krzysztof Penderecki’s “Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima” must be reserved for another evening.[2]

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[1] “Knock” only ends with a plosive (the plosive of its initial graphemic “k” is literally silenced, in symbolic agreement with the verbal contrast Donne establishes), and the initial plosive of “breathe” is softened considerably by the subsequent liquid “r” (as opposed to, say, the vowel of “batter,” a word which is, moreover, disyllabically and thus doubly plosive). In addition, “breathe” itself terminates in a smooth (and also onomatopoeic) fricative.

[2] Postscript: the original Doctor Atomic libretto also misinterpreted physics (see Cockrell).