

Crucibles of the Male Soul: Metaphysical and Postmodern Masculinities in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and RM's *Indigo*

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Abstract

Masculinity has long been constructed as steady, rational, and invulnerable, i.e., an identity solidified through performances of control, restraint, and emotional impermeability. However, the lyric form has often unsettled these assumptions by staging the masculine self in moments of desperation, instability, confession, and spiritual or existential testing. This paper argues that John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and RM's 2022 solo album *Indigo* form two powerful lyric archives in which masculinity is not affirmed but disassembled, not triumphant but trembling. Across four centuries and radically different cultural worlds, Donne and RM share a common impulse: to dramatize the masculine soul in crisis and expose the fragility beneath its surface.

Keywords: RM, Donne, Masculinity Studies, Lyric, *Indigo*, *Holy Sonnets*

Introduction

As a 17th-century metaphysical poet grappling with mortality, divine judgment, and the precarious nature of grace, Donne stages a masculinity grounded in spiritual desperation. His lyric voice is full of anguish, paradox, and self-accusation. RM, the South Korean rapper, songwriter, and producer widely recognized as the philosophical center of BTS, is embedded in a postmodern environment marked by digital saturation, fame, emotional fatigue, and the

fragmentation of the self. While RM writes from the secular, hyper-mediated present, his lyric introspection resonates with Donne's existential instability and emotional exposure.

Thus, although their contexts differ drastically, post-Reformation Christian England versus contemporary late-capitalist Korea, Donne and RM both reveal masculinity not as a stable identity but as a site of conflict, fracture, and self-revision. Their lyric speakers encounter crises that dismantle the mythologies of masculine power. What emerges instead is a masculinity defined by vulnerability, contradiction, exhaustion, and a longing for solace or rest.

This comparative reading positions Donne's theological anxiety and RM's emotional and creative exhaustion as parallel crucibles through which masculinity is reimagined. The "male soul," as represented by both lyricists, becomes a terrain of restlessness, sometimes reaching upward toward grace, sometimes collapsing inward under the weight of public spectacle. Yet both voices insist that the truth of the masculine experience is found not in strength but in brokenness. The lyric form functions as the medium through which these fractures are named, explored, and, at moments, momentarily soothed.

John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* inhabit a world where salvation is uncertain, and the self is repeatedly confronted with its own insufficiency. Masculinity in Donne's devotional poetics is inseparable from spiritual crisis. The speaker is almost always a man brought low, that is to say, besieged, corrupted, sinful, or divided against himself. Rather than embodying stoic Protestant masculinity, Donne's speaker performs his spiritual anxiety with emotional excess, rhetorical urgency, and a willingness to confess weakness.

The opening of "Holy Sonnet V" is one of the clearest illustrations of Donne's theological and masculine self-deconstruction:

"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, oh, both must die" (lines 1–4).

Here, the masculine subject is a microcosm crafted with precision (“cunningly”) yet ruined from within. His identity is fractured, internally betrayed, ravaged by a corruption he can neither escape nor fully comprehend. The metaphysical conceit of the human-as-world foregrounds the instability and fragility of masculine existence. Although he possesses reason (“angelic sprite”), he is undone by sin, failing to live up to the spiritual and moral expectations placed upon him.

Critics such as Barbara Lewalski have emphasized Donne’s “meditative mode” as a form of spiritual confrontation in which the speaker becomes both confessor and judge of himself (Summers 275). Masculinity, in Donne’s hands, is inseparable from this confessional posture. The male soul must narrate its own failures before God.

Few lines in English poetry expose masculine vulnerability as starkly as those in “Holy Sonnet XIV”:

“Batter my heart, three-person’d God” (line 1).

Here, the male speaker begs for spiritual assault. He does not request gentle correction but violent intervention, an acknowledgement that he is too weak to transform himself. This is a masculinity premised on surrender, not heroism. The climax of the sonnet, “Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me” (line 14), reveals a masculinity longing for domination in order to be purified. The eroticization of divine force collapses spiritual and bodily desire, highlighting how Donne uses metaphysical paradox to dramatize a psyche divided and longing for impossible unity. As Stanley Fish notes, Donne’s poetic language is driven by a “bulimic” cycle of desire and disgust, where the self is constantly consumed and expelled through rhetorical intensity (Fish 227). Masculinity, therefore, is performed through the very act of linguistic implosion.

In Holy Sonnet X, Donne famously addresses death directly:

“Death, be not proud” (line 1).

This rhetorical personification reveals a desperate defiance, a masculinized challenge to mortality. Yet death's minimization functions less as certainty and more as spiritual wish-fulfilment. Critics such as John Stachniewski have argued that the *Holy Sonnets* are saturated with despair and theological dread, despite their declarations of faith (Stachniewski 677-705). When Donne's speaker berates death, he simultaneously reveals how deeply it frightens him. Masculinity is expressed not in conquering death but in confessing terror of it.

In "Holy Sonnet XIX," Donne announces the condition of inner contradiction:

"Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one" (line 1).

This is a model of masculinity built on spiritual fluctuation, inconstant devotion, and emotional volatility. Masculinity here is not rational or disciplined but unpredictable, inconsistent, and full of turmoil.

Together, these sonnets stage masculinity as spiritual vulnerability. Donne's speakers are not models of religious fortitude but men undone by the very crises through which they seek salvation. Masculinity becomes a shattered mirror of the divine: reflective, flawed, and perpetually yearning to be remade.

Where Donne's world is shaped by the theological anxieties of early modern England, RM's *Indigo* is forged within the hyper-pressured, algorithmically mediated, and globally scrutinized terrain of 21st-century fame. RM's masculinity emerges through exhaustion, loneliness, fragmentation, and emotional honesty. Although he does not invoke God, his lyric persona expresses a secular version of the same crisis that haunts Donne: the fear that the self cannot remain intact under overwhelming pressure.

***Indigo* and the Self — RM's Lyricism and the Postmodern Male**

RM has been referred to as the "philosopher who raps," a testament to the deep intellectualism, introspection, and ethical sensitivity of his lyric practice ("Philosopher Who Raps"). Scholars such as Parc and Kim view RM as a cultural bridge, someone whose

globalized identity allows him to navigate various cultural registers. Others, such as Rachmawati, highlight his linguistic nuance, emotional transparency, and uncommon leadership style. This scholarly foundation establishes RM as more than a pop figure; he is a contemporary lyric poet whose work invites literary analysis.

In “Yun,” RM declares, “I wanna be a human ’fore I do some art” (RM). This deceptively simple confession rejects the dehumanizing processes of celebrity culture. The masculine self, under capitalist productivity and idol expectations, is stretched thin. Being “human” becomes a precondition for creativity, but also a state RM fears he may be losing.

“Wild Flower,” perhaps the centerpiece of *Indigo*, further dramatizes masculine exhaustion:

“Where’s my end finally gonna be? Everything’s so exhausting, from A to Z /
When’s this wretched mask finally gonna come off?
Yeah, me no hero, me no villain, I’m barely anything.” (RM)

Rather than constructing a masculine persona of confidence or dominance, RM dismantles every heroic narrative surrounding him. He rejects the binary of hero/villain and embraces uncertainty. Like Donne, he confesses the fear of collapse. But where Donne seeks divine renewal, RM simply wants relief.

In “Lonely,” RM articulates the emptiness beneath public visibility. Fame isolates him rather than empowers him. Masculinity, in this context, becomes a performance both demanded and punished by the public eye.

Scholars such as Hasanah et al. emphasize RM’s rhetorical tendency toward moral and emotional openness (Hasanah et al.). RM’s masculinity, therefore, emerges not through dominance or invulnerability but through emotional lucidity. His lyric persona is tender, contemplative, and weary i.e., a masculinity exhausted by constant self-display.

Much of *Indigo* rejects narrative closure. Instead, the album reflects Jonathan Culler's notion of lyric temporality which are episodes of thought, feeling, or insight that do not require narrative resolution. RM does not attempt to unify himself; he lives within the fracture, mirroring the postmodern subjectivity shaped by algorithmic noise, fan expectations, and global cultural flow.

This refusal to seek "salvation" (spiritual or psychological) marks a major departure from Donne. And yet, RM's honesty about his emotional vulnerability positions him as a vital figure in contemporary discussions of masculinity. He humanizes the male experience rather than mythologizing it.

Between God and the Void — Comparative Lyric Tensions and Masculine Performance

A comparative framework reveals that Donne and RM, despite the temporal and cultural gulf between them, approach masculinity as a dynamic, wounded condition. Their crises differ in origin; Donne's is theological, RM's existential, but their lyric strategies illuminate shared emotional landscapes.

Donne's address is upward and outward, directed toward an omnipotent God whose judgment and mercy structure the speaker's identity. RM's address, in contrast, is inward and lateral. He speaks to himself, to listeners, to a world that overwhelms him. Donne seeks divine intervention; RM seeks self-recognition.

Donne's shame is rooted in sin, its stain, its consequences, its threat to salvation. RM's shame emerges from exposure, fame, and the loss of privacy. Yet in both cases, shame becomes a catalyst for masculine confession.

Donne expresses collapse through violent metaphors including ravishment, battering, burning, sieging etc. RM expresses collapse through metaphors of exhaustion, loneliness, and dissolving identity. Donne wants to be broken so he can be remade. RM accepts his brokenness as the only truth available to him.

Donne's temporality is eschatological i.e., his lyric voice is shadowed by eternity. RM's temporality is transient and secular, shaped by the rapid churn of digital culture. Yet both experience the self as unstable, fleeting, decaying.

In both Donne and RM, the lyric form becomes a sanctuary of exposure. It allows the masculine subject to articulate fears, contradictions, and desires that cannot be spoken in normative social spaces.

Conclusion

By examining Donne and RM together, this paper proposes a cross-temporal understanding of masculinity as inherently fragile. Whether confronting divine judgment or global celebrity culture, the male self is repeatedly undone by forces that exceed its capacity to remain whole. Donne's metaphysical speaker and RM's postmodern persona reveal that the masculine soul, when stripped of performance and power, is marked by doubt, longing, shame, anxiety, and a hunger for transformation or rest.

Both artists demonstrate that masculinity performs itself most truthfully in moments of fracture. Their work expands the boundaries of what constitutes masculine expression by foregrounding emotional honesty, vulnerability, and existential complexity. This comparative study thus contributes to masculinity studies, lyric theory, and global literary discourse by demonstrating how lyric poetics remain a vital site for interrogating the evolving conditions of male subjectivity.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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