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‘For whom the bell tolls’, John Donne, and William Perkins

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One of the most well-known phrases by Donne may have its origin in an edifying anecdote by William Perkins. In *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Seuerall Steps in my Sicknes* (1624), Donne tells of hearing the passing bell tolling, and wonders if ‘hee for whom this Bell tolls, may bee so ill, as that he knowes not it tolls for him; And perchance I may thinke my selfe so much better than I am, as that they who are about mee, and see my state, may haue caused it to toll for mee, and I know not that’. Donne concludes that ‘this *Bell* calls vs all: but how much more *mee*, who am brought so neere the *doore* by this *sicknesse*... The Bell doth toll for him that thinkes it doth... Therefore neuer send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee’.¹

Visitation articles enquired about the precise time at which the bell was tolled: before death (a Christian duty, allowing prayer for a soul still on earth) or after death (a superstitious practice, encouraging heretical prayer for a soul now gone to judgement).² Not to want the bell tolled was condemned as schismatic, an offence against Christian charity and community.³ It should be a

¹ J. Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Seuerall Steps in my Sicknes* (1624), pp. 610-19.

² *Articles to Bee Inquired of, in the Diocesan Visitation of the Most Reuerend Father in God, Toby... L. Archbishop of Yorke* (1623), p. 9.

³ R. Bancroft, *Daungerous Positions... Under Pretence of Reformation, and for the Presbiteriall Discipline* (1593), p. 124.

moment when individuals in the parish came together in prayer. The standard modern edition of *Devotions*, by Anthony Raspa, cites as inspiration for the passage a contemporary Italian humanist's discussion of how tolling the bell is part of the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead.⁴ Donne may, however, have had a more local and pertinent story in mind.

A best-selling tract by Perkins came out in both London and Edinburgh in 1593, and was reprinted a further eight times by 1638. *A Direction for the Government of the Tongue According to Gods Word* promised its reader it would focus on disreputable verbal arts: 'Swearing, blaspheming, Cursed speaking, Railing, Backbiting, Slandering, Chiding, Quarrelling, Contending, Iesting, Mocking, Flattering, Lying, dissembling, Vaine and Idle talking' - just the sort of racy meta-discursive matter which might appeal to Donne. Perkins tells of how

a serving man in *Lincolnshire*, who had still in his mouth an use to sweare, *Gods pretious blood*, and that for very trifles: being often warned by his friendes to leave the taking of the Lords blood in vaine, did notwithstanding still persist in his wickednesse, untill at the last it pleased God to acite him first with sicknesse, and then with death: during which time of the Lordes visitation, no perswasion could moue him to repent his foresaid blaspheming, but hearing the bell to towle, did most hardly in the anguish of his death, start up in his bed, and sware *by Gods blood this bell towled for me*. Whereupon immediatly the blood abundantly from all the joynts of his body, as it were in streames,

⁴ Citing Angelo Rocca, *De Campanis Commentarius* (1612), J. Donne, *Devotions on Emergent Occasions*, ed., A. Raspa (New York, 1987), p. 173.

did issue out most fearfully from mouth, nose, wrestes, knees, heeles, and toes, with all other joyntes, not one left free, and so dyed.⁵

This anecdote was so striking it was repeated in a Paul's Cross sermon of 1613 and a tract against drunkenness in 1617.⁶ Both Donne's meditation and Perkins's story urge their readers to taken impersonal 'occasions' as personal admonitions: both bodies and bells are warnings, and their effect should be shared with other Christians, in story.

⁵ W. Perkins, *A Direction for the Government of the Tongue According to Gods Word* (1593), p. 72.

⁶ A. Gibson, *The Lands Mourning, for Vaine Swearing* (1613), p. 73; T. Young, *Englands Bane: or, the Description of Drunkennesse* (1617), [C4v].