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Donne's "The Bracelet": Trafficking in Gold and Love

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John Donne's "The Bracelet" is one of the most admired as well as the most elusive of his elegies. In order to untangle its complex links, many critics have often gone source hunting. Source hunting is a tricky business, however, and can just as often turn up base metal rather than gold. "The Bracelet," like so many of Donne's poems, is replete with references to the contemporary London scene. This has led some critics to limit the influences to the contemporary ones and to search for parallels to Donne's lost chain within recent dramas such as Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* or Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* that Donne might have known."[1] Yet not a few critics have insisted that the basic influence is more ancient and that "The Bracelet," like others of Donne's elegies, owes a primary debt to Roman elegy.

To find Ovid or Propertius in Donnean elegy would hardly be surprising. For an English Renaissance poet, the Roman elegists are hardly a recondite source. Although Helen Gardner has pronounced that "The Bracelet" owes little if anything to Ovid, Alan Armstrong and Roma Gill have disputed her judgment.[2] Both Armstrong and Gill insist on the elegy's Ovidian debts. Armstrong believes, however, that Donne, while following the Roman elegists, has freed himself in "The Bracelet" from the conventions and the language of the enslaved Roman lover. Gill thinks on the contrary that Donne accepts the Roman elegists' basic views and regards women as merely sexual objects. Even though both agree that Roman elegy gave birth to Donne's poem, neither has explored extensively this presence within "The Bracelet," or even offered convincing parallels to Donne in Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus. So where exactly do we stand vis-à-vis Donne and this so-

called source material? What exactly can Roman love elegy tell us about Donne's lover and his golden chain?

Let us begin with the lover, the mistress, and the situation they find themselves in. First, let me make clear that I am not looking for lost chains among the ancient elegies. Helen Gardner may very well be right that the lost chain from Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* teased Donne's imagination and provided the original "metal" he alchemizes in the elegy. Instead, let us concentrate on the mistress' demand for a new bracelet. Doing so, we will discover that the situation in "The Bracelet" exactly duplicates the situation that Ovid, Tibullus, and Propertius repeatedly exploit in their love elegies—the demand of the mistress for a gift, preferably one of gold. Further, though Donne's language and metaphors rarely replicate those of the Roman elegists, Donne continually refers back to the love relationships in Roman elegy as the touchstone for his own relationship with his mistress. Like the Roman elegist (and particularly the explosively dramatic Ovid), he opens his elegy in an argumentative tone—as though he were addressing the mistress herself—and he holds a lively dialogue with her until virtually the close of the elegy.

The situation is this. In order to stay in his mistress's good graces, in order to insure the continuation of her sexual favor, the lover must provide a gift. In Donne's case the gift is a replacement for a gift originally provided, a golden chain that must now be replaced by providing the goldsmith with twelve golden coins—the "angels" that Donne refers to throughout the poem. The angels have status both as gold coins—the requisite money—and as messengers of worldly or otherworldly love. As in Roman elegy, there is a tension between practical commercial matters—the necessity of emptying one's purse of money to provide the gift—and the higher principles of love and even religion.

The elegy opens with the lover addressing the mistress' demand for the replacement chain. This repeated demand for a gift provides the linking motif in the elegy that reminds us that we are in a world of the Roman elegy. Donne's mistress may at first appear a romantic, distressed at the loss of a love token, but each time she reiterates her

demand for a new bracelet, she places herself squarely in the line of the mistresses of Roman elegy—Ovid's Corinna, Propertius' Cynthia, and Tibullus' Nemesis—mercenary grasping women. If we glance at a few of the elegies and the depiction of the mistresses therein, the resemblance is clear. Cynthia, Propertius tells us, weighs her lover's purse before she decides whether or not to entertain him favorably (Elegies 2.16.11-12).[3] He loudly complains of this treatment and laments the avariciousness of the sex. Her list of gifts is very specific. In his second book of elegies (2.16; 2.24), for example, Propertius finds himself trapped by Cynthia's requests for jewels from the east, stuff from Tyre. To counter her demands, he insists—as Donne's lover does—that he wants to be loved for himself alone, not for the gifts he brings. He complains that gift-giving and receiving puts their relationship on a mercenary basis. It also implies that anyone with the requisite gifts may buy her favor. He protests that he loves her more than all the wealth in the world; why should she not feel the same about him (1.14). After all, it was through his song, his poetry—not with pearls and gold—that he first won her. But Cynthia is adamant. All the lover's complaints are vain. He may mutter under his breath that gift-seeking only brings woe (2.16). In the end he risks rejection when he refuses to buy the pleasures of sex with a gift (2.20).

Ovid and Tibullus are not far behind in complaining about their mistresses' desire for rich gifts. Ovid is indignant about having to "pay" for sex. It is against nature, he maintains. The ram doesn't woo the ewe by giving presents. Only woman demands her price. It's not, Ovid insists, that he objects to giving his mistress a gift. He is not that niggardly. What irks him is that she flatly demands a present. He should be free to give.

> nec dare, sed pretium posci dedignor et odi;
> quod nego poscenti, desine velle, dabo.
> (*Amores*, 1.10.63-64)

> Not the giving, but the demanding of payment, I disdain and despise;
> What I refuse as a demand, cease to demand and I shall give.

Why, reasons Ovid, should my desire for pleasure cause me loss and yours bring you gain? It's not fair.

The lover's complaints in Donne's elegy and his strategy in dealing with his mistress both resemble and differ from that of the Roman elegist. First of all, he never directly accuses his mistress of avarice. His complaints, however, indirectly address the issue. On the surface he "seems" merely to be lamenting the loss of the bracelet and the threatened loss of the gold angels to replace it. Contemplating the loss of these angels, he repeatedly rings the changes on the word "angel"—as representing the gold coin itself or the golden messenger depicted on the face of that coin. So, rather than arguing with the mistress about her demand and accusing her of greed, he digresses. Yet after each digression, he returns obsessively to the basic situation that has set his elegy in motion—the mistress's demand for a new bracelet. Moreover, every time he returns to this implacable demand, we perceive all too clearly that his mistress is no fond innocent. She too, like Propertius' Cynthia, has weighed her lover in gold and found him wanting. Never wavering in her resolution, she keeps insisting—in her own literal-minded way—that the gold coins be melted down for the new chain. The desperate lover mounts argument after argument, alternative after alternative to "save" his angels. She dismisses the angels to the waiting fire, preferring pure gold in the form of a bracelet to the golden coins or to whatever metaphysical symbol they represent.

Thus, "The Bracelet" is a poem that avoids telling its audience directly what we cannot fail to perceive—that the woman loves gold better than her lover. Yet if we read between the lines, the implication is there. Openly Donne speaks of gold's power to ruin; *sotto voce* he regrets that it sways the female heart. The lover wistfully repines that his mistress will love him less when his money is gone (53-54). He hints that if she loved him at all, she would not demand that he sacrifice the money. He finally states baldly that his gold "now must nurse [her] pride" (74).

The reason for the lover's reticence is clear. Like the excluded lover of Roman elegy, he knows that it is useless to inveigh against his mistress. He will not be readmitted to her favor without the requisite

gift. Moreover, he is evasive about his exclusion and ashamed that a mere woman holds the ultimate power of yes or no. When Donne wittily recasts her as God the Father, whose "will [must] be done" (79), he is merely remaking the almighty Roman *domina* into a Christian *dominus*. Yet whether one casts it in Roman or in Christian dress, the poet cannot get around the basic situation: the mistress demands; the lover assents.

Thus, Donne, following closely in the line of Propertius and Ovid and Tibullus, makes almost the same observations that they do about the peril to his purse of the mistress' demand. The money, he repines, should be spent to provide him with the daily necessities of life or the means to do charitable acts: "should do good workes, and should provide/Necessities" (73-74). Losing it must lose him his "guard, [his] ease, [his] food, [his] all" (49). The "bitter loss" of his cash now follows hard upon the loss of the bracelet. Donne thus is not alone in feeling that the mistress is taking advantage of the situation and forcing her lover to dip into his capital to provide her with luxuries. The Roman elegist Tibullus laments that his mistress Nemesis—she is aptly named—demands that he sell his goods—his very estate—so that she may have a gift (2.1).

But there is a larger concern that links Donne to the world of Roman elegy. Their text may be the greed of woman; their subtext is the power of greed in all human affairs. Donne and the Roman elegists while painting a graphic picture of the mistress who demands a gift, do not neglect the larger issues that such mercantile preoccupations point to. Reaching out to the marketplace and to the political arena, they consider other manifestations of greed; they consider also the ethical issues at stake—the more universal question of good and bad that the specific situation seems to imply. Donne's concern for the threatened angels that must be used for a new bracelet is just such a marketplace issue that takes on broader meaning. On the one hand, he can contrast his good English gold angels with their bad continental counterparts (23-48). Or he can reach out by analogy to higher metaphysical matters—describing the corruptibility not of mistresses or gold coins but of heavenly spirits—good angels who fell into hell, where they too must be "burnt

and tyed in chaines," condemned to the furnace like Donne's gold coins—condemned for another's fault (19-22).

None of the Roman elegists go so far with their metaphysical speculations. Nevertheless, they are not unlike the Christian poet in proposing that the sin of avarice may shake even a pagan Olympus. Jove had to change himself into a shower of gold before his mistress Danae would accept him, Ovid wittily quips (3.8.29-30). On earth female covetousness could decide matters of state; Tarpea committed treason for an armlet; Eripyle for a necklace (1.10.48-52). Further, gold corrupts man and woman alike. Greedy men ransack the earth for gold. Many evils lurk in gold, Tibullus warns. Gold vitiates beauty; gold causes war (1.10.7). Propertius also admits that the avariciousness of women is only one aspect of the general evil that gold causes (3.13).

Donne's diatribe on good and bad angels carries much the same message, whether the good angels are good English coins or the good spirits that serve God and the bad angels the corrupt, clipped coins of France and Spain or the aspiring angels that fell with Lucifer. Yet even when he extends his example to embrace corruption in Heaven or to describe the corrupt politics of England's rivals—Spain and France—he is conflating political and sexual issues. He sneers at French crowns, possessed of "their naturall country rot" (22), French gold that as often purchases the "French disease" from France's prostitutes as it purchases the ruined *res politica* of its country's civil wars. Just like water circulating through streams or blood through veins, gold circulates like bad blood through foreign trade, ruining the body politic. Bad money has left "Gorgeous *France* ruin'd, ragged, and decay'd" (40). Similarly, in Spain the Pistolets, "still travailing" are compared to cannon-shot or the many-angled figures in a conjurer's book. Such gold destroys or deludes, leading men and nations into war and black magic. Donne sums up:

> I would not spit to quench the fire they'were in,
> For they are guilty of much heinous sin. (47-48)

Like the Roman elegists, Donne has discoursed widely on the political and social evils of gold to bring the lesson home to his mistress: gold

corrupts. If it has corrupted religious and political relationships from the highest to the lowest, then it can also poison amatory ones. Donne does not, of course, accuse his mistress of perfidy on an international scale. But when he alludes to French crowns "circumcis'd most Jewishly" (28) or to gold ruining France, Scotland, and Belgia, he implies that the kind of damage that can be done to nations can also redound on lovers. Gold only remains harmless when it is properly used—to buy necessities or to be given away charitably. When it nourishes corrupt politics in heaven or earth, when it "buys" love or nurses a mistress's pride, it runs the risk of damnation. These are harsh words.

Hence, when we come to the final section of the elegy, the curse on the "Finder" of the first bracelet, we understand that Donne is practicing a program of deflected rhetoric. Curses on gold are commonplace both in the classical and the Christian tradition. Gold is, after all, the root of all evil. But Donne appears not to curse gold itself, but the man who has found gold in the form of the lost golden chain:

> But oh, Thou wretched Finder . . .
> May my most heavy curse upon thee fall. (91, 94)

Here again we must read between the lines. On the surface it appears Donne is indicting the unknown Finder of avariciousness because, moved by greed, he keeps the chain, rather than restoring it to its rightful owner. Curses on avaricious men may readily be found in Roman elegy. Propertius curses the man who cherishes gold (3.12) because he has placed the highest value on the shining metal and not on things more valuable than gold—love and honor and poetic wit. These intangibles—like Donne's uncorrupted angels—are in a sense more "golden," more pure than gold itself. Both Propertius and Ovid reflect upon the time when their mistresses valued them and their wit more than gold. Hence, when that standard of value changes, gold must be cursed. For gold has replaced love. And love has the greater value.

The Roman elegists reflect that the women themselves are not alone to blame. Complicit with them are those who have made them desire rich goods or value gold more than their lovers. Tibullus, for example, indicts the merchants who have made women avaricious—those who

gather emerald and dye wool for sale, those who procure Coan silks and pearls. Also blameworthy are those bawds who traffic in love and who eagerly shut out lovers who lack gold. Tibullus includes them in his curse (1.39). Love becomes hostage to gold (2.6). Therefore, gold itself or golden gifts that have bought the mistress's favor are included in the elegist's curse (Propertius, 2.16).

Gold is a four-letter word; so is love. Among the Greek poems attributed to Anacreon is a lyric on gold and love that observes how the one has driven out the other.[4] Among the divisions that love of gold causes are: quarrels between brothers, the slighting of parents, war, and all other conflicts. The worst of all these divisions is that suffered by the lover. By gold the lover is overthrown. The anacreontic concludes with a curse on the man who first doted on gold and made it a substitute for love.

Donne could hardly have been unaware of these ancient curses on gold and those who cherish it.[5] When he curses the Finder of the bracelet, moreover, he includes within his curse a range of maledictions that apply to those other than the Finder himself. The sum of evils that spring from an obsession with gold are such as cling not just to the Finder but also to the mistress and the lover. Gold fatally chains those who prize it, and the links of the chain connect the three persons in this fatal drama of winning and losing love. The curse on gold deflects on the mistress who first possessed the bracelet and demands its replacement in gold, the lover who lost it and must provide its substitute by cashing in the gold he also prizes, and the Finder who prizes the lover's token for the gold it contains.

The curse that concludes the elegy confers theological, political, social, sexual, and personal woes on the "wretched Finder" of the chain. Because of his lust for gold he will be "fetter'd, manacl'd, and hang'd in chaines" (95), both on earth and in hell. He will betray his country for foreign gold—and he will be betrayed for that betrayal even to the point of losing his payment in gold. He will be poisoned by gold and rot in body; he will be libeled by gold and be ruined in report. And, most of all, because he has betrayed love by his covetousness, he will obtain no love, but rot with "lust-bred diseases," possessing "itchy

desire and no abilitie" (103-04). "All of the hurt which every Gold hath wrought" will fall on this unfortunate creature—"want after plenty, poore and gouty age, / The plagues of travellers, love and marriage / Afflict thee; and at thy lifes latest moment / May thy swolne sins themselves to thee present" (105-110).

Why does Donne mount this mighty malediction against a human being whose only fault is to find the chain that the lover has lost? The lover cannot even be certain that the Finder is keeping the chain deliberately. The last lines of the poem leave open the possibility that the Finder will "repent" and "restore" the chain. The language of the malediction is such that we may suspect that it is aimed not at the Finder alone but, like its ancient prototypes, at gold itself and at the commerce in gold and love.

At the centerpoint of "The Bracelet" is the mistress immovable in her will. About her revolves the intricate circle of blame and blamelessness, of intention and non-intention—a busy commerce in lost and found gold, in good angels about to be consigned to the fire and corrupt angels permitted to continue in their ruinous dealings. Because of her demand for a new chain, a mighty malediction has been leveled against the Finder of the first chain, a malediction that becomes also a curse on gold and love. At the very last moment, however, Donne holds out the possibility of restoration. Addressing apparently the hypothetical Finder of the bracelet, he urges him to "restore" it, pleading on the one hand gold's medicinal and restorative qualities and on the other threatening him with gold as a fatal poison at the heart, should he withhold the bracelet.

> But I forgive. Repent, thou honest man.
> Gold is restorative; restore it then.
> Or if with it thou beest loath to depart
> Because 'tis cordiall, would 'twere at thy heart. (111-14)

The message of forgiving and repenting—of restoring that which has been lost applies not only to a lost bracelet, but also to lost love and to a mistress who has been withholding love for gold. The innocent

angels that the lover is about to sacrifice have come to symbolize, as critics have recognized, the innocent love enjoyed before the unlucky loss of the bracelet. When the mistress demands that the lover convert these "angels" to gold for a new bauble, he takes a closer look at his "angelic" love and discovers that it has been corrupted by the crass love of the marketplace. Further, he also is forced to betray his own innocent first love in order to keep the "love" of his gold-hungry mistress. By the end of the elegy, it is quite certain that the lover has determined to cash in the angels to supply the new bracelet. He too has paid the price.

In one sense with the chain's loss the lover has lost all illusions about himself, his mistress, and their relationship. Gold may be a cordial indeed, but this gold appears to have poisoned the heart.[6] Donne's elegy begins with the lover remarking on a "good which oft [he] mist" from his mistress (4); it ends with his admitting his guilt for the "sad decay" of his angels (89). Somewhere in between something else has decayed—a relationship which to his "bitter cost," he has found based not on love, but on money.

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Notes

1. Helen Gardner follows Grierson in believing that Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* is the primary influence on "The Bracelet": *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Oxford Univesity Press, 1963). But apart from the basic situation of a lost chain and some pointed references to crying through the streets as a means of recovering the chain, "The Bracelet" owes little, if anything, to Kyd. Donne's mistress is not the reproachful and jealous Perseda, and there are no dire consequences awaiting the lover if he fails to replace the chain beyond facing his mistress's wrath. Donne never follows Kyd's romantic excesses. He avoids as well the extravagance of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and its mix-ups between wife and mistress over the inadvertent transfer of a chain to Antiphilus 2 instead of Antiphilus 1.

2. Gardner, pp. 112-13; Roma Gill, "*Musa Iocosa Mea*: Thoughts on the Elegies," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1972), pp. 47-72; Alan Armstrong, "The Apprenticeship of John Donne: Ovid and the Elegies," *ELH* 44 (1977): 419-42. Also see William Rockett, "Donne's Libertine Rhetoric," *ES* 52 (1971): 507-18.

3. Quotations from Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus are from the Loeb Library texts of these authors.

4. In his 1554 edition of the anacreontea, Estienne entitles anacreontic #46 "Aurum" (Gold). Thomas Stanley translates it this way:

> But of all the greatest pain
> Is to love unlov'd again;
> Birth in love is now rejected,
> Parts and Arts are disrespected,
> Onely Gold is look'd upon;
> A curse take him that was won,
> First to doat upon it; hence
> Springs 'twixt Brothers difference;
> This makes Parents slighted; this
> Wars dire cause and fuel is;
> And what's worse by this alone
> Are we Lovers overthrown. (p. 25)

Also see Henri Estienne, "Observationes in Anacreontis Carmina," in *Anacreontis Teij Odae* (Paris 1554), p. 65; Thomas Stanley, "Excitations upon Anacreon," *Poems* (London, 1651), pp. 81-82 for commentary on this anacreontic.

5. See Robert Bryan, "John Donne's Use of the Anathema," *JEGP* 61(1962): 305-12.

6. Julia Walker also emphasizes the negative aspects of love relationship, remarking that the man is more in love with his gold than his lover: "Donne's Words Taught in Numbers," *SP* 84 (1987): 44-60.