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Lure and Allure in Donne's "Aire and Angels"

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When in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* Octavius laments Antony's idleness in Alexandria, he reads a letter about his fellow triumvir, who " . . . fishes, drinks, and wastes / The lamps of night in revel" (I.iv.4-5). Later in the play, after Antony returns to Rome, Cleopatra recalls their joint venture at fishing. Her account becomes, in effect, a metaphorical means whereby she, the angler, seeks to lure Antony back to her, then catch him. To her attendants, she says:

> Give me my angle, we'll to the river there,
> My music playing far off, I will betray
> Tawny-finned fishes. My bended hook shall pierce
> Their slimy jaws; and as I draw them up,
> I'll think them every one an Antony,
> And say, "Ah, ha! y'are caught!" (II.v.11-15).[1]

Cleopatra's references to "my angle" and "[m]y bended hook" indicate, respectively, her fishing tackle and the hook on which the bait is fastened, either live or artificial. In this play, however, the woman functions as both the angler and the lure. After all, the deployment of the lure--what fishermen call the presentation--manifests the cunning mind of the angler. In the past, Cleopatra presented herself to Antony by various means, each alluring: her scintillating attire enhanced by the sunshine or moonlight; the toils of her garb unfurling like streamers in the breeze; her billowing garments akin to the puffed sails of a vessel but similar, as well, to a lure afloat and adrift, moved by the currents in the water and breezes in the air; her darting movement to and fro; her arousal of the onlooker's appetite, which results in feeding, then

feasting. What Enobarbus calls "[h]er infinite variety" describes the ingenuity of Cleopatra as an angler and her varied attractiveness as a lure, at times akin to a pleasure craft, not unlike the one on which she was wafted by breezes above, and by currents in, the Cydnus River.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, similar metaphors of lure and allure abound, most notably when the three women--Hero, Margaret, and Ursala--induce Beatrice to overhear their conversation concerning Benedick's supposed love for her. Noticing the furtive approach of Beatrice, the women proceed to arouse her appetite or excite her curiosity. Ursala comments:

> The pleasant'st angling is to see the fish
> Cut with her golden oars the silver stream
> And greedily devour the treacherous bait.
> So angle we for Beatrice, who even now
> Is couched in the woodbine coverture. (III.i.26-30)

Hero even urges the women to move closer to Beatrice, so that "her ear lose nothing of the false sweet bait" (l. 33). Among other figurative correlations, the fins of the fish are likened to the "golden oars" propelling a vessel; and the "woodbine coverture" behind which Beatrice hides resembles the reed-like meshes in which fish conceal themselves along the banks of a river.

The likeness of a woman's "allure" to "a lure" for fishing also informs numerous Renaissance lyrics, including John Donne's "The Baite," in which the speaker addresses the female listener in the following way: "... thou thy selfe are thine own bait" (line 26).[2] The speaker, moreover, likens the erotic interplay of man and woman to angling, in which "curious traitors, sleavesilke flies / Bewitch poore fishes wandring eyes" (lines 23-24). The foregoing account explicitly describes a particular kind of fishing lure, namely the artificial fly tied by hand with sleevesilk or silken threads and most often with hair, animal or human. Indeed, the materials, the hand tools, and handicraft to fashion such "curious traitors" have remained essentially the same across the centuries. Meticulously fashioned by fishermen, these lures

"dressed" a hook with fabric, fibers, and strands of hair that simulate a natural fly: a mayfly, stonefly, caddisfly, damselfly, or dragonfly.

If "The Baite" explicitly refers to fly fishing, another poem by Donne, "Aire and Angels," emphasizes the same sport. In fact, the wordplay in the title of the poem suggests hair, the material to compose some of the lure and to fasten together its parts, and angles, crucial means in presenting the lure. Fishing, therefore, becomes a significant metaphor in the poem, whose most renowned phrase, "loves pinnace," designates a handmade artificial lure, specifically a fly, an identification not yet explained in critical commentary. Accordingly, in light of what I have recounted above, my aim is twofold: first, briefly to describe fishing with artificial lures in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England; second, to explain how and why the handcrafted lure, "loves pinnace," manifests the trifold nature of women, a topic that informs many of the Songs and Sonnets but never so wittily integrated with the sport of fly fishing than in "Aire and Angels."

I

Though begun as a means of procuring food, angling became a sport in England by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, perhaps earlier. In fact, Dame Juliana Berners or Barnes, Prioress of Sopwell, putative author of the *Treatyse of Fyshinge wyth an Angle*, first printed this manual on angling at St. Albans as an appendix to the second edition (1496) of her book on hawking, hunting, and heraldry. Dame Juliana, who explains (what she calls) the "crafty sport" of the nobility, angling, summarizes venerable practices and codifies lore associated with fishing. Thereafter, Izaak Walton, Charles Cotton, and Henry Wotton, among others, express keen interest in angling, though death prevented Cotton from publishing his treatise on the sport. In the first edition of *The Complete Angler* (1653), Walton does give some attention to fishing with artificial flies, and in the sixth edition of his work (1676), he incorporates Cotton's treatise, which emphasizes fly fishing.[3]

Fishermen use artificial flies not only to appeal to hungry fish but also to attract their attention and arouse their curiosity. The success of artificial flies depends on their close resemblance to insects, and different species of fish are more tempted by certain flies than by others. Dame Juliana cites the preference of trout for flies, which undergo metamorphosis. From the sixteenth century to the present era, in fact, anglers have chosen the mayfly as the most popular lure for trout. Thus, they create lures to simulate the exact appearance--size, color, markings, and movement--of the mayfly in each stage of its development.[4]

Cotton provides a detailed account of the four stages of development of a typical mayfly, which, when interrelated with present-day commentary on the same process, provides a helpful context for analyzing artificial lures in Donne's "Aire and Angels."[5] Preparatory to the first stage of development, adult mayflies, called spinners, return instinctively to water in order to mate, an activity that occurs while they swarm usually above the riffles of a river. The females drop the fertilized eggs onto the water. Here, the first stage of development begins, when the eggs hatch into an underwater form called a nymph, which breathes through gills and feeds on water plants. For a few months to approximately two years, a nymph lives underwater. In the second stage, the nymph, fully grown, swims to the surface, where it sheds its nymphal skin and, after molting, becomes a winged fly, called a dun or subimago. Third, until the air and sun stiffen its wings, the dun floats on the surface of the water; and when countless insects hatch simultaneously, they blanket large areas. Fourth, with its wings usable, the dun, now called an imago or spinner, takes to flight.

This fourfold cycle recurs when the spinners return to the river to mate in a swarm; and having done so, males and females fall half-spent or fully spent onto the surface of the water. At any time, with the notable exception of the spinner that has flown away from the water, the mayfly in its four stages of development, whether on the water or under the water, will lure fish. The male or female mayfly also lures fish when as a spinner it returns to the river, falls spent after mating, and "dies" on the surface.

II

In the context that I have outlined above, the allusions in "Aire and Angels" to the manufacture and use of artificial lures will come into focus. Artificial lures imitate "bait fish," such as minnows, and insects or flies. Walton, for example, recounts how a woman-angler who used a live minnow as a model manufactured an artificial one:

> . . . the mould or body of the minnow was cloth, cloth, and wrought upon, and over it, thus, with a needle; the back of it with very sad French green silk, and paler green silk towards the belly, shadowed as perfectly as you can imagine, just as you see a minnow: the belly was wrought also with a needle, and it was, a part of it, white silk; and another part of it with silver thread: the tail and fins were of a quill, which was shaven thin: the eyes were of two little black beads: and the head was so shadowed, and all of it so curiously wrought, and so exactly dissembled, that it would beguile any sharp-sighted Trout in a swift stream.[6]

Such a lure, sometimes called the "phantom or angel minnow,"[7] pertains directly to "Aire and Angels," since the word "phantom" is a variation of "phantasm." Like angels, who disclose themselves apparitionally or phantasmically to humankind, because they have neither the substance nor the essence of the beings whom they simulate, artifical lures, which have material presence, lack the substance and essence of the bait-fish and insects that they affect or imitate. When, moreover, an artificial lure imitates an insect, it is more of a phantom or an angel than its counterpart that affects a bait-fish. For in its higher stages of development, a fly is winged and airborne, potential that inheres in the aquatic forms of the insect and that would appear to reside in the artificial lure.

Walton provides an inventory of "twelve kinds of artificial made Flies," which are "likely to betray and condemn all the Trouts in the river."[8] He also gives directions in the art of fly-tying and itemizes the contents of a fly-tying kit or "bag": "bear's hair, or the hair of a brown

or sad-coloured heifer, hackles of a cock or capon, several coloured silk and crewel to make the body of the fly, the feathers of a drake's head, black or brown sheep's wool, or hog's wool, or hair, thread of gold and of silver; silk of several colours, especially sad-coloured, to make the fly's head: and there be also other coloured feathers, both of little birds and of speckled fowl."[9]

Using scissors, needle, and pin, the instruments of a garment maker and also a sail maker, a fisherman fashioning a fly to dress an angle or hook would pay particular attention to the design and appearance of the wings of the lure. Since the feathers of a fowl (or more than one fowl) will become the wings of the fly-lure, what Walton terms fly-angling may be called, in view of Donne's "Aire and Angels," angel-angling. When one considers, moreover, that the Latin words for feather, wing, and fin (and even wing-like expansion) include "pinna" and "penna," the rationale for Donne's use of "loves pinnace" comes into focus. The OED indicates that, among other meanings, "pinnace" is a small, light vessel, and in *The Merchant of Venice* (I.i.14), the rigging and sails of a vessel are likened to "woven wings." Related to the nautical significance of the term "pinnace" is its figurative implication. The OED records that "pinnace" figuratively suggests a woman. Various spellings of "pinnace" in the OED--"pynnage," "pynnege," "pinnage"--designate more graphically how the term suggests a woman, whose attire, akin to plumage, also resembles the rigging of a vessel, a likeness substantiated by several citations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. When the attire is garish rather than modest, the OED indicates that the woman may be a mistress or a prostitute. In line with such views, the term "loves pinnace" designates an artificial lure whose woven wings function like the sails of a small vessel--in effect, a pleasure craft or, one might say, love boat. In the manner of Cleopatra's languid travel along the Cydnus River, when the men who beheld her would experience loving arousal, "loves pinnace" in Donne's poem becomes the lure that men desire. In "Aire and Angels," however, other language with nautical and piscatorial significance, commonplace in Donne's era and in our own, enriches our understanding of "loves pinnace." Words such as "ballast," "steddily," and "overfraught" (lines

15-16, 18) indicate the importance of weighting a lure so that it fulfills its particular purpose--hovering just above the surface of the water, riding on the surface and being moved naturally thereon by wind and by currents in the water, or being submerged at the precise depth where the fish are feeding and then being moved naturally by currents under the surface of the water. And when the lure simulates a fly "spent" after mating, it must ride on the surface of the water with such delicate balance that it may not be upright but listing, with the one wing higher than the other, sufficient to float though free to sink.

Indeed, the triple use of an artificial lure or "loves pinnace"--above, on, and below the water--correlates with the trifold nature of women recounted in the Songs and Sonnets. First, when an angler daps, dabs, or dibbles, he or she casts the line into a lofty trajectory that describes an arc. Then by retracting the line just before the lure strikes the water, the angler creates a virtual whiplash in the air, its sound attracting the fish; and the airborne lure also creates a flitting shadow on the surface of the water, an attractive visual effect. This activity, called shadow casting, may impel a fish to leap into the air, a practice recounted in Norman Maclean's novel *A River Runs Through It*, as well as in its cinematic adaptation. Such a lure signifies the transcendent woman, whose sublime and rarefied presence is within the ken of the beholder, thereby urging him to rise to her.

Second, when the artificial fly is dropped gently onto the water, the slight splash and the floating lure attract the fish. Indeed, Cotton likens this kind of lure to "a ship at hull"; and when many natural flies appear on the water simultaneously in a hatch, present-day anglers liken them to "little sail boats floating in the current," images that underscore the visual import of "loves pinnace."[10] Such an artificial lure, almost all of which is above the surface, is called a dry fly, which has at least twofold significance for our interpretation of "Aire and Angels." If "loves pinnace" imitates a "spent" insect after mating, it has descended from the more rarefied elements to the coarser elements, thus representing perhaps a woman who commingles her higher and lower natures in order to appeal variously to a man's sensuality and spirituality. If the dry fly, recently hatched from its aquatic form, stretches, stiffens, and (in

this process) splashes its wings on the water's surface in an effort to become airborne, it signifies the sensual woman who strives to sublimate her lower nature.

Third, the artificial fly overfraught with dress, then dropped gently on the water, will slowly sink, for it is a wet fly. Reaching a point of buoyancy at a particular depth, where the fish are feeding, it will remain there while being moved by the natural currents in the water. Such a lure typifies the predominantly sensual woman, the garishly attired mistress or prostitute, who inhabits a coarser milieu and appeals to baser desire in men.

For all three lures--above, on, and under the water--other language of "Aire and Angels" provides further elaboration. The phrase "limmes of flesh" (line 8), for instance, refers to parts of the fly other than the wings, while the wordplay in "limmes" draws attention to the imitative character of the lure, which "limns limbs." And when in the language of the poem, the "soule . . . [t]akes limmes of flesh" (lines 7-8) and thereafter "Love must . . . take a body too" (line 10), the dual reference--"take" and "takes"--echoes commonplace language in Donne's era (and still current nowadays) for a fish being attracted to a lure, then "taking (to)" it. If, moreover, the "soul" and "Love," respectively identified in Donne's poem as "parent" and "child," manifest the relationship of procreator and offspring, then the import for piscatorial analysis of "Aire and Angels" is clearcut. To achieve material presence, the soul takes (to) limbs of flesh, the medium through which it manifests itself on earth. And when Love issues, as an offspring, from an incarnate soul, it can only take (to) another incarnate soul, a soul in or of the flesh. Accordingly, in Donne's poem a fish with its hunger or curiosity lovingly aroused, so to speak, takes (to) an artificial lure, only to discover that the material presence lacks the substance and essence of the living creature that it affects or imitates. Or to put it another way, an artificial lure has material presence, simulates a body, but lacks the form or soul of the creature that it pretends to be. From the standpoint of scholastic philosophy, echoed and parodied in the piscatorial language of "Aire and Angels," such a lure is "[s]ome lovely glorious nothing"(line 6) and, indeed, "[e]xtreme, and scatt'ring bright" (line

22). But love cannot "inhere" (line 22) herein; it cannot, in other words, be "here" "in her." Lacking even a "soul of sense" (Donne's phrase from "A Valediction forbidding mourning"), a lure may arouse carnal appetite that it cannot gratify. At the other extreme, a lure may induce a sublimated response that it cannot fulfill.

While the classification and discussion of artificial flies may be refined to develop more nuanced concepts of womankind or womanhood, the central significance of "loves pinnace" as a fishing lure appears certain. To promote more nuanced analysis would misdirect attention from the ambiguity and irony of Donne's "Aire and Angels," which encourages a reader to speculate that the various artificial flies (above, on, and below the water) may not be projections of women but percepts of men. The male percept imposes phantasy onto reality, shapes and transforms (Shakespeare would say "deforms") reality to accord with phantasy. The woman thus perceived is less a function of her own presence and nature and more an index of the man's varied outlook. In conclusion, a reader inevitably speculates whether Donne, in his piscatorial awareness in "Aire and Angels," wittily poses the following question: how many angels can fit on the head (or tip) of an angle?

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Notes

1. Shakespeare is quoted from *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Barbara Everett (New York: Signet New American Library, 1988); and *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. David L. Stevenson (New York: Signet New American Library, 1989). Act, scene, and line numbers are cited parenthetically.

2. Donne's poetry is quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Doubleday & Company, Inc.: Garden City, New York, 1967). Line numbers are cited parenthetically.

3. Charles Chenevix Trench, *A History of Angling* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1974), chapter 2 ("The Renaissance of Angling"), pp. 27-59. To examine Dame Juliana's treatise firsthand, see S.T.C. No. 3309: "This present boke shewyth the manere of hawkynge & huntynge: and also of cote armors. And of the blasynge of armys. (The treatyse of fysshynge wyth an angle)." Concerning fly fishing, see Walton's letter to Cotton, dated April 29, 1676, in *The Compleat Walton*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Bloomsbury: The Nonesuch Press, 1929), pp. 599-600.

4. Trench, p. 35, summarizes Dame Juliana's remarks. For modern and present-day commentaries on how and why artificial lures attract trout, see, among others, the following: Charles K. Fox, *The Book of Lures* (Rockville Centre, NY: Freshat Press, 1975); George W. Harvey, *Techniques of Trout Fishing and Fly Tying* (New York: Lyons & Burford, 1990); *Fly Fisherman's Fly-Fishing Tactics for Trout, Bass, Panfish, Saltwater* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Cowles Magazine, Inc., 1994); *Cabela's Fly Fishing 1997* (Sidney, Nebraska: Cabela's), 1997.

5. *The Complete Angler of Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton* (London: John Major, 1824), pp. 327-329; *Fly Fisherman's Fly-Fishing Tactics for Trout, Bass, Panfish, Saltwater*, pp. 12-14.

6. Izaak Walton, *The Complete Angler* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons LTD., 1906; repr. 1947), p. 84.

7. Izaak Walton, *The Complete Angler*, p. xli.

8. Izaak Walton, *The Complete Angler*, pp. 91-92.

9. Izaak Walton, *The Complete Angler*, p. 94.

10. *The Complete Angler of Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton, p. 328; Fly Fisherman's Fly-Fishing Tactics*, p. 12.