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Colloquium: "Farewell to Love"

Introduction

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Donne's "Farewell to Love," unlike many of the poems selected by the John Donne Society for panel discussion at its annual meetings, has received relatively little extended commentary.[1] Moreover, it appears rarely in manuscript (four early manuscript versions survive) and only entered print in the 1635 edition of Donne's collected poems. Nor are there any references to it, authentic or apocryphal, from Donne's contemporaries. The three papers presented at the Thirteenth Annual Donne Conference, then, offered a welcome opportunity to address a poem that has been too little discussed.

The titles of the three papers interact intriguingly to imply a suggestive, and perhaps deliberate, indeterminancy in "Farewell to Love." Richard Todd in "'Things' as Artifacts, 'thing[s]' as shifting signifiers," Graham Roebuck in "Into the Shadows" and Theresa DiPasquale in "Things not Seen" seem to agree that there is a hidden subtext to the surface text of Donne's poem. It is all the more reassuring, then, to have Gary Stringer's collation to introduce the poem and the confidence of his concluding assertion that, *pace* Grierson, Gardner, Redpath et. al., "there is no bibliographical problem with the text of 'Farewell to Love.'" His careful reasoning, fully detailed for us here, supports his demonstration that interpretation can now "be argued with increased rigor and nuance because grounded on a stabilized text."

Those interpretations have in the past, as in the present set of papers, usually included reference to the difficulties posed by the ambiguous syntax and varied punctuation of the lines concluding the third stanza. Since each of the essays addresses those lines in some detail, it might

be useful to point to an ostensibly less ambiguous section by way of introduction to the nature of the poem's complexity as a whole. The handling of the dominant image in this passage, I suggest, takes place in the context of Reformation discourse about the nature of the image, that sixteenth-century equivalent of the shifting signifier that occupies the attention of the writers of the essays to follow.

The image, or signifier, I want to look at occurs in the passage that opens the second stanza of the poem. Here the speaker appears to continue his meditation on the peculiar nature of desire by making a new comparison, a comparison predicated on the kind of thinking about images and idols that engaged Reformation theology. Now mature, no longer naive, and distanced by time and the buffetings of adverse experiences in love from his earlier idealism, he comments cynically on the familiar paradox of desire, that, its object obtained, it no longer pleases. To do this, he gives concrete shape to his assertion:

> But, from late faire
> His highnesse sitting in a golden Chaire,
> Is not lesse cared for after three dayes
> By children, then the thing which lovers so
> Blindly admire, and with such worship wooe. (11. 11-15)

The image wittily makes its point against the salacious reader by thus forcing that reader to supply a more specifically literal word for "thing" in line 14, but the selection and handling of this image—the gilt gingerbread purchased at a fair and then discarded by the very children who had originally clamored obstreperously for it—is more interesting as suggestive of Reformation discourse and some of the thinking about images that that discourse made explicit. To begin with, it is presented in language that gestures specifically toward the context of idols and idolatry in its emphasis upon words like "golden" and "worship," which cue the reader into seeing that sugared figure as a mock heroic idol from the start. More significantly, the image also functions deceptively, and its particular form of deception is specific to this same discourse as both it and what it signifies entice its viewers to invest it

with the value that they "blindly" ascribe to it and then, equally absentmindedly, withdraw. By both investing in and emptying out the image, Donne thus deftly concentrates the iconophilic to iconophobic shift that characterized the preceding century's concern about a viewer's reaction to images. Most important, however, is something that we as later readers may have missed—the multiplicity of references implied by this one image, a multiplicity that also demonstrates the disturbing fecundity of the inert object invested with human significance, the awareness of which permeates the language of religious reformers like the writer of the Elizabethan *Homilie against peril of Idolatrie*. Scholars have attributed the reference of the "highnesse sitting in a golden Chaire" to the popular fair pastries described above but then moved quickly on to the much-discussed crux of lines 28-30.[2] That these figures were kings and queens allows the speaker a witty irreverence at the expense of royal authority, but a second allusion, not previously acknowledged, at least in print, is also in play. As one historian has pointed out, the royal reference is slightly distorted since the few pastry molds still extant are all of standing, not "sitting" figures. One other powerful royal figure, however, is often depicted as "sitting in a golden Chaire": Cupid, the capriciously dangerous god of love and, more appropriately for this poem, lust.[3] Once the chain of possibilities is apparent, a third familiar reference comes to mind, that of the Christian God "sitting" in judgment (a reference perhaps triggered or reinforced by the otherwise arbitrary "three dayes" implying Christ's sacrifice that mitigated such judgment). The last two of these references, to Cupid in his manifestation as the warlike god of love and to the Christian God sitting in judgment, would also call to mind other visual images, made familiar by emblem books in the first instance and paintings of the Last Judgment in the second. Protestant reformers were of course united in their objections to the depiction of God himself so the latter allusion, though at several removes from the original reference, might, if called into the educated or well-travelled reader's recollection, be slightly disturbing. The image in Donne's poem thus behaves as Reformation discourse suggested, breeding other images spawning dangerous associations.

What also justifies that adjective, "disturbing," in exploring the fecundity of Donne's selection of image here, moreover, is how the erotic nature of images in the discourse of Protestant reformers (in references to images which "seduce" and "betray" and incite desire) correlates with the erotic content of the next lines which the speaker's meditation on his selected image sets up. Shifting back to a more abstract description of the desire to which his image has given graphic shape, the speaker says:

> Being had, enjoying it decayes:
> And thence,
> What before pleas'd them all, takes but one sense,
> And that so lamely, as it leaves behinde
> A kinde of sorrowing dulnesse to the minde. (11. 16-20)

Like the surfeit following image worship, worship of the god of lust leaves a lingering revulsion.

The correlations here, with typical Donnean wit in linking the sacred and the profane, run close to blasphemy but also direct the reflective reader's attention. The implied attitudes toward images oscillate back and forth between the Reformed and Roman Catholic positions, on the one hand trivializing their potency, on the other suggesting that their effect on man is divinely endorsed. While neither position is fully affirmed, the habits of thought that underlie them are drawn directly from both sides of Reformation discourse on images.

Johan Huizinga characterized the medieval church as defined by its tendency "to give concrete shape to every conception," having in mind the obsession with icons, relics, the elaborately clad statues of saints, the various portraits and statues of the Virgin, even the corporeal sense of church architecture.[4] Donne's speaker, as the poet wittily demonstrates, seeks rather to express not the sacred but the profane in the physical terms of a concrete image. By doing so in the context of Reformation discourse on images, however, he opens the door to a meditation on the curious nature of worship and its connections with the sensual, the central issue of conflict in the crisis of the image as detailed above. Although handled in witty, secular terms in this short lyric, the topic of

the image and its slippery role in amplifying the ways of human understanding would be a recurrent one in Donne's verse. As A.J. Smith observed, the speaker in this poem, unlike Wyatt's and Sidney's speakers, never seems concerned with one particular woman but with the nature of sexual experience itself (116). One might add to Smith's observation that it isn't even sexual experience per se that catches this speaker's attention but that unfathomable "moving" (1. 35), which, applied to both women and images, provides the unresolved enigma of the poem.

The effect, then, of reading Donne's handling of the image against the language of Reformation discourse is to notice that the poet's accusation against his speaker is against his effort to trivialize what cannot be trivialized, to name what cannot be named, to deflect what cannot be deflected. Each of the papers that follows engages this theme in its own way, en route to an intriguing set of different but compatible conclusions.

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Notes

1. A. J. Smith's "The Dismissal of Love," published in his *John Donne: Essays in Celebration* (London, 1982), is the most extensive treatment of the whole poem; see pp. 111-122 especially. The textual crux in stanza three is addressed most thoroughly by H. J. C. Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne* (Oxford, 1929) 2:52-53; J. Hayward, *Donne: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (1929), pp. 766-7; G. Williamson, *Modern Philology* (1939) 30:1-33; L. Hotson, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16 April 1949; H. Gardner, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 June, 1949; T. Redpath, *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, 1956 and 1980, pp. 145-9 and pp. 148-52; 306-311 respectively.

2. The reference to the "gilt gingerbread" goes back to an offhand remark by Chambers and is therefore difficult to verify. (See Richard Todd's essay p—.)

3. For a roughly contemporary example, note Aphra Behn's poem beginning "Love in fantastic triumph *sat*" [italics mine].

4. *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), p. 152.