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"to good ends": The Final Cause of Sacramental Womanhood in *The First Anniversarie*

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In the *Anniversaries*, John Donne portrays Elizabeth Drury as a sacrament lost to mankind; the poems evoke his concern with humanity's alienation from and abuse of sacraments, including not only the ecclesiastical sacraments such as Baptism and Holy Communion, but also the Sacrament of Woman as Donne defines her. Donne, I would argue, seeks to cope with and compensate for that alienation and abuse through the practice of a sacramental poetics that depends upon the active participation of readers. In *The First Anniversarie*, a particularly important component of the poet's project is his representation of women as conduits of grace, beings whose final cause is the good of man. Donne completes the introductory section of *The First Anniversarie* by asserting that the "new world" he and his readers constitute "may be safer, being told / The dangers and diseases of the old" (87-88).[1] In the first section of the poem's main body (lines 91-190) he then turns to describing the diseases of man himself, the being in whom—to quote the first line of this section—"There is no health" (91); as Donne parses it in the lines that follow, diseased relations between men and women are a major component of

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[1]All quotations from the *Anniversaries* are taken from Volume 6 of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995). Other poems are quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967). Donne's sermons are quoted from *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953-1962).

humanity's illness. He thus defines man's "ruinous" state partly through the voices of women: ". . . poore mothers crie, / That children come not right, nor orderly / Except they headlong come, and fall vpon / An ominous precipitation" (95-98). Mothers cannot change the post-lapsarian irony that, in obstetrics, right-side-up is wrong, that the healthiest babies tumble into the world upside-down. They can only see and mourn that truth, their cries in the pain of childbirth acknowledging humanity's fallenness even as the pain they feel is itself a punishment for that fall. The "poore mothers" are both sinful daughters of Eve and grief-stricken prophets whose cries make manifest man's perversity. It is to the latter role that the poet himself aspires. In the conclusion of *The First Anniversarie*, he will invite a comparison between his own work and the prophetic song sung by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy. But the cries of anonymous women, rather than the composition of the male patriarch, are the first models of prophesy in Donne's poem.

In the lines that follow the "poore mothers" image, as many critics have observed, Donne evokes the photo-negative of his exalted "Idea of a Woman," seemingly rehashing the traditional misogynistic doctrine of woman as man's confusion. But this passage is introduced by an ultra-Donnean question that should influence our reading of what follows. "How witty's ruine?" the poet asks (99), prompting readers to watch for comparable wit in the poetry that pits itself against ruin:

> How witty's ruine? how importunate
> Vpon mankinde? It labour'd to frustrate
> Euen Gods purpose; and made woman, sent
> For man's reliefe, cause of his languishment.
> They were to good ends, and they are so still,
> But accessory, and principall in ill.
> For that first mariage was our funerall:
> One woman at one blow, then kill'd vs all,
> And singly, one by one, they kill vs now.
> We doe delightfully our selues allow
> To that consumption; and profusely blinde,
> We kill our selues, to propagate our kinde. (99-110)

These lines do *play upon* conventional misogyny. But to say that they express it is to ignore both the witty interrogative that introduces the apparent misogyny and the rueful joke about male orgasm that follows it. Read within this frame, the claim that women are "accessory, and principall in ill" and that woman is to blame for the Fall does not—to say the least—resonate as entirely earnest. On the contrary, these lines are reflections on the wittiness of ruin, on the deep ironies of fallen existence already touched on in the lines about childbirth. The point, I would argue, is not to impugn women's status as individuals capable of good as well as evil, but to reflect wryly on woman's relationship to *man's* goodness and sinfulness.

Woman is a gift sent by God "For mans reliefe"—to correct the alone-ness that God said was "not good" and, as Manley points out in his chaste observation that the line has "slight sexual overtones," to relieve his sexual longing. As a helpmeet for man, one who changes the "not good" of solitude to the grace of married love, woman was and still is "to good ends." As Elizabeth L. Wiggins explained in a 1945 article, Donne is here using Aristotelian terms for different aspects of causality. The passage refers both to "*final cause* or *end*," the purpose for which something is made and to "*principal* and *assisting efficient causes*."[2] The principal efficient cause is the primary force actualizing or bringing about a thing's final cause or end, while an assisting efficient cause is something that affects but does not primarily determine the motion of a thing towards its end. Donne is exclaiming at the irony that a woman's ability to be both the principal efficient cause of her own sin and an assisting efficient cause of a man's sin thwarts her good final end or purpose, her final cause as defined in Genesis, which is to be a help to man, an accessory to his goodness. Even in the postlapsarian world, she can realize her final cause as a helpmeet by becoming the assisting efficient cause of a man's movement toward a good end; but no woman can be the principal efficient cause of good in a man. He must be that for himself.

So far, so *good*. But how can Donne argue that "in ill" woman is not only "accessory" but "principall" as well? The answer lies in Donne's elision of the philosophical definition of the word "principal" with other meanings applicable in this context. In lines 385-386 of *The*

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[2]"Logic in the Poetry of John Donne," *Studies in Philology* 42 (1945): 56.

Second Anniversarie, Donne says that "Still before Accessories doe abide / A triall, must the principalls be tride." He thus uses the noun "principall" very clearly in its legal sense: "A person directly responsible for a crime, either as the actual perpetrator (*principal in the first degree*), or as present, aiding and abetting, at the commission of it (*principal in the second degree*)" (*OED* n. def. 2b). It is this legal meaning that is most clearly paired with and opposed to "accessory." The noun "principal" was also used as late as 1660 to refer to an "original document, drawing, painting, etc., from which a copy is made" (*OED* n. def. 5a); and as an adjective, too, "principal" could mean "original" (*OED* adj. def. 6, 8). When one considers these definitions in relation to the scholastic ones we have just been exploring, the full force of Donne's wit in the *First Anniversarie* passage becomes apparent. A woman can be the secondary efficient cause of a man's sin, the instrument he uses in moving toward an evil end, a means by which his sin is carried out, or an accessory to the crime. She may also be a principal efficient cause of her own wrongdoing; and in the case of Eve, the action that made her the principal cause of her own sinfulness also made her the principal sinner, the original one merely imitated or copied by Adam. A clever Lincoln's Inn lawyer might argue, moreover, that Eve was the "principal in the first degree," the "actual perpetrator" of the original sin; whereas Adam, who was merely "present, aiding and abetting, at the commission of" her crime, was no more than a "principal in the second degree." Donne knows quite well that Eve's sin was not the principal efficient cause of Adam's; he has not forgotten Romans 5:12, which specifically says that "by one *man* sin entered into the world, and death by sin." But he wittily explores the tension between that verse and Genesis 3:6, in which Eve "did eat" *first*, and then "gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." Whether or not Donne would have described Adam's transgression as Milton did, as a "completing of the mortal sin / Original"[3] (*PL* 9. 1003-1004), he is obviously fascinated with the tangled web of causation and legal responsibility, as well as with the seductive pseudo-logic of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. Within

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[3]John Milton, *Paradise Lost*. Ed. Alastair Fowler (London and New York: Longman, 1971). A subsequent quotation from *Paradise Lost* is also taken from this edition.

the space of five lines, he says that "One woman . . . kill'd vs all" by her acting as principal in the principal or original crime, that all women "singly, one by one, . . . kill vs now," acting as assisting efficient causes of man's depletion in intercourse, and that "We kill our selues," that men are principal efficient causes and principal perpetrators of their own demise. In short, there is less misogyny here than scholastic and legal wit, which is the poet's response to the wittiness of ruin itself, to its ingenious perversion of woman's final cause or "good ends" as defined in Genesis 2.[4]

Of course, the Idea of a Woman as figured forth in Elizabeth Drury is the counter-point and antidote to the dark ironies of fallen gender relations. Or perhaps not "of course"; such a conclusion has been seriously challenged of late. Does Donne's *Idea of* a Woman have anything to do with *Woman*, or does Donne celebrate Elizabeth Drury only by separating her from her sex and thus canceling or erasing her gender? For Ronald Corthell, Donne's "project . . . depends upon an emptying of Elizabeth's corporeal womanhood,"[5] and for Elizabeth Hodgson, Donne "construct[s] Elizabeth Drury not only as a figure of idealized femininity but also by her very perfection a desexed, desexualized, *almost* masculinized figure."[6] In support of this argument, Hodgson quotes lines 177-182 of the *Anatomy*, in which Donne praises Elizabeth as "Shee in whom vertue was so much

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[4]I am indebted to Graham Roebuck for his observation of a particularly interesting way in which this passage reflects a gendered response to the Fall. Donne's shifting use of personal pronouns creates a problematic tension between "we" meaning "mankinde" (all human beings of both sexes) and "we" or "us" meaning "men" (males of the species). Most readers would no doubt interpret the "we"s of lines 94-95 as referring to humanity in general as fallen ("we are neuer well, nor can be so"; "We are borne ruinous"); but must one reinterpret these lines in light of 103-110, where "we/us" are clearly male and "they" clearly female? Is it *we men* who are born ruinous, our state observed and mourned by women but not necessarily shared by them? The ambiguity adds to the wit of the passage, rendering any hint of misogyny even more equivocal.

[5]"The Obscure Object of Desire: Donne's *Anniversaries* and the Cultural Production of Elizabeth Drury," *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti (New York and Toronto: Hall/Macmillan, 1994), 131.

[6]*Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne* (Newark and London: Univ. of Delaware Press / Associated Univ. Presses, 1999), 175.

refin'd, / That for Allay vnto so pure a minde / Shee tooke the weaker Sex, shee that could driue / The poysonous tincture, and the stayne of Eue, / Out of her thoughts, and deeds; and purifie / All, by a true religious Alchimy. . . ." For Hodgson, these lines both define Elizabeth "as a 'super' woman capable of circumventing the curse on her sex, and [identify her] with something entirely other than woman which chooses in a Christlike kenosis the female form for a habitation" (175).

The Christology underlying this interpretation seems to me to be confusingly heretical. An analogy between Elizabeth and Christ founded upon a more orthodox conception of the hypostatic union would imply that, whatever is other-than-womanly in Elizabeth's nature, she is no less truly a woman than Christ is truly a man. But the language of the passage in question is alchemical; and when Donne uses such language in his sermons, he is usually not addressing ancient Christological dogmas and heresies, but rather attacking Roman Catholic doctrines contested by Protestants during his own time. For example, Donne says that defenders of the doctrine of Purgatory are like "our Alchymists," who claim to find their art in the writings of Virgil, Ovid, Moses, and Solomon: "so these men can finde such a transmutation into gold, such a foundation of profit, in extorting a sense for Purgatory . . . out of any Scripture" (7: 191). Even more relevantly, he uses the image of alchemists in another sermon to denigrate Catholic sacramental theology, impugning both Transubstantiation and the doctrine that attrition is sufficient for a good confession: "Our new *Romane Chymists*. . . , they that can *transubstantiate bread into God*, they can change any foulness into cleanness easily. . . . A sigh of the *penitent*, a word of the *Priest*, makes all clean, and induces an absolute pureness" (1: 203, 204).

Donne's language in *The First Anniversarie* associates Elizabeth Drury with a legitimate version of such sacramental transformation and purification. At first, he presents her as a prudent metal-worker rather than an alchemist, as "She in whom vertue was so much refin'd, / That for Allay vnto so pure a minde / Shee tooke the weaker Sex" (177-9). Here, Donne presents Elizabeth's earthly existence as consubstantial; her female body and her sexless, divine intellect formed an alloy in which both "metals" coexisted like bread and the Body of Christ in the Lutheran conception of the Eucharist. Yet the following lines describe a positive, auto-reflexive version of the

alchemistic sacrament Donne's sermon impugns: Elizabeth "could driue / The poysonous tincture, and the stayne of *Eue*, / Out of her thoughts, and deeds; and purifie / All, by a true religious Alchimy" (179-82). These lines propose seriously a sacramental purgation that the sermon mocks as spurious. Elizabeth eliminated all that was imperfect in the female principle; because she was able to "driue / . . . the stain of *Eue*, / Out of her thoughts, and deeds," she was no longer an alloy; instead, the "pure" (that is, unmixed) essence of her "minde" transmuted "All" of her, imparting its own essential "purity" to the whole that was Elizabeth, including her female body. Her sex was thus no longer "weaker" in any sense, though "she" was still biologically a woman. In the transubstantiation of the Eucharistic elements, the physical properties of bread and wine, the tangible accidents, remain, but their essence changes. Elizabeth, too, was transformed by a kind of transubstantiation. She made her post-lapsarian female self—body, mind, and soul—into pure, unalloyed virtue.

The poet's language assures the Protestant reader that the transubstantiation of Elizabeth's female sex was no deceptive magic like that of the "*Romane Chymists* . . . that can *transubstantiate bread into God*," but a "true religious Alchimy." However, even as the qualitative adjectives "true" and "religious" insist on a distinction between Elizabeth's transformed nature and any other alchemy—metallurgical or theological—the noun they modify preserves the analogy they strain against. In losing Elizabeth, the world has lost the true sacramental alchemy that transmutes base material elements into spiritual gold. Now that she is gone, man's ability to perceive the virtue she embodied is impaired. As Edward Tayler argues in his study of the *Anniversaries,* man can no longer grasp the Idea of a Woman, her unalloyed essence.[7]

In the next four meditative sections of *The First Anniversarie*—reflections on the world's loss of "cohærence" (213), "proportion" (252), "Colour" (340), and "correspondence" (396) between heaven and earth—Donne continues to anatomize the corpse of a world devoid of "true religious Alchimy." Without its binding force, the fabric of human society is not what it once was. In particular, the loss of "cohærence" (213), the "crumbled" (212) state of "all Relation"

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[7]See *Donne's Idea of a Woman* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 30.

(214) suggests the breakdown of community that must result when men are no longer united in Holy Communion, which the Council of Trent calls "a symbol of that unity and charity with which [Christ] wished all Christians to be mutually bound and united."[8] It is the sacrament, as the Elizabethan Homilies declare, "wherein they that eate . . . should bee knitte together" and "ioyned by the bond of loue, in one mysticall bodie."[9] In saying that Elizabeth Drury was "She that had all Magnetique force alone, / To draw, and fasten sundred parts in one" (221-2), Donne thus elides the function of sacramental woman with that of the Eucharist. To lose one is to suffer the same consequences as ensue from the loss of the other, for without woman, who is the guarantor of paternity and the source of physical and spiritual nourishment, man is stripped of all that the Homilies' "bond of loue" affords, "All iust supply, and all Relation" (*First Anniversarie* 214). In the world in which communion is sundered and womanly grace is spurned, "Prince, Subiect, Father, Sonne, are things forgot, / For euery man alone thinkes he hath got / To be a Phœnix, and that there can bee / None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee" (215-18).

Born only of themselves, alone in their uniqueness, the would-be phoenixes of this passage contrast violently with the famous hermaphroditic phoenix of Donne's "The Canonization," whose "ridle hath more wit," which is to say both more complexity and more depth, in being identified with man and woman *joined*: those "two being one, are it. / So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit." The phoenix of "The Canonization" is an emblem of resurrection rather than of disintegration and chaos; its sexual energy is a sacrament of heterosexual love, or to use the Greek-derived synonyms the words of the poem evoke, a mystery of eros: "Wee dye and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love." All such erotic sacramentality is lost to the world of *The First Anniversarie*, and the world is therefore "crumbled out againe to his Atomis" (212).

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[8]*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 72. The passage is taken from the Thirteenth Session's "Decree Concerning the most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist."

[9]*Certaine Sermons or Homilies, Appointed To Be Read in Churches, in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I, 1547-1571.* Ed. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968), 203.

The sacramentality of the feminine, which is lost to the self-generating male phoenixes of *The First Anniversarie*, is beautifully evoked in the section of the poem devoted to color:

> When nature was most busie, the first weeke,
> Swadling the new-borne earth, God seemd to like,
> That she should sport herselfe sometimes, and play,
> To mingle, and vary colours euery day.
> And then, as though she could not make inow,
> Himselfe his various Rainbow did allow. (347-52)

This passage poignantly revises the image of "poore mothers" crying out at the topsy-turvy births of children into a world turned awry by sin; for in lines 347-352, a joyful Mother, Nature herself, rejoices at the birth of the infant earth, a perfect baby whom she swaddles in a glorious range of hues. The God of this passage seems inspired by the deity of Proverbs 8, who works in concert with a female Wisdom. "The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way," Wisdom declares in that chapter, "before his works of old. . . . When he prepared the heavens, I was there: . . . when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men" (verses 22, 27, 29-31).[10] "Rejoicing"—"*ludens*" in the Vulgate's Latin—Donne's Nature plays as will Milton's Wisdom and her sister Urania "In presence of the almighty Father" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 11). Even the rainbow, God's own fatherly addition to the colors of Nature, is provided only "*as though* she could not make inow" (351), not *because* she could not. The King James Bible's "as one brought up with him" is "as a nourisher" in the Geneva translation, and it is color, a nutriment of Nature's own making, that the "noblest sense" of man "feed[s] on" in line 354 of Donne's poem. The idea of the eye feeding on color is a world away from the pale, abstract exhortation of lines 187-188, in which the Anatomist urges the reader to "feed on . . . Religion." No

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[10]*The Holy Bible . . . Commonly Known as the King James Version* (New York: American Bible Society, n.d.). The quotation from the Geneva translation below is taken from *The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1599 edition with undated Sternhold & Hopkins Psalms* (Ozark, MO: L. L. Brown, 1995).

such colorless mandate had been necessary "If she whom we lament had not beene dead" (360); for in her—in this sacramental woman—"all white, and redde, and blue / (Beauties ingredients) voluntary grew, / As in an vnuext Paradise" (361-3) that provided all the nourishment man needed.

No Paradise can exist on earth, however, without a regenerate Eve. The "medicinall" effect of Elizabeth Drury's virtue (404) cannot work in her absence; for, "as some Serpents poison hurteth not, / Except it be from the liue Serpent shot, / So doth her vertue need her here, to fit / That vnto vs; she working more then it" (409-12). These lines suggest an analogy between Elizabeth and Christ, who was lifted up on the Cross as the Serpent was lifted up in the desert (John 3:14) and whose power to save those who look to him for healing proceeds from what Hooker calls "his personal and true presence" in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.[11] Just as the virtue or efficacy of the Eucharist and its influence in human lives depends upon Christ's living presence, so Elizabeth's sacramental "vertue" depends upon her presence. But because "Shee, shee is dead," that presence would be lost to the world save for Donne's poem and the readers he addresses as "her creatures, whom she workes vpon" (455). Through their response to the "blessed maid / . . . / Whose name refines course lines" (443, 446), Elizabeth's "true religious Alchimy" (182) still purifies both the language of poetry and the metal of the human soul. Though even in life "she could not transubstantiate / All" into gold (417-18), her virtue now "workes vpon" (455) those who "celebrate" Elizabeth (2, 38, 450) by devoutly receiving Donne's "tribute" to her (447); it effects in them a purifying "concoction" (456) and whets their appetites for "the rich ioyes . . . / Of which shee's now partaker, and a part" (433-4).

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[11] *Laws* V.lxvii.11. In *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity and Other Works by and about Richard Hooker*, Vol. 2, Collected by John Keble. 7th ed. Revised by R. W. Church and F. Paget. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888; facsimile rpt. Ellicott City, MD: Via Media, 1994), 357.