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Absorbing Difference in Donne's Malediction Forbidding Morning

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One of what a number of critics have called "the poems of mutual love," "The Sunne Rising" shares with its libertine counterparts in the *Songs and Sonets* a deliberate straining and sophistical persuasion. The poem is, of course, an *argument*; it seems to be trying to persuade someone—the sun, the reader, the beloved, or perhaps the speaker or poet himself—about love's immutable, transcendent, and therefore invulnerable properties. While acknowledging the playful wit of its logical, tonal, and imagistic reversals, while acknowledging the exuberance of its bravado and the humor of its hyperbole, I'm also struck by the *desperation* of a speaker who cannot utter his way out of fragmentation, differentiation, and alteration—and who therefore attempts to inoculate himself against their toxic effects by utterly absorbing them into his system.

Whenever I teach "The Sunne Rising," my students invariably remark (and this often takes the form of a lament) that either the speaker or the poet, and certainly the reader, is confused. The poem, they complain, proceeds by way of a series of contradictions and reversals. For example, the speaker begins with a malediction forbidding morning, banishing the sun from his bedroom, but he ends with an invitation to "shine here to us." Moreover, the tone shifts from contempt ("Busie old foole ... Sawcy pedantique wretch") to solicitude ("Thine age asks ease"). And the emphatic spondees that pepper the lines ("late school boyes ... tell Court-huntsmen ... houres, dayes, monthes ... She'is all States, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is") give way to the metrical regularity of the final five lines of the poem—the largest block of verse to scan smoothly. Yet another shift occurs in the second stanza, where the speaker invokes

the differentiations of time that he disavowed in lines 9 and 10; and although "Love . . . no season knows," there are nevertheless "lovers seasons" (l.4). How, my students ask, can the sun be both "unruly" and "pedantique"? And aren't the following reversals of logic precisely the kind of pitfall that a successful argument avoids? The *first* stanza dissociates the lovers from the world, repudiating mundane hierarchies and measurements, and claiming that love is "all alike." But the *second* stanza attributes to love the world's highest distinctions of wealth and title, and the *third* stanza transforms the lovers into the world itself. If conventional laws of behavior are trivial—as one can infer from their uninspiring followers in lines 6 and 7—and if juxtaposing the king to insects in lines 7 and 8 deflates the dignity of rank, then why does the speaker attempt to become the standard for all behavior? Why does he strain to become the law itself, like the kings to whom his attention returns in every stanza? Rather than undermining kings and subverting political hierarchies, the lover ends by endorsing and appropriating monarchical control.

After encouraging my students to identify these, and other ingredients in the living bouillabaisse of Donne's contradictions, I ask them to try to account for those vexed moments of reversal. They are often drawn to the speaker's unconsummated boast that he has the power to "eclipse and cloud" the sun's beams "with a winke." He doesn't follow through on his threat because, he says, he does not want to lose sight of his beloved. But more importantly, if he denies the standards of differentiation that the sun personifies, he will deprive himself of any evaluative means of comparing and championing love's greater merits. He can measure love only in terms of the distinctions that he has disparaged throughout the first half of the poem. Consequently, the volta at the end of line 14 signals an important reversal in the speaker's argument: the second half of the poem restores the value of social distinctions. Once denigrated, kings and the world's "harvest" (now promoted to a harvest of "spice and Myne") are expressive of love's properties. Once "all alike," love is now defined in terms of division: geographical ("both th'Indias"), chronological (all that the sun sees between "to morrow late" and "yesterday"), and hierarchical divisions ("those kings whom thou saw'st"). The lovers themselves are separately limned: the woman's body becomes a place of commerce; her riches "of spice and Myne"

are those of the marketplace. And while she may comprise all states, he is the ruler.

My worldly students note that this newly differentiated love is no easier to defend logically than "love, all alike" was. The speaker can still express the value of his love only by committing logical solecisms and straining the imagination; he reasons speciously, for example, from adjunct to subject (from 'love constitutes all the world's value' to 'love constitutes all the world'), in order to transform the reified microcosm of lines 11-13 into the macrocosm around which the sun revolves. What pretends to be a poetic resolution that enables lovers to stay in bed is a sleight of mind, a blinding new ontology that is ratified by mute sunshine. According to the speaker's terms, by 'obeying' his command to "Shine here to us," the sun endorses the lovers' status as the entire world. But of course the command directs the sun to do exactly what it always does, and the speaker disingenuously treats its natural shining as a rational response.

These logical contortions are funny and delightful, but as I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, they are also desperate. Part of the desperation comes from the impossibility of articulating unity in language that is constituted of difference. Tilottama Rajan argues that informing "the self-consciousness of the *Songs and Sonets*" is a pervasive "doubt as to whether language—as human invention rather than divine dictation—can constitute truth."[1] She identifies "The Sunne Rising" as one of the most strained of Donne's poems that assert their triumph over time; it is strained because it claims that "the alchemy of language can actually transform the world of fact represented by the motions of the sun, and [can] create through rhetoric what cannot be affirmed through logic" (809-10). Rajan takes a dim view of the hyperbolic illusion of the poem, characterizing its argument as "the self-deflating metaphors or a merely extravagant wit," and remarking that it is "fairly obvious" that "the poem asks to be resisted" (810).

But if "The Sunne Rising" is in part about the failure to articulate or even to experience the claims for transcendence that it makes, that is not to say that it is a failed poem. Indeed, the more sophistry,

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[1]Tilottama Rajan, "'Nothing Sooner Broke': Donne's *Songs and Sonets* As Self-Consuming Artifact," *ELH* 49 (1982): 805.

solipsism, and demiurgic swaggering we encounter, the more we revel in the parodic heroism of asserting a uniquely constructed ontology of unanimity out of the multaneity of language and experience. Needless to say, "The Sunne Rising" shouldn't be reduced to postmodern angst. It is, among other things, a poem of celebration. It celebrates both love and "the alchemy of language." The poem ends by welcoming the difference it earlier repudiated, professing to absorb it. In asserting its triumph over fragmentation, it makes a "perilous claim for the strength of [its] incarnationist rhetoric," but it also "invites us to participate in its verbal transvaluation of reality at the same time it invites our skepticism, our questioning whether such word-building magic is ever more than verbal shamanism."[2] "The Sunne Rising" demonstrates that if difference is constitutive, so is the word-magic of poetic language.

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[2]James S. Baumlin, *John Donne and the Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1991), 302-3.