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Oral Sex and Verbal Tricks—John Donne and Renaissance Sexual Practice

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Love's Progress" has been described as "mocking," "crude," "coarsely vulgar," "unpleasant," "violent, selfish, and cruel," so "swollen and flushed with the grossness of [its] own conceits" that "the only proper response seems to be to walk away," a "misogynistic screed dressed in glorious poetry."[1] Recent salvage operations re-conceive the poem as an allegory depicting something more deserving of serious exploration: patronage and professional advancement, Roman Catholicism, economics of trade and colonialism, verbal jousting and homo-social male bonding.[2] Lost in translation is the female body, the

[1]Rebecca Ann Bach, "(Re)placing John Donne in the History of Sexuality," *ELH* 72 (2005): 260; Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (1995; rprt, London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 205; Viscount Tredegar, "John Donne—Lover and Priest," in *Essays by Divers Hands* (United Kingdom: Royal Society of Literature, 1936), p. 162; Michael Francis Moloney, *John Donne, His Flight from Mediaevalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), p. 151; N. J. C. Andreason, *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 121; and Wilbur Sanders, *John Donne's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 40.

[2]R. V. Young concludes, "In the end we cannot be sure when Donne is talking about a lover or a discoverer, about a woman or a country, about sex or gold, about lust or avarice" ("'O My America, My New-Found-Land': Pornography and Imperial Politics in Donne's 'Elegies,'" *South Central Review* 4 [1987]: 45–46). Shankar Raman uses the "Derridean logic of reversal and displacement" to "emphasize a radical uncertainty or undecidability regarding what the poem is 'about'" ("Can't Buy Me Love: Money, Gender, and

central subject and glory of Donne's poem. That erasure becomes particularly problematic when scholars then criticize Donne for what modern theoretical approaches have done to him—for "show[ing] little respect or regard for women."[3]

Donne's poem is an instructive document not only for the history of literature but also for the history of sexuality, which combines a body of ideological assumptions with a set of rules for practice.[4] Donne begins perfectly properly, as if giving a lecture: "Whoever loves, if he do not propose / The right true end of love. . . ."[5] As the verb "propose" signals, "[t]he right true end of love" was, of course, holy matrimony and procreation. That not only made women objects of "trade" in the marital market place, defining their worth according to their "virtue," "beauty," and "wealth,"[6] but it also shaped medical constructions of the female body, informing theories of conception and prescribing or prohibiting particular sexual practices. Although Donne was himself shaped by ideological, economic, and social forces, his exploration of the female body comprises a remarkably progressive polemic against some of the period's most powerful scientific claims, social norms, and sexual prohibitions.

During the second half of the sixteenth century the study of anatomy developed dramatically. Expanding the work of their classical precursors,

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Colonialism in Donne's Erotic Verse," *Criticism* 43 [2002]: 136). Similarly, Sawday asks, "are we reading about female bodies which are metamorphosing into continents, or continents which are to become bodies?" (p. 198). I want to thank Jeffrey Johnson for sending me a draft of his paper on the poem's relation to Roman Catholicism.

[3]Roma Gill, "*Musa Iocosa Mea*: Thoughts on the Elegies," *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 55.

[4]See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[5]Donne, "Love's Progress," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (London and New York: Penguin Press, 2006), lines 1–2. All quotations from Donne's poems are from this edition. Alan Armstrong describes the speaker as a "*praeceptor amoris*" ("The Apprenticeship of John Donne: Ovid and the Elegies," *ELH* 44 [1973]: 427).

[6]The classic feminist account is Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157–210.

Aristotle, Galen, and Hippocrates, path-breaking Renaissance scientists such as Fallopius, Vesalius, Paré, and Guillemeau subjected every aspect of human physiology, including the female reproductive organs, to theoretical speculation and empirical investigation. By the 1590s when Donne was writing "Love's Progress," their findings were widely disseminated and debated on the continent, first in Latin for the erudite and then in vernacular translations that became all the rage.[7] Donne's audience would have found these discussions of female anatomy all the more electrifying because they had not yet been published in England.[8] Competing theories abounded; rivalries, claims to fame, and accusations of "error" were rife. Donne references the volatile nature of the field by twice using the verb "err" and by announcing an even more climactic "error" in his final couplet.

Donne's elegies and love poems were originally written for a private audience, and his manuscripts, carefully guarded. The *Elegies* were first printed as a group in 1633, two years after Donne's death, but "Love's Progress" was omitted from the first and second editions of Donne's poems, presumably due to objections from the censor.[9] Because the subject matter was so scandalous, Donne presents his exploration of the female body as an analogy to the exploration of the world. The trope of the voyage of discovery was widely used by anatomical writers since antiquity, but Donne's ingenious elaboration is unique—and path-breaking. Donne's poem promulgates what Renaissance scientists learned both from antiquity and their own anatomical explorations, but his "application" and "use" of their findings for non-reproductive sexual pleasure, for women as well as for men, with or without marriage, poses a

[7]The *Elegies* are usually dated between 1593 and 1598. See "Dates and Circumstances," in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, *Volume 2: The Elegies*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 448–453 and 875.

[8]Donne was an avid reader of medical texts, as Kate Frost demonstrated in "Bedded and bedrid: Severall Steps in Our Sicknes," her marvellous presidential address to the 2009 John Donne Society Conference. The text of Frost's address appears in this volume of *John Donne Journal* (see above, pp. 1–16).

[9]Helen Gardner states, "the objection of the licensor prevented its appearance in 1633" (*John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965], p. 133).

far more radical challenge to propriety than the published medical treatises were prepared to confront or condone.

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The opening lines announce that "Love's Progress" is a poem about women, addressed to men: "Whoever loves, if he do not propose / The right true end of love, he's one. . ." (1–2). The generalizing scope of "Whoever loves" is immediately limited by the specifically male pronouns "he" and "him." The point of view quickly shifts to the first person plural, strengthening the bond between speaker and audience.[10] Indeed, the pronouns "we" and "our" recur sixteen times in the course of the poem, continually reaffirming the speaker's affinity with the male cohort to whom he eagerly imparts his state-of-the-art anatomy lesson.

"Love's Progress" begins with the reigning ideology: "Whoever loves" is no doubt aware that "the right true end of love" is marriage and children. But then, right in front of our eyes a bear cub licked into shape by its mother's tongue becomes "a monster that were grown / Faced like a man" (7–8). These surprising, bizarre tropes introduce something disruptive, unsettling, and potentially frightening: the Renaissance obsession with the monstrous, especially with monstrous births which were regarded as "a visible image of the mother's hidden passions."[11] In his 1573 treatise, *Des Monstres and Prodiges,* Ambroise Paré explored the monstrous shapes the human body could supposedly take, from Siamese twins with supernumerary heads and limbs, to grotesque amalgams of human and animal shapes, to hermaphrodites with "new strange" combinations of female and male.[12]

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[10]Gardner writes: "The *Elegies* give an overwhelming impression of masculinity" (p. xxiv). Sanders observes that Donne was writing for "an exclusively male" audience (pp. 42–43). The classic account of Donne's male coterie is Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

[11]Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 6. See also Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), p. 77.

[12]Ambroise Paré, *Des Monstres and Prodiges*, ed. Jean Céard (Geneva: Droz, 1971). The English translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) omits the hermaphrodites.

Paré was reporting groundbreaking science—the dissection of fetuses that miscarried or women who died during pregnancy or childbirth to determine what went awry. The problem was that his monsters violated the "perfect" bodies created by God in his own image. Paré's hermaphrodites proved so scandalous that they were omitted from subsequent editions. However wacky the beginning of "Love's Progress" may seem today, its "new strange shapes" (5) are the Renaissance equivalent of an X rating—a warning that "Love's Progress" includes mature themes, adult language, violence, and sexually oriented nudity. Audiences are advised to take this rating very seriously.

"Love's Progress" comprises a three-stage voyage of discovery that becomes increasingly transgressive as the poem progresses. The shock of each climactic disclosure depends on the slowly building tension and repeated deferral. Thus, after hinting at "monstrous" perversions to come, Donne introduces a classic Aristotelian inquiry, which is appropriate (if not exciting) since the Renaissance study of anatomy and conception began with Aristotle:

> . . . . Perfection is in unity: prefer
> One woman first, and then one thing in her.
> I, when I value gold, may think upon
> The ductileness, the application,
> The wholesomeness, the ingenuity,
> From rust, from soil, from fire ever free.
> But if I love it, 'tis because 'tis made
> By our new nature (use) the soul of trade.
> (9–16)

The movement of thought is at once hyper-logical and extravagant, a bravura Donnean performance of intellect and wit. The premise, "Perfection is in unity," echoes the definition of "perfection" from book 5 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* which defines the "perfect" or complete to mean "That beyond which it is not possible to find even a single part."[13] Donne's comparison of women and gold ostensibly strengthens the speaker's bond with his audience of men on the make, ready to see women as commodities for trade. Yet here, as in "A Valediction of

[13]Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Hope (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 111.

Weeping" where the initial trope of coinage proves as fragile as the tear it embodies, Donne interrogates rather than reifies the analogy.

In asking what constitutes the "unity," the "perfection" or completeness of woman, Donne is playing with the age-old Aristotelian question: "What, then, is it that gives a man his unity, and why is he not a mere aggregate of things?"[14] Quibbling on the notion of unity, Donne moves from philosophical premise to particular "application": "Perfection is in unity: prefer / One woman first, and then one thing in her." This mimics Aristotelian methodology: to determine "the what-is-it-to be of things," one must "examine parts in order to discover what sorts of parts are parts of primary being and what sorts, not."[15]

Donne's analogical reasoning and manic wordplay ("unity," "yet love but one," one what? "one woman"? "one thing"?) are excessive—more a display of Donne's own "ingenuity" (meaning high-mindedness, honesty, distinguished intellectual capacity, quickness of wit) and "ductileness" (meaning malleability or flexibility) than a serious analysis of the characteristics of gold. Yet within the verbal display lies a pressing inquiry: "All these in women we might think upon / (If women had them), and yet love but one" (17–18).[16] By asking "If" *all these* attributes of gold pertain to women, Donne prompts his audience to test their abstract assumptions about "perfection" and "women" against the empirical observation of "[o]ne woman."

If Donne's foreplay is making you impatient, that is part of his strategy, for he is about to shift from mind to body, from heady abstractions to the "one thing," as yet unnamed, that makes a man "love" a woman. First, however, he needs to define the limits and danger of the

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[14]Aristotle, p. 178.

[15]Aristotle, p. 169.

[16]Katherine Park and Robert A. Nye explain, "Many early medical theorists, like the poets and the philosophers of their time, saw the moral and physical universe as a dense web of correspondences linking not only the male and female genitals, but also the realms of animal, vegetable, and mineral. Each statement of analogy contained within it a dynamic tension, a simultaneous affirmation of similarity and (just as important) of difference. . . . Any reading that emphasizes only the similarities in this cosmos, let alone reduces them to identities, misrepresents the entire structure" ("Destiny is Anatomy," Review of *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* by Thomas W. Laqueur, *The New Republic*, 18 February 1991, p. 55).

"ingenuity" he has himself introduced, nay flaunted. "Can men more injure women than to say / They love them for that by which they're not they?" (19–20). Of course, there is always a temptation for lovers, poets, and critics to be carried away by intellect and wit. Yet, Donne declares, reducing women to a quality that does not constitute their "primary being" is not only futile and foolish, it is wrong. To "love them for that by which they're not they" is a logical fallacy. Worse yet, it is immoral, for nothing "more injure[s] women" than reducing them to an abstraction constructed by men for their own profit and pleasure.

What, then, properly speaking, makes a woman a woman? This ancient debate, which is still being thrashed out by scientists, gender theorists, and pundits today, gathered renewed momentum and traction during the Renaissance when the study of anatomy raised fundamental questions about the similarities and differences between male and female bodies. Helkiah Crooke's *Mikrokosmographia a description of the body of man*, explains the points of contention: "This difference of the Sexes do not make the essentiall distinctions of the creature: the reasons are: First (because as *Aristotle* saith in his second Booke *de Generatione Animalium* . . .) in all creatures there is not this distinction or diuersity of Sexes. Secondly, because essentiall differences do make a distinction of kinds: now we know that the Male and the Female as both of one kinde, and onely differ in certaine accidents. But what these accidentall differences are is not agreed vpon as yet."[17]

In setting out to distinguish fundamental differences between the sexes from accidental differences, Donne shifts his investigation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to the *Historia Animalium*—from abstract philosophical questions about identity and essence to the empirical study of living bodies using the dissection of dead bodies. "Makes virtue woman?" (21) Donne asks, implying by the skeptical tone of the interrogative that the answer to the question of what makes a woman a woman is not to be found in philosophy, ethics, or religion but in science, medicine, and social practice: "if we / Make love to woman, virtue is not she, / As beauty'is not, nor wealth" (23–25). By defining the

[17]Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia a description of the body of man* (London, 1615), p. 271.

verb "love" to mean, "Make love to woman," Donne broaches something far more radical and risky, the ethics and practice of sexuality.[18]

"The Undertaking," which is generally read as an exalted, Neoplatonic poem about "virtue" and transcendent love, provides an instructive parallel. By using the word "love" as it is used in "Love's Progress," to mean "make love" to a woman, "The Undertaking" challenges traditional gender roles ("forget the he and she") and surreptitiously defends its own innovative moral code:

> If, as I have, you also do
> Virtue'attired in woman see,
> And dare love that, and say so too,
> And forget the he and she. . . .
> (17–20)

Donne is up to his old verbal tricks, making love to a virtuous woman under the guise of exalted, spiritual love. The old equivocator wants it both ways, truly sacred and really profane, though he knows that is bound to provoke the mockery of "profane men . . . / Which will no faith on this bestow, / Or, if they do, deride" (23–24).

In "Love's Progress" critics do indeed "deride" Donne for equating "love" with sex. Yet that was, in fact, a primary definition of the word. As Donne has already strategically pointed out, the verb "love" was commonly used to mean, "make love to." Furthermore, from Old English through the sixteenth century "love" (in addition to its abstract and religious senses) meant: (1) an intense feeling of romantic attachment based on sexual attraction; (2) sexual desire or lust, especially as a physiological instinct; amorous sexual activity, sexual intercourse. Critics repeatedly object that Donne's directive, "prefer / One woman first, and then one thing in her," turns woman into a sex object. Yet much as "The Undertaking" recommends to Donne's trusted confidant

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[18]On "Love's Progress" as a parody of Neoplatonic love, see Paul N. Siegel, "Donne's Cynical Love Poems and Spenserian Idealism," S*eventeenth-Century News* 10 (1952): 12. For a fuller reading of "The Undertaking," see my essay, "Elizabethan Love Poetry and the Female Lyric Audience" in *Representing Women in Renaissance England*, ed. Ted-Larry Pebworth and Claude Summers (Columbia: University of Missouri Press: 1997), pp. 76–92.

what it simultaneously hides from "profane men," "Love's Progress" promotes "a braver thing" that it conceals from mockers and skeptics.

Donne's immediate predecessors, Neoplatonist philosophers and Petrarchan poets, argue that earthly female beauty lifts man's mind from earth to heaven, from imperfect matter to perfect form. "Love's Progress" reverses the process, moving from contemplation of the spheres back down to earth: "Although we see celestial bodies move / Above the earth, the earth we till and love" (33–34). From classical antiquity to the Renaissance tilling the earth was a common trope for sexual intercourse.[19] Donne also depicts the womb as ground to be tilled in "Elegy: The Comparison": "Is not your last act harsh and violent, / As when a plough a stony ground doth rent?" (47–48). By comparison to the rough, harsh plowing that gives neither the friend nor his mistress much sexual pleasure, the speaker and his lover enjoy a warm, reciprocally satisfying sexual relationship:

> Then like the chemic's masculine equal fire,
> Which in the limbeck's warm womb doth inspire
> Into th'earth's worthless dirt a soul of gold,
> Such cherishing heat her best loved part doth hold.
> (35–38)

In stressing the correspondence between the speaker's "masculine equal fire" and his mistress's "warm womb," these lines suggest that man's "fire" and woman's "heat" are not only reciprocal but "equal."[20] By then making it impossible to determine whether the "cherishing heat her best loved part doth hold" is his or hers, Donne queries the most commonly cited distinction between women and men—the belief, stemming from

[19]As Crooke writes, "The womb cald Vterus, is by Aristotle called the Field of Nature, into which the seed as well of the woman as of the man, is partly powred partly drawne" (p. 221). Like most of the seventeenth-century English medical treatises cited in this essay, *Mikrokosmographia* was "Collected and translated out of all the best authors of anatomy." Donne could not have read Crooke before writing "Love's Progress," but he could have read the authors Crooke catalogues.

[20]See Ilona Bell, "Gender Matters: The Women in Donne's Poems," in *A Cambridge Companion to Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 201–216

Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, that "a woman is so much less perfect than a man by how much her heat is lesser and weaker than his."[21]

The parallels between "Love's Progress" and "The Comparison"—the gold, the tilled field, the "best loved [private] part"—introduce the contemporary debate about female anatomy that underlies and propels both poems. "Love's Progress" not only rejects transcendent love for corporeal love but it also interrogates the Aristotelian conception of the womb, "the earth we till and love." Aristotle stresses differences between the sexes: man was hot and active, woman cold and passive; man provided the seed for reproduction, she provided soil for the seed to grow in. Renaissance anatomists weighed the Aristotelian theory of sexual difference against the Galenic one-sex model, which argued that women and men had the same basic reproductive organs and that both sexes contributed seed necessary to conception, though the woman's organs remained internal and imperfect because she lacked sufficient heat to draw the genitalia outside the body where they could attain their perfect or complete form—the form of the male. Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* provides a concise summary of the Galenic model: "The whole Matrix [womb] considered with the stones and Seed Vessels, is like to a mans Yard [penis] and privities, but Mens parts for Generation are compleat and appear outwardly by reason of heat, but womens are not so compleat, and are made within by reason of their small heat."[22]

In *Making Sex* Thomas W. Laqueur presents a hegemonic one-sex theory that conflates Aristotle and Galen, but their competing views were hotly contested, then as now.[23] Just as Donne previously invoked

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[21]Quoted from *Dr. Chamberlain's midwives practice* (London, 1668), p. 25.

[22]Sharp, *The Midwives Book* (London, 1671), p. 37.

[23]In *Making Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), Laqueur represents the one-sex theory as hegemonic. Park's and Nye's review demonstrates that the competing models were widely debated and contested. Janet Adelman remarks: "A random sampling of those who have assumed the hegemony of the one-sex model reads like a Who's Who of prominent and up-and-coming Renaissance literary critics" ("Making Defect Perfection: Shakespeare and the One-Sex Model," in *Enacting Gender on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 43 n. 7). The most influential literary application is Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiation: The Circulation of*

and elaborated the Aristotelian precept "Perfection is in unity" in order to test its application and usefulness, he now proceeds to invoke and critique these controversial theories of conception. Declaring boldly that the woman's "centric part" is as "worthy," "fit" and "infinite" as the soul, Donne rejects *both* the Aristotelian theory that women were monstrous perversions of the perfect male form *and* the alternate Galenic theory that women's sexual organs, though essentially the same as men's, remained internal and imperfect.

Here, Donne joins Renaissance thinkers who maintained that "the perfection of all naturall things" depends on "perfect generation" which can only occur if woman's reproductive organs are as perfect as man's. Helkiah Crooke's summary of the debate is remarkably pertinent to "Love's Progress": "Wherefore *Aristotle* thinketh that the Woman or female is nothing else but an error or aberration of Nature, which he calleth by a Metaphor taken from Trauellers which misse of their way and yet at length attain their iournies end; yea he proceedeth further and saith, that the female is . . . the first monster in Nature. . . . But this opinion of *Galen* and *Aristotle* we cannot approue. For we thinke that Nature aswell intendeth the generation of a female as of a male: and therefore it is vnworthily said that she is an Error or Monster in Nature."[24] Donne satirizes the Aristotelian view of woman as a monstrous perversion of the perfect male body at the beginning of "Love's Progress" when the sexually undifferentiated "lump" of flesh turns into a monster by acquiring the head of a man rather than the sex organs of a woman.

Nothing or no thing was common slang for female genitalia; if the woman's sex organs were inverted and pressed inside due to a lack of heat, there would be literally "nothing" to see.[25] By punning on "sea"/see and "o'erlick"/o'erlook, Donne's witty opening lines—"he's one that goes / To sea for nothing but to make him sick /. . . if we o'er lick / Our love and force it new strange shapes to take, / We err, and of a lump a

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Social Energy in Renaissance England (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 78–93.

[24]Crooke, p. 271.

[25]For a dazzling account of Shakespearean punning on "nothing"/"no thing," see Harry Berger, Jr., "Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado About Nothing*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982): 302–313.

monster make" (2–6)—playfully debunk both the Aristotelian notion that female genitalia are nauseating monstrosities and the Galenic theory that they are internal and invisible. Instead, Donne argues, the external female sex organ is not "nothing" but something—indeed, the "one thing" his male cohort need, above all, to find and seek. Thus, after 30 lines of teasing delayed gratification, "Love Progress" finally concludes with its first climactic disclosure: "So we her airs contemplate, words, and heart, / And virtues, but we love the centric part" (35–36). Modern critics complain that these lines present a reductive view of women since "the centric part" clearly refers to female sex organs; however, that is an anachronistic misperception. Since, as Donne has already alerted us, "love" literally means, make love to women or have intercourse with women, men do in fact "love the centric part," the woman's genitals. Duh!

Although Donne's witty build-up makes it tempting to dismiss the entire argument as a bawdy joke, we should not let either "civility" or salaciousness prevent us from confronting what Donne is actually saying here. True, Donne makes it impossible to deny the self-evident truth that men "make love" to "the centric part"—or as he puts it in "The Comparison," "her best loved part." However discomfiting this frank acknowledgement of sexuality may be, "Love's Progress" *also* acknowledges that "Whoever loves" of course continues to "contemplate" the woman's other "virtues": "her airs [meaning her outward appearance or demeanor], words, and heart."[26] Indeed, the poet cares enough about this to reiterate what he has already stated not once but twice, though modern critics miss the point nonetheless. To "prefer," to favor or elevate "One woman first, and then one thing," "the centric part," does not diminish or negate everything else. Instead, it recognizes that love, while embracing all manner of virtues, begins with sexual desire and ends with sexual orgasm. Similarly, the claim that "virtue is not she, / As beauty'is not, nor wealth," does not belittle virtue, beauty, or wealth. Rather, it warns that would-be lovers who make "one" of these things the sole premise and ultimate goal of their love are missing out. That assertion, so

[26]Most critics assume incorrectly that Donne rejects these virtues. For example, James Winny thinks Donne is "contemptuous of everything in woman except 'the centrique part' of their sex" (*A Preface to Donne,* rev. ed. [London and New York: Longman, 1981], pp. 159–160).

unexceptionable today, was so daring and shocking that it took Donne thirty-five lines to explain what he meant.

Donne knew that his polemic would almost certainly be misconstrued as a denigration of women. Indeed, scornful, mocking responses to "Love's Progress" may have prompted him to adopt a more confidential, elliptical tack when presenting an analogous argument in "The Undertaking." Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* go to much greater lengths than the *Elegies* to conceal their sexual subtext through circumlocutions, double entendres, and extended metaphysical conceits, and for good reason. When English writers first began to publish translations or accounts of Renaissance anatomy in the early seventeenth century, they too worried that their work would be misconstrued and misused by lewd young men. For example, Jakob Rüff prefaced the English translation of his Latin treatise, *The Expert Midwife,* with a similar warning (or was it an advertisement?): "But young and raw heads, Idle servingmen, prophane fiddlers, scoffers, jesters, rogues; avant, pack hence I neither meant it to you neither is it fit for you." Helkiah Crooke also acknowledged the danger, but decided the advancement of learning was worth the risk: "Indeede it were to be wished that all men would come to the knowledge of these secrets with pure eyes and eares, such as they were matched with in their Creation: but shall we therefore forfet our knowledge because some men cannot conteine their lewd and inordinate affections?"[27]

Writing before "these secrets" were published in England, Donne had at least as much reason to worry that his exploration of "the centric part" would be interpreted as vulgar and demeaning to women. Therefore, he elaborates:

> So we her airs contemplate, words, and heart,
> And virtues, but we love the centric part.

[27]Rüff, *The Expert Midwife* (London, 1637), p. A.5.r. As Gail Kern Paster remarks, "Writing about birth in English . . . opens up a textual space from which men—and their erotic interest in women's bodies—cannot be excluded" (*The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], p. 188).

> Nor is the soul more worthy or more fit
> For love than this, as infinite as it.
> (35–38)

Although this may seem like another example of Donne's outrageous wit, these lines echo anatomical writers who defend their investigations by arguing that the spirit was immanently present in the seed and reproductive organs which confer immortality on otherwise mortal man. When Donne argues that the female sexual organs are as "worthy," "fit for love" and "infinite" as the soul, he was being jocoserious, using his all-licensed wit to examine the serious controversies and as yet unexplored opportunities generated by the new anatomy.

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Before Donne can teach his male audience the "application" and "use" of "the centric part," they need to know what "this desired place" looks like and where it can be located. Forget the conventional route, Donne advises, that only leads men astray: "But in attaining this desired place / How much they err that set out at the face" (39–40). Too many Renaissance poets were *blasonneurs*, praising the woman from top to toe, lavishing so much attention on the woman's beauty that the description became its own goal and the poetry its own end—another instance of the syndrome Donne lamented earlier: "Can men more injure women than to say / They love them for that by which they're not they?"[28] But, you may well wonder, why does "Love's Progress" proceed to do precisely what Donne warns against, beginning with the woman's hair, eyes, lips, and detaining us, or distracting us for a full thirty-six lines of descriptive detail, mythological allusion, and analogical argumentation? A question to be asked. To some extent, I think, digression *is* the point, as in Robert Frost's "Directive": "The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you, / Who only has at heart your getting lost."[29] But Donne has other, more

[28]For a critique of the blazon, see Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies, Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987); Parker argues that the division of the female body uses "the lexicon of merchandising—of praising with purpose for to sell" (p. 130).

[29]Frost, "Directive," in *Selected Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1963), lines 8–9.

specific motives as well. Since anatomists were only just beginning to chart the woman's body when Donne was writing the poem, there was considerable danger of getting lost en route: "The hair a forest is of ambushes, / Of springs, snares, fetters and manacles" (41–42).

Donne's GPS system offers cutting edge technology, replacing the misleading maps of his predecessors and continually recalculating the lover's current position *vis-à-vis* his final destination. To provide a basic orientation in female anatomy, Donne represents the woman's face as a map of the territory to be explored. The nose, which lies between the rosy spheres of the cheeks, establishes "the first meridian" (47), the longitudinal line that will, eventually, lead to the desired destination. "[H]er swelling lips" (53), another important landmark, pose the second navigational challenge since the horizontal line of the lips crosses and thus obscures the first meridian. To further impede progress, the sounds issuing from her lips are as enchanting as Siren's songs, as mesmerizing as "Wise Delphic oracles" (56)—far more arresting than Donne's own earlier metaphysical speculations: "We anchor there, and think ourselves at home" (54). Clearly, Donne was not deaf to the woman's other virtues.

Despite the irresistible allure of eyes, lips, and tongue, the vigilant voyager will eventually be drawn onward by the mounds of her breasts, also easily located, where he will again be detained, since "The Sestos and Abydos of her breasts" (61) offer their own distinct attractions: "Not of two Lovers, but two loves, the nests" (62). After this nourishing rest stop, the traveler must return to the "first meridian" which leads through the "Hellespont" (60), the Dardanelles strait that runs between her breasts. Heading towards the navel which lies directly above "the centric part," he must be wary not to be misled by the islands or "moles" (64) dotting the sea of her stomach. Her navel itself may be difficult to espy because it was likely to look quite different from his own. Midwives generally tied the umbilical cord tightly on female babies—"they think (forsooth) it makes them modest, and their privities narrower"—while leaving it longer on males to make "the instrument of Generation long."[30] But we are losing sight of our destination.

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[30]Heather Dubrow quotes this passage from Nicolas Culpeper's *A Directory of Midwives* (1651) to illustrate "the anxieties that impel and are impelled by Renaissance discourse of gender and sexuality" and "the disagreements that pepper the gynecological manuals" ("Navel Battles: Interpreting Renaissance

Carried off course by his own verbal tricks, Donne has clearly failed to heed his own warning, "How much they err that set out at the face" (40). Nonetheless, the delay has been instructive, for Donne's detailed description of the journey serves two purposes. First, the map of the female body is itself a valuable navigational tool because the majority of Donne's contemporaries were about as familiar with female bodies as they were with the Americas or the Indies. Not only were they likely to have more limited sexual experience before marriage, but early modern people were rarely naked. They slept and generally had sex in their undergarments. When Elizabeth I contracted small pox, her illness was attributed to her rash insistence on bathing nude. When Donne's speaker persuades the woman to remove *all* her clothing in "Elegy: Going to Bed," his triumphant delight—"Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee" (33)—reminds us that the woman's naked body was a genuine discovery: "America, my new-found-land" (27).

In "Love's Progress" the *odyssey interruptus* down the woman's body demonstrates that the process of discovery is important in and of itself. In fact, the speaker has been somewhat disingenuous or cagey in announcing, "How much they err that set out at the face," for one primary meaning of the word, "err" was, to stray from a path or direction. By detaining us at the woman's face and breasts, Donne has provided empirical proof for his own claim that those who "set out at the face" are bound to "err," or to wander off course. Moreover, he reminds us, explorers who set sail for the Indies found untold treasures in the Americas: "And sailing towards her India, in that way / Shall at her fair Atlantic navel stay" (65–66). By straying off course, Donne's voyager not only discovers unforeseen riches, but he also learns an important lesson in anatomy, namely, the importance of foreplay, the lesson medical experts such as Ambroise Paré were at pains to teach:

> When the husband commeth into his wives chamber hee must entertaine her with all kind of dalliance, wanton behaviour, and allurements to venery: but if he perceive her to be slow, and more cold, he must cherish, embrace, and tickle her, and

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Gynecological Manuals," *American Notes & Queries*, 5 n.s. [1992]: 6). Audrey Eccles observes that "the length of the penis depended on the length [of] the navel-string" (*Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England* [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1982], p. 33).

> shall not abruptly, the nerves [the penis] being suddenly distended, breake into the field of nature [the vagina], but rather shall creepe in by little and little, intermixing more wanton kisses with wanton words and speeches, handling her secret parts and dugs, that she may take fire and bee enflamed to venery, for so at length the wombe will strive and waxe fervent with a desire of casting forth its owne seed, and receiving the mans seed to bee mixed together therewith.[31]

Paré's medical advice is essentially the same basic lesson the middle section of "Love's Progress" provides—with one crucial difference.

Medical writers who instructed husbands to arouse their wives "with all kind of dalliance, wanton behavior, and allurements to venery" believed that the woman's seed was (1) necessary to conception and (2) contained in vaginal fluids that were only released when the woman was sexually aroused, only many thought when she reached sexual climax.[32] As Jane Sharp explains, "this *Clitoris* will stand and fall as the Yard doth, & makes women lustfull and take delight in Copulation, and were it not for this they would have no desire nor delight nor would they ever conceive."[33] The medical authorities scrupulously point out that "delight in Copulation" was God's design to preserve the human race. On that putative goal, Donne remains conspicuously silent.

Having entertained and instructed his audience—*dulce et utile*!—for a full seventy-two lines, Donne breaks off . . . just before reaching the promised land. Like merchants bound for the Indies who were carried by ocean's currents to the new world, Donne's voyager can't find the tree for the forest: there "where thou would'st be embayed, / Thou shalt upon another forest set / Where some do shipwreck, and no further get" (68–70). As David O. Frantz observes: "The speaker has shifted person again, now he is describing the voyage for a 'you'; he has separated himself out, done away with the 'we.'" Frantz concludes, "the shifting of person is

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[31]Tho. Johnson, *The Workes of That Famous Chirurgion: Ambrose Parey, Translated out of Latin and Compared with the French* (London, 1634), p. 889.

[32]For a fascinating but extreme exposition of this theory, see Laqueur, "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," *Representations* 14 (1986): 1–41.

[33]Sharp, pp. 43–44.

confusing, and one has the sense that Donne is careless through this part of the poem."[34] Or so it might seem.

The abrupt disruption makes the second section seem like another pointless detour or a sly parody of *coitus interruptus*, but there's a lesson there, an important lesson that both the structure of the poem and the direct address forces "you" (and "us") to confront. Before proceeding, Donne suggests, as he switches to the more intimate second person singular, "thou" had'st better stop and think about what "thou" should'st do next.

* * * *

Appropriately, the third section is only twenty-four lines, a third shorter than the two preceding sections. The direct address is individuated, intrusive, inescapable, the syntax blunt and decisive: "Rather set out below; practice my art" (73). The speaker reassures us that he has personally subjected his instructions to empirical testing, for the primary meaning of "art" was, skill in doing something based on experience and practice, or skill in the practical application of the principles of a particular field of knowledge or learning. Indeed, it is the speaker's personal experience and "practice" of this progressive "art" that differentiates him from his male peers. Trust me, Donne says, speaking directly to each of you, this really is the best way to proceed.

The speaker is now ready to offer not only expertise in theory but also a set of rules for "practice"—the "application" and "use" promised at the outset of our voyage: "Some symmetry the foot hath with that part / Which thou dost seek, and is thy map for that" (74–75). The shape of the foot—presumably the V between the big toe and the second toe—offers a rough approximation of what you're looking for, though honestly, it's not that easy to "see" what Donne is talking about here. Clearly, he's still hesitant, for after announcing this new direction loud and bold, he lapses back into a set of shared assumptions that "Whoever loves" can "see" and readily accept:

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[34]Frantz, *Festum Voluptatis: A Study of Renaissance Erotica* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), p. 227.

> Civility, we see, refined the kiss
> Which at the face began, transplanted is
> Since to the hand, since to the'imperial knee,
> Now at the papal foot delights to be.
> If kings think that the nearer way, and do
> Rise from the foot, lovers may do so too.
> (81–86)

Here, at long last, Donne focuses on "one thing," "the kiss"—the kiss "transplanted" from the woman's lips and "cleaving tongue" to the foot, and then redirected from her foot back up, up to "the centric part." Ah, now "we see." "Love's Progress" advocates—*cunnilingus*.

No wonder this poem is so oblique. One can't talk about going down on a woman without, as it were, beating around the bush, or lapsing into coy insinuation and *double entendre*. That explains why it took Donne so much time to get to the point. It also explains why he was so concerned that his followers would get lost. "[*T*]*his* desired place" is a lot more difficult to locate than the pits and holes mentioned in line 32. You've got to find *exactly* the right spot, and that's not so simple, even if you know what you are looking for, and, it seems, most members of Donne's audience did not.

If the goal were sexual intercourse (as Donne's editors and critics generally assume), starting at the head would work just fine. But if you are performing oral sex for the first time, the woman will be much more likely to "take fire and bee enflamed to venery" if you take "the nearer way." Since "kings . . . do / Rise from the foot," surely it's good enough for the rest of you. So get down on your knees, Donne directs, and make your way back up to "the centric part." Unlike the top of the female body, the lower half presents no serious distractions. Hence you can move quickly: "free spheres move faster far than can / Birds, whom the air resists" (87–88). Don't waste your time with "the'imperial knee." No nerve endings there. Fly straight up: what you are looking for is hidden in plain sight.

If you are still having a hard time finding the clitoris on this "map," Donne has already provided additional information. Now, he suggests, it would be instructive to reread the poem from the foot to the head because the mouth provides an even better "map" than the foot: "Rich nature hath in women wisely made / Two purses, and their mouths aversely laid" (91–92). Donne's choice of words implies what the medical

literature corroborates: the clitoris is found at "the mouth or orifice of the womb." Indeed, this second mouth resembles the first because it also has "two lips": "At the bottom of the womans belly is a little bank called a mountain of pleasure near the well-spring. . . . Under this hill is the spring-head, which is a passage having two lips."[35] Thus, it turns out, all the time and effort devoted to the woman's body in lines 37–72 was not "misspent" after all. If you zoom in on the "swelling lips" as described above, your route will now be clearer, as long as you make one important navigational adjustment: the lips of the upper mouth are horizontal, whereas the lips of the labia are turned aside, or "aversely laid."

The word "aversely" was a neologism, derived from the Latin prefix *a-* plus the verb *versere*, meaning, therefore, turned aside or away, or turned in the backward or reverse direction.[36] Appropriately, by turning back to antiquity Donne has rediscovered the perfect word for the "new strange shapes" and repeated deferrals and reversals "Love's Progress" represents. Now it's time to read the poem "aversely," or backwards, paying careful attention to the instructions that Donne has already painstakingly provided but that we unwittingly, or aversely, turned away from our first time through. "The right true end of love" is not really the "swelling lips," but the swelling clitoris. This "lump," already swollen by all the foreplay, lies within and between the "two lips" of the labia, much as the tongue lies within and between those other, more visible lips. Donne's chosen term, "the centric part," offers another pointed clue. If you draw a line between the lips of the labia, you'll find "this desired place" right there, at the center. When you have finally arrived there "where thou would'st be embayed," where the woman's body is awash with fluids, you should put down your anchor so that you won't be prematurely swept off course. From "thence the current be thy pilot made" (67): the current flowing past the clitoris and coursing through the woman's body during orgasm releases vaginal fluids that will prevent you from sailing on by, making it clear that you have finally found "this desired place."

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[35]Sharp, pp. 33–34.

[36]The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites "aversely" as first appearing with this meaning in 1646 (s. v., "aversely," adv., 1.b.).

The usual terminology for sex organs is plural: genitals, genitalia, private parts, privy parts, secret parts. The singularity of Donne's lexicon, reinforced by his manic punning on "unity" and oneness, specifies that "Love's Progress" is not about "organs of conception" but about "one thing," "the centric part," "this desired place"—the clitoris. In wending its way through a remarkably un-Donnean landscape of classical allusions (Cupid, Pluto, Siren's songs, and Delphic oracles), the poem's voyage of discovery retraces the route followed by European anatomists who "rediscovered the clitoris through a rereading of the ancient Greek works, supplemented by their own anatomical researches on female cadavers."[37] Aristotle, Galen, Hippocrates, and Avicenna all cite the clitoris as a part of female anatomy, but the term fell out of use during the Middle Ages, at least in academic medical discourse. (No doubt it persisted in private practice.)[38]

With the rebirth of interest in the classics, Renaissance scientists began to wonder, what was that "thing" the ancients kept mentioning? Charles Estienne hailed the clitoris in his 1545 Latin treatise, though Gabriellus Fallopius claimed five years later that he was the first to discover it.[39] To some extent, they were both right: Estienne associated the clitoris with urination. Fallopius connected it to reproduction. It was Realdo Columbo, however, who, in 1564, first described the clitoris as "the principal seat of women's enjoyment in intercourse, so that if you not only rub it with your penis, but even touch it with your little finger, the pleasure causes their seed to flow." Well, we can't have that. Even though Columbo scrupulously equated female orgasm with conception ("causes the seed to flow"), his discovery discomfited European

[37]Quoted from Katherine Park's seminal essay, "The Rediscovery of the Clitoris: French Medicine and the Tribade, 1570–1620," in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio [New York: Routledge, 1997], p. 173). Park's article was the inspiration for this essay.

[38]Valerie Traub observes, "It is only under the auspices of anatomy that the clitoris is given a name. . . . With that articulation came a representational crisis" ("The Psychomorphology of the Clitoris," *GLQ* 2 [1995]: 90–91).

[39]For an invaluable "history of the clitoris in Western, predominantly medical, literature," see Laqueur, "Amor Veneris, vel Dulcedo Appeletur," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, pt. 3, ed. Michel Feher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 90–131.

anatomists who were alarmed by the fact that female sexual pleasure did not depend on intercourse with a man. Within five years Andreas Vesalius declared an aroused clitoris a monstrosity found only in women hermaphrodites. A decade later Ambroise Paré recounted the "[e]xtremely monstrous thing that occurs in the labis of some women" whose genitals grow erect when stimulated, "like the male penis, so that they can be used to play with other women."[40]

In 1615, approximately two decades after Donne wrote "Love's Progress," Helkiah Crooke became the first English writer to use the word "clitoris" in print. Crooke located "the *Clitoris* in the toppe of the priuite," where it "cleaueth and is tyed; in so much that being neruous [or full of nerves] and therefore of most exquisite sence, from his attrition lustfull imaginations are communicated to these Ligaments, and from these to the vesselles leading the seede."[41] Donne does not use the word "clitoris," and there's no way to know whether the word was used in private conversation before it appeared in print. If Donne knew the word, he obviously preferred the teasing poetic circumlocutions he used in "The Comparison" and "Love's Progress": "the best loved part," "the centric part," and "this desired place."

In linking women's "lustful imaginations" to female physiognomy, Crooke echoed the anxieties expressed earlier by Vesalius and Paré: "Somtimes, they grow to so great a length . . . especially among the Egyptians, amongest whom this accident (as *Galen* saith) is very familiar. Wherefore in Maidens before they grow too long they cut them off, and before they marry."[42] Donne's phrase, "sailing towards her India," alludes to the medical controversy, since swollen or enlarged clitorises were regularly associated with India and Egypt, as Jane Sharp's more skeptical retelling of the familiar tales of monstrosity confirms: "sometimes it grows so long that it hangs forth at the slit like a Yard, and will swell and stand stiff if it be provoked, and some lewd women have endeavoured to use it as men do theirs. In the *Indies,* and *Egypt* they are frequent, but I never heard but of one in this Country, if there be any they will do what

[40]Paré, p. 26. Realdo Colombo, *De re anatomica libri XV* (Venice, 1559), p. 243.

[41]Crooke, p. 225.

[42]Crooke, p. 237.

they can for shame to keep it close."[43] The furor over the clitoris and the "monstrous" possibility that women could bring each other to sexual orgasm, or that a woman could bring herself to orgasm, helps explain another of Donne's most erotic elegies: "Sappho to Philaenis" reaches a climax along with its speaker when Sappho gazes at herself in a mirror and imagines herself making love to a female Philaenis. If the rediscovery of the clitoris encouraged women to masturbate or to give each other sexual pleasure, there was nothing monstrous or wrong with that, Donne suggests in "Sappho to Philaenis." But Donne was no dope: he knew the machinery could be operated by a man as well as a woman.[44]

"Love's Progress" is a satire, but its barbed wit is not, as critics assume, directed against women. Rather, it is directed at male writers who were threatened by the idea that women could experience sexual pleasure without having intercourse with men, or getting pregnant, or sacrificing their long preserved virginity. The beginning of "Love's Progress" not only parodies Aristotle and Galen, it also spoofs Renaissance anatomists who were so appalled by the implications of their own discovery that they claimed the swollen or erect clitoris was a monstrosity:

> We err, and of a lump a monster make.
> Were not a calf a monster that were grown
> Faced like a man, though better than his own.
> (6–8)

"We err," Donne says bluntly, if we believe the preposterous claims that a swollen clitoris—a "lump" of flesh "grown" to look "like a man"—is "a monster."

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[43]Sharp, p. 45. For an illuminating comparison of Crooke and Sharp, and an astute summary of the modern critical debate, see Elizabeth D. Harvey, "Anatomies of Rapture: Clitoral Politics/Medical Blazons," *Signs* 27 (2002): 315–346.

[44]Traub argues that Sharp "registers (and attempts to dispel) the anxiety that eroticized contact among Englishwomen was in fact occurring" (p. 90).

Many critics find the ending of "Love's Progress" particularly objectionable:

> Rich nature hath in women wisely made
> Two purses, and their mouths aversely laid:
> They then which to the lower tribute owe,
> That way, which that exchequer looks, must go;
> He which doth not, his error is as great
> As who by clyster gave the stomach meat.
> (91–96)

As all the *Variorum* annotations for the final line acknowledge, a "clyster" was an enema. Hence, Donne's final couplet is usually read as an "obscene jest" about anal intercourse. Older critics complain vehemently: the "gratuitous illustration" of the final line leaves "a dirty smudge"; the "whole poem is challenged and coarsened" by such "candid vulgarity"; Donne's "own disgust is patent in the nauseating [concluding] image."[45] More recently, some critics have begun to applaud Donne's daring: Donne "invokes a secondary series of puns," Jonathan Sawday writes, "to close the poem off with an allusion to the 'error' of anal intercourse, which the poem seems, nevertheless, to be endorsing as a problem of technique rather than morality. Quite clearly, Donne's blazon was meant for an anatomically and sexually literate audience, who would have appreciated the teasingly convoluted language within which the joke was encloaked."[46] Donne had no ethical objections to male/male sexuality any more than to female/female sexuality, but the exacting sex education provided in "Love's Progress" suggests that his audience was less "anatomically and sexually literate" than Sawday assumes. Moreover, as George Klawitter acknowledges and Sawday's own highly convoluted language reveals, it's difficult to deny that Donne's ending directs his audience away from homoerotic fantasies of anal sex back to the woman's body.[47]

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[45]Gill, p. 95; V. N. Sinha, *John Donne: A Study of his Dramatic Imagination* (New Delhi: K. K. Bhargawa, Caxton Press, 1977), p. 102; and Murray Roston, *The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 138.

[46]Sawday, p. 206.

[47]Klawitter offers an alternative reading of Donne's final lines (*The Enigmatic Narrator: The Voicing of Same-Sex Love in the Poetry of John Donne* [New York:

In fact, the ending is an altogether apt conclusion to the poem's central focus on "the centric part," the clitoris. Here too, one needs to understand the contemporary medical debate to grasp the meaning of Donne's trope. To begin with, "*Wh*[*e*]*ther Clisters can passe vpward vnto the Stomacke*"[48] had been a serious subject of debate since antiquity. Furthermore, Donne's final "clyster" invokes another pressing debate that has even more direct "application" to "Love's Progress": Should clysters be used during pregnancy? This question had far greater medical import than it might seem today because clysters were an important part of regular preventative health care and because, in the absence of reliable birth control, Renaissance women spent a large part of their adult lives pregnant. Some medical experts maintained that clysters were "always most proper," especially, during pregnancy when it was vital to keep the stomach working smoothly so the fetus could develop healthily. Yet many thought that pregnant women should avoid clysters which could cause abortion. They warned that clysters should not be used early on, or only "with discretion, leauing out all manner of ingredients which might cause a fluxe of the belly, for feare of Abortment, or being deliuered before their time, as *Hippocrates* saith."[49] Clysters were more often prescribed late in pregnancy when birth was eagerly awaited, especially when the baby was overdue.

That clysters were also pharmacological concoctions injected directly into the vagina—a fact overlooked both by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and by Donne's commentators—connects the final line even more closely to the poem's unfolding argument. Simon Forman's private, unpublished gynecological treatise prescribes "glisters and Iniections to caste into the matrix [the womb] to lysome yt and to sumple the matrix and to lose the humors and to make the matrix open and the vaines to open and to strengthen the matrix." The goal, at least the acknowledged goal, was to loosen lumps of dried blood and tissue remaining from a prior pregnancy

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Peter Lang, 1994], p. 182). Ben Saunders recuperates Donne for readers who eschew hetero-normative sexuality, but does not discuss "Love's Progress" (*Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation* [Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2006]).

[48]Crooke, p. 166.

[49]*Child-birth or, The happy deliuerie of vvomen … Written in French by Iames Guillimeau the French Kings chirurgion* (London, 1612), p. 49.

since clysters could bring on menses that failed to issue at the proper time. In fact, many women who consulted Forman for gynecological problems were seeking relief from unwanted pregnancies. Hence, at the end of the treatise Forman "skips a line and continues in a less careful hand. 'And here vnderstand a greate secrete that Eleborus albus poured 1 dram is a strong vomite yf you put therof in your Iniection yt will mak yt work the better & sonner." Forman's "secrete" appendix specifies various herbs, flowers, vegetables, and fruits (including rosemary, saffron, hollyhocks, cabbage and figs) that could be used in a vaginal clyster to induce abortion.[50]

Thus, it turns out, the clyster that concludes "Love's Progress" is the sixteenth-century equivalent of a DNC—in effect, an abortion putatively performed to cleanse the uterus and cure internal ailments. Donne's final couplet is not gratuitous vulgarity nor is it only homoerotic wit. Rather it is a serious warning that Donne's readers "must" follow his instructions exactly if they are to avoid the serious "error" of unwanted pregnancy. To be sure, anal intercourse (whether with other men or women) was one way to avoid pregnancy, but it is not *the* way Donne recommends in "Love's Progress." Oral sex could also do the trick, though stimulating the clitoris could be risky business for "whoever" was not ready to "propose" marriage, since, many believed, if she "take fire and bee enflamed to venery . . . at length the wombe will strive and waxe fervent with a desire of casting forth its owne seed."

Yet, even if one was skeptical that female orgasm was necessary for conception, as Donne's satiric opening lines suggest he was, there was nonetheless a serious danger that sexual intimacy would lead to intercourse and that intercourse would end in pregnancy. Consequently, after directing his readers to plant their kisses on the woman's "centric part," Donne's final couplet warns them *not* to plant their seed in the womb, lest they find themselves seeking a "clyster" to give "the stomach meat," i.e., to purge the flesh growing inside her stomach ("meat" signified food in general and flesh in particular). That is why Donne urges his male readers to "Practice my art." "May *barren* angels love so?" (23, my emphasis) Donne asks. Yeaah. If you "make love to woman" using the "empty and [ostensibly] ethereal way" "Love's Progress"

[50]Quoted in Barbara H. Traister, "'Matrix and the Pain thereof': A Sixteenth-Century Gynaecological Essay," *Medical History* 35 (1991): 446.

recommends, the woman will remain "barren" (or childless) and seemingly angelic.

If we now retrace our quest from the end to the beginning of "Love's Progress," Donne's opening images seem even less outrageously bizarre and more evidently germane to the ongoing anatomical discussion:

> Whoever loves, if he do not propose
> The right true end of love, he's one that goes
> To sea for nothing but to make him sick.
> Love is a bear-whelp born; if we o'er lick
> Our love, and force it new strange shapes to take,
> We err, and of a lump a monster make.
> Were not a calf a monster that were grown
> Faced like a man, though better than his own?
> (1–8)

"Love's Progress" is not an allegory with a simple one-to-one relation of image and meaning, for as Donne's obsessive quibbling on "one" and "two" reveals, the point is to satirize those who insisted upon "one" "right, true" model of conception. Indeed, there are any number of ways to interpret these "new strange shapes." As we've already observed, the image of the "lump" "we o'er lick" until it becomes a "monster" satirizes the notion that monstrous births were caused by the woman's lusty, immoral imagination or that the aroused clitoris was a monstrous perversion of nature. In retrospect, it also satirizes the notion that non-reproductive sex ("o'erlick" that lump!) was a sinful perversion of nature, even as it pokes gentle fun at those readers who feel so queasy at the thought of kissing her "lower" "mouth" that it all comes to naught: "he's one that goes / To sea" or to look "for nothing but to make him sick." But if Donne's reader finds the "one thing" he's looking for, and if he can "stomach" Donne's advice, he had better not then plant his seed in her lower purse, lest he find that his mistress is pregnant and as nauseous as if she'd actually gone on a sea voyage with him, for that might require them to use the "clyster" mentined at the end of the poem. Indeed, when we read the poem "aversely," or backwards, Donne's opening lines explicitly refer to the dead or aborted fetus that Simon Forman's "clyster" was designed to produce. Donne uses the standard medical terminology cited in *The Widwives Book*: "an ill shaped *lump* of flesh which grows greater every day in the womb, and is fed by the Terms that flow to it,

and this is that Midwives call a *Mole* or Moon-*Calf*" (my emphasis).[51] Donne again refers to the fetus, aka mole or mooncalf, when he later warns, "Some island moles may scattered there descry" (64). Those moles, or growing fetuses protruding from the sea of the woman's stomach, threaten to divert the voyager from the route mapped out in "Love's Progress": the journey to safe, non-reproductive sex.

To avoid this "error," Donne's readers must follow his instructions precisely. We'd best take another look:

> Rich nature hath in women wisely made
> Two purses, and their mouths aversely laid:
> They then which to the lower tribute owe,
> That way, which that exchequer looks, must go. . . .
> (91–94)

After paying their tribute to the "lower" mouth, Donne's readers "must go" "aversely," or backwards, back through the poem, back up the woman's body, back to the upper "purse," the woman's mouth. In retrospect, "that exchequer looks" very much like the other one. Check it out:

> Unto her swelling lips when we are come,
> We anchor there, and think ourselves at home,
> . . . . . .
> There in a creek, where chosen pearls do swell
> The remora, her cleaving tongue doth dwell.
> (53–54, 57–58)

Now "we see." The woman's "cleaving tongue" will make him feel as if he has finally "come" "home." The last shall be first. Oral sex for him as well as her. The gift that keeps on giving! The kiss that keeps on coming! By depositing his semen in that "purse," Donne's voyager will avoid the need for the dread clyster.

Once the reader has mastered each part of the poem's carefully delineated but skillfully encoded directions, he is ready to put it all together. So here we go again: "Rich nature hath in women wisely made / Two purses, and their mouths aversely laid" (91–92). Once he has

[51] Sharp, p. 106.

figured out where he is heading, he can turn "aversely" or backwards. That way, he can enjoy her "cleaving tongue" on his yard at the same time that she enjoys his ever so "refined" "kiss" on her "lower" "mouth." "Perfection *is* in unity." So get with the program, get "aversely laid." Don't say I didn't warn you—this poem is definitely X rated.

* * * *

Depending on how you interpret Donne's initial directive, "Prefer one woman first and then one thing in her," "Love's Progress" can be read as an argument for promiscuity, i.e., for choosing "first" one woman and then another, or for monogamy, for "first" choosing "one woman" and then preferring "one thing in her." Since the goal is to shift the discussion from morality to anatomy, "Love's Progress" remains appropriately agnostic. Various members of Donne's audience would, no doubt, have applied Donne's anatomy lesson differently at different times, as Donne himself did by writing poems as varied as "The Indifferent" which vaunts "I can love her, and her, and you and you, / I can love any, so she be not true" (8–9), or "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" which remains true to one woman despite their impending separation.

The number of parallels between "Love's Progress" and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" is striking. Both use the trope of a sea voyage, both move from contemplation of the spheres back down to earth. Both compare the "unity" or "perfection" of love to gold (the elegy's "ductileness" [12] becomes the valediction's hauntingly beautiful image of "gold to airy thinness beat" [24]), and both reject the analogy to gold for a trope that is more adaptable, more "fit" for "use."[52] Like the reciprocal sexual pleasure figured by the "two mouths" "aversely laid" in the elegy, the union of the "two" lovers in the valediction hinges on their mutual sexual bond: "Our two souls therefore, which are one, / . . . / If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two" (21, 25–26). Even more intriguingly, the valediction's conclusion—"Thy firmness

[52]Lindsay A. Mann argues that Donne's love poems use gold and circles as images of perfection, while the more cynical poems use the same images to objectify love ("Sacred and Profane Love in Donne," *Dalhousie Review* 65 [1985]: 542).

makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun" (35–36)—echoes the image of the compass introduced in "Love's Progress"—"the emblem that hath figured / Firmness" (79–80) in Renaissance emblem books—even as it recalls the elegy's circular structure.[53]

Alluding to the earlier rhymes "come"/"home," Donne hints that he has returned to where "my art" "begun"—to his lover's "centric part" which now "grows erect as that comes home" (32). Donne must still "obliquely run" (34) because orgasm and an "erect" clitoris or penis could only be discussed obliquely, through analogy, circumlocution, and *double entendre*. To preserve his lover's virtue and protect her freedom of choice, the speaker conceals their sexual union from the rest of the world: "'Twere profanation of our joys / To tell the laity our love" (7–8). Yet, by choosing "one woman first, and then one thing in her," her "firmness," "A Valediction" shows that sexual pleasure can comprise steadfast constancy, the "one thing" that will enable her to uphold their love during his absence. As the valediction's complexly unfolding conceit demonstrates, moreover, their future "unity" depends on the centric part she plays and the choice only she can make. Thus "Love's Progress" provides the subtext or pre-text for "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," even as the valediction also shows where the journey "begun" in "Love's Progress" can "end," not with a reductive view of women as commodities to be traded between men but as a loving conversation with "one woman" who acts on her own desires—and who thinks complexly enough to understand Donne's notoriously difficult analogies.

"Love's Progress" figures "progress" in two senses: both a journey towards "this desired place" and an advance in what is known. Yet as the Renaissance rediscovery of the ancient Greek clitoris illustrates, what is known can also be hid. Three centuries after Columbo described the clitoris as "the principal seat of women's enjoyment in intercourse," Freud downgraded clitoral orgasm to an unhealthy, infantile obsession. Consequently, the clitoris had to be rediscovered and validated by Masters and Johnson and reclaimed by women's health collectives. Once again, the medical authorities failed to keep pace with sexual practice. As Helen O'Connell, Kalavampara V. Sanjeevan, and John M. Hutson report in the 2005 *Journal of Urology,* the "typical textbook descriptions of

[53]John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1967), p. 67.

the clitoris lack detail and include inaccuracies." Using the ancient tool of dissection along with the latest technologies of microdissection and magnetic resonance imaging, O'Connell, Sanjeevan, and Hutson discovered that "the cluster of erectile tissue responsible for female orgasm" is far more extensive than modern science recognized. Their explanation: a large part of the clitoris is internal and thus difficult to see. Sound familiar?[54]

"[P]ractice my art," Donne writes in "Love's Progress," directing us to put his "map" of the female body to "use," but also inviting us to actively engage his daring, innovative poetry. With its sexy feet, circular form, and fluid, "swelling" tropes, "Love's Progress" teaches poets and lovers and lovers of poetry how to do better. Donne's verbal journey entices us to circle back, recalculate, and begin anew, again and again. Its repeated deferrals, surprising climaxes, and continually retraced footsteps comprise a meta-analogy for the experience of poetry which acquires "new strange shapes" upon each rereading and which progresses, like medical science, by constantly reflecting back on itself and its relation to the past. According to Jonathan Sawday, "at heart, every *blasonneur* knew, the goal was conquest, the end result a mocking male laughter."[55] John Donne knew better. He directed his satire at scientists whose ideological anxieties led them to monstrously distort the implications of their own findings or "profane men . . . / Which will no faith on this bestow, / Or, if they do, deride" ("The Undertaking," 22–24). "We err," Donne writes, warning his readers to beware erroneous premises and claims that "injure women" and men too.

Much as sixteenth-century anatomists rediscovered the clitoris by reading Greek texts and dissecting Renaissance bodies, Donne dissects the conventional poetic form of the blazon to rediscover the sexual and verbal pleasures hidden at its core, even when "the centric part" is "derided" by "mocking male laughter" or "hid" by ideological prohibition. "Love's Progress" exposes the "error" foisted upon Donne's contemporaries not only by law and religion but also by anatomy and medicine which joined forces to suppress sexual practices that did not

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[54]See Rebecca Chalker, *The Clitoral Truth: The Secret World at Your Fingertips* (New York and London: Seven Stories Press, 2000). O'Connell, Sanjeevan, and Hutson, "Anatomy of the Clitoris," *Journal of Urology* 174 (2005): 1189.

[55]Sawday, p. 205.

lead to the officially sanctioned "right true end of love," conception and procreation. In advocating "delight in copulation," Renaissance medical treatises were considerably more progressive than religious and prescriptive writings, but the competing theories of conception promulgated by the medical authorities, like the sex education they provoked, were nonetheless far more constrained than the imaginative sex and verbal tricks proffered by Donne's poetry since they advocated sexual pleasure only as a means to procreation. By retracing the Renaissance debate over female anatomy, we can rediscover "the new strange shapes" that make Donne's "new-made idiom" ("Valediction of the Book," 21) at once so convoluted and so audacious.

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