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Post-Coital *Tristesse*, Prolactin, and Donne's "Farewell to love"

Michael A. Winkelman

> And dispositions good or ill,
> Are as the several atoms still;
> And every passion which doth rise,
> Is as each sort of atoms lies.
> — Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle,
> "All Things Are Governed by Atoms"[1]

Donne's poetry—though he once referred to it as "prophane, imperfect, oh, too bad"[2]—adds up to an insightful if haphazard chronicle of human amatory endeavors. T. S. Eliot recognizes how this probing sensuality informed Donne's outlook in his own poem "Whispers of Immortality":

> Donne, I suppose, was such another
> Who found no substitute for sense,
> To seize and clutch and penetrate;
> Expert beyond experience,

[1]Cavendish, "All Things Are Governed by Atoms," in *Seventeenth-Century British Poetry: 1603–1660*, ed. John Rumrich and Gregory Chaplin (New York and London: Norton, 2006), lines 5–8.

[2]Donne, "To Mr. *B. B.*," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1967), line 26. All further quotations of Donne's verse, except for those from the *Holy Sonnets* and the *Elegies*, will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

> He knew the anguish of the marrow
> The ague of the skeleton;
> No contact possible to flesh
> Allayed the fever of the bone.[3]

This physical component is fundamental to Donne's work. It would be reductive to identify it, or any other master trope, as the key to unlocking the man, though scholars have made such claims before. For instance, one says Donne's religious apostasy best explains him; another, that it is his shift from a medieval to an early modern worldview.[4] Rather than posit any such totalizing hypothesis, this essay will take up a particular instance of one central dilemma for Donne: the mind/body problem in matters of love. As he wrote his friend Sir Henry Goodyer, "You (I think) and I am much of one sect in the philosophy of love, which, though it be directed upon the mind, doth inhere in the body and find plenty entertainment there."[5] Repeatedly, he questions the connection between "abstract spirituall love" ("Valediction of the booke," 30) and "firme substantiall love" ("A Valediction of my name, in the window," 62). In large measure, he assays this Metaphysical conundrum by pondering the validity of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS SEX. He does not seem to come up with a consistent final answer to this crux; the *Songs and Sonnets* and *Elegies* offer diverse responses ranging from neoplatonic sublimity to Ovidian bawdry. There is a tendency, however, to affirm the metaphorical equation, a signature move in his *volte* towards celebrating the flesh: "As glad to have my body, as my minde" ("The Blossome," 40).

Herein my investigation will focus specifically on one erogenous text of his: the convoluted and obscure "Farewell to love," in which Donne descants on post-coital *tristesse*. My micro point will be that understanding the effects of prolactin on the sex drive reveals the real underlying physiological basis for the situation delineated in the poem.

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[3]Eliot, "Whispers of Immortality," in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, 1952), lines 9–16.

[4]See, for example, John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the 'New Science' upon Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).

[5]Donne, *Selected Letters*, ed. P. M. Oliver (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 57.

My larger point, in brief, is that like MRI's or X-rays used to diagnose bodily ailments, insights drawn from evolutionary psychology, cognition, and neuroscience now afford us a clearer view of Donne's standout achievement in this and other poetical dispatches on a wide range of "amorous paine" ("To Mr. *C. B.*," 8).

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Some *jeunes filles en fleurs* must have put out for Donne; as he would later confess: "alas the fire / Of lust . . . burnt" him during his disorderly youth.[6] His "Farewell to love" reflects on a certain psycho-somatic concern stemming from such regrettable incidents. It has four ten-line, logaoedic stanzas rhyming $a_{2}a_{5}b_{4}c_{5}c_{5}b_{4}d_{1}d_{5}e_{5}e_{5}$. The odd short lines among the iambic pentameter are utilized both for grammatical transitions ("Thus when" [7]) and emphasis ("The sport" [27]). The title links it, somewhat incongruously, to the more exalted valedictions and aubades, but the roughness and Propertian qualities connect it to the cynical early satires and misogynistic youthful elegies "written by Jack Donne, and not by Dr Donne."[7] Yet in spite of its affinities with his more libertine output, it is also in many ways a very sophisticated example of *erudita libido*.

> Whilst yet to prove,
> I thought there was some Deitie in love
> So did I reverence, and gave
> Worship, as Atheists at their dying houre
> Call, what they cannot name, an unknowne power,
> As ignorantly did I crave:
> Thus when
> Things not yet knowne are coveted by men,

[6]Donne, Holy Sonnet 7 (Original Sequence), in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 1: The Holy Sonnets*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), lines 10–11. All further quotations from Donne's *Holy Sonnets* will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[7]Donne, *Selected Letters*, pp. 88–89; see also the verse epistle "To Mr. *Rowland Woodward*: 'Like one who'in her third widdowhood,'" 5.

Our desires give them fashion, and so
As they waxe lesser, fall, as they sise,[8] grow.

But, from late faire
His highnesse sitting in a golden Chaire,
Is not lesse cared for after three dayes
By children, then the thing which lovers so
Blindly admire, and with such worship wooe;
Being had, enjoying it decayes:
And thence,
What before pleas'd them all, takes but one sense,
And that so lamely, as it leaves behinde
A kinde of sorrowing dulnesse to the minde.

Ah cannot wee,
As well as Cocks and Lyons jocund be,
After such pleasures, unlesse wise
Nature decreed (since each such Act, they say,
Diminisheth the length of life a day)
This; as shee would man should despise
The sport,
Because that other curse of being short,
And onely for a minute made to be
Eager, desires to raise posterity.

Since so, my minde
Shall not desire what no man else can finde,
I'll no more dote and runne
To pursue things which had indammag'd me.
And when I come where moving beauties be,
As men doe when the summers Sunne
Growes great,
Though I admire their greatnesse, shun their heate;
Each place can afford shadowes. If all faile,
'Tis but applying worme-seed to the Taile.
(1–40)

The speaker reflects on how unsatisfying sexual consummation for men turns out to be: "it leaves behinde / A kinde of sorrowing dulnesse to the

[8] *sise*, MS: rise

minde" (19–20). He ambivalently, ambiguously turns away from loving women: "I'll no more dote and runne / To pursue things which had indammag'd me" (33–34). As the few critics who have touched it agree, this crabbed lament on the disillusioning inadequacy of sexual experience calls out for clarification.

Since my overall approach is "biocultural," let me contextualize "Farewell to love" within its time and place by quickly explaining that the author's ribaldry was not as disreputable as it might now look. Despite the rise of Puritanism, seventeenth-century English literature did not shy away from contact with the flesh. In fact, many risqué works based on classical and European precedents, such as Ovid and Aretino respectively, were in wide circulation.[9] Texts specifically about orgasm treated premature ejaculation, impotence, masturbation, and mutual satisfaction. Ovidian highlights of this field include *Amores* 3.7, inspiration for Aphra Behn's "The Disappointment" plus Rochester's "The Disabled Debauchee" and "The Imperfect Enjoyment" ("In liquid raptures I dissolve all o'er, / Melt into sperm, and spend at every pore"[10]); and *Ars Amatoria* 2.725–732, which urges couples to finish together:

> Ad metam properate simul: tum plena voluptas,
> Cum pariter victi femina virque iacent.
>
> [Then is the fulnesse of all sweet content
> When both at once striue, both at once are spent.][11]

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[9]Useful entrées into the extensive and growing secondary literature on sexually explicit texts of the Renaissance include Ian Frederick Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and James Grantham Turner, *Schooling Sex: Libertine Literature and Erotic Education in Italy, France, and England, 1534–1685* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[10]John Wilmot, "The Imperfect Enjoyment," in *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David Vieth (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1968), lines 15–16.

[11]Ovid, *Ars Amatoria,* in *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, trans. J. H. Mozley, 2nd ed., The Loeb Classic Library 232 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1985), 2.727–728. The English translation I quote is from *Thomas Heywood's "Art of Love": The First Complete English Translation of Ovid's "Ars Amatoria,"* ed. M. L. Stapleton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan

Also titillating readers were Montaigne's *Essays* "On the Power of the Imagination" and "On Some Verses of Virgil," and "The Choice of Valentines" (or "Nashe his Dildo") by "the English Aretine" Thomas Nashe. Finally, as is well-known, Shakespeare penned myriad lewd passages and quibbles (the playwright's fatal Cleopatra according to Samuel Johnson), like the Porter's observation in *Macbeth* about excessive consumption of alcohol:

> It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him and it mars him; it sets him on and it takes him off; it persuades him and disheartens him, makes him stand to and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him.[12]

While Donne could, in writing a familiar epistle, express disapproval of a friend for wishing to read the "forbidden . . . profane books" of the notoriously obscene Italian "P. Aretinus,"[13] note that "Aretines pictures have made few chast[e]" in *Satyre IV* (70), and condemn said Aretino's "licentious pictures" in *Ignatius His Conclave*, his own "harsh verse" was itself frequently pretty racy ("To Mr. *T. W.*: 'Hast thee harsh verse,'" 1).[14] Three poems of his are particularly relevant. In "The Dreame," his "Deare love" awakens him while he is on the verge of a nocturnal emission, with obvious double entendres: "Thou cam'st to kindle, goest to come; Then I / Will dreame that hope againe, but else would die" (29–30). In "Sapho to Philaenis," the lesbian poetess gets turned on

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Press, 2000), 2.994–995. Heywood's translation of Ovid was also known as *Loues School*.

[12]Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 2.3.29–32. All further quotations from Shakespeare's plays and from his sonnets will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically. On Shakespearean sex puns, see Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (New York: Dutton, 1960).

[13]Donne, *Selected Letters*, pp. 5–6.

[14]Pietro Aretino was an early sixteenth-century satirist known as "il flagello dei principe," "the scourge of princes," whose *Sonneti Lussuriosi* were originally published with graphic illustrations in *I Modi*, but the first editions were heavily censored.

through fantasizing: "Likenesse begets such strange selfe flatterie, / That touching my selfe, all seemes done to thee" (51–52). And in his widely distributed, public "Epithalamion, Or mariage Song on the Lady Elizabeth, and Count Palatine being married on St. Valentines day" for their wedding in 1613 (the occasion for Shakespeare's *Tempest*), he wishes them all nuptial happiness:

> Two Phoenixes, whose joyned breasts
> Are unto one another mutuall nests,
> Where motion kindles such fires, as shall give
> Yong Phoenixes, and yet the old shall live.
> (23–26)

The "sorrowing" downside to sex examined by Donne in "Farewell to love" was also taken up by two of his most noteworthy contemporaries. Ben Jonson treated the theme somewhat differently in his "Fragment of Petron[ius] Arbiter Translated":

> Doing, a filthy pleasure is, and short;
> And done, we straight repent us of the sport:
> Let us not then rush blindly on unto it,
> Like lustful beasts that only know to do it:
> For lust will languish, and that heat decay.
> But thus, thus, keeping endless holiday,
> Let us together closely lie and kiss,
> There is no labor, nor no shame in this;
> This hath pleas'd, doth please, and long will please; never
> Can this decay, but is beginning ever.[15]

Rather than simply rejecting passionate intimacy, Jonson/Petronius alternatively finds lasting delight in extended, unending foreplay.[16] On

[15]Jonson, "Fragment of Petron[ius] Arbiter Translated," in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Hereford Percy and Evelyn Simpson, vol. 8 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), lines 1–10.

[16]For further analysis of this *festina lente* trope, see William Kerrigan, "Kiss Fancies in Robert Herrick," *George Herbert Journal* 14 (1990–1991): 155–171; and Michael A. Winkelman, "Flirtation; or Let Us Sport Us While We May: An Assay and Manifesto," *The Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 49 (2007): 56–73.

the other hand, Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 ruefully bemoans how concupiscence impels men to odious venereal obsessions that afterwards produce intense regret:

> Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
> Is lust in action; and, till action, lust
> Is perjur'd, mur'drous, bloody, full of blame,
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
> Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
> Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
> Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
> On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
> Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
> Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
> A bliss in proof, and prov'd, a very woe,
> Before, a joy proposed, behind, a dream.
>
> All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
> To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.
>
> (1–14)

Such expenditure is as unfulfilling as can be, inducing a kind of Burtonian melancholic insanity. Unlike the timeless pleasures in line 9 of Jonson's translation, Shakespeare's satyriasis is continuously harmful: "Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme" (10). Stephen Booth comments that the poem depicts "the perverse and self-defeating energy" of lechery.[17] It probably stands closest to "Farewell to love" in tone, though unfortunately the extent or direction of influence between them remains unknown.

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A major essay by Christopher Ricks, "John Donne: 'Farewell to Love,'" represents the prevailing scholarly thinking about post-coital malaise in Donne's works today.[18] To me, Ricks seems impressionistic

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[17]Booth, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 443.

[18]Ricks, "John Donne: 'Farewell to Love,'" in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 19–50; this essay started out as "Donne after Love," in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry,

and too clever by half (e.g., "Donne's accents . . . are not sportive, or s'pportive"[19]), but he has some fascinating ideas. In criticizing Donne's outlook, he also takes other academics to task for their alleged aloofness or detachment: "The professionalizing of literary studies, of which our culture is the victim-beneficiary, has brought with it the price paid for all professionalism: an induration against its own central human imperatives."[20] Given the recent deluge of politically correct publications seemingly more focused on issues of race, class, and gender identity (*viz.* feminist critiques of Donne) than on actual textual interpretation *per se*, this may now be a partial truth at best. Nevertheless, it usefully grounds his condemnation, a view ultimately based on the poet's perceived psychological weakness. Finding in Donne a misogynistic revulsion against sex and love, Ricks offers "value judgments" and "moral objections":

> Donne's poems . . . record a dislike of having come. . . . The corrosion and distortion are produced by what for Donne comes to spilt acid: spilt semen. . . . Donne's poetry . . . debases, demeans, and degrades. . . . For Donne, alive to the pun on 'die,' a poem's ending is likely to relate to . . . orgasm's affiliation to death.[21]

He is correct that several of Donne's "slimy rimes" ("To Mr. *E. G.*," 2) express depressing or fearful thoughts about carnal cravings. However, the major fault with his line of attack lies in his failure to realize that there is an innate biochemical basis for sometimes feeling bad after getting off. Donne, conversely, understood the underlying "central human imperatives" better.

Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1986, new series no. 12 (Baltimore, MD, and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 33–69. For additional commentary on the poem, see the "Farewell to love" Colloquium in *John Donne Journal* 18 (1999): 195–253; and A. J. Smith, "The Dismissal of Love: or, Was Donne a Neoplatonic Lover?," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 89–131.

[19]Ricks, p. 40.

[20]Ricks, p. 21.

[21]Ricks, pp. 19, 24, 34.

Galen provides the *locus classicus* for this idea: "post coitum omne animal triste est" (after sex, all animals are sad). Such *tristesse* happens occasionally to both males and females due to sex hormones released in the brain at orgasm.[22] One, dopamine, generates feelings of joy (the French word *jouissance* means not only "bliss" but also "sexual climax"), but a second, prolactin, represses dopamine's effects, thereby darkening the mood. Also known as luteotropic hormone, prolactin is a vital polypeptide made up of 199 amino acids, best known for stimulating postpartum lactation for new mothers. Lest matters be portrayed too mechanically, it should be emphasized that the relevant corporal processes are extraordinarily complex, with a barrage of physiological, external, and mental factors affecting the quality of the experience. One sexpert states that "orgasm [is] a reflex of the autonomic nervous system that can be either facilitated or inhibited by cerebral input (thoughts and feelings)."[23] The biochemistry behind all this has only recently begun to be analyzed with any kind of thoroughness, as the award-winning researchers behind *The Science of Orgasm* have reported.[24] The perceptual sensations depend on an intricate series of chemical reactions along the

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[22]Information in this section comes from Barry Komisaruk, Carlos Beyer-Flores, and Beverly Whipple, *The Science of Orgasm* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); "Sex with a Partner Is 400 Percent Better," *New Scientist*, 25 February 2006, p. 21; Tillmann H. C. Krüger, Manfred Schedlowski, and Michael S. Exton, "Neuroendocrine Processes during Sexual Arousal and Orgasm," in the *Psychophysiology of Sex*, ed. Erick Janssen, Kinsey Institute Series 8 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 83–102; Helen Fisher, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* (New York: Holt, 2004); and Mary Roach, *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex* (New York: Norton, 2008).

[23]Roach, p. 232. For an unhelpful study, wholly enthralled by French deconstructionist theory and in significant measure given over to interpreting pornography, see Murat Aydemir, *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). An associated question about the role of pheromones in human sexuality remains under investigation at present; it would provide an intriguing gloss to Donne's "Elegie: The Perfume": "Onely, thou bitter sweet, whom I had laid / Next mee, mee traiterously hast betraid" (53–54).

[24]*The Science of Orgasm* won the Bonnie and Vern L. Bullough Book Award from the Foundation for the Scientific Study of Sexuality in 2007.

brain-pituitary-gonadal axis. Some of the key neurotransmitters involved, especially serotonin, testosterone, and dopamine, give rise to euphoria, the proximate cause driving procreation (it "desires to raise posterity" [30]), but a countervailing after-effect is a surge in prolactin levels. It should be stressed that individual results are subject to complicated interactions among these various natural steroids, while sensory responses are additionally affected by age and health, or use of drugs and medicines. It is this boost in the amount of luteotropic hormone in the bloodstream that is directly responsible for the male refractory period, the immediate cessation of longing noted by Donne in stanza 3. Sometimes, depending on the psychological and physio-anatomical elements, a warm afterglow ensues: "at orgasm, levels of vasopressin dramatically increase in men and levels of oxytocin rise in women. These 'cuddle chemicals' undoubtedly contribute to that sense of fusion, closeness, and attachment you can feel after sweet sex with a beloved."[25] But at other times, even if the intercourse itself is great, even if, so to speak, the man hits a home run, he subsequently feels let down: "a high level of prolactin . . . is often associated with a decrease in both libido and sexual satisfaction in men. . . . Normally, the prolactin released at orgasm almost immediately 'feeds back' on the brain circuits related to sexual motivation and inhibits sexual drive."[26] This phenomenon lies beneath Donne's malign, despairing, disdainful attitude.

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Bearing that little chemistry lecture in mind, we may better appreciate Donne's treatment. "Farewell to love" traces out what has turned a man away from screwing around with women. A. J. Smith, in his generally astute reading, tentatively identifies the poem's attitude as "positivist, empiricist, sceptical, [and] naturalistic," but explicitly asserts that "this 'kinde of sorrowing dulnesse' which the mind feels surely isn't just *post coitum triste*."[27] The sophistry and amorous apostatizing certainly make the speaker a most Donnean persona. The poem presents itself as a rigorous, logical expostulation, signalled by rhetorical markers including

[25]Fisher, p. 89.
[26]Komisaruk, Beyer-Flores, and Whipple, pp. 197–198.
[27]Smith, "Dismissal of Love," pp. 122, 117.

"So," "Thus," "But," "unlesse," "Because," and "Since." Simultaneously, though, outré similes and cryptic phrasing present audiences with major syntactic and semantic challenges. In this regard, it's a little like deciphering teens' text messages nowadays. Donne begins by establishing the problem: he has wondered if his blind faith in love is warranted. The opening exemplifies the charge many have aimed at him of writing something that is not really poetry, a fault he anticipated in a verse letter to Thomas Woodward: "Now if this song be too'harsh for rime, yet, as / The Painters bad god made a good devill, / 'Twill be good prose, although the verse be evill" ("To Mr. *T. W.*: 'All haile sweet Poët,'" 25–27). This strand of criticism starts with none other than his good friend Ben Jonson: "Done for not keeping of accent deserved hanging."[28] Yet, poetically speaking, the conventional pairing of "love" and "prove" in lines 1–2 fits exquisitely well. Typically, Elizabethan sonnets tie "love" and "prove" to assert undying affection, like the final couplets of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* 25 ("Virtue's great beauty in that face I prove, / And find the effect, for I do burn in love"[29]) or Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 ("If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved" [13–14]). Unlike them, Donne is setting out "to prove" the case in the sense of "to make trial of, try, test . . . to find out, learn, or know by experience."[30] His initial belief, however, has not yet undergone verification, but is, rather, a projection of his "desires" (9). His friend Sir Francis Bacon pointed out in his *Novum Organum* that this propensity to hypostatize is an inherent mental attribute: "The human understanding is of its own nature prone to abstractions and gives a substance and reality to things which are fleeting."[31] Here Donne reifies Love as an idol, perhaps anticipating how kids view the edible gingerbread monarch of the second stanza. We find here another one of the *Songs and Sonnets*'

[28]A. J. Smith, ed., *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 69; see also 196, 368 ff.

[29]Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* 25, in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), lines 13–14.

[30]*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "prove," v., II.6 and II.7 (from the Latin *probare*).

[31]Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *Works*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 8 vols. (Boston: Taggard and Thompson, 1863), §51.

fascinating, impertinent confrontations with Cupid and his ilk, one of the ways the poet establishes his own mastery (see also "Loves Usury," "The Indifferent," "Loves Deitie," "The Funerall," "Loves exchange," and "Lecture upon the Shadow"). Having set forth the issue, Donne proceeds with analogies in stanza 2, explanations for what he finds in stanza 3, and his regrettable conclusion in stanza 4.

The conceit of the gingerbread king figure in stanza 2 exemplifies what critics of Metaphysical verse, like John Dryden and Samuel Johnson, saw as over-intellectualization:

> But, from late faire
> His highnesse sitting in a golden Chaire,
> Is not lesse cared for after three dayes
> By children, then the thing which lovers so
> Blindly admire, and with such worship wooe;
> Being had, enjoying it decayes:
> (11–16)

Physically unrequited beaux and belles want the object of their affections—or at least selfish sexual gratification—as much as youngsters still care for a king-shaped cookie after a fair. The ingeniousness of the comparison is on display in the headless line 16, reminiscent of Shakespeare and Jonson: "Being had, enjoying it decayes." The pastry is savored while being reduced through consumption; likewise the orgasmic endpoint of copulation causes penile detumescence and leads immediately to the aforementioned dissatisfaction: "A kinde of sorrowing dulnesse to the minde." The ruminations of Troilus in Shakespeare's troubling play about the Trojan War are apposite here: "This is the monstruosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite and the execution confin'd, that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit" (*Troilus and Cressida*, 3.2.81–83). Like other cravings, the obtainment paradoxically ends the pleasure, an element of attraction known as far back as Plato's *Symposium*, where Socrates contends that "any case of desire is necessarily desire for something which is lacking."[32]

[32]Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 39, §200a.

The faint puns, *woe*/*woo* (spelled "wooe") and "sorrowing"/*sour*, would seem to reinforce the dismal tone.[33]

Next a scientific-sounding explanation is considered:

> Ah cannot wee,
> As well as Cocks and Lyons jocund be,
> After such pleasures, unlesse wise
> Nature decreed (since each such Act, they say,
> Diminisheth the length of life a day)
> This; as shee would man should despise
> The sport,
> Because that other curse of being short,
> And onely for a minute made to be
> Eager, desires to raise posterity.
> (21–30)

A definitive sense to these *lineas serpintinatas* is by no means apparent. Editors John Rumrich and Gregory Chaplin remind us that they are "generally regarded as the most difficult lines in Donne's poetry."[34] Whatever the exact intended meaning, the *sounds*, such as those harsh, plosive *k*'s and *d*'s, emphasize the gloomy effect. The pejorative terms beginning with *d* ("decayes," "dulnesse," "dying," "Diminisheth," "despise," and "dote") all but contaminate the more neutral or positive terms "Deitie" and "desire." This passage, moreover, furnishes a great example of Donne's propensity towards obscurity. As Charles Lamb noted two centuries ago, Donne's "meaning was often quite . . . *uncomeatable*, without a personal citation from the dead."[35] The overall

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[33]"Wooe" (woo) in line 15 rhymes with "so"; it might be acknowledged that this wordplay could be unintentional. However, for what it's worth, Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (in *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1912]) includes a similar pun on *sorrow*/*sour*, when Cupid lessens "the joyes of love": "A thousand *sowres* hath tempred with one sweet, / To make it seeme more deare and dainty, as is meet" (6.11.1).

[34]Rumrich and Chaplin, eds., p. 44 n. 6; see also Smith, "Dismissal of Love," p. 117 n. 1.

[35]Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*, p. 290. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "*Un-come-at-able*" = "unattainable, inaccessible." Perusing *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*, one frequently comes across entertaining

gist would apparently be that Mother Nature has made climaxing immediately regrettable for men to counterbalance the opposing feeling, the longing to experience and re-experience the fleeting ardor that drives reproduction.[36] Donne's relative Sir Thomas More includes the commonplace in *Utopia* that the sex drive is biological: "pleasures of the body . . . which arises from satisfying the appetite which Nature has wisely given to lead us to the propagation of the species."[37] The extended male refractory period, ergo, is a sociobiological adaptation or refinement, presumably keeping men from giving in to their otherwise excessive horniness, and thereby allowing the important business of the world to proceed.

Donne has given us some further trouble spots here, too. Is the question mark supplied by two seventeenth-century manuscripts after "pleasures" authorial, or should there be one after "this," omitted in transcription or absent due to the irregularities of early modern punctuation?[38] Is the opening "Ah" meant to be mimetic—a sigh of disappointment playing off the writer's signature "Oh's"? How seriously are we to take the claim that *la petite morte* shortens life—the implicit sex/death metaphor—as "they say" in lines 24–25? Would this make his avowal of abstinence, his declaration of celibate retirement, an oath of self-preservation? (Compare *The First Anniversarie*: "We kill our selves, to propagate our kinde" [110]; and Donne's *Paradox* "That all things kill themselves": "we daily kill our *bodies* with *surfeits*, and our minds with *anguishes*. . . . Of *Affections*, *Lusting* our *lust*."[39]) Is *all* intercourse "sport," or only brief animal-like rutting? Lastly, the end of the sentence does not quite parse grammatically. The primary meaning must be, as John

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examples of prominent readers likewise confused by Donne, including Ben Jonson (p. 70); King James (p. 74); Coleridge (p. 270); and William Hazlitt, who opined that the Sphinx couldn't unravel Donne's quaint riddles in verse (p. 308).

[36]A related question, whether the female orgasm is an adaptation or by-product for humans, remains unresolved at present and is the topic of ongoing scientific inquiry.

[37]More, *Utopia* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), p. 52.

[38]See Gary A. Stringer, "The Text of 'Farewell to Love,'" *John Donne Journal* 18 (1999): 201–213.

[39]Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. Evelyn Simpson, Helen Gardner, and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 10–11.

Shawcross glosses it, "the shortness of the act was decreed by nature to increase desire in order to raise posterity."[40] Given that the "other curse" is the brevity of lovemaking, may we also detect Christian sin and its hastening of death besides the biological curse of despising the sport afterwards? Lastly, is the convoluted expression throughout meant to convey or capture some of the overall negativity of the poem as a whole? These little cruxes seem open to multiple interpretations.

The final stanza brings renunciation:

> Since so, my minde
> Shall not desire what no man else can finde,
> I'll no more dote and runne
> To pursue things which had indammag'd me.
> And when I come where moving beauties be,
> As men doe when the summers Sunne
> Growes great,
> Though I admire their greatnesse, shun their heate;
> Each place can afford shadowes. If all faile,
> 'Tis but applying worme-seed to the Taile.
> (31–40)

As he announces, he will no longer engage in self-destructive behavior, chasing the impossible. Or maybe he will. He will try to avoid attractive women, but the last polysemous sentence ironically opens up the possibility of his continued dalliance.[41] (Interestingly, both in lines 20 and 31, he places his lust squarely in his "minde," the rhyme word, in apparent recognition of the brain's centrality to his integrated being.) He is, on the level closest to the surface, stating that prevention will abate his priapic impulses, and if such evasive action "fails," his final measure will be to put an anaphrodisiac on his phallus.[42] A converse reading applies,

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[40]Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, p. 150 n. 30.

[41]Jasper Jackson, the protagonist of Edward Docx's recent novel *The Calligrapher* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), set in present-day London, goes through similar experiences while on commission to copy Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, which furnish a witty intertext to the story (see especially pp. 26–27).

[42]Cf. Ovid's *Amores*, 3.7, in which he considers the possibility that some sort of charm or potion—an anti-Viagra—has rendered him impotent. In Christopher Marlowe's translation: "What, wast my limbs through some

though, just as readily. If all his efforts at shunning "faile," well, then, "each such Act" itself is no more than a bodily urge, delivering his sperm ("worme-seed" or *semen sanctum*) to her "Taile," still a vulgar colloquialism for the female sexual organs.[43] In fact, this poem's ending is replete with erotic innuendo. Certainly the verbs "come" and "do" are puns, while the phrase "each place can afford shadows" faintly suggests an image of where he could "hide" his male organ. It is not as poetical as the parallel figure in "Aire and Angels"—"thy love may be my loves sphere" (25)—but it expresses, in context, a similarly half-submerged idea.[44] Another oddity here stems from the metaphorical slippage in lines 35–39. He conflates the men avoiding the "great" summer sun with his own efforts at shunning the "greatnesse" and "heate" of the ladies; they are all too hot and best evaded.[45] "Things" is another weird floating signifier—flowing from generally unknown objects (8) to the sex act (14) to women (34), with a sort of overlapping accrual of connotations; it is possible to call this antifeminism. The strange internal rhyming on

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Thesalian charms, / May spelles and droughs do sillie soules such harmes? . . . Why might not then my sinews be inchanted, / And I grow faint, as with some spirit haunted?" ("Elegia 6" [sic], beginning "Quod ab amica receptus" in the Latin, from *Ovid's Elegies* (or *All Ovid's Elegies*), in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 2nd ed., vol. 2 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 1981], lines 27–36). On Donne's figurative, colloquial use of "wormseed," see Siobhán Collins, "Riddling Wonders: Gold Coins and the Phoenix in Donne's Genre-Defying Verse," *Appositions: Studies in Renaissance/Early Modern Literature and Culture* 2 (2009): 1–14 (online).

[43] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "tail," n.[1], 5.c.

[44] There is also a probable pun on *damned*/"indammag'd" in line 34, analogous to *sin*/"insinuating" when Milton describes Satan sneaking into the Garden in *Paradise Lost* (in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes [New York: Odyssey Press, 1957]): "close the serpent sly / Insinuating, wove with Gordian twine / His braided train, and of his fatal guile / Gave proof unheeded" (4.347–350). George Chapman's Jacobean revenge tragedy *Bussy D'Ambois* uses the same pun.

[45] Cf. "The Autumnal," where Donne acknowledges "Yong *Beauties* force our love" (3), but claims to prefer mature love: "Since such loves naturall lation is, may still / My love descend, and journey downe the hill, / Not panting after growing beauties, so, / I shall ebbe out with them, who home-ward goe" (47–50). *Lation*, an obscure astronomical term, means motion, with a pun on elation and translation, and possibly less arduous sex?

admire and *desire*(*s*) (see lines 9, 15, 30, 32, 38) creates another little back-current against the main argument. Finally, the lame ending, similar to "Aire and Angels" or "The Curse," seems appropriate here since it fits the subject matter so well.

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Donne's anatomization of post-coital *tristesse* is too downbeat and unsentimental ever to be considered one of his finest works. However, it seems unfair and mistaken to attack it, as Ricks and others do, simply because it is negative. Rather, it should be considered a case where Donne has again successfully mapped the emotional and physiological states he was describing. "Loves Alchymie," something of a companion piece, charts similar terrain. True love ultimately proves elusive; it is certainly not found via swiving. Instead, it is "that hidden mysterie," "a winter-seeming summers night," and "this vaine Bubles shadow" (5, 12, 14).

"Farewell to love" starts off "ignorantly" (6). From the benighted perspective of the modern life sciences, it is tempting to identify those "Things not yet knowne" as prolactin and the other natural sex hormones and neurotransmitters involved in feeling "A kinde of sorrowing dulnesse to the minde" (20). Likewise, then, the "unknowne power" would be the genetic imperative to procreate, key to nineteenth-century naturalist Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, of course (5). Educated people now accept (by and large) his fundamental principles of natural and sexual selection. What many do still find extremely troubling about certain recent developments in cognitive science, however, is the reduction in free will this all entails. The determinism expressed in the epigraph to this essay, from "All things Are Governed by Atoms" by Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, is profoundly unsettling to many people's deeply cherished beliefs about their essential identities. (As a faithful Christian, Donne assumed he possessed a soul: he was "a little world made cunningly / Of Elements, and an Angelike spright," [Holy Sonnet 7, 1–2]). Fear of determinism seems, though, inherently part of Donne's poem; in some ways, realizing he is destined by Biology to chase such bittersweet ends is even more sorrowful than the despising he knows he will feel afterwards. It reduces him to being subhuman, to the level of "lecherous goats" (Holy Sonnet 9 [Original Sequence], 3) and

"Foxes."[46] Yet Donne's linkage of the physical and mental—integrated Aristotelean hylomorphism rather than Cartesian duality—and their biological causation marks him as a very clear-sighted *magister amoris naturalis*.

In "Farewell to love," he sets forth ideas about eroticism that are far from mainstream. We cannot say with any degree of certainty what his conscious motivations for writing the pieces were, let alone his unconscious ones, but we can observe that throughout the *Songs and Sonnets* he made an effort to get past conventional wisdom, to dig deep and get at the truth of the matter. In a later religious composition, Donne explained that this curiosity was a constituent element of his humanity: "because I am a man and no worme . . . and enlightned with some glimerings of Naturall knowledge."[47] His cogitations on what he saw and felt led to the creation of striking works of verse. While florid banalities may always be popular with the middlebrow set, the urge to question accepted pieties and to challenge ossified norms also seems deeply ingrained in the artistic psyche. Donne was something of a proto-scientist, who "ripp'd me'and search'd where hearts should lye" ("The Legacie," 14), and he offers us a prime example of the results of such intellectual adventuring.

Bowling Green State University

[46]Donne, Elegy 9 ("Change"), 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), line 11.

[47]Donne, *Essays in Divinity*, ed. Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), p. 37, de-italicized.