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Courting Anne More

Ilona Bell

It seems like a wonderful irony of history that the millennial celebration of John Donne was held at Loseley Park, the visible sign of Anne More's aristocratic heritage—the very heritage that would have prevented her from marrying John Donne, had not she not been willing to defy her father's will and incur his wrath.

Most twentieth-century scholars have either ignored Anne More, or insisted upon her absence, her silence, her elusive unknowability. Recently, as the Loseley conference signifies, Anne More has begun to receive the attention she deserves, thanks to M. Thomas Hester's collection, Dennis Flynn's biographical forays, Arthur Marotti's chapters on the courtship and marriage, and Ted-Larry Pebworth and Claude Summers' confirmation that John Donne wrote the three Burley love letters to Anne during their courtship.[1] This essay explores some of the ways that Anne More can help explain Donne's *Songs and Sonets*; but first, let me review what we know about her, and Donne's courtship of her.[2]

Anne More was born in 1584, the daughter of Sir George More and Anne More, the granddaughter of Sir William More (who built the magnificent house at Loseley because Queen Elizabeth supposedly said his old house was not fit for her to tarry in), and the great granddaughter of Sir Christopher More, who bought the estate his descendants still own today. Around 1598 Anne More went to London to live with her aunt, the second wife of Sir Thomas Egerton, the Keeper of the Privy Seal. It was customary for the daughters of the aristocracy and gentry to be sent to London to live with a well-placed relative where

they could receive an education and be introduced to society. When Anne arrived at York House, John Donne was living there, working as the Lord Keeper's secretary, using his wit and learning to make his way in the upper echelons of Elizabethan government and society.[3]

The three Burley letters, which John Donne wrote to Anne More before their marriage, use all the resources of art to persuade Anne More that she should marry her brilliant poet/lover rather than one of the wealthy, curled darlings of the nation.[4] The first letter is by far the most exuberant: "Madam you owe me this releif because in all that part of this somer wch I spent in yr presence yo doubled ye heat and I liued vnder ye rage of a hott sonn & yr eyes."[5] Donne thought Anne was *really* hot, and it seems that the feeling was mutual. Given the value Elizabethan society placed on modesty and chastity, a raging female libido might have given a more conventional suitor pause.[6] But not John Donne; he loved Anne's passion. Their physical intimacy heightened rather than lowered his estimation of her.

Their courtship seems to have prospered in great secrecy until December 1600 when Sir Edmund Neville told Sir George More about the affair, and Sir George hastily brought Anne brought back to Loseley Park in Surrey.[7] From that point on, it was much more difficult for the lovers to meet. Donne sent Anne the third Burley letter during this time, when he was desperately afraid of losing her. I suspect he also sent her some of his more anxious poems such as "A Jet Ring Sent" and "The Prohibition."

In December 1601 Anne accompanied her father to London for the opening session of Parliament. As Donne later wrote to Sir George: "At her byeng in town this last Parliament, I found meanes to see her twice or thrice."[8] Walton, who thought Donne's marriage was the greatest mistake of his life, complained that they married "without the allowance of those friends, whose approbation always was, and ever will be necessary, to make even a vertuous love become lawful."[9] By describing her as a "minor" or "underage," modern scholars have perpetuated Walton's assumption that John Donne married Anne More "illegally." But in sixteenth-century England, ecclesiastical law gave any female over the age of twelve and any male over the age of fourteen

the right to marry without parental consent. It was not Anne's age but her father's rage that made Anne jailbait.

The couple must have hoped that, once the marriage was a *fait accompli*, Sir George More and Sir Thomas Egerton would relent, securing the couple's financial well-being and supporting Donne's professional aspirations. That is not how it turned out, at least for the first few years. John Donne, Samuel Brooke, who performed the marriage, and Christopher Brooke, who witnessed it, were all thrown in jail. In the famous Loseley letters, now at the Folger Library, Donne wrote to Sir George More and Sir Thomas Egerton begging their understanding and seeking their blessing. Donne was a lawyer—and a proud man. He argued that their clandestine marriage contract, dating back to the time when he and Anne were both living in London, could not be broken without loss of honor. Since it predated any subsequent attempts by her father to arrange a marriage, he urged, it was not only morally but also legally binding.

Sir George More and Sir Thomas Egerton were not assuaged, but the courts confirmed the marriage that spring.[10] Egerton refused to let Donne rejoin the staff at York House, and the newlyweds moved to Pyrford. The Donnes lived together in Surrey for fifteen years, separated only by Donne's expeditions to the continent and his engagements in London. On 15 August 1617, at the age of thirty-three, Anne More Donne died of puerperal fever, seven days after the still-born birth of her twelfth child.

So what do these facts tell us about Anne More? Clearly, she was daring and rebellious. As Donne reminded her father, "We adventured equally." Her father's anger, her own religious upbringing, Elizabethan social codes that equated female honor with chastity and submission, her inheritance and the privileged life it promised—in the end all this paled in comparison with her desire to spend the rest of her life with John Donne.

Looking back, it is tempting to see Anne More as an awestruck groupie, eager to attach herself to the renowned poet and preacher who is so highly regarded today. But Donne was not a celebrity when Anne More betrothed herself to him sometime between 1598 and 1601.

Rather, he was an aspiring public servant, who had completed his education at the Inns of Court and been to war. He was thirteen years older than she. He had no title, a depleted inheritance, and a limited income. Worse yet, his family, albeit distinguished, was Roman Catholic, and it was not clear whether Donne himself had truly embraced the Church of England.[11]

What drove Anne More to elope with such a man? Although Sir George couldn't understand (or wouldn't concede) the attraction, John Donne had great wit, abundant charm, excellent connections, and stunning verbal aptitude. Even more important, he wrote passionate, powerfully persuasive poetry of courtship. My hunch is that Anne was at once sexually aroused by the heat and rage of the hot sun and intellectually emboldened by Donne's powerful rhetoric—eager to share the romantic, literary life John Donne offered her.

Many scholars and critics have questioned whether Anne More could have read Donne's poems, for in sixteenth-century England female literacy was limited.[12] To some extent, the question is moot, since Donne's poems were clearly written to be performed. Most of them were probably recited to Anne, either by Donne himself or by his carefully chosen envoi.[13]

Nonetheless, all the evidence suggests that Anne More was extremely well educated. Although Walton is not always reliable, it is notable that one of the few details he mentions about Anne is that she was "curiously [meaning unusually] and plentifully educated."[14] Walton's claim is confirmed by an exciting document Dennis Flynn discovered amidst the Loseley papers.[15] The document, technically known as an "assignment of term of years," assigns certain revenues for specific purposes for a given period of time. Signed by Sir George More, it declares that he and "Anne my wife" purchased the rights to a mill near Odiham for 150 years for the express purpose of supporting, educating, and improving the prospects of their four unmarried daughters. Here are the crucial lines: "Nowe know yee that for and in consideracon of the maintenaunce educacon and advauncement of my fower daughters viz Mary More Margaret More Anne More and Elizabeth More I have thought convenient and doe by theis psents

absolutely determine that the foresaid mille Baylieweke and lands before mencioned and the pfitte and comodetyes of the same shalbe bestowed and imployed by equalle porcions amongest my fower daughters."

"[M]aintenaunce, educacion and advauncement"—these three key words suggest that Sir George More saw education as integral to assuring his daughters' place in society. This is presumably what Donne is alluding to in the second Burley letter when he praises Anne's father for "building of so fayre a pallace as you are and so furnishing it as his care hath done."

Indeed, the three Burley love letters are permeated with laudatory remarks about Anne's learning. The first letter concludes, "I wilbee bold to kiss yt fayre vertuous hand wch doth much in receaving this letter & may do easyly much more in sending another." Donne's comment that she may "easily" send him "another" letter is at once a plea for a quick response and a tribute to her epistolary accomplishments. Indeed, the phrase, "may do easyly much more" sounds like a carefully coded allusion to the names Donne and More which are discreetely omitted from this potentially scandalous letter. The second Burley letter concludes by assuring Anne that her learning makes her all the more attractive: "here I sweare to yo by my loue & by yt fayre learned hand wch I humbly kisse." Together, the three Burley letters prove that Donne's attraction to Anne was inextricably tied to her learning. Even more important, they show that Donne courted her in witty, metaphoric, sprightly, enigmatic language—exactly the kind of language that undergoes "Rimes vexation" in his *Songs and Sonets*.[16]

At the height of their affair, when their relations were at their sunniest, Donne seems to have had utter faith in Anne's ability to appreciate and respond to his intellectually challenging and emotionally charged literary style. Later, as external circumstances began to wrench them apart, his intellectual boldness and personal daring were checked by feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, and uncertainty. In the third letter his language became less playfully enigmatic and more desperately self-dramatizing, tinged with a scathing bitterness that is barely held in check by lingering memories of tenderness and trust.

Thus the three Burley love letters contain in miniature the wildly vacillating tones of voice, the intensely dialogic imagination, the sophisticated tropes and enigmatic, equivocal rhetoric that are so characteristic of Donne's love poetry.

What we now know about Anne More, and Donne's courtship of Anne More, can, I believe, enrich, alter, or complicate our reading of his love poems. A love poem is a poem of courtship if its primary lyric audience is the woman the poet is courting, or if it uses the conventions of the genre to seem as if it was originally addressed to the poet's mistress. Poetry of courtship should not be confused with memoir, autobiography, or love story. It does not comprise "a rigidly chronological diary," for it is not a narrative of events that have already occurred.[17] Rather poems of courtship are interventions, carefully constructed rhetorical acts that use all the resources of art to convince the private female lyric audience to love and marry (or at least have sexual intercourse with) her brilliant poet/lover.[18]

In reading an Elizabethan lyric as a poem of courtship—as one side of a lover's conversation, or one moment in a larger lover's dialogue—we should not blithely impose the poet's life upon the poem, lest we distort the language to fit the life, any more than we can confidently extract information about the life from the poem, since even the most personal poems of courtship are artful constructions. But we can hope that contradictory, incongruous, or hitherto inexplicable aspects of the poem will make better sense once we stop to imagine how the poet/lover's mistress might have understood and responded to his diction, tropes, and argument.

Since poems of courtship are typically used in clandestine love affairs such as John Donne and Anne More's, their private meanings are often encoded so as to be accessible only to the poet/lover's mistress and their chosen confidants: "[B]elieve with me," Sidney alerts the readers of *A Defence of Poesy*, "there are many mysteries contained in poetry which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused."[19] A dialogic reading should ideally acquire an integrity of its

own which brings together all the myriad details of the poem, but it may only become visible or comprehensible to us when we apply what we know about the life, when we bear in mind the ways in which the Elizabethans conducted their courtships and the ways in which poetry was used in courtship, and when we consciously remember that Elizabethan poems of courtship were conventionally addressed to the poet/lover's mistress.

To illustrate how Donne's *Songs and Sonets* can be read as poems of courtship, I want to look closely at "The Flea," Donne's most flamboyant seduction poem. The following reading of "The Flea" has been constructed, at least initially, so that it can stand on its own, apart from the life, even though it occurred to me, as it did not occur to previous critics, because of what I have discovered about Donne's courtship in particular and the poetry and practice of Elizabethan courtship in general.

"The Flea"

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead,
    Yet this enjoyes before it wooe,
    And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two,
    And this, alas, is more then wee would doe.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where wee almost, yea more then maryed are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet.
    Though use make you apt to kill mee,
    Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,
    And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.

> Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since
> Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?
> Wherein could this flea guilty bee,
> Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?
> Yet thou triumph'st, and saist that thou
>
> Find'st not thy selfe, nor mee the weaker now;
> 'Tis true; then learne how false, feares bee;
> Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee,
> Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.[20]

Most critics agree that "The Flea" is one of Donne's most amusing and polished performances, though they disagree about the tenderness or cynicism of the speaker's tone and the ultimate success or failure of his persuasion. A number of critics argue that no woman could possibly be swayed by such an obviously specious argument.[21] Others respond that the female interlocutor clearly enjoys the poet/lover's ingenuity and playfulness, though they continue to argue about whether or not she will yield up her virginity once the poem comes to an end.[22] Of course, there is no way to know what happens when a poem ends. Yet the very fact that critics have become so embroiled in this perplexing question indicates that "The Flea," even more than other Renaissance love poems, invites its readers to look beyond the text—to consider not only how the woman is represented within the poem but also how she responds outside the text, on the margins of the poem.

Even critics who read the poem in diametrically opposed ways seem to begin with the unquestioned assumption that the female interlocutor is a virginal young woman whose moral and social scruples have led her to refuse the poet/lover's proposition:[23]

> Thou know'st that this cannot be said
> A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead.

The poet/lover is trying to convince the woman to make love with him by drawing an analogy to "this," i.e., the flea's bite. But obviously just because the flea's bite hasn't affected her maidenhead doesn't mean the

poet/lover's proposition is equally innocuous, and besides, no one *chooses* to be bitten by a flea. Since the Elizabethan code of ethics equated a woman's honor with chastity, for an unmarried woman to decide to yield up her virginity was a grave matter with potentially serious moral and social consequences. If the female interlocutor is a virgin, the speaker's logic is clearly specious.[24]

If we take the poem's assertions at face value, however, the speaker's analogical reasoning is not as contradictory, or absurd, as it seems. The poet/lover claims that making love would involve no loss of maidenhead. That would, in fact, be a true proposition if the woman is not a virgin. If this is a libertine seduction poem, the speaker may be flattering the woman, whom he knows to be promiscuous, by addressing her as if she were a virgin, even though he knows, and she knows, that is not the case: "Thou know'st that this cannot be said / A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead." Regardless of the speaker's tone or intentions, his logic is less spurious and more compelling if the female interlocutor is not a virgin. But what happens if "The Flea" is not only what it seems to be, a witty seduction poem, but also a tender, coded poem of courtship?

If the poet/lover knows the female interlocutor is not a virgin because they already have a sexually consummated, loving relationship, making love now would indeed change very little, and could reasonably, in all good faith and good humor, be compared to a flea bite. When read from this point of view, the very structure of the sentence—"Thou know'st that this cannot be said"—implies the shared understanding of an ongoing, close relationship. As we shall see in due course, this intimacy is assumed again in line 16. But if she is not a virgin, why is she resisting the poet/lover's advances?

> Yet this enjoyes before it wooe,
> And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two,
> And this, alas, is more then wee would doe.

As Donne's editors note, the description of the flea, "pamper'd" or deliciously fed with their combined blood, is a witty allusion to the

medical theory that blood combined during intercourse, and led to conception. If she is worried about getting pregnant, perhaps Donne hoped to dispel her fears with laughter. After all, in an age where birth control was rudimentary and unreliable, repeated sexual encounters would have greatly increased the chance of conception. Donne also seems to be so carried away by his own cleverness that he doesn't stop to realize the conceit might swell rather than assuage her fears.

It is only after the first stanza has been wrapped up in that resounding triple rhyme that the poet/lover pauses to consider her response. At this point he realizes what the second stanza proceeds to examine, that the problem is much too complicated to be resolved by a witty analogy:

> Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
> Where wee almost, yea more then maryed are.
> This flea is you and I, and this
> Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is;
> Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met
> And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet.

In sixteenth-century England a promise to marry, made in the presence of two witnesses and followed by coitus, constituted a legally binding common law marriage.[25]

If the lovers have exchanged an honorable promise to marry, and if their blood has already mingled in bed as it has mingled in the flea's body, they are, as Donne's self-correcting syntax suggests, "almost, yea more then maryed." The sequence of ideas, "though parents grudge, and you," suggests that the lady's resistance stems, not from any personal aversion on her part but from her fearful awareness of their parents' disapproval. The speaker chooses the verb, "grudge," meaning hesitation or grumbling rather than outright opposition, to temper their parent's resistance and soften her reservations.[26]

It may seem ridiculous to think of a flea as "our mariage bed, and mariage temple," but erotic passion is ridiculous even as it is exalting, as both Donne and Shakespeare frequently attest: "things base and vile, holding no quantity, / Love can transpose to form and dignity" (MSND

1.1.232-33). The exalted, gem-like beauty of the image, "cloyster'd in these living walls of Jet," is all the more astonishing because visual description and sonorous lyricism are not Donne's wont, as they were Spenser's and Sidney's.[27]

Once we overcome our initial aversion to the flea—and what creature could be more puny and irksome than a flea?—the insect's body provides a remarkably apt metaphor for clandestine lovers such as John Donne and Anne More. As a verb, *cloister* means both to shut up in seclusion and to shut up or restrain within narrow limits. Like the bedroom walls that enclose the lovers in "The Sunne Rising" and "The good-morrow" where Donne's conceit "makes one little roome, an every where," the flea tropes the lovers' isolation from the larger social world. Because they cannot be seen together, the poet/lover and his mistress have had to sequester themselves, carrying on their courtship in darkness and secrecy which the black walls of the flea's body signify so aptly. Moreover, the word "cloistered" was regularly applied to the womb (O.E.D. 1.b), so the image further represents and tries to assuage the woman's continuing fear of pregnancy.

The second stanza ends with another resounding triplet:

> Though use make you apt to kill mee,
> Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,
> And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.

The word "use," which is usually glossed to mean custom or habit, has prompted most critics and readers to see the female interlocutor as a conventional Petrarchan lady who kills her lover with icy disdain, and indeed I think that is how Donne hoped it would be seen by "prophane men . . . Which will no faith on this bestow" ("The undertaking"). But to the female interlocutor who is the poem's primary lyric audience, the words "apt" and "use" evoke an ongoing relationship with a poet/lover who well knows how she is likely to respond. Moreover, both "use" and "kill" have familiar sexual double entendres.[28] Hence the conventional Petrarchan language serves as a screen for the sexual intimacy that has remained a dark secret between them.

Between stanzas two and three the woman kills the flea, which is Donne's way of acknowledging that her objections are far too serious to be dispelled by the gorgeous imagery of stanza 2, any more than they could be quelled by the playful wit of stanza 1. Yet, Donne, being Donne, cannot resist one final plea—and one final twist to the metaphor:

> 'Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee;
> Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee,
> Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.

As a transitive verb, "waste" can mean: to consume one's strength or capacities, to destroy or annihilate something immaterial.[29] Since "honor" was commonly used to mean both virginity and the female pudenda, the conclusion can be read as a cynical seduction poem—a seduction that makes better sense, I would argue, if the speaker knows the woman is not a virgin.[30]

Yet once again the lines take on an additional, and very different meaning when one reads the poem as addressed to the poet/lover's mistress. As the rhythm, "whén/ thou yeéld'st/ to meé," stresses, yielding to "to meé" will involve no loss of honor. By contrast, yielding to anyone else would not only expose her as a "fain'd vestall" (to quote the embittered poet/lover of "The Apparition") since her future husband would soon discover she is not the virgin she seems to be, but it would also require her to betray the honor she has already pledged to this poet/lover. But if they have exchanged an honorable promise to marry, making love with him now will not diminish her honor any more than the flea's death has diminished her life or weakened her capacities. Under these circumstances, it is not making love with him but refusing to make love with him that would constitute a loss of honor.

Although "The Flea" seems like one of Donne's most shockingly unconventional poems, there was a well-established genre of Renaissance flea poems.[31] The ur-flea poem, attributed incorrectly to Ovid, is an apostrophe to the flea. After describing in lascivious detail the flea's daring forays into the woman's privy parts, the speaker concludes

by saying that if the woman doesn't submit herself to him, he will assume the body of a flea so that he can force his way into the most secret crevices of her body. In marked contrast, Donne's persuasion poem comes to a dead halt at the end of each stanza, where his poet/lover confronts his dependence upon the lady's response. The flea's death provides a graphic acknowledgment that his wishes are unavoidably contingent on her response, and that no matter how forcefully he argues his case, the outcome is hers to decide.[32]

Formalists may prefer to see "The Flea" as a fictional poem of courtship, written to look as if it were addressed to the poet's mistress, and the interpretation I have sketched so far has been deliberately derived from the poem itself without specific reference to the circumstances of Donne's courtship of Anne More. Deconstructionists may prefer to attribute the contradictory readings to the radical instability of language itself. Both the formalist approach and the deconstructive critique seem apt, but I want to explore another explanation for the poem's inherent duality—and duplicity.[33]

Once one accepts the unconventional premise that the speaker and the woman addressed are honorably betrothed lovers, "The Flea" becomes a tender, empathetic, and much more convincing poem of courtship. Since the poem of courtship, with its defense of an honorable, consummated, clandestine love affair, is so carefully concealed behind a witty seduction poem calculated to amuse Donne's male coterie with its outrageous logic, it seems likely to me that John Donne was wooing Anne More in words "which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits [they] should be abused." Indeed the details of the poem fit the circumstances of Donne's courtship so precisely that I think the resemblance is not a coincidence.[34]

The image of the flea brings together, in language as compact as the flea itself, all the complications, anxieties, and contingencies of John Donne's clandestine love affair with Anne More. For example, the word "cloysterd" refers not only to being shut up in seclusion but also to the monasteries that were closed during the Reformation. Hence, as Hester and DiPasquale have suggested, it is probably a deliberate reference to Donne's own Roman Catholicism, which was Sir George

More's primary objection to the match.[35] Hester and DiPasquale disagree about whether the poem adopts a Catholic or a Protestant position in the heated, ongoing controversy over the Eucharist. I think the "sacrilege" Donne's poem strives to prevent is not a misconception of the Eucharist but a profanation of the joys they both hold sacred:

> Though use make you apt to kill mee,
> Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,
> And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.

In addition to the sexual and customary meanings discussed above, "use" also has both a religious meaning—the distinctive ritual or liturgy that prevailed in a given church—and a legal meaning—the act of holding land or property so as to derive revenue—both of which apply to the most pressing impediments to John Donne's courtship of Anne More. If her father were to discover that she had betrothed herself and given her "honor" or chastity to John Donne, a Roman Catholic who may have only nominally accepted the English liturgy and a lawyer with no wealth or title, Sir George More might disown his daughter, denounce her fiancé, and impoverish them both. On the other hand, if she should break her promise to marry John Donne in order to marry a Protestant or an aristocrat chosen by her father, that would destroy her (or so John Donne wants her to think) for it would end her freedom to choose the life she has imagined and prevent her from remaining the woman she "is"—the woman John Donne has encouraged her to "bee" by writing poems such as "The Flea." Moreover, losing the woman he adores would also kill John Donne.

In the third Burley letter, when John Donne thinks Anne More has rejected him, his "desperat mind is sick," and he falls into a near fatal depression, or so he desperately wants her to believe:

> only yo know whethr ever I shalbee better & only yo can tell me (for yo are my destyny) whether I were best to dy now, or endevor to liue & keep ye great honor of being yr servant. (f.299v)

In "The Flea," though taken aback by her refusal to make love, John Donne is still in a more playful and optimistic state of mind. Until Anne is taken back to Loseley by her furious father, Donne still thinks his wit and imagination, the only wealth he has to offer, will convince her to remain true to their honorable but secret marriage contract.

Since John Donne cannot dispel Anne More's deeper fear that yielding to him will infuriate her father, "waste" her inheritance, and impoverish their future together, he focuses on "honor"—an intangible moral quality that he can shape and control through the power of his language. The syntax of the final lines—"Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee, / Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee"—makes it possible to read "honor" as the subject of the verb, "waste," meaning to diminish or consume the livelihood of a person, to spend one's substance or impoverish oneself. If one interprets "so much" not as an adjective modifying "honor," but as a pronoun and direct object, then the conclusion also suggests that Anne's honor will waste or consume just so much "as this flea's death tooke life from thee," that is, almost nothing at all. If "The Flea" is a poem of courtship addressed to Anne More, John Donne's immediate goal is to persuade her that making love with him, now, will not diminish her substance or worth in any way. His ultimate goal is to show her how to convince her father their actions were governed by honor, and should not, therefore, diminish or consume her livelihood.

Whereas submitting to her father's wishes would cause Anne to betray everything she holds most dear, yielding to John Donne (even if that seems to make her passive) is a way of asserting her freedom of choice and affirming her freedom of action. Much as "The Sunne Rising" ends by inviting the sun to "[s]hine here to us," and thus overturning the claims with which it began, "The Flea" ends by overturning its initial pretense that making love requires no more of a decision or action on her part than being bitten by a flea.

A number of critics have suggested that the speciousness of the poem's logic is a way of dramatizing and exploring the limits of reason itself. I have been arguing instead that once we give up the notion that the woman is a virgin, the reasoning makes very good sense at each

stage in the poem. To be sure, the argument shifts as the stanzas unfold, but that is because the very best arguments accommodate the objections they provoke. Donne hopes to convince Anne More with his reasoning and wit, but he also knows—and wants her to know—that her response has a great impact on his reasoning. The Burley letters and poems such as "The good-morrow" and "A Valediction of my name, in the window" imply that Anne More and John Donne were sexually intimate before marriage.[36] The second, more tenderly erotic reading I have developed here makes better sense, both logically and emotionally, when we consider the possibility that the female interlocutor is not an unmarried virgin, anxiously protecting her chastity, but Anne More—or an imaginary lover whose concerns are virtually indistinguishable from Anne More's—who has refused to make love because she is struggling with her own doubts about the feasibility of their relationship.

In "The Flea" Donne's persuasion ends by reminding his beloved Anne More that the decision is hers to make, and by urging her to claim the agency available to her. If she joins with him in transforming their unconventional conception of "honor" into an active force, together they can give the things society considers base and vile (flea bites, premarital sex, filial disobedience, etc.) a new form and dignity. As John Donne wrote Sir George More after their clandestine marriage, "We adventurd equally having these honest purposes in our harts."[37] Anticipating and exploring a lover's reservations while still predicting a positive response is not a bad rhetorical strategy, at least until things begin to go seriously awry. "The Flea" ends optimistically, with the expectation that this persuasion will prevail—"Just so much honor, *when* thou yeeld'st to mee / *Will* wast" (my emphasis)—and all the biographical evidence suggests that it did, at least until Sir Edmund Neville informed Sir George More that his daughter was carrying on a secret relationship with John Donne.

The reading I have sketched here does not replace the witty seduction poem that has delighted so many readers. Rather, I would argue that "The Flea" is a more complicated and brilliant poem precisely because every line and every stanza allow these two diametri-

cally opposed readings to coexist in tension with each other. The more common cynical reading shows what a rarity is the secret lover's dialogue concealed within.[38]

Indeed, the first stanza of "The Flea" ends, "And this, alas, is more then wee would doe," with the same delicate allusion to the names Donne and More that we have already encountered in the first and most impassioned Loseley letter, "Thou might easily do much more." As Donne phrases it so memorably in "Loves growth,"

> Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use
> To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse,
> But as all else, being elemented too,
> Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.

How then should we construe the relationship between "The Flea" and John Donne's courtship of Anne More? Of course, it is possible that the dramatic situation was suggested by a real flea which cheekily bit them, one after another; however, it seems highly unlikely that Donne could have composed three such perfect stanzas at the very moment the flea was biting and Anne was objecting, for brilliant poems of courtship require the same blend of inspiration and perspiration as any other highly wrought lyric. Rather, I think, "The Flea," like so many of the *Songs and Sonets*, is an intricate analogy, constructed by John Donne to convince Anne More to accept his proposal despite her fears and her family's objections. Like so many Elizabethan poems of courtship, "The Flea" is a carefully constructed rhetorical artifice, written to be performed for the private female lyric audience's benefit, designed to amuse her with his wit, to dazzle her with his mental agility, to reassure her with his attentiveness to her concerns, and to embolden her with his passion—and his principled but unconventional code of ethics.[39] The shifts in tone anticipate the larger conversation Donne hopes the poem will provoke and sustain.

When we pause to consider how Anne More might have understood "The Flea," the amusing but apparently specious argument turns into a deeply witty and complex dialogue about a highly fraught emotional situation that has potentially serious consequences for both

lovers. "The Flea" contains a profound exploration of the risks and rewards Anne More had to weigh in deciding whether to continue her clandestine love affair and to honor her secret marriage contract with John Donne: the very real dangers of getting pregnant, incurring her father's wrath, and wasting her inheritance versus the unconventional beauty of their freely chosen love, leading to the wondrous conception of a new life.

Although the stanza form is typical of Donne, "The Flea" has an extraordinary number of repeated rhymes. The reiteration of "this" "is" (1-2, 11-12) urges Anne More to treasure and preserve what "is," while the repetition of "mee," "thee," "bee," "three" (3-4, 16-18, 25-27) exalts the love, trust, and understanding that already exist between them—the physical and spiritual union of "me" and "thee" that will "be" "three" and four, and ultimately twelve children conceived from the mingling of their blood in their "marriage bed."

The complicated love story revealed (though not told) by the three Loseley love letters suggests that many more of the *Songs and Sonets* may have been poems of courtship, written to Anne More while her name was still More. As the critical history of "The Flea" illustrates, most critics have been loath to consider this possibility for two competing but understandable reasons. The first is a question of ethics. Donne's most exalted poems of mutual love, such as "The good morrow," "The Sunne Rising," "The Canonization," "The Extasie," and, I would add, "The Flea," celebrate a love that is at once sexually consummated and spiritually exalted. As Dayton Haskin has shown so masterfully, nineteenth and early twentieth century versions of Donne's life still color our view of Donne's poetry more than we might expect.[40] Earlier critics didn't want to consider the possibility of a premarital love affair because they were anxiously trying to protect John Donne and Anne More from charges of moral turpitude.

The second problem is literary. Modern critics, swayed by Eliot's definition of the lyric as the voice of the poet speaking to himself or no one, have read Renaissance lyrics in general, and Donne's above all, as an occasion for male self-exploration and self-fashioning.[41] The new

historicist focus on patronage and self-advertising, combined with the feminist tendency to see Woman as the object of male exchange, suggests that the real lyric audience, the important lyric audience, was Donne's male coterie.[42] Yet, as I argue in *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship,* the Elizabethans themselves saw love poetry as the language of courtship. As Sidney's *Defense of Poesie*, Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*, the opening sonnets of *Astrophil and Stella*, *Delia*, and *Amoretti* are all at pains to explain, the conventions of the Elizabethan lyric genre were designed to convince the female lyric audience to accept the poet/lover's suit. The Elizabethan poet/lover went to great lengths to woo his beloved in elaborately constructed poetry in order to prove his devotion and worthiness. It is precisely their wit and artistry that made poems of courtship successful, as poetry and if all went well also as courtship.

To some extent, all poetry says what cannot be said otherwise, what can only be articulated through the complexities, ambiguities, and sonorities of poetic language. The Elizabethans saw poetry as the ideal language of courtship precisely because it provided a coded language, full of ambiguity and innuendo, that could mean different things to different readers. Poetry of courtship could hint at sexual intimacies and emotional complications that were better left implicit.

Any poet who aspired to greatness, or any poet who hoped to use his literary skills for professional advancement, would also have written for a coterie of friends, poets, and potential patrons. Poetry of courtship was often written so that a private meaning, ascertainable by a beloved or a confidant, would not be readily apparent to a male coterie or the world at large. A poem such as "The Flea" doesn't suddenly acquire a straightforward, clear meaning when we apply what we know about Donne's courtship. Rather, it becomes more multivocal, hinting veiled *double entendres,* suggesting alternative meanings, murmuring tendernesses and dispelling anxieties that might not be evident to "prophane men . . . Which will no faith on this bestow" ("The Undertaking").

Eventually, the best poems of courtship were likely to appear in print; sometimes they were pirated, as in the case of Daniel's *Delia* or

Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Sometimes they were published by the poet himself, as in the case of Spenser's *Amoretti*. Sometimes they were published posthumously by the poet's literary executors, as with Donne. At any rate, most of the best Elizabethan poems of courtship are elliptical and ambiguous, written so that they could be interpreted variously by the poet's mistress and their confidants, the male coterie, and the wider manuscript or print audience.

Poems of courtship are usually written to the moment, as the courtship unfolds. They attempt to bring about the kind of relationship the poet/lover seeks. They are a "dialogue of one"—that is, they are the male poet/lover's side of an ongoing conversation. They hope and assume that the poet/lover's mistress will respond positively. Just as Donne encourages Anne to think that she "may do easyly much more" by responding to the first Burley letter, his poems of courtship are inherently dialogic, poised anxiously in anticipation of a reply. A letter writer who is eager to elicit a response will pose lots of questions; similarly, Donne's *Songs and Sonets* are full of questions for Anne to ponder and resolve: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I / Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?" ("The good-morrow"), "To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?" ("Womans constancy").

Donne's love poems are obsessively self-conscious and self-correcting, constantly attempting to recast or rewrite previous poetic strategies that fell flat. Because they are contingent on the beloved's answering response, their characteristic mode is conditional: "If yet I have not all thy love" ("Loves infinitenesse"); "Our two soules therefore, which are one . . . If they be two, they are two so" ("A Valediction forbidding mourning").[43] We constantly see Donne making extravagant claims, then hedging, hesitating, inquiring, needing to know what Anne More thinks and feels.

The poems' most declarative speech acts are short-lived. Imperatives are tempting, but they usually dissipate as soon as they are uttered. Poems of courtship are hortatory rather than declarative: "True and false feares let us refraine, / Let us love nobly,'and live. . ." ("The Anniversarie"), "Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one"

("The good-morrow"). They cajole and plead: "what ever shall / Grow there, deare, I should have it all" ("Loves infinitenesse"). They speak, as Rosalind does in *As You Like It*, "with most petitionary vehemence" (3.2.190).

Like all poems of courtship, Donne's *Songs and Sonets* are unavoidably contingent, linked to circumstances outside the poem that the poet/lover did not create and cannot control. They rarely provide a foregone account of something that has already happened; rather, they are a rhetorical performance, designed to strengthen the poet/lover's intellectual, emotional, and physical conversation with his mistress. Poems of courtship may look back at an earlier moment of shared intimacy or joy, as Donne does in "The Extasie," but they do so for a purpose: they use earlier experiences as a means of defining the present and shaping the future. They may succeed as poetry while failing as persuasions to love. But unlike Petrarchan complaints, which continue to celebrate love "begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility," as Marvell puts it in "The Definition of Love," poems of courtship strive to recuperate a love affair gone awry by showing that the impediments are insignificant, and the problems, surmountable.

Although most critics have been wary of associating "The Flea" with Anne More, it fits the paradigm I have been describing perfectly. It begins with an imperative: "Marke but this flea, and marke in this, / How little that which thou deny'st me is." But it quickly turns to prayer: "Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare . . . Let not to that, selfe murder added be." When petitions fail, Donne's poet/lover begins asking urgent questions: "Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since / Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence? / Wherein could this flea guilty bee, / Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?" Having invited his mistress to respond, he acknowledges her answering response: "Yet thou triumph'st, and saist that thou / Find'st not thyself, nor mee, / the weaker now."

I think that John Donne is writing to Anne More, reminding her of the radical redefinition of honor that he elucidates in both the Burley letters and the Loseley letters. She's hesitating not because she's anxious to preserve her virginity but because she is afraid of getting

pregnant, and she's under a lot of pressure to end the relationship. As Walton writes, "These promises were onely known to themseves, and the friends of both parties used much diligence, and many arguments to kill or cool their affections to each other: but in vaine."[44] In "The Flea," as in so many of the *Songs and Sonets,* John Donne uses all his wit and art to convince his beloved Anne More that the impediments to their love are as miniscule and insignificant as a flea.

In "Valediction of the book" Donne refers to "manuscripts, those Myriades / Of letters, which have past twixt thee and mee." Unfortunately, none of Anne's letters or manuscripts have been found, though I'd like to think they still exist, waiting to be discovered, not far from Loseley Park. Since we don't have Anne's responses to Donne's persuasions, let me conclude by recalling what Donne said about her in the epitaph he wrote upon her death: "Faeminae lectissimae dilectissimaeque"—"A woman most choice/select/read, most beloved/loving/well-read." As Tom Hester suggests and Donne's language implies, Anne was Donne's "best reader and text"—his best poetic subject and his most precious lyric audience.[45] Hovering on the margins of the poems, explaining seemingly contradictory or illogical assertions and revealing otherwise imperceptible meanings, her implied presence makes Donne's love poetry more complex, more enticing, and more convincing.

Williams College

Notes

1. See *John Donne's 'desire of more': The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996); Dennis Flynn, "Donne and a *Female* Coterie," *LIT* 1 (1989): 127-36; Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, "Donne's Correspondence with Wotton," *John Donne Journal* 10 (1991): 33.

2. For arguments against reading Anne More into the poems, see Janet E. Halley, "Textual Intercourse: Anne Donne, John Donne, and the Sexual Poetics of Textual Exchange," *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: essays in feminist contextual criticism,* ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press,1989), pp. 187-206; Julia Walker, "Anne More: A Name Not Written," in Hester, pp. 89-105.

3. The most complete biographical accounts of the courtship are: Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne,* 2 vols (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1899); Edward Le Comte, *Grace to a Witty Sinner: A Life of Donne* (New York: Walker, 1965); R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). For a literary interpretation of the poems as courtship, see Marotti, pp. 133-51.

4. The Burley Manuscript, which is now catalogued among the Finch Collection, D. G. 7, Lit. 2, in the Leicestershire Record Office, Leicester, England, contains additional letters by Donne, but this essay only refers to the three letters addressed to Anne More, discussed in my essay, "'Under Ye Rage of a Hott Sonn & Yr Eyes': John Donne's Love Letters to Ann More," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,1986), pp. 25-52.

5. The three Burley letters are reproduced and transcribed in "'Under Ye Rage of a Hott Sonn & Yr Eyes.'"

6. For additional information on the Elizabethan code of ethics, see Ann Rosalind Jones, "Nets and Bridles: Early Modern Conduct Books and Sixteenth-Century Women's Lyrics," in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), 39-72, and Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,1956).

7. For a detailed account of Neville's tale-telling and its reverberations, see Bell, "'if it bee a shee': The Riddle of Donne's 'Curse'," in Hester, "desire of more," pp. 106-39, and Dennis Flynn, "Anne More, John Donne and Edmond Neville," also in Hester, "desire of more," pp. 140-48.

8. John Donne papers. *Original Letters of John Donne Relating to his Secret Marriage,* John Donne Papers, Folger Library, Washington, D.C.

9. *The Lives of Dr John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr Richard Hooker, Mr George Herbert* (London, 1670), p. 18.

10. Walton, p. 20, writes, Donne "was forced to make good his title to her and to get possession of her by a long and restless suit in Law; which proved troublesom and chargeable to him." For further information about the extant documents and different theories of what they might mean, see Edward Le Comte, "The Date of Donne's Marriage," *Etudes Anglaises* 21 (1968): 168-69, and W. Milgate, "The Date of Donne's Marriage—A Reply," *Etudes Anglaises* 22 (1969): 66-67.

11. For the definitive study of the impact of Catholicism on Donne's formative years, see Dennis Flynn, *John Donne & the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). For a reading of Donne's lyrics that emphasizes his Catholic habits of mind, and especially his penchant for the art of equivocation, see M. Thomas Hester, "'this cannot be said': A Preface to the Reader of Donne's Lyrics," *Christianity and Literature* 39 (1990): 365-385.

12. For further evidence that Donne was indeed writing for a private female lyric audience, see Flynn, "Donne and a *Female* Coterie." For a creative and knowledgeable response to the arguments about Anne More's literacy, see Margaret J. M. Ezell, "A Possible Story of Judith Donne: A Life of Her Own?" *John Donne Journal* 17 (1998): 9-28. For a review of recent studies of early modern female literacy, see Margaret Ferguson, "Response: Attending to Literacy," in *Attending to Women in Early Modern England*, ed. Betty S. Travitsky and Adele F. Seeff (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), pp. 265-79.

13. On the oral nature of Elizabethan literature, see Bell, *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of* Courtship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 1; Robert Darnton, "History of Reading," ed. Peter Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 140-67; William Nelson, "From 'Listen, Lordings' to 'Dear Reader'," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 46 (1976/77): 110-124; Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1971).

14. Walton, p. 22. For a trenchant account of Walton's Laudian bias, see David Novarr, *The Making of Walton's* "Lives," *Cornell Studies in English* 41 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1958). As Ezell notes, "since Walton viewed the marriage of John and Anne as the fundamental 'error' in his life, there would be little incentive for Walton to provide her with artificial attainments or to attempt to elevate her as an individual apart from the importance of her family connections" (11).

15. I'm extremely grateful to Dennis Flynn for sharing this information with me, and allowing me to be his herald, both at the Loseley conference and here, in print. He will undoubtedly have more to say about the document when he completes the next volume of his biography.

16. The phrase is from "The Triple Fool."

17. Walker, p. 93.

18. On the centrality of rhetoric, see Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University

Press,1976).

19. *Sir Philip Sidney's Defence of Poesy*, ed. Dorothy M. Macardie (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1964), p. 53.

20. All Donne's poems are quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967).

21. Laurence Perrine, "Explicating Donne: 'The Apparition' and 'The Flea'," *College Literature* 17 (1990), 7, argues that "[i]f we extrapolate from the evidence given *in* the poem as to her past behavior, her intelligence, and her morality, we must conclude that she is a sensible young lady, not at all deceived by the young man's sophistry," (7). Marotti, suggests that Donne uses "outrageously sophistical means" to transform the sexual act into a "morally and socially honorable one," (93).

22. Doniphan Louthan, *The Poetry of John Donne: A Study in Explication* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1951), p. 83, surmises that "she had no basic objections to begin with. The ritual consists in a mock battle of wits, with the outcome virtually assured; it is the give-and-take which is pleasurable." Dwight Cathcart, *Doubting Conscience: Donne and the Poetry of Moral Argument* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), also thinks that "Even before one hears the speaker, it is clear that they have agreed, with smiles, to end between the sheets" (60). Patricia Meyer Spacks, "In Search of Sincerity," *College English* 29 (1968), concurs: "The woman's yielding is inevitable, the rest is only talk," (593).

23. Cathcart argues that "[t]he you" represents "what is orthodox, logical, reasonable, and moral," (37).

24. Most critics try, in one way or another, to make a virtue out of the poem's failed logic. For example, Murray Roston, *The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 109, 112, notes "the obvious untenability of the conclusions at which the argumentation arrives" and argues that "the deliberate speciousness of the reasoning . . . is carefully staged to expose by subtle ridicule the weakness of ratiocination itself." H. David Brumble III, "John Donne's 'The Flea': Some Implications of the Encyclopedic and Poetic Flea Traditions," *Critical Quarterly* 15 (1973), concludes that the speaker's "arguments are indications of the extent to which reason, the divine faculty, has been corrupted" by "his persona's spiritual aridity," (153).

25. For additional information on the history of courtship and marriage, see Bell, *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship*, chapter 3; John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1985); Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1570-1640*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1987).

26. All definitions taken from the *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

27. Most critics interpret the image more cynically. Where I see imaginative transformation, Toshihiko Kawasaki, "Donne's Microcosm," *Seventeenth-Century*

Imagery: essays on uses of figurative language from Donne to Farquhar, ed. Earl Miner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), sees a "parody of the sacred rites of matrimony," (34).

28. The sexual meaning of *use*, as in the common phrase, "he has the use of her," also appears in "Valediction of the booke," "Or loth so to amuze / Faiths infirmitie, they chuse / Something which they may see and use." It is a critical commonplace that Donne uses the word "die" to refer to reaching sexual climax. Less frequently noted is his penchant for punning on the associated word, "kill," though the *double entendre* is all too clear in "The Dampe":

Kill mee as Woman, let mee die
As a meere man; doe you but try
Your passive valor, and you shall finde than,
In that you'have odds enough of any man.

Of course, the variant, "Naked you'have odds enough," makes the sexual *double entendre* even clearer.

29. See Theresa M. DiPasquale, "Receiving a Sexual Sacrament: 'The Flea' as Profane Eucharist," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995), pp. 81-95. Although she cannot quite relinquish her initial "impression that 'yeeld'st' is a transitive verb with 'honor' as its direct object," DiPasquale concludes, "Of course, 'honor' turns out to be the subject of the completed sentence, 'yeeld'st' intransitive, and the "when . . . " clause parenthetical," (88).

30. As Frank Kermode points out in *The Selected Poetry of Marvell*, Signet Classic Poetry Series (New York: New American Library, 1967), Marvell also puns on the word "honor" in "To His Coy Mistress," (76).

31. For more information on earlier flea poems, see Theodore Redpath, ed., *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1956, 2nd ed. 1983), p. 175; Helen Gardner, ed., *John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 174-75; Brendan Lehane, *The Compleat Flea* (New York: Viking, 1969); Brumble, "John Donne's 'The Flea': Some Implications."

32. By contrast, Spacks argues that "the 'seriousness' of the conclusion is part of the final contemptuous joke on the woman, as the speaker for the moment accepts her system of values and turns it against her," (594).

33. For deconstructive readings of Donne, see Thomas Docherty, *John Donne, undone* (New York: Methuen, 1986); Ronald Corthell, *Ideology and Desire in Renaissance Poetry: The Subject of Donne* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

34. Since "The Flea" has traditionally been read as a witty and specious seduction poem, most critics have assumed that it precedes Donne's courtship of Anne More. Judah Stampfer, *John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), places it among "The Early Poems." Marotti assigns

"The Flea" to the time of Donne's studies at Lincoln's Inn, even though he acknowledges, that for a seduction poem, "'The Flea' seems particularly unerotic in character, extraordinarily preoccupied with ethical and social, particularly marital, matters" (93). Teresa DiPasquale is the only critic I know to take the bold step of suggesting "intriguing parallels between the woman in the lyric and Ann More Donne" (83). Although she reads the flea as a Protestant sacramental sign of the woman's virginity, there are also intriguing parallels between her reading of the poem and my own reading of both "The Flea" and "The Curse."

35. In "this cannot be said," Hester describes "The Flea" as "a *dialogue d'amour* between a 'Catholic' exegete and his 'Protesting' lady" who sounds very much like Anne More (377), though Hester leaves the connection implicit. Hester also argues that the poem contains "multiple metonymies on the verbal associations of *puce*/*pucelle*/Pucelle: a flea/a maiden/the Virgin" (379). My suggestion that the woman to whom the poem is addressed is not a virgin makes the analogue all the more impious, and the poem all the more daringly unconventional.

36. In "Anne More: A Name Not Written," Julia Walker discusses Donne's poetic punning on Anne's name.

37. Folger ms 44.

38. DiPasquale also argues, as I have done here, that "The Flea" invites two distinct readings, "an anti-Petrarchan, libertine reading, based upon the principles of radical iconoclasm" as well as an "invitation to genuine erotic communion [with] intriguing parallels [to] Anne More Donne" (83).

39. For some compelling critiques of Donne's attitude towards love and women, see Achsah Guibbory, "'Oh, Let Mee Not Serve So': The Politics of Love in Donne's *Elegies*," *ELH* 57 (1990): 811-833; Janel Mueller, "Women Among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Donne For," *Modern Philology* 87 (1989): 142-58; Christopher Ricks, "John Donne: 'Farewell to Love'," in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 19-50.

40. See Dayton Haskin, "Reading Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* in the Nineteenth Century," *John Donne Journal* 4 (1985): 225-52; "On trying to Make the Record Speak More about Donne's Love Poems," in Hester, *"desire of more,"* pp. 39-65.

41. For a summary of the anti-biographical argument, see Walter J. Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," *PMLA* 90 (1975): 9-21.

42. See John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind & Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet;* David Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Cornell University Press, 1980); Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Camille Wells Slights, "A Pattern of Love: Representations of Anne Donne," in Hester, "desire of more", suggests a valuable revisionist approach to the question: "As a fictional representation of a loved woman, Anne Donne is a powerful and empowering presence, and

Donne's male friends are marginalized as fictive and actual spectators and readers" (77).

43. In "'let me love': Reading the Sacred 'currant' of Donne's Profane Lyrics," in *Sacred and Profane: Secular and Devotional Interplay in Early Modern British Literature*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Richard Todd, Alasdair MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996), Hester describes Donne as "*the poet of supposition*," noting that "'*If*' appears 90 times, in 43 of the 57 lyrics; '*but*' 98 times; '*yet*' over 30; '*but yet*' over a dozen" (130). Hester concludes that "it remains possible that Donne himself, in either a playful or intimate tone, either in poetic dialogues given to Anne or introspective/analogical evaluations of their own predicament, could not say whether he was attempting to *seduce* or to *convert* his beloved, the daughter of the robustly Protestant Sir George More. *If*, that is, the poems do figure forth in any way Donne's addresses to Anne More/Donne" (145, Hester's italics).

44. Walton, p. 18.

45. Hester, "'Faeminae Lectissimae': Reading Anne Donne," in Hester, "desire of more", p. 23.