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"So, if I now should utter this": Donne, Love, and the Liminal Moment

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"Donne is an actively assertive, deeply repetitive poet who makes plain the pattern he works with," notes Josephine Miles. "In poem after poem [. . .], Donne addresses, exhorts, argues, and then counters his own arguments."[1]

> Donne's way is not to narrate, not to set scenes and atmosphere in any thorough way; no more by substantive vocabulary than by connectives does he present and expatiate. As his chief connectives are *and*, *but that*, *to*, in disjunction, relation, and direction, and the rest of his connectives support mainly the logic or consequences, so his substantive vocabulary also establishes a world of arguable inference.[2]

The significance of Miles's analysis of the operations of Donne's syntax has recently been enhanced by the attention that Heather Dubrow has brought to the function of such seemingly neutral anchor

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[1]Josephine Miles, "Ifs, Ands, and Buts for the Reader of Donne," in her *Poetry and Change: Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, and the Equilibrium of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 65–83; quotation on pp. 68–69. For a summary of Miles's theory of poetic syntax, and objections to her methodology, see P. M. Wetherill, *The Literary Text: An Examination of Critical Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 59–63.

[2]Ibid., pp. 80–81.

words as "here" and "this" in Donne's poetry.[3] Clearly, the weight of Donne's meaning rests not on the memorable words he coins like "*Sesqui-superlative*" ("Upon Mr Thomas Coryats Crudities," l. 2) or the provocative phrases he fashions like "Dull sublunary lovers love" ("A Valediction forbidding mourning," l. 13) or "a winter-seeming summers night" ("Loves Alchymie," l. 11),[4] but on the monosyllabic words that allow his lyrics to pivot and turn, oftentimes with dizzying speed.

Thus, a reader should not be surprised to note that the heaviest weight of the poetic action of those lyrics grouped by the editor(s) of the 1633 *Poems* under the title *Songs and Sonets* should rest on two deceptively simple words, "now" and "if." "Now" situates Donne's speaker and interlocutor in a sharply defined present moment as the speaker—sometimes cagily, sometimes warily, sometimes exuberantly—anticipates what might happen next. Donne's "now" invariably indicates a liminal moment (to borrow from the insightful model that Joan Faust has developed for the study of Andrew Marvell) in which the speaker is poised between two states of being and seeks to transition from physical frustration to erotic satisfaction, from emotional uncertainty to metaphysical certainty, or, most profoundly,

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[3]Heather Dubrow, *Deixis in the Early Modern Lyric: Unsettling Spatial Anchors Like "Here," "This," "Come."* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). I have been anticipated in part of my argument by M. Thomas Hester (who is also quoted in this regard by Dubrow), who observes that Donne is "*the poet of supposition*. '*If*' appears 90 times, in 43 of the 57 lyrics [in *Songs and Sonets*]; '*but*' 98 times; '*yet*' over 30; '*but yet*' over a dozen" ("'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 et al [Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1996], pp. 129–50, 130); as well as by Mario Praz, who observes that "Donne's torturous line of reasoning frequently takes the form of a statement, reversed at a given point by a 'but' at the beginning of a line" (*Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970], pp. 97).

[4]Quotation of Donne's poetry throughout is from *The Complete English Poems*, ed. C. A. Patrides (1985; rpt. New York: Knopf/Everyman's Library, 1991). I have, however, silently emphasized in passages quoted the occurrence of the words "now" and "if."

from a profane existence to one grounded in the sacred.[5] That is, intensely conscious that the present moment marks a state perpetually on the verge of change (change not only in the lovers' circumstances but in the speaker's attitude and corresponding stance as well), the speaker anticipates the various possibilities that may emerge and attempts to negotiate what will happen next.[6]

The "if" clause, by extension, proves the speaker's primary means of negotiating with his female interlocutor in the "now." (And it is important to note from the outset that Donne is one of the few Renaissance poets for whom there is almost *always* an interlocutor, as much as the oracular Milton is a poet for whom there rarely is.) The speaker's "if" oftentimes functions as a rhetorical sonar wave emitted to ascertain the woman's stance in the hope of either reinforcing her wavering position or altering that position entirely. The poem, thus, becomes a verbal chess game in which the speaker's "if" proves a tentative move that seeks to determine what additional rhetorical action on his part might elicit the hoped-for response from his would-be beloved. Perhaps the most telling example of this operation is line

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[5]Joan Faust, *Andrew Marvell's Liminal Lyrics: The Space Between* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012). As Faust demonstrates, however, Marvell intends "to remain in that area in between, refusing a closure that would delineate yet accordingly disappoint" (p. 4). Such a carefully constructed state of suspension between two well defined states would be anathema to Donne, whose speakers have no doubt on which side of the divide they would like to emerge.

[6]Elsewhere Dubrow comes to a similar conclusion but from a different direction than the one I've taken: "by telling stories about what has happened, by regulating the stories others tell, by substituting rival stories for ones an antagonist proffers, and by turning stories about what may not happen into stories about what will happen, Donne uses narration to control the demons on the edges of his singularly edgy poems, especially death and betrayal." She concludes that "If Donne is the poet of narrativity to an extent we have not acknowledged, he is also the poet of the disnarrated: of verges and edges, of what might or might not happen. So many of his lyrics are uneasily located on the brink between the anticipation of a story and its realization"; "Reconfiguring Figuring: Donne as a Narrative Poet," in *Go Figure: Energies, Forms, and Institutions in the Early Modern World*, ed. Judith H. Anderson and Joan Pong Linton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp, 59–72, quotations on p. 66 and pp. 68–69.

9 of "The undertaking," "So, if I now should utter this," which might be paraphrased as "What would happen were I to say the following?" The majority of the lyrics in the *Songs and Sonets* test how firm or weak the emotional ice is on which the speaker prepares to venture out. Donne's "if" functions as the key component of his speaker's strategy to move, seduce, provoke or implore the female interlocutor to act in a specific way. At the critical junction of the "now," the speaker must oftentimes secure the interlocutor's acquiescence or cooperation. The poem records the speaker's progress from one "now" to the next, and, should circumstances demand, from that second "now" on to yet a third, and so on, until he is on the verge of achieving his desired state of being. The "if" clause is the speaker's primary rhetorical means of effecting his translation from a less to a more desirable condition.

Consider in general how many of Donne's love lyrics are predicated upon unstable, quickly changing circumstances—as even their titles (whether provided by Donne or assigned by sometimes extraordinarily perceptive copyists) suggest. The very titles of "Lovers infinitenesse," "Loves growth," "Loves Progress," "The Anniversarie," "Farewell to love," and "The Blossome" emphasize the grounding of human experience in temporal processes: like a flower that grows from seed, buds, blossoms, and dies, love has a starting—and sometimes, alas, ending—point, with various stages in between. The noun-gerund in the title of the poem most often printed as "The undertaking" suggests something that is in the act of happening as the poem unfolds. Likewise, the titles of "The Sunne Rising," "Breake of day," "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies Day*, Being the shortest day," "The good-morrow" and the four "Valediction" poems mark specific moments in time that cannot hold much longer than the duration of the poem. And while the titles of "The Relique," "The Funerall," "The Will," "The Dampe," "A Feaver," "The Legacie," "The Dissolution," and "The Expiration" signify processes of death and corporeal decay, those of "The Dreame" and "The Apparition" signal insubstantial experiences that may vanish as suddenly as they materialize. Ironically, the one poem to include "constancy" in the title does so facetiously inasmuch as "Womans constancy" asserts that women are incapable of being faithful. In every instance the speaker is on the verge of change, of an alteration of his circumstances; he (and,

possibly, *she* in "Breake of day") is engaged in a process whose outcome he is anxious to control.

Well might the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 assert that "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds" (ll. 2–3); in Donne's lyrics the only constant is that the lover must constantly negotiate the challenges offered by change. In "Loves growth" the speaker struggles with the conundrum that his love could not have been "infinite," as he earlier thought, "**if** spring make'it more" (l. 6); nor could it have been as pure as he thought "**if** this medicine" prove "mixt of all stuffes" (ll. 7–9). The speaker attempts to resolve the paradox of how "From loves awakened root do bud out **now**" new "blossomes on a bough" (ll. 19–20) by positing an analogy: "**If**, as in water stir'd more circles bee / Produc'd by one, love such additions take" (ll. 21–22). The analogy is presented as a hypothesis that the speaker hopes to be able to rely upon as constantly changing circumstances undercut his initial assumption about the value of his love—that is, as each new "now" proves the former to have been weaker than he initially thought. Significantly, although the speaker goes on to fashion from the cosmos an exquisite metaphor that explains how the speaker's love can continue to grow without undercutting the interlocutor's confidence in the integrity of that love (ll. 23–24), he concludes by drawing a parallel in the final lines to princes' failing to remit in times of peace the taxes they levied to support a war (ll. 26–27), an implicit reminder of the ebb and flow of social harmony and, by extension, of the speaker and interlocutor's feelings.

Consider also the tension between desire and possession that animates "Lovers infinitenesse" which, like "Loves growth," is predicated upon a series of "if" clauses in which a speaker—who seems relatively confident in the purity of his love—is forced to negotiate a series of challenges. The "infinitenesse" of the title precludes the presence of a "now" in the poem, signaling, rather, the continued postponement of the state of fulfillment that the speaker anticipates—namely, that he and the interlocutor "Be one, and one

anothers All" (l. 33). (Significantly, the word "all" or its rhyme occurs nineteen times in the poem.[7])

The presence of five "if" clauses in the poem, however, indicates the speaker's concern whether he and his beloved can indeed "Be one, and one anothers All." "**If** yet I have not all thy love, / Deare, I shall never have it all," the speaker opens (ll. 1–2), seeming to preempt from the start the very state that he desires to reach, inasmuch as he goes on to protest that he has exhausted all the means currently available to him to secure the interlocutor's love. Then, as the speaker in Emily Dickinson's "I cannot live with thee" does under far more tragic circumstances and to a far more somber effect, he proceeds to explore the conditions under which his beloved might not have given him all her love, each of those conditions stemming from the possibility that even as she assured him that she loved him, she reserved some of her love for other men: "**If** then thy gift of love were partiall, / That some to mee, some should to others fall, / Deare, I shall never have Thee All" (ll. 9–11). "Then" becomes an anti-"now" in the poem, a once-present moment that is the antecedent of the current present moment in which the speaker negotiates with the interlocutor.

In the second stanza, the speaker posits the possibility that "**if** then thou gavest mee all," it was but all the love she had to give at that moment (ll. 12–13). He recognizes that "**if** in thy heart, since, there be or shall, / New love created bee, by other men" (ll. 14–15), he cannot hope to have all her love. Grammatically, these four lines suppose a conditional mode within a conditional mode, revealing how intensely conscious the speaker is both of how quickly circumstances may alter, and of how prepared he must be to accept the unreliability of his beloved's earlier assurance that she loved him and him alone. The final "if" clause in the poem proves the most disturbing inasmuch as, after asking the beloved to reaffirm her love by pledging her heart to him on a daily basis, the speaker speculates that "**If** thou canst give

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[7]The drive to "Make all this All" ("Upon the translation of the Psalmes," l. 23) is surely the single most important operation of Donne's imagination—that is, the impulse to achieve a fully harmonized, completely integrated state of being that allows the speaker to escape the incoherence of the world that is so powerfully described in *The First Anniversarie*.

it, then thou never gavest it" (l. 28), reinforcing his opening statement of doubt that he will ever have all of the interlocutor's love.

"Lovers infinitenesse" resolves the speaker's doubt by concluding with two closely related paradoxes ("Loves riddles," l. 29) that the more love one gives the more one has to give, and—in an image that recalls the compass conceit of "A Valediction forbidding mourning"—that "though thy heart depart, / It stayes at home" (ll. 29–30). These paradoxes seem a way of overcoming any remaining reluctance on the interlocutor's part to give all her love to the speaker. Linguistically, "Lovers infinitenesse" is the most quicksilver-like of Donne's *Songs and Sonets*. "Now" is replaced by a series of "then"s in lines 8, 9, 12, 13, and 28 which both indicate a "now" that no longer exists, and the statement of a logical consequence ("**If** thou canst give it, **then** thou never gavest it," l. 28). Similarly, "yet" (lines 1, 7, 20, 23) emerges as the anticipation of a still-to-come "now" on the part of a speaker who marvels at the continuous growth or emergence of "new" love (lines 15, 18, 26) and—as the suggestion of only a partial portion—as the antithesis of the much-desired "all." It is difficult at times to be certain what love the speaker is referring to (the love that the interlocutor promised him in the past, the love that she is offering him at the moment, or the love that he hopes to secure from her in the future) when they collapse eventually into "All." What is clear, however, is that having exhausted "Sighs, teares, and oathes, and letters," not to mention "all my treasure," in wooing his mistress (ll. 5–6), the speaker must elicit from his beloved some indication that she transfers to him any love that she *may* have reserved for or received from other men—the conditional mode being the operative function here inasmuch as the speaker is struggling to limit a quickly expanding number of possibilities.

It is precisely because the speaker dwells in possibility that he must resort to manipulating shifting conditions through "if" clauses. "A Lecture upon the Shadow" begins at high noon ("**now** the Sunne is just above our head," l. 6; compare "**now** 'tis not so," l. 11)—after the speaker and his interlocutor have been walking three hours. In this time their two separate shadows have gradually merged and, then, disappeared as, with the sun finally directly overhead, they cast no shadow. The speaker finds the changing shape(s) of their shadows to be emblematic of the progress of love: the lovers enter into a

relationship with trepidation, concealing their anxieties and fears, until they reach a moment of perfect union when the relationship is unshadowed. The power of the poem lies in the speaker's awareness that the moment is but a moment. He and the interlocutor are at a critical juncture in their relationship when their "infant loves" (l. 9) have reached maturity, but if they continue walking, their shadows will once again lengthen and eventually separate. That is, as in the Sphinx's riddle to Oedipus, maturity invariably declines into senescence. The shadow's growth and diminishment, like the extension and contraction of that pair of compasses in "A Valediction forbidding mourning," illustrates the changing condition of love.

How can the speaker of "A Lecture upon the Shadow" hold their relationship at the perfection of that moment? He introduces a set of hypothetical conditions—"**if** our loves faint" (l. 19), "**if** love decay" (l. 24)—as though checking to see whether the mere mention of possible calamity isn't enough to halt his interlocutor in her tracks and, thus, suspend time: if the couple doesn't walk further, they won't risk diminishing their love. That is to say, by freezing the present moment, they ensure that their love remains at its fullest. The poem bears a close relationship to "The Sunne Rising" in which time is the enemy of love ("Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme, / Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time," ll. 9–10), driving the speaker to command the sun to stand still and warm them. Significantly, if the sun's age asks ease and the planet is happy to cease revolving around the earth and, rather, remain in its present position (the *now*) and continuously warm and illuminate the speaker and his beloved, then time is halted. In "A Lecture upon the Shadow," the speaker seeks to create the conditions under which, like Joshua at Jericho, he can make the sun stand still. His "if"s prolong the "now."[8]

[8]"The Flea" enacts an equally fluid and shifting drama, but one that takes place in real time, as it were, leaving the speaker no opportunity to posit a conditional. Because the flea "**now** sucks thee" (l. 3), the speaker must take advantage of a situation that arises suddenly, extemporizing in response to gestures made by his interlocutor that he cannot anticipate with certainty. When the interlocutor triumphantly crushes the flea and "Find'st not thy selfe, nor mee the weaker **now**" (l. 24), he can only draw a conclusion that is itself hypothetical—that is, an implied "if." "Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee, / Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee" (ll. 26–

A reader might reliably expect a speaker to attempt rhetorically to manipulate the circumstances in a lyric in which that speaker admits uncertainty, and thus betrays anxiety, regarding the outcome of his discourse. But the same type of operation drives even a poem like "The good-morrow," which is grouped by Helen Gardner among the poems of ecstatic love in which mutuality of affection seems to guarantee that the speaker and interlocutor's love is eternal and unchanging—that is, that unlike "Dull sublunary lovers love / (Whose soul is sense)" ("A Valediction forbidding mourning," ll. 13–14), their refined feelings make them impervious to change.[9] But just how confident is the speaker of the mutuality of his and the interlocutor's love? The speaker of "A valediction forbidding mourning" struggles to define whether they share one soul or two ("IF they be two," 25), rendering the moving description of the lovers' separation and reunion hypothetical, a wished-for but still uncertain conclusion. And in many ways, "The good-morrow" delivers the most powerful present moment of all the *Songs and Sonets*.

> And now good morrow to our waking soules,
> Which watch not one another out of feare;
> For love, all love of other sights controules,
> And makes one little roome, an every where.
> Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,

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27). There is no need for an "if" clause when the woman has made his point for him.

[9]Gardner places "The good-morrow" among the "poems of mutual love, in which there is no question of falseness on either side [as in the more cynical love poems] or of frustration by either lover of the other's desire [as in the poems of unrequited love]." She continues, "These are poems that treat of love as union, and of love as miracle, something that is outside the natural order of things"; Helen Gardner, "General Introduction," *The Elegies and Songs and Sonnets of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), xvii–lxii; quotation on p. liii. She is most likely thinking, among other poems, of "The good-morrow" when elsewhere in her introduction she cites Donne's having "given supreme expression to [. . .] the theme of the rapture of fulfillment and of the bliss of union in love" as reason for his being the "greatest love-poet" of the English language (p. xvii).

> Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have showne,
> Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one.
> (ll. 8–14)

This stanza marks a liminal moment, not simply as—following a night of lovemaking—the speaker awakens from the unconsciousness of sleep into the refreshed consciousness of morning, but also the emergence of his awareness of what love is: "If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee" (ll. 6–7). Like Romeo's love for Rosalind, the speaker's previous relationships prove to have been two-dimensional shadows on a Platonic cave wall. He finally understands what the real thing is.

But as in "A Lecture upon the Shadow," the perfect moment in "The good-morrow" can hold but for a moment. The lovers' relationship, like the new day, will progress—that is, the sun will move across the sky, casting shadows on the speaker and the interlocutor. How might the speaker sustain this moment of exquisite consciousness? How might he project himself and the interlocutor beyond the ravages of time? How else, but by concluding the poem in the conditional mode:

> What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
> **If** our two loves be one, or, thou and I
> Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.
> (ll. 19–21)[10]

The poem is a dramatic monologue intended to provoke a response from the interlocutor. Will she acknowledge that she loves him as

[10]The punctuation and phrasing of these lines is open to debate. The semi-colon at the end of line 19 seems to have been introduced by one scribe in H5, which the compositor of A appears to have accepted and transmitted to most of the modern print editions. Some manuscripts (B7, B13, B32, B47, C1, C9, CT1, DT1, DT2, H4, H6, H7, HH1, HH5, IU2, NY1, O21, TT1, TT2, VA2, and VA2) offer no punctuation whatsoever at the end of line 19, making for a radically different statement: "What ever dies is not mixt equally / If our two loves be one . . . ." At the risk of basing my choice of text on aesthetic reasons rather than reliable textual evidence, I prefer Patrides's reading largely because it sharpens the drama of the speaker's exchange with his interlocutor.

much as he has just professed that he loves her and, thus, like the woman in "A Lecture upon the Shadow," hold perfectly still and thereby confirm that this one little room is the everywhere around which the sun need no longer huff and puff in his diurnal trek around the globe? Or will she embarrassedly gather up the pieces of her clothing bestrewn about the room, tell him that he's a great fellow, and that last night was really swell, but she's not looking for a permanent relationship? Gardner presumes the mutuality of the speaker and interlocutor's love in "The good-morrow," but the reader never hears the latter's voice confirm that their love is mixed equally and so can never die—just as the reader never learns whether the woman in "Elegie [XIX]. To his Mistress Going to Bed" drops her final piece of clothing and permits him the full revelation that he so ardently desires—or whether in "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" God does indeed scourge the back that the speaker has turned to Him for correction and thereby elects him to salvation.

By concluding "The good-morrow" with an "if" clause, the speaker attempts to ensure the continuation of the present moment, hoping—like the speaker of "A Lecture upon the Shadow"—to make the sun stand still. The power of the poem derives from the way in which the speaker's exuberance is shadowed by his emotional fragility: he posits the condition under which mutuality can be achieved and sustained, only to wait expectantly to learn whether his interlocutor will confirm that her love is equal to his. The speaker's exquisite "now" remains at the mercy of an unresolved "if."[11]

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[11]The speaker of "The Anniversarie" betrays a similar fragility. The "now" (l. 4) of this poem indicates the current moment, which is exactly one year from that day when the speaker and the interlocutor first saw one another. In the face of so much evidence of how the world decays as it ages, the continuing strength of their love is cause for celebration ("our love hath no decay," l. 7). Indeed, the only divorce that the speaker initially seems to anticipate is their being buried in separate tombs or graves ("**If** one might, death were no divorce," l. 12). But a more powerful "if" clouds the conclusion of the poem inasmuch as the speaker expresses his confidence that, "**except** one of us two" betray the other (l. 26, emphasis added), they will "adde againe / Yeares and yeares unto yeares, till we attaine / To write threescore" (ll. 28–30). This "if" seems all the more powerful for being only implied; it is as though the speaker does not dare to voice it directly. Thus, while the

The speaker's recognition in "The good-morrow" that "What ever dyes, was not mixt equally" may well be, directly or indirectly, the controlling idea of every one of the poems in the *Songs and Sonets*. Gardner's division of the poems into two groups that express either cynicism about love (the poems of the "licentious young amorist" who is also a "frustrated young lover," xxvii) or joy in a deeply satisfying mutuality (those by the adherent to the neoplatonic doctrine of "love as union," xxvii) might more profitably be analyzed in terms of the stance that the speaker takes in the search for and maintenance of an always uncertain mutuality—that is, whether he mocks the "winter-seeming summers night" ("Loves Alchymie," l. 12) of relationships that fall far short of the mark of mutuality, or attempts to secure from the interlocutor some assurance that she will continue to love him as much as he loves her and, thus, elect him to salvation. "It cannot bee / Love, till I love her, that loves me," the speaker of "Loves Deitie" (ll. 13–14) recognizes, although the "Rebell and Atheist" in him cynically concludes that "A deeper plague" "must bee / **If** shee whom I love, should love mee" (ll. 27–28).

The reliance upon "if" clauses by the speakers of Donne's love lyrics to effect a transition from current circumstances to pending future happiness is made the more extraordinary when the *Songs and Sonets* are contrasted with the great Hymns in the later stage of Donne's poetic career. Like so many of the *Songs and Sonets*, all three Hymns mark liminal moments. In "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany," the speaker's embarking in a "torne ship" (l. 1) becomes the emblem of his progress to salvation. Likewise, in "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" the speaker's entering an antechamber is figured as his journey through watery straits. And in "A Hymne to God the Father," the speaker confesses "a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne / My last thred, I shall perish on the shore" (ll. 13–14). The words "now" and "if" do not occur in any of the hymns because the speakers recognize the futility of attempting to manipulate the implied interlocutor. The only stance that these speakers can take as they anticipate the ultimate translation is the

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poem seems to conclude on a note of jubilation, it aims—like "The good-morrow"—to provoke an assurance from the interlocutor that she will never betray him, that she cares for him as much as he does her.

same that Donne is depicted taking in his marble funeral monument: they stand and wait.

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