John Donne Journal
Vol. 3, No. 1 (1984)

Compasses and Cartography: Donne's "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning"

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As is to be expected in the case of so celebrated an image, attempts to locate sources and analogues for the "stiffe twin compasses" of Donne's "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" continue apace. Since Grierson[1] noted long ago the parallels between Donne's metaphor and a pair of lovers and twin compasses included in verses by Omar Khayyam, further correspondences have been detected in Baroque emblems and printers' devices, a madrigal by Guarini, Paracelsus and alchemical symbolism, a contemporary poem in a commonplace book, and works by Dante. In addition, John Freccero's detailed analysis of the poem has revealed close parallels between the compass and the double motion of the figure which it inscribes and Chalcidius' commentary on the *Timaeus* as well as in Renaissance astronomical thought. And, most recently, A. B. Chambers has located in the works of Michael Maier a compass emblem that helps resolve the poem's meaning by reconciling the Christian doctrine of glorified bodies with alchemical deaths and resurrections.[2]

To these I would add the possibility, surprisingly overlooked in a poem on travel and leave-taking, that Donne's inspiration was the compasses or dividers (as opposed to "directional" compasses), which for purposes both utilitarian and aesthetic are common features of Renaissance maps. Placed immediately above the numerical scale and with legs usually extended, compasses serve to indicate the scale of measurement the cartographer has adopted; moreover, combined with elaborate borders and cartouches, fanciful illustrations, and decorative lettering and color, they contribute much to the richness and beauty present in early maps. For Donne's contemporary, the land-surveyor William Folkingham, this complex beauty

> consists in Complements, and Compartiments. Complements comprehende the Flie or Flies [compass indicators], Scale and Compasse [dividers], Kalender, Characters, Colours &c. . . . Compartiments are Blankes or Figures bordered with Anticke Boscage or Crotesko-worke, wherein Evidences or other Memorables may be abreviated. And these may be contrived in Parallelograms, Squares, Circles, Ovalls, Lunaries . . . compassed and tricked ad libitum.[3]

That Donne's imagination was stimulated by the cartographer's art is evident through frequent references of varying complexity in the poems and sermons.[4] To cite only two examples, the apparent simplicity of the "maps" or astronomical charts which reveal "worlds on worlds" to the beholder in "The Good Morrow" (l. 13) evolves into imagery arguably derived from cordiform maps in the poem's final stanza.[5] In the "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" the bed-ridden speaker's body becomes the "flat map" upon which attentive physician-cosmographers have discovered a "South-west discovery" that, "*Per fretum febris*," will lead to both death and resurrection (ll. 8-10).

Even brief perusal of antique map collections will reveal the popularity of the compass design. First appearing in German maps dating from around 1500, dividers are common features in the highly decorated woodcuts of German cartographers of the earlier sixteenth century.[6] They appear in the more subdued copper-plate engravings of later sixteenth-century Italian map-makers[7] and frequently in those of their more exuberant Flemish contemporaries, such as Ortelius.[8]

In England, dividers are particularly prominent in maps produced during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. They are, for example, part of the rich ornamentation of those included in *The Mariners Mirrour* (London, 1588) and appear, along with terrestrial and celestial globes, ships, sea monsters, mariners, and navigational instruments, in the elaborately engraved title-page of this nautical atlas (see Fig. 1).[9] At the top of this design, we note that the engraver, Theodore de Bry, has even included a group of five men and a boy peering apprehensively into the glass, somewhat like Donne's "sad friends" watching intently for signs of life in the dying "virtuous" man before them. However, the compass which forms an important part of the lavishly decorated map of "THE SEA COASTES of England, from the Sorlinges by the landes end

to Plymouth," also included in *The Mariners Mirrour* (pp. 114-15), is more convincing as a source or analogue for Donne's image. Against the background of "THE CHANELL BETWEEN ENGLAND AND FRAVNCE" (Fig. 2) and flanked by a ship under full sail and an ornate compass rose, de Bry has fashioned two figureheads, man and woman, at the upper ends of the compass (Fig. 3). Clearly, Donne's identification of his pair of faithful lovers with the "roaming" and "fixt" feet of a compass may have been inspired by such a design.

Further contemporary examples of the cartographic compass are to be found in the maps engraved by Humphry Cole,[10] and they are a nearly constant feature in the famous series of county maps prepared by Christopher Saxton[11] as well as in those of John Speed. Among the latter, two maps included in Speed's *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (London, 1611-12) warrant attention for their combining of compasses with human figures. Speed's map of Cambridgeshire includes a "compartiment" containing two men in academic costume, one holding a scale and compass in a "leaning" position (Fig. 4), and a detail from Speed's map of Herefordshire shows a man seated at a table and holding a compass above the scale of miles (Fig. 5).

Whether or not one accepts Walton's statement that Donne presented the "Valediction" to his wife at the time of his journey to France with Sir Robert Drury in 1611, the poem is—in addition to much else—an attempt to transcend, by means of a powerful spiritual love, the grief of parting and physical separation necessitated by travel. In selecting the "twin compasses" as a dominant and unifying symbol, Donne, whether actually preparing for a sea voyage or participating imaginatively in the "teare-floods, [and] sigh tempests" of leave-taking, would have been resorting in a very natural and logical manner to the iconography of travel as recorded on the maps of his time.

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Notes

1 *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912), II, 41.

2 See, respectively, Josef Lederer, "John Donne and the Emblematic Practice," *RES*, 22 (1946), 196-200; Doris C. Powers, "Donne's Compass," *RES*, n.s. 9 (1958), 173-75; D. C. Allen, "Donne's Compass Figure," *MLN*, 71 (1956), 256-57; W. A. Murray, "Donne's Gold-Leaf and his Compasses," *MLN*, 73 (1958), 329-30; Peter J. Seng, "Donne's Compass Image," *N&Q*, n.s. 5 (1958), 214-15; Robert F. Fleissner, "Donne and Dante: The Compass Figure Reinterpreted," *MLN*, 76 (1961), 315-20; John Freccero, "Donne's 'Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,'" *ELN*, 30 (1963), 335-76; and A. B. Chambers, "Glorified Bodies and the 'Valediction: forbidding Mourning,'" *JDJ*, 1 (1982), 1-20.

3 *Feudigraphia: the synopsis or epitome of surveying methodized* (1610), pp. 56-58, quoted in R. A. Skelton, *Decorative Printed Maps of the 15th to 18th Centuries* (London: Spring Books, 1965), pp. 16-17.

4 In addition to the two familiar references cited, Donne employs map imagery for varied purposes in at least five other poems: in "Loves Progress" (ll. 74-75), the term suggests—with high-spirited salaciousness, and in keeping with the poem's overall nautical metaphor—the correspondence ("symetrie") which exists between the foot and the pudendum; in "Satire IV" (ll. 3-4), Donne's anti-courtly satire is intensified through portrayal of the court as a kind of purgatory in comparison to which hell is only a pale reflection or "scarse map"; on the other hand, in "To Mr T. W." ("At once, from hence"), the poet's verse is the true representation or "strict Map" (l. 8) of his sorrow; for the speaker in "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington," meditation upon the virtuous subject of the poem can make the earth a "map," i.e., a model or type, of heaven (l. 14); finally, in "Upon the Annunciation and Passion falling upon one day. 1608," Donne's cartographical conceit results from combining this coincidence of calendar with the paradox in representing the extremes of East and West on "plaine," i.e., flat maps: ". . . this day hath showne, / Th'Abridgement of Christs story, which makes one / (As in plaine Maps, the furthest West is East) / Of the'Angels *Ave*,' and *Consummatum est*" (ll. 19-22). For references to maps in Donne's religious prose, see Robert L. Sharp, "Donne's 'Good Morrow' and Cordiform Maps," *MLN*, 69 (1954), 494, n. 2, and Lederer, 198, n. 2 and 199.

5 Sharp, pp. 494-95.

6 Skelton, p. 17, and Plate 3b.

7 Skelton, p. 17, and Plate 11.

8 See the examples in Abraham Ortelius, *Il Theatro del Mondo* (Brescia, 1598), pp. 79, 83, 87, 89, 131.

9 Title-page of *The Mariners Mirrour*, Anthony Ashley's English translation (London, 1588) of the *Spieghel der zeevaert* by L. J. Waghenaer, the first printed sea-atlas. This and the following illustrations are reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

10 Skelton, Plate 31.

11 Skelton, Plates 32, 33. See also Raymond Lister, *How to Identify Old Maps and Globes* (London: G. Bell, 1965), Plates 7 and 40.

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