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Eden and Agony in *Twicknam Garden*

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Donne scholarship traditionally views *Twicknam Garden* as "the one great poem that resulted from Donne's relations with the Countess [of Bedford]."[1] Sir Herbert Grierson and a succession of other scholars have established precedent for this view of the poem,[2] even though only the title *Twicknam Garden*, which Donne himself appears not to have given the poem,[3] links it to Donne's patroness and even though, as John Carey points out, "there is nothing in this poem which suggests that it relates to the Countess of Bedford."[4] But tradition persists in identifying the poem with the Countess, creating a host of well-known problems.[5] Foremost is the too narrow biographical reading of *Twicknam Garden* which, as N. J. C. Andreason demonstrates, inevitably becomes circular: "the poetry is evidence for Donne's biography, and the biography reconstructed from the poetry is used to interpret the poetry."[6] The attempt to illuminate Donne's life and his relationship with the Countess of Bedford through the poem has cast *Twicknam Garden* into critical obscurity that can only be lifted through an intentionally distanced view of the poem.

Scholars have commonly regarded *Twicknam Garden* as "cynical and depressing,"[7] a "terrifyingly bitter poem" spoken as a "harsh and vindictive response to scorn."[8] As the following discussion discloses, however, Donne's speaker emerges as no ordinary loser in the game of courtly love but as a self-professed self-deceiver who suffers self-inflicted misery. A master of irreverence and irony, he purposefully exaggerates his plight as miserable lover frankly desiring the affections of the wrong woman. Even his waltzing entrance into the garden suggests his empassioned complaint should be taken largely as the stuff of hyperbole—perhaps not a wholly frivolous complaint,[9] but not so grim as most critics hold. Frivolous praise is no praise at all, and ultimately the speaker's irreverence and irony turn complaint to compliment. Figuring an irreconcilable Neoplatonic love dilemma through disparate rather

than merely opposite "before" and "after" garden images, the speaker elevates the lady above all other women. Such exaltation constitutes high tribute indeed, whether the poem honors Donne's patroness or, perhaps, some other noble lady, or whether it witnesses some other occasion altogether.

Troubled readings of *Twicknam Garden* result largely from misinterpretations of the poem's first stanza, particularly of how Donne's treatment of imagery serves his speaker's motivation in relation to the lady of the garden. As an initial case in point, Petrarch's influence on the poem has long been established,[10] and the speaker enters the garden in what critics commonly mistake as a conventional Petrarchan humor:

> Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares,
> Hither I come to seeke the spring,
> And at mine eyes, and at mine eares,
> Receive such balmes, as else cure every thing.[11]

Since countless lovers in the Petrarchan tradition have so reacted when their ladies prove not to be their soul companions, such unrequited love might seem the plight of Donne's unhappy speaker: sorrow, not joy, brings him to the garden; he loves but is not loved. Yet the language with which he introduces himself immediately alerts us that his is no conventional Petrarchan dilemma. Both Andreason and Murray Roston correctly note in other contexts that Donne's speaker figures himself a penitent needing extreme unction;[12] the emphasis, however, falls not on penitence but unction, not forgiveness but relief. The speaker's very admission that he brings with him temptation's serpent (l. 8) because the lady in question remains true to someone else (ll. 26-27) indicates a less pious purpose for his visit than his figure intimates. In this first of several occasions where Donne purposefully uses orthodox religious imagery to reveal his speaker's unorthodox secular motives, the speaker's need of extreme unction alludes to the physical rather than the spiritual urgency of his situation. A dying penitent need not employ temptation to receive extreme unction from a priest of the church, but a Petrarchan lover "dying" of unrequited love might well need such aid to obtain "unction" from his "priestess" in the garden of love. Representing himself as such a "dying" man, Donne's speaker enters Twicknam Garden with temptation in order to secure the garden's metaphorical "healing waters,"[13] the "balmes" of love's comfort—a sign, a word, an embrace—that under conditions favorable to his cause would most

certainly relieve his misery. Readily confessing but never repenting his desire to compromise the lady's virtue, he is less a hapless victim of unrequited love than a willing prisoner of thwarted passion.

Clearly no penitent in this garden, Donne's speaker seeks not spiritual renewal[14] but physical satisfaction, not grace but gratification. Knowing already that the lady's commitment to someone else precludes his becoming her soul companion, the speaker still hopes to prompt her infidelity to ideal love. Again Donne projects the speaker's motive through ironic treatment of an orthodox religious image: the Roman Eucharist and its power of transubstantiation. Just as the substance of the Eucharist becomes the true presence of Christ, so the physical union of soul companions becomes the essence of love. Such love is a miracle. But Donne's speaker intends no such miracle, and Donne's Eucharistic inversion, whereby manna becomes gall, emphasizes the destructive potential of the speaker's "spider love"—his envy[15] and his unfulfilled desire.[16] Through the spiritual nourishment of her genuine Neoplatonic relationship, the lady already partakes of love's manna, and the speaker knows that his seduction of her would only debase her spiritual love without ennobling his own miserable passion. Hence his purpose for entering the garden is an infidelity that would profane Love's miracle.

Toward the achievement of such profanation the speaker admittedly brings the serpent so that the garden "may thoroughly be thought / True Paradise" (ll. 8-9). Interpreters of *Twicknam Garden* unanimously presume these lines to mean a fallen Eden, a "paradise lost, because the speaker is his own tempter."[17] To be sure, the serpent's presence makes this garden a genuine Eden but not a fallen one. Eden contains both virtue and temptation in its prelapsarian state, a state implied in Twicknam Garden by the lady's constancy to ideal love and the speaker's awareness of carnal desire. Only when he brings temptation into the garden does it take on the character of "true" Eden: the paradise of choice. But the speaker has been mistaken in thinking he can precipitate the lady's fall, for she has chosen fidelity to a higher principle of love than has he. She is not Eve, nor any descendant of that so-called "perverse sexe" (l. 26) that works man's misery through deceit. Although clearly he wills to do so, the speaker has not actually "reenacted the pattern of the Fall"[18] in Twicknam Garden, nor can he properly envision himself "a latter-day Adam duped by love for a woman."[19]

Recognition that the speaker does not figure himself as Adam deceived by Eve in a fallen Eden is crucial in properly understanding the poem, for it points to the true nature of his misery. In his cry "Self-traitor"

(l. 5), Donne's speaker acknowledges himself rather than some external force as the source of his deception and misery. Through Donne's continued inversion of religious imagery, the speaker associates himself with Judas as the betrayer of man's highest spiritual potential. Thus the speaker also associates his agony with that of Christ, although he is anything but a Christ figure himself. For *Twicknam Garden* is about the speaker's suffering and his desire to mitigate it. Because of the speaker's failure to seduce the lady from ideal love, the garden remains for her a prelapsarian Eden, and just because it does so, Twicknam Garden becomes for the speaker not a fallen Eden but a Gethsemane. Within his complaint, then, the speaker reflects upon the irreconcilable differences between himself and the lady in terms of these two gardens: the Eden of her unshakable fidelity and the Gethsemane of his unquenchable passion. He bemoans not the polarity of grace and sin,[20] but the impasse of constancy and lust.

Over the years, interpreters of *Twicknam Garden* have felt the poem's internal structures and images to reflect somewhat disjunctive, even illogical, relationships. Writing in 1962, for example, Leonard Unger complains that "not until the end of the poem does the speaker pursue any argument or set up any extended metaphor as a seeming fulfillment to the direction of the whole poem."[21] In particular, Unger sees no logic in the speaker's requests for senselessness in stanza 2. Similarly, Judah Stampfer finds the poem's relationships "strangely slack," expressing "no crisis in the speaker's life,"[22] and Bernard Richards regards the speaker's complaint as "strained and intense."[23] Not surprisingly, all of these observations occur within discussions informed by a view of the garden as a fallen Eden; its attendant assumptions about punishment for sin rather than mitigation of pain make the poem's internal relationships appear disunified, even tortured. But according to the present study, it is precisely the impasse between Eden and Gethsemane projected in stanza 1 that provokes in the subsequent stanzas the speaker's consideration of radical alternatives to his suffering. His primary concern is the mitigation of his misery. All hope of Neoplatonic consummation gone for him, truly it would seem to him "wholesomer" (l. 10) if the garden's glory were cast into wintry darkness, its mocking joy and vitality frozen into deathly silence. But nature's death would not ease his pain, and even though he does not wish to endure the disgrace of Eden's mockery, he also does not want to "leave [the garden while still] loving"[24] and carry with him the agony of his unsatisfied desire. Besides, having claimed Gethsemane as the figure for his destiny, the speaker cannot

leave, for Gethsemane has no outcast; unless he stays, his complaint has no purpose. No more to be shaken from his passion than the lady from her constancy, he commits himself to his garden—his agony—and thus to his "death."

Christ in Gethsemane prayed of God, "let this cup passe from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt,"[25] thus subordinating personal desire to divine will. But Donne's speaker has no intention of subordinating his will to that of ideal love, and in parody of Christ's earnest struggle with divine destiny, the speaker not only requests that Love allow him permanence in the lady's garden but also presumes to set senselessness as the condition under which such permanence would best suit him:

> . . . let mee
> Some senseless peece of this place bee;
> Make me a mandrake, so I may groane here,
> Or a stone fountaine weeping out my yeare. (ll. 15-18)

Existence as either the humanlike groaning mandrake[26] or the silent stone fountain—the speaker's preferred forms of senselessness—would, as Earl R. Miner reminds us,[27] diminish the speaker's importance in the chain of being. But of course the speaker's reduction has been in progress since his entrance into the garden, prompted already by the lesser rather than the higher quality of humankind, by animal passion rather than angelic spirit. His request for further diminution to the vegetable and mineral worlds not only affords him the heretical luxury of form without feeling but also extends the implied inversion of his Gethsemane figure wherein he descends to the level of lowest matter as Christ ascends to the level of highest spirit.

Judah Stampfer maintains that "the speaker becomes a stone fountain to no purpose,"[28] but the speaker's diminution directly links his protestation of misery to his ultimate praise of the lady of Twicknam Garden. The speaker figures himself not as an active "savior in the religion of love"[29] but as a static likeness of a willful martyr to both ideal love and its earthly shadow, whose clear, passionless tears may spare lovers the misery of misplaced, exaggerated affections. As such a stone fountain he becomes a vehicle through which courtly lovers may resolve their love dilemmas through alchemical rather than conventional Neoplatonic methods. His insistence that as "loves wine" all tears "are false that tast

not just like mine" (ll. 20, 22) poses in its Eucharistic language a Neoplatonic heresy. The same Petrarchan poets who "wrote that true lovers' sighs and tears are love's meat and drink, whereas false tears are unpalatable"[30] well knew that eyes alone reveal the quality of lovers' hearts. According to the speaker's explanation, however, women are a "perverse sexe," and one "can [no] more judge woman's thoughts by teares, / Then by her shadow, what she weares" (ll. 24-25). In *The Indifferent*, of course, Donne treats infidelity as a virtue in women, but the lady of *Twicknam Garden* is not among the virtuous unfaithful whose tears must be tested for purity. Her singular fidelity to Neoplatonic love elevates her above all other women and "kills" the speaker. Connoting the seventeenth-century sense of "death through intercourse," the poet's pun on "kills" reverberates in its ironic designation of the speaker's demise through the lady's consummate relationship with her soul companion. The speaker implies that unlike other women, who as descendants of Eve attain perversity through inconstancy, the lady of Twicknam Garden deviates from the norm of inconstancy and thus attains perversity through fidelity. This paradox illuminates the speaker's final assertion that the lady is "therefore true, because her truth kills me" (l. 27), suggesting not that she acts in order to spite him[31] but that her perversity—her "killing" constancy—proves to him that she alone among women is genuine. Rather than "an evil effect of an unrequited love,"[32] perversity becomes praiseworthy evidence of her virtue.

By stepping back from the familiar biographical approach to *Twicknam Garden*, the foregoing discussion provides a clearer understanding of the poem and its relationship to Donne's other poetry. *Twicknam Garden* is structurally unified, its parts are logically related, and its chief ideas and figures contribute to its overall design. In its unconventional treatment of poetic commonplaces and familiar religious imagery, its patterns of ascendant and descendant values, and its ironic wit, Donne's poetic method in *Twicknam Garden* is typical rather than anomalous of that in his other poetry. More importantly, the present study clarifies the hyperbolic nature and complimentary purpose of the speaker's complaint, showing the speaker to be a created character whose abnegation, through figures of Gethsemane in relation to Eden, is simply part of the poetic materials from which he creates the design of his complimentary verse. Seeing the speaker as something other than an extension of the poet's inexplicably tormented psyche removes familiar but unfounded suspicions that perhaps *Twicknam Garden* reflects Donne's guilty response to inappropriate feelings for his patroness or his vindictive

response to a rejection of him—real or imagined—by his patroness or some other member of the "perverse sexe." In short, *Twicknam Garden* does not enlighten us about John Donne's life, except insofar as the poem provides further evidence of the poet's consummate artistry.

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Notes

[1] John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 79.

[2] Sir Herbert Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), vol. 2, p. 26. Among those who follow Grierson's lead are J. B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit: An Analytical and Comparative Study of the Poetry of John Donne* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p. 174; R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (New York: Clarendon, 1970), pp. 175-76; Richard E. Hughes, *The Progress of the Soul: The Interior Career of John Donne* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 125; Helen Gardner, *John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 215; Judah Stampfer, *John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), pp. 216-17; Theodore Redpath, ed., *'The Songs and Sonets' of John Donne* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1957), p. xxv; and Murray Roston, *The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), p. 141.

[3] Gardner notes that "In many manuscripts there is no title and *B* has simply 'In a Garden,'" but chooses *Twicknam Garden* on the authority of tradition, p. 215. Grierson's 1912 edition notes title variants in the MSS but cites *Twicknam Garden* without further comment, vol. 1, p. 28. In "John Donne's 'Twicknam Garden': An Interpretation," *Visvabharati Quarterly* 39 (1973-74), 179, A. B. Chatterjee characterizes current acceptance of *Twicknam Garden* as the authoritative title of this poem as "academically unsound."

[4] Carey, p. 74.

[5] Charles M. Coffin, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New York: Modern Library, 1952), p. xxiv; Doniphan Louthan, *The Poetry of John Donne: A Study in Explication* (New York: Bookman, 1951), pp. 149-50; N. J. C. Andreason, *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 10-13; Chatterjee, pp. 172-83.

[6] Andreason, p. 10.

[7] Patricia Garland Pinka, *This Dialogue of One: The 'Songs and Sonnets' of John Donne* (Birmingham: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1982), p. 98.

[8] Andreason, p. 151.

[9] Chatterjee, p. 175.

[10] See in particular Sylvia Ruffo-Fiore, *Donne's Petrarchism: A Comparative View* (Firenze: Grafica Toscana, 1976), pp. 46-49, and Donald L. Guss, *John Donne, Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in the "Songs and Sonets"* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 85-87, for discussions of parallels between *Twicknam Garden* and Petrarch's sonnets. See also Roston, pp. 141-42.

[11] Grierson, vol. 1, p. 28, ll. 1-4. Further citations are from this edition.

[12] Roston, p. 141; Andreason, p. 146.

[13] Bernard Richards, in "Donne's 'Twicknam Garden' and the *Eons Amatoria*," *Review of English Studies* 33 (1985), 180-81, argues that because too much emphasis has been placed on "spring" as "season" and thus on the idea of spiritual renewal, insufficient attention has been given to "spring" as "healing waters." Under the circumstances set forth in the poem, however, the only renewal possible for this speaker is physical which, in turn, would bring him no spiritual benefit.

[14] See Louthan, pp. 148-53; also Andreason, p. 146.

[15] Gardner, p. 215, reminds us that "Among the Seven Deadly Sins Envy is always represented as, or accompanied by, a serpent." For variant readings of "spider love," see Chatterjee, p. 180; and Pinka, p. 99.

[16] Ruffo-Fiore, p. 48.

[17] Earl R. Miner, *The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 56. Andreason, p. 149, also insists that "because of his destructive love, 'True Paradise' is for him the Garden of the Fall rather than the Garden of Bliss."

[18] Andreason, p. 150.

[19] Pinka, p. 99.

[20] Andreason, p. 149.

[21] Leonard Unger, *Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), p. 31.

[22] Stampfer, p. 172.

[23] Richards, p. 183.

[24] Grierson, vol. 2, p. 26, retains the wording "leave loving" from the 1633 edition of *Songs and Sonets* but expresses puzzlement about why the speaker should believe he could stop loving. Addressing Grierson's question at a later time, Andreason claims as the crux of the speaker's dilemma his decision to love in spite of his ability to do otherwise, pp. 149-50. At other times, editors such as Gardner, p. 83; John T. Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) p. 116; and A. L. Clements, *John Donne's Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. 15, have omitted "loving," choosing instead "nor leave this garden," on the authority of mss. and the editions of *Songs and Sonets* after 1633.

[25] Matthew 26:39 in *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

[26] Although most modern editors accept Grierson's having the mandrake groan (vol. 2, p. 26), Gardner, p. 216, argues for "grow" (1633 edition) because "the mandrake was not held to groan when *in situ*; it only groaned when it was torn up." Richards, p. 181, reminds us that another property of the mandrake was "to snatch him away to perform some aphrodisiac or generative miracle."

[27] Miner, p. 56. See also Pinka, p. 100; and Gardner, p. 216. For discussion of a lover's reduction to vegetable, mineral, and animal states in another poetic context, see Anthony Low and Paul J. Pival, "Rhetorical Pattern in Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress,'" *JEGP* 68 (1969), 414-21.

[28] Stampfer, p. 173.

[29] Pinka, p. 101.

[30] A. J. Smith, ed., *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* (London: Allen Lane, 1971), p. 404.

[31] Pinka, p. 102; Redpath, p. 43.

[32] Ruffo-Fiore, p. 46.