

Donne's "Air and Angels": A Gross Misreading

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Whilst thus to ballast love, I thought,
And so more steadily to have gone,
With wares which would sink admiration,
I saw, I had love's pinnacle overfraught.
(ll. 15-18)

In *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*, edited by Richard Machin and Christopher Norris (Cambridge University Press, 1987), Thomas Docherty offers the following interpretation of these lines 15-18 of Donne's "Air and Angels":

The word "pinnacle" is odd in this context: a ship of fools may be one thing, but a ship of love or of lovers is another. . . . Drawing attention to itself the word "pinnacle" invites the obvious exchange with "penis." The silent reading makes explicit sexual sense of the lines, in which there appears now a revelation of the otherwise unspeakable enormity of Donne's erection, and a notion that it attracts such admiration as to make rival "pinnacles" sink, fall downwards or become detumescent. The euphemistic language of rhetorical flowers is useful as a means of allowing a reader to "hear" texts or voices other than that presented to her or his eyes and ears. It opens the poem to the intrusion of "alien" impurities, ghostly verbal visitations which haunt the reader with the possibility of producing multiple meaning, "dialogical sense," so to speak, from the poetry. (p. 93)

Thomas Docherty is a well-known advocate of "theory" (the word tends to be placed, for some reason, in inverted commas by the editors,

suggesting that some special sense should accrue to it), but this nonsensical reading shows that "theory" dispenses with common sense at its peril. Quite simply he has created some alternative scenario of what the poem is about that bears no relation to Donne's meaning or meanings; it is all too apparent that he does not understand the poem at this point. Not the least of his shortcomings is that he does not explain the ostensible gist of the conceit. In no sense does his interpretation elucidate, make sense of or throw light on "Air and Angels"—it is nothing other than an impertinent critical excrescence. It is the kind of analysis that merely adds to the case against creative criticism. I am not opposed to the search for multiple meanings for poetry, but the possible variants are required to be plausible and internally operable. I also think that they should correspond to available semantic possibilities at the time of composition, but I concede that this might be open to debate.

Docherty's interpretation is filled with unexamined and unquestioned assumptions. It is nonsense to say that the word "pinnacle" is odd, or that it draws attention to itself. How does it draw attention to itself? In no possible way so far as I can see. It may be odd to certain modern readers with a limited range of vocabulary, but it was not to Donne's original readers and is not to competent readers now, and they are the ones that most matter in providing a historically reliable interpretation. And there is nothing odd about a ship of lovers: there are a number of poetic *topoi* which associate ships and love. Donne's ship (or the speaker's if one prefers) is concerned with a single lover rather than lovers, and the body of the ship and the body of the mistress have become almost fused into an image that we cannot quite see in a single instant, but must imagine in some other mode as rapidly shifting alternatives. Donne is, for the moment, thinking of some kind of love-quest, some journey to spiritual love in which a physical body is allowed to make it possible. To keep the vessel low in the water he ballasts it with heavy, physical feminine attributes; these are the "wares" of the conceit. There is a danger that abstract "admiration" for the spiritual woman may fly too high and remote, so needs to be kept down and stabilized. In fact, though he discovers that he has overloaded the ship, and now is in danger of being too non-platonic and sinking altogether into a state of lust unregenerated by any noble aspirations. So the speaker has to move towards some kind of compromise, whereby the woman is envisaged as angel—existing in bodily form, but not gross and heavy.

If my reading is right, and in broad terms I do not see how it could be anything else, then Docherty's is wrong. He has invented rival

"pinnaces," but there is no evidence whatsoever in the text in front of us that they are there. If rival pinnaces (as penises) are supposed to sink it could not be by means of over-ballasting, since, paradoxically, it is precisely this over-ballasting with bodily experience (according to Docherty) that creates the formidable erection of the speaker in the poem. If there is a pun to be evoked, or a ghostly presence to be conjured up, it is the alternative meaning of "pinnacle" that was available around 1600—a prostitute or a light woman of easy virtue; this was probably because a pinnacle is a small, swiftly moving supply or scouting vessel. Donne may wish to imply that there is a danger in making his mistress so physical that she becomes perilously close to being a woman of easy virtue or a prostitute; there is such a usage in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* II.ii, for instance. However, it is best to relegate this suggestion to an extremely shadowy form of existence, since it does not contribute much to the overall meaning. In fact, the pun that Docherty thinks he recognizes has helped to lead him astray. He speaks of "silent reading" (by which he means that one word looks like another on the page). But *penis* and *pinnacle* are not homonyms, not here at least. *Penis* and *pinnacle* as heard puns (homophones) are admittedly somewhat more likely, but still not especially close in sound. But adopting the shadowy idea of the penis does not produce any sensible, coherent ghostly alien meaning, especially if it is both Donne's own penis and those of his rivals that are overfraught; how then are the other penises of rivals to be sunk? This interpretation does not follow the decorum of Donne's conceit, since Docherty requires us to envisage a process flying in the face of reason, whereby freighting raises one vessel (or penis) and lowers or sinks others. And what is this ghostly situation that is acted out in the haunted theater of Docherty's mind? An erect male lover, standing alone, or lying with a real or imagined mistress, exhibiting himself to flabbergasted rivals? Surely these possibilities are too preposterous to contemplate. In any case it is not clear to me that the sight of an enormous penis on an exemplary lover is necessarily detumescing for his rivals, although it could be in some circumstances.

And there is another objection. It will always be possible to ante-date entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I have done it myself often enough; but the first recorded use of "penis" is 1676, in a private letter of Thomas Browne, and it was not in general use as a naturalized and idiomatic word until the eighteenth century. The Latin word *penis* existed in Donne's time of course, but it makes interpretation very far-fetched if meaning requires cross-references to other languages. If

Docherty's reading is going to be at all historical and scholarly he does at the very least have to admit this small problem to his readers.

We witness in this analysis of Docherty's a piece of scholarly activity that is a hindrance rather than a help to any understanding of Donne. Far from contributing anything to our reading it is detritus that has to be cleared away before understanding can begin.

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