

## Editor's Preface

In its exploration of the experience of love, Donne's poetry is so amazingly rich that it seems impossible neatly to categorize the various attitudes toward love in the *Songs and Sonets*, though it is difficult to resist the temptation to do so. Some poems like "Loves Alchymie" are cynical, disillusioned, even misogynistic meditations. Others like "The good-morrow" are idealistic and celebratory (sometimes labeled "sincere," a problematic term since it implies that the other poems aren't), describing love as transcendent and capable of uniting two people in a way that momentarily lessens the difference between the male and female lovers. But there are other poems that fall somewhere in the middle, "Aire and Angels" being a supreme example.

"Aire and Angels" is particularly intriguing and provocative because it brings together in one poem something of both the idealism and the cynicism that occur in separate and distinct poems. As an important poem that has been read in contradictory ways and has produced intense critical disagreement, "Aire and Angels" seems particularly suited to a special issue of the *John Donne Journal*.

The idea for this issue began at the Fifth Annual Conference of the John Donne Society at Gulfport, Mississippi, in February 1990. Each year, one of Donne's poems is selected for attention in a special session—a poem that is particularly difficult or controversial in some way, and that is considered crucial in assessing Donne's achievement. In the 1990 conference, a panel discussion was devoted to "Aire and Angels," and I was the moderator. R. V. Young distributed to the panelists, and to all attending the conference, a "position paper," in which he argued that the poem's rejection of Petrarchan love, with its Platonic body/soul dualism, is founded on a Thomistic sense of human nature and a biblically sanctioned understanding of the relation of man and woman. Three panelists (Stella P. Revard, Phoebe S. Spinrad, and Michael C. Schoenfeldt) gave brief responses, and Judith Scherer Herz commented on both the responses and the paper. At this point, the session was opened up to anyone who wanted to participate, and a lively, one might say heated, discussion ensued.

After the conference was over, a number of us felt that the poem seemed as able to generate controversy as ever, and that there was still more to be said. So, with the particular encouragement of M. Thomas Hester, the idea of a special issue of *The John Donne Journal* evolved.

This issue opens with R. V. Young's paper and the responses of the four panelists, slightly modified for publication. Most of the other articles that follow were written specifically for this issue. John T. Shawcross discusses the text of "Aire and Angels" and the way the context of the poem within the manuscripts might influence interpretation. John R. Roberts gives a useful, detailed survey of the critical debate about the poem. "Interpretation"—of literature, of Donne, and of this particular poem—is the subject of Arnold Stein's widely ranging and ruminative essay. The next three essays offer specific readings of "Aire and Angels." In a paper originally presented at the 1990 Donne Conference in the session immediately preceding the panel discussion (hence Judith Herz's reference to it in her response), Albert C. Labriola examines Donne's bawdy, even promiscuous punning and playful analogies. Janel Mueller's reading explores the widening gap "between asserted control and manifest indeterminacy" as the speaker discursively plays with "difference." Seeking to answer the question "why the last lines [of the poem] are there at all," Camille Slight explores the "progress of love" in the poem towards an ideal of companionate marriage that may be disturbing in its implications. My own thoughts on the poem conclude the issue.

This issue is intended to be explorative, not definitive. No single collection of essays can exhaust the richness and subtlety of the poem or the possible responses to it. Surely there will be more written about it. Some of these essays may prompt others to work out their own readings. "Aire and Angels" is a poem that virtually everyone who writes on seems to feel strongly about. Perhaps it is because, no matter how well we historicize the poem as the product of a culture and society different than our own, it still speaks to something important in our experience.

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