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Angels in "Aire and Angels"

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At Midnight Mass this past Christmas, the celebrant made reference in his homily to an Italian locale that claims possession of relics of the archangel, St. Michael. I looked inquiringly at the nun seated beside me. With a twinkle in her eye, she whispered, "Feathers."[1] This is a more amusing remark if we look beyond our discomfort with what the modern mind takes as a quaint notion— that angels might actually exist—and put the matter in the context of the angelological controversies that persisted beyond the time of John Donne until the end of the 1600s. It had only been in the thirteenth century that St. Thomas Aquinas had, for a time, definitively formulated the Catholic view of angels by identifying the Messengers of the Lord in sacred Scripture as separated substances or pure intelligences, conceived in Aristotelian terms.[2] When an angel is thus understood as an utterly simple substance with no physical component at all, the notion of an angelic relic becomes especially peculiar and problematic; and important issues are raised in explaining the apparitions and actions of angels recounted in the Bible. What is more, Donne's "Aire and Angels" emerges as a more resonant and intelligible poem—though certainly not a less intricate poem—when it is read in the light of the precise features of Scholastic angelology.

The Thomist interpretation displaced earlier Christian assumptions about angels that had understood them in the light of the aetherial demons of the Neo-Platonic tradition that possessed natural bodies, however tenuous in composition; and Thomas' teaching was not uncontroversial in his day. During the Renaissance it was put in question again. The pronounced Neo-Platonism of many humanists, especially those with a predilection for magic and the occult, brought back into favor a conception of angels as analogous to aerial demons. Ficino, for example, says that "Though Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus distribute them [demons] into particular orders, into gods, archangels, angels, demons, principalities, and heroes, yet all these particular divinities are, I repeat, commonly named demonic." He also maintains that all rational souls, including the souls of "demons," are always joined to an aetherial "chariot" or "vehicle."[2] Humanism was generally unfavorable to metaphysical elaborations of Christian teaching by Scholastic theologians, especially those that seemed to lack scriptural warrant, and this tendency was reinforced by the Protestant Reformation. Milton's Protestantism and humanism are probably both factors in the calculated rebuke to Scholasticism presented by

the palpably physical angels of *Paradise Lost*.[3] Finally, a distinct but not wholly unrelated strand is the appearance of the angel image in Petrarchism, where it is almost inevitably associated with the idealized figure of the beloved lady as emissary or symbol of the spiritual realm of divinity. The angelic lady of Petrarchan love poetry easily suggests the aerial Neo-Platonic demon because the account of love in the sonnet tradition, at least in its idealistic version, is so compatible with the Neo-Platonic concept of spiritual love deriving ultimately from the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. The ready conjunction of the two is plain in the famous discourse ascribed to Pietro Bembo in the fourth book of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.

Now if John Donne is, in some measure, a Petrarchist as a poet, it is because Petrarch essentially invented the language of love for the modern world, and in Donne's age the terms and tropes of love poetry were inescapably Petrarchan. But when Donne deploys these tropes most overtly, he is most at pains to subvert them:

> Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?
> What merchant ships have my signs drown'd?
> Who saies my teares have overflow'd his ground?
> When did my colds a forward spring remove?
> When did the heats which my veines fill
> Adde one more, to the plaguie Bill? [4]

These lines (10-15) from "The Canonization" enact Petrarchan conceits by declining to apply them to *his* love. Moreover, the transcendent implications of the tropes are diminished by their literalistic attribution to the mundane and disagreeable. Much the same procedure is at work in "A Valediction forbidding mourning":

> So let us melt, and make no noise,
> No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,
> T'were prophanation of our joyes
> To tell the layetie our love. (5-8)

Even in this most "spiritual" of Donne's love poems, with its scorn for "Dull sublunary lovers love / (Whose soule is sense)" (13-14), the poet distances himself from the noisy, public complaints of the Petrarchan sonneteer. We are again reminded that Donne's poems were generally not intended for publication.

"Aire and Angels" is a rather more subtle and elaborate dismantling of a Petrarchan trope, the lady as angelic presence, and it manages the figure in a way that discloses Donne's fundamental objection to the Petrarchan/Neo-Platonic treatment of love. There is more at stake here than poetic fashion, rakish rejection of conventional idealism, or cynical disillusion. Every version of Petrarchism,

whether straightforward or parodic, rests upon a Neo-Platonic assumption of an essential dualism of body and soul. This view entails a dichotomy of physical and spiritual love and generates a hopeless tension between desire for the beauty and charm of a woman's body and reverence for the chaste virtue of her mind.[4] This aspect of Petrarchism explains why even Donald Guss, the most resolute interpreter of Donne from a Petrarchan perspective, finds the "Petrarchism" of "Aire and Angels" not altogether satisfying. Although the poem has "Nothing but praise for his lady," Guss remarks, "Donne's devotion is perpetually disappointed; and it is not surprising when he concludes, with epigrammatic point, that woman's love is ever less pure than man's."[5] Donne, however, remains a Thomist in his general understanding of reality and the human condition, despite his gradual shift in ecclesiastical allegiance. For Donne, then, a human being is not a soul lodged, much less trapped, in an altogether dispensable body; to be human is, rather, to be an intrinsically composite creature — a body animated by a soul that is its formal cause and principle of existence. Love between a man and a woman, therefore, is both physical and spiritual, involving the soul and body of each in inextricable fashion. If we surrender to the idealistic temptation of spiritualized adoration of woman, then "a great Prince in prison lies" ("The Extasie" 68). "Aire and Angels" begins by invoking the conventional Petrarchan conceit of the desirable woman as a remote and unapproachable angel, but it closes with an analogy based on the Thomist conception of angels. The allusion to St. Thomas—it is almost a gloss—serves as a marker, indicating the metaphysical foundation of Donne's rejection of the dualistic notion of an irreconcilable antagonism between soul and body and, hence, between chaste love and erotic desire. Although the poem is, on the surface, a witty thrust in the war between the sexes, at a deeper level it embodies a philosophical proposition regarding the proper relationship between men and women and thus seeks to establish a basis for peace. Of course this is no guarantee that Donne's proposals will effect so much as a truce in our contemporary war zone.

The opening lines of "Aire and Angels" draw an analogy between the erotic appeal that women cast over men and the mysterious apparitions of angels in Scripture and pious legend:

> Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
> Before I knew thy face or name;
> So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame,
> *Angells* affect us oft, and worship'd bee. (1-4)

This gambit is fairly typical of Donne's treatment of Petrarchan conventions. While the lady is praised by the comparison with angelic influence, which suggests that she is an emissary from the divine realm, at the same time it serves as an elegant excuse. The probable mode through which this paragon might have exercised such influence would be through lesser manifestations of femininity—other women.

The notion is more overt in "The good-morrow": "if every any beauty I did see, / Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee" (6-7). Thus when "Aire and Angels" concludes with an (apparent—we shall return to this issue) assertion that men, or at least their love, ought to be compared to angels, women merely to the air that renders angels visible, then the point of the poem seems to be a wry reversal of a Petrarchan topos. That astute reader of Donne, Thomas Carew, seems to have taken many of Donne's poems in this fashion and attempted to imitate the witty turn at the close in such poems as "A divine Mistris":

> Nor need I beg from all the store
> Of heaven, for her one beautie more:
> Shee hath too much divinity for mee,
> You Gods teach her some more humanitie.[6]

In each instance the standard Petrarchan conceit, indicative of the lady's transcendent worth, is in some way subverted.

But there is more to Donne's poem than a simple send-up of erotic idealism, a move that had been assimilated to the conventions of the Petrarchan tradition. The greater depth of Donne's critique emerges when we consider some of the more resonant evocations of the angelic lady in that tradition. It is striking that often the figure appears in a context that stresses the more sinister elements of the Petrarchan vision of love. In "*The 7. Wonders of* England" from Sir Philip Sidney's *Certain Sonnets*, the desired lady is accounted "A woman's mould, but like an Angell graste, / An Angell's mind, but in a woman caste" (66-67);[7] but all of her virtues are principally notable as the cause of the poet's utter undoing. In the "*Fift song*" of *Astrophil and Stella*, Stella is called a "witch" and "a Devill, though clothd in Angel's shining" (74, 81); and her angelic qualities are bound up with her erotic power: "Thy fingers *Cupid's* shafts, thy voyce the Angels' lay" (11). Although Stella is "sweet," she is "sweet poison to my heart" (8). Now this convergence of ferocious and angelic qualities, which are "sweet poison" to the lover, finds its paradigm in Petrarch himself. If Stella is both angel and devil, so Laura is "This humble wild creature, this tiger's or she-bear's heart that / comes in human appearance and in the shape of an angel" (*Rime* 152:1-2: "Questa umil fera, un cor di tigre o d'orsa / che in vista umana o 'n d'angel vene").[8] The unrequited love that she inspires in him is a "sweet poison" (dolce veneno) that is certain to end the poet's life (5-8). The angel motif is anticipated a few poems earlier in *Rime* 149, when the poet feels "her angelic form and her sweet smile become less harsh toward me" (1-2: "mi si fa men dura / l'angelica figura e 'l dolce riso"). But this poem concludes with a paradoxical assertion of the fundamental Petrarchan dilemma:

> But still I do not find this war coming to an end, nor any state of my heart tranquil: for the more hope makes me confident, the more my desire burns. (13-16)

[Nè però trovo ancor guerra finita
nè tranquillo ogni stato del cor mio,
che piu m'arde 'l desio
quanto più la speranza m'assicura.]

Sidney likewise deploys the figure of the desirable lady as heavenly messenger to intimate what an abyss of hopelessness Petrarchan love is. In sonnet 60 his guardian angel ("good Angell") brings him into Stella's longed-for presence only to suffer "Thundred disdaines and lightnings of disgrace" from "That heav'n of joyes." He is utterly discomfited—we might almost say *deconstructed*—by "this fierce *Love* and lovely hate":

Then some good body tell me how I do,
Whose presence, absence, absence presence is;
Blist in my curse, and cursed in my blisse.

In the following sonnet (61) the paradox of unrequited, indeed unrequitable, Petrarchan love attains its keenest edge in the "Angel's sophistrie" of the imperious lady:

Now since her chaste mind hates this love in me,
With chastned mind, I straight must shew that she
Shall quickly me from what she hates remove.
O Doctor *Cupid*, thou for me reply,
Driv'n else to graunt by Angel's sophistrie,
That I love not, without I leave to love.

Since "doctor" was a title of respect for a revered teacher in the Scholastic tradition, since the humanists routinely referred to the Scholastics as "sophists," and since St. Thomas Aquinas was already known as the "Angelic Doctor" (*Doctor Angelicus*), Ringler's suggestion that Astrophil is accusing the "angelic" Stella of using the Scholastic method of the Angelic Doctor to fend off his advances is probably correct.[9]

It is fitting, then, that Donne calls on Thomas—in particular his account of angels but also his view of human nature—to counter the aporia of self-destructive Petrarchan love. In "Aire and Angels" the woman as angel, as "voice" or "shapeless flame," is an inadequate object for human love, because human beings are not angelic pure intelligences tragically trapped in bodies, but rather bodily creatures animated and informed by specifically human souls. Since we are not altogether spiritual in our nature, our natural human love is not fulfilled on a purely spiritual realm:

Still when, to where thou wert, I came,
Some lovely glorious nothing I did see,
But since, my soule, whose child love is,
Takes limmes of flesh, and else could nothing doe,
More subtle then the parent is,
Love must not be, but take a body too,
And therefore what thou wert, and who
I bid Love aske, and now
That it assume thy body, I allow,
And fixe it selfe in thy lip, eye, and brow. (5-14)

Peter De Sa Wiggins has shrewdly pointed out that "Aire and Angels" comprises a pair of modified sonnets—Petrarchan sonnets with the octave/sestet arrangement reversed or Shakespearean sonnets with the sententious closing couplets emphasized into triplets. Likewise, he draws attention to the passage in the *Summa Theologiae* that is most significant for the interpretation of Donne's poem.[10] It seems to me, however, that he has missed the import of these valuable observations. The Petrarchan structure of these "sonnets" is inverted because their thrust is the inversion of Petrarchan assumptions, by which love begins with body and moves up the Platonic ladder toward the soul and ultimately the realm of pure spirit. But the first part of "Aire and Angels" begins in the vaguely "spiritual" realm of barely accessible angels and comes to rest "now" (in human time) in a "body"—in the "lip, eye, and brow" of a particular woman.

For Petrarch the experience of erotic passion, as an index to a purely spiritual longing, has to remain unfulfilled since fleshly consummation would spoil the very purity giving it force: "But I sing her divine beauty, that when I have departed from this flesh the world may know that my death is sweet" (*Rime* 217: "Ma canto la divina sua beltate / che quand' i' sia di questa carne scosso / sappia 'l mondo che dolce é la mia morte"). In fact, near the end of the sequence (e.g., *Rime* 346), the soul of the dead Laura is envisioned as happily free of the limits of mortality, praying for the salvation of her poet whose thoughts and desires are now all focused on heaven. In the final poem, the great canzone to the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Rime* 366), even Laura is displaced—her ravishing beauty is reduced to earth, her power attributed to the "Virgin unique in the world, unexampled" (53: "Vergine sola al mondo, senza esempio"):

> Virgin, one is now dust and makes my soul grieve who kept it, while alive, in weeping and of my thousand sufferings did not know one; and though she had known them, what happened would still have happened, for any other desire in her would have been death to me and dishonor to her.
>
> Now you, Lady of Heaven, you our goddess (if it is permitted and fitting to say it), Virgin of deep wisdom: you see all, and what another

could not do is nothing to your great power, to put an end to my sorrow, which to you would be honor and to me salvation.

> [Vergine, tale é terra et posto á in doglia
> lo mio cor, che vivendo in pianto il tenne
> et de mille miei mali un non sapea;
> et per saperlo pur quel che n'avenne
> fore avvenuto, ch'ogni altra sua voglia
> era a me morte et a lei fama rea.
> Or tu, Donna del ciel, tu nostra Dea
> (se dir lice et convensi),
> Vergine d'alti sensi:
> tu vedi il tutto, et quel che non potea
> far altri é nulla a la tua gran vertute:
> por fine al mio dolore
> ch'a te onore et a me fia salute.] (92-104)

By the very nature of his passion it cannot be gratified; Laura cannot make him happy because the only happiness is salvation, which requires that Laura be renounced, since her attraction is precisely in the totality of the claim her beauty makes upon his desire—a desire that, satisfied, would be "death" and "dishonor."

To be sure, Renaissance poets in the Petrarchan tradition do rebel against Petrarch's regimen of endlessly deferred desire. In *Astrophil and Stella* for example, after carefully elaborating how love occasioned by Stella's physical beauty leads to admiration for the spiritual virtue of her mind, the exasperated Astrophil blurts out, "'But ah', Desire still cries, 'give me some food'" (71:14). Still, at the end of the sequence, if Astrophil has not accepted the Petrarchan dilemma, he has also not escaped it:

> So strangely (alas) thy works in me prevaile,
> That in my woes for thee thou are my joy,
> And in my joyes for thee my only annoy. (108:12-14)

When Sidney steps out of the Astrophil persona, he does not seek to rehabilitate desire or redefine its meaning, but to rest in Stoic self-possession, "Desiring nought but how to kill desire" (*Certain Sonnets* 31:14).

Now in the first half of "Aire and Angels" Donne challenges this view not merely from the perspective of frustrated desire (however strong a motivation that may be), but on a metaphysical basis. Love is indeed spiritual because it is the "child" of the "soule," but since the soul "Takes limmes of flesh, and else could nothing doe," love must also culminate in the flesh. Notwithstanding the risqué pun on "doe" ("copulate"), this is an Aristotelian and Thomist doctrine regarding

the relationship between soul and body, which contradicts the Platonic assumptions implicit in Petrarchism. The physical beauty of Laura and Stella is but an image or shadow of their spiritual beauty, which is in turn but an image of the form of the beautiful itself. The beauty of an earthly woman then properly points beyond itself, and sexual consummation can only be a diminution of desire's ultimate goal. But according to St. Thomas the human soul is the form of the body and only performs properly human acts in conjunction with the body: ". . . the soul, since it is part of human nature, does not have the perfection of its own nature except in union with the body."[11] That is why the first "sonnet" of "Aire and Angels" moves from a generalized desire for beauty to the desire for a specific woman whose beauty is animated by her soul and exists in its complete form only in the composite, not in a purer form in the soul alone. The Thomist touches in this first part of the poem thus set up a radically Thomist conclusion in the second "sonnet" that rewrites the Petrarchan implications of the initial angel trope.

The second "sonnet" begins by asserting that a love grounded on merely physical considerations is no more adequate than a purely spiritual love. As Donne, in "The Canonization" and "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," declines to apply certain Petrarchan metaphors, so here he declines to blazon the beauties of "Ev'ry thy haire." As the soul "could nothing doe" without the body, so the body, unanimated by the informing principle of the soul, would lack intelligibility and even actual existence.[12] Hence fascination with the sheer physical beauty of the beloved woman is not only idolatry—as Petrarch and Sidney, as well as Donne, concede[13]—it is also a misunderstanding and perversion of human nature:

> Whilst thus to ballast love, I thought,
> And so more steddily to have gone,
> With wares which would sinke admiration,
> I saw, I had loves pinnace overfraught,
> Ev'ry thy haire for love to worke upon
> Is much too much, some fitter must be sought;
> For, nor in nothing, nor in things
> Extreme, and scattring bright, can love inhere. (15-22)

To love a woman as pure spirit in a natural, human context is to love "nothing," but to love her physical beauty as such is to love "things / Extreme, and scattring bright"—flesh uninformed by meaning or rational purpose. "Pinnace," in addition to meaning the small sailing vessel of Donne's nautical metaphor, also was a slang term for "prostitute."[14] I suspect that we are supposed to be reminded here of the destructive frustration, depicted in Wyatt's adaptations of Petrarch and in Sidney's Astrophil, that comes of the attempt to spiritualize an intense, erotic focus on a woman's beauty. The bipartite structure of "Aire and Angels" thus corresponds to the spiritual/physical dichotomy of soul/body dualism inherent in Petrarchism.

This dichotomy is simply dismissed in the final six lines by a transformation of the angel trope that opens the poem. The beloved woman is no longer an angel—emissary or image of divine transcendence; rather it is the love of the man that is "angelic" insofar as it calls forth and shapes the responsive love of the woman, even as an angel shapes the air into a manifestation of his presence. Only in her return of his love "can love inhere":

> Then as an Angell, face, and wings
> Of aire, not pure as it, yet pure doth weare,
> So thy love may be my loves spheare;
> Just such disparitie
> As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
> 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee. (23-28)

The analogy is intriguing both for what it affirms and what it denies: the proper object of the speaker's unfixed love at the poem's beginning is the reciprocal love of the woman. The goal is mutuality, but this must not be confused with equality or even with perfect union. St. Thomas explains how angels assume bodies of air in answer to the objection that air cannot be the vehicle of angelic apparition because it lacks shape and color:

> Although air, in its abiding tenuousness, would not retain shape or color; when it is condensed, it can be shaped and colored, as is obvious in clouds. And thus angels assume bodies of air, condensing it by divine power to the extent required for the formation of the body to be assumed. [15]

On the other hand, a spiritual substance cannot be properly *united* to an aerial body, since air, though "more noble" (*nobilius*) than earth, is less noble than a body of "equal composition" (*aequalis complexionis*)—like a human body.[16] Donne has not chosen to compare the relation between man's love and woman's to the composite unity of soul and body, but to the assumption of aerial body by an angelic intelligence. Even in love, man and woman remain disparate individuals—"just such disparitie" is just what is at stake. The union between man and woman is temporal and earthly, not eternal and heavenly: "And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: but they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Luke 20:34-35).

Now there are several reasons why Peter De Sa Wiggins' attempt to apply angels' purity to woman's love and air's purity to man's will not do. It rests upon the proposition that in line 25 "my love" has ceased to mean the passion of the speaker and now means the woman herself, while "thy love" correspondingly refers to the speaker himself.[17] The argument, though ingenious, is far-fetched,

perhaps motivated by the effort to make Donne seem less "sexist" and hence more palatable to contemporary sensibilities. To begin with, in the last two lines "Aire" is syntactically parallel with "womens love," "Angells puritie" with "mens"—grammar thus tells against Wiggins' rearrangement of the comparison. Second, the task that the poem sets for itself is to find a "spheare" in which the love of the masculine speaker can "take a body" or "inhere." If line 25 says, as Wiggins argues, that the man is the passive "spheare" for the active intelligence of the woman, then a question is being answered that was never asked; and the answer is not one that we would normally associate with Donne who writes, in "Elegie: On his Mistris," of "that remorse / Which my words masculine perswasive force / Begot in thee . . ." (Shawcross, 18: 3-5).

Most telling against Wiggins' reading, how ever, is that it violates the overall logic of the poem, which from start to finish assails the Petrarchan/Neo-Platonic view of woman as angel, and neglects the significance of the very passage in St. Thomas that Wiggins himself brings to bear on the interpretation of the poem. It is in his explanation of *why* angels assume bodies that the Angelic Doctor furnishes the rationale for Donne's analogy:

> Angels do not require an assumed body for their own sakes, but for ours; as by associating familiarly with men, they make known that rational fellowship that men anticipate having with them in a future life. In addition, when angels assumed bodies in the Old Testament, it was a certain figural indication that the Word of God would assume a human body: for all the apparitions of the Old Testament were ordained to that apparition by which the Son of God appeared in the flesh.[18]

In quoting this passage Wiggins observes that the comparison of the sexual union of the lovers to an angelic apparition suggests that "their embrace will be analogous to the Incarnation of God's goodness, to the sanctification of human nature by divine nature, and hence any question of a difference in purity between them will be rendered nugatory."[19] Now it is true that Donne is comparing the sexual relation of a man and a woman to the Incarnation, but the insistence on "just such disparitie" between the love of man and woman can hardly be said to render the distinction "nugatory." Moreover, the association is certainly not a radical notion of Donne's, and in its magisterial formulation St. Paul stresses the difference in purity:

> Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by

> the word. . . . For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be j oined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.
>
> (Ephesians 5:22-26, 31-32)

It is hard to imagine how Donne could have failed to think of St. Paul's elaboration of nuptial symbolism, or how we can neglect to apply it to the interpretation of "Aire and Angels," once a relationship is established among sexual love, angelic apparitions, and the Incarnation. It all confirms that the poem closes with an assertion of the priority of the masculine role.

Doubtless, no one is really surprised: Donne has, after all, come in for a good deal of bad (academic) press in recent years as a negative exemplum of, among other things,"phallogocentrism," which "consists in assimilating all being and language to male dominance, to man as the norm and the arbiter of meaning."[20] But it seems to me that little is to be gained by attempting to mitigate Donne's view in the interest of reconciling it to current ideological predilections. Wiggins argues for the consistency of the angel trope in "Aire and Angels" in order to save the rhetorical effectiveness of "an extremely elegant seducer whose sincerity can only be measured in terms of the delicacy and the intelligence with which he compliments the woman to whom his words are addressed."[21] The notion of a sincere seducer is innately spurious, although the more successful of the breed are undoubtedly "elegant." Presumably a woman would prefer delicate and intelligent flattery to the crude and stupid variety; however, if she succumbs to it, she is still the victim of man who has exploited the Petrarchan angel trope for the precise purpose of proving it false. The woman who allows herself to be seduced is no longer a divinely chaste "angel"—emissary of a purely spiritual realm. On the other hand, if she resists, if she retains her superior status (as "sexist" in its own way as the converse), then she does so at the expense of her humanity, and not just in Thomas Carew's sense of the term.

It is precisely this quasi-divinization of woman that is, in Ronald J. Corthell's phrase, "exposed as a mystification." Corthell makes a further important point by noting that in the concept of angelic apparition at work in "Aire and Angels," the angelic intelligence does not inform the aerial body as human soul informs human body.[22] This renders problematic Helen Gardner's remark in her commentary on the poem: "His love is regarded as soul seeking a body, that is, form seeking matter to inform; and here it appears as an intelligence finding the sphere it can animate and rule."[23] It is important to be aware of the terms of the analogy to see in what the masculine "dominance" consists. As the analogue to angelic intelligence, man's love is active and originary; however, the woman—or rather her *love*—is not utterly passive, and her distinct identity is not lost in loving a man, in the way that the body is not a *human* body apart from the soul. In fact, in asking for *her love*, the poet is asking for her consent, for a movement of her will. "Love" (*amor*),

says St. Thomas, "is a passion: properly at least, insofar as it is sensual, generally however, and in an extended sense of the term, insofar as it is in the will."[24] Moreover, in his discussion of the sacrament of matrimony, St. Thomas quotes St. John Chrysostom, who says, "Marriage is effected not by sexual intercourse, but by the will"; and Thomas himself concludes, "Therefore consent effects a marriage."[25] Thus, when the speaker of "Aire and Angels" requires the love of the lady as the "spheare" of his own love, he is bringing her down out of the celestial hierarchies and asserting his own initiative in assuming the active role in vesting himself with her love. He is, in other words, assuming that boys will ordinarily ask girls to dance and invite them on dates, that men will ordinarily propose to women. He is soliciting not the pity or favor of a "divine mistris" through flattery, but the free, mutual consent of a woman who, if not his equal in the sexual arrangements of the day, is his equal in the freedom of her human will. The exercise of free will was important to Donne, as *Satyre III* most plainly shows; and in St. Thomas he found an ally. "Slaves should not be held to obey their masters, nor children their parents, in the contracting of matrimony or the keeping of virginity or anything else of this kind," he writes.[26] You may recall that St. Thomas' parents attempted to prevent him from entering the Dominicans—the new radical Order of Preachers. Donne's marital difficulties involving an irate parent are too well known to need recounting here.

"Aire and Angels" raises a good many issues of which only a few are treated in this paper, and those in a rather summary fashion. I have emphasized the Thomist intellectual grounding because the poem makes the same emphasis by way of allusion, and because the Thomist vision of human nature and sexual relations appropriate to that nature provides substance and direction to Donne's wit and literary playfulness, even at their most risqué. Arthur Marotti, not surprisingly, finds the occasion of "Aire and Angels" in the poet's client relationship to aristocratic patronesses like Lady Bedford, but it seems to me that genuine love is at stake in this poem, not its complimentary counterfeit. Rather than "underlying resentment" against the patronage system,[27] the poem bespeaks rueful yet good-humored realism about the possibilities of love between a man and a woman. The "discontinuity" that Ronald Corthell finds in "Aire and Angels" may result not from an ideological "accommodation of an uncontested, because unidentified, patriarchy," nor from "the 'imaginary' nature of this resolution executed in the supersubtle language of angelology,"[28] but from the nature of the human situation itself, at least as it is conceived in Christian, and specifically Thomist, terms. What is puzzling about the poem is after all largely accessible to historical and philological investigation, except for what has been complicated by attempts to make Donne's words more agreeable to contemporary assumptions and sensibilities. It is a mistake, I think, to confuse our discomfort with a poem's meaning with an aporia in the poem itself.

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Notes

[1] According to Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Longmans, Green, 1941), pp. 584-85, the Archangel left footprints in the marble of a church on Mt. Gargano near Sipontus on the coast of Apulia. The Catholic monthly, *30 Days*, has recently (December, 1989) dealt with the question of angels in contemporary Christian faith and worship, laying stress on the unanimous teaching of twentieth-century popes that angels are real and significant in human life.

[2] The passages are in Ficino's commentary on the *Phaedrus* and in the *Theologia Platonica* in *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, ed. and trans. Michael J.B. Allen (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), pp. 120/121, 232/233.

[3] On the place of St. Thomas' angelology in Catholic tradition, see Kenelm Foster, O.P., ed. and trans., Appendix 1, "Angelology in the Church and in St. Thomas," in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), IX, 301-05. For a general account of "Angelology in the West," see Robert H. West, *Milton and the Angels* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1955), pp. 1-17. In addition to West, for angels in Milton, see C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 108-15. By the way, George MacDonald Ross, "Angels," *Philosophy* 60 (1985), 495-511, while insisting that we must take philosophers of the past literally in their discussions of angels, determines, nonetheless, that they did *not* dispute about the number of angels able to occupy simultaneously the head of a pin. (For this last reference I am grateful to Albert C. Labriola of Duquesne University.)

[4] Donne's poetry is quoted throughout from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

[5] *John Donne, Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in The Songs and Sonets* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1966), p. 169.

[6] Thomas Carew, *Poems, 1640* (fac. rpt., Menston, England: Scolar Press, 1969), p. 8.

[7] Sidney's poems are quoted throughout from *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

[8] The English translations and Italian originals of Petrarch are quoted throughout from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976).

[9] *Poems*, p. 478. St. Thomas had just been proclaimed the Common Doctor of the Church in 1576, but the title *Doctor Angelicus* went back to the time of his canonization process in the early fourteenth century. For the humanist depreciation of the dialectical method of Scholastic theologians as "sophistry," see St. Thomas More, "Letter to Martin Dorp," *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 15, *In Defense of Humanism*, ed. and trans. Daniel Kinney (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), esp. pp. 15-17, 27-37, 45.

[10] "'Aire and Angels': Incarnations of Love," *ELR* 12 (1982), 87-101.

[11] *Quaestiones Disputatae* III: *De Spiritualibus Creaturis* 2 ad 5 (5th ed., Taurini/Romae: Marietti, 1927), II, 318: "Unde anima, cum sit pars humanae naturae, non habet perfectionem suae naturae nisi in unione ad corpus." John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind & Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 41-42, 240, stresses the influence of St. Thomas on Donne, especially in "Aire and Angels." Terry G. Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 35, shows how Donne's admiration for St. Augustine did not alter his acceptance of Thomist epistemology. A. J. Smith, *The Metaphysics of Love: Studies in Renaissance Love Poetry from Dante to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 200-01, comments on St. Thomas' role in the Aristotelian modifications of Neo-Platonic theories of love during the Renaissance.

[12] Cf. *De Spiritualibus Creaturis* 2 resp., II 317: "Si enim anima non uniretur corpori ut forma, sequeretur quod corpus et partes ejus non haberent esse specificum per animam; quod manifestum false apparet; quia recedente anima non dicitur oculus aut caro et os nisi aequivoce, sicut oculus pictus vel

lapideus. Unde manifestum est quod anima est forma et quod quid erat esse hujus corporis; id est a qua hoc corpus habet rationem suae speciei." See also *Summa Theologiae* 1:76:1.

[13] In a Petrarchan Holy Sonnet, "What if this present were the worlds last night?" (Shawcross #170), Donne refers to the erotic longing of his youth as "idolatrie," and Sidney *(Astrophil & Stella* 5) describes Cupid with his arrow of desire as "An image. . . , which for our selves we carve." Petrarch likewise keeps "an image" of Laura for himself (*Rime* 130) and doubts whether she is "mortal woman or a goddess" (*Rime* 157).

[14] See Murray Proskey, "Donne's 'Aire and Angels,'" *Explicator* 27 (1968), item 27.

[15] *Summa Theologiae* 1:51:3 ad 3 (3rd ed., Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1961), I, 369-70: "licet aer, in sua raritate manens, non retineat figuram neque colorem; quando tamen condensatur, et figurari et colorari potest, sicut patet in nubibus. Et sic angeli assumunt corpora ex aere, condensando ipsum virtute divina, quantum necesse est ad corporis assumendi formationem."

[16] *De Spiritualibus Creaturis* 7 ad 4, II, 341.

[17] Wiggins, pp. 93-95.

[18] *Summa Theologiae* 1:51:1 ad 1, I, 369: "... angeli non indigent corpore assumpto propter seipsos, sed propter nos; ut familiariter cum hominibus conversando, demonstrent intelligibilem societatem quam homines expectant cum eis habendam in futura vita. Hoc etiam quod angeli corpora assumpserunt in Veteri Testamento, fuit quoddam figurale indicium quod Verbum Dei assumpturum esset corpus humanum: omnes enim apparitiones Veteris Testamenti ad illam apparitionem ordinatae fuerunt, qua Filius Dei apparuit in carne." Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* IX.5, in *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vives, 1895), XXV.382, also stresses the essential distinction between the angel and the matter it assumes as a body: "Si igitur ratio propria quidditativa Angeli esset nota, per illam propter *quid* posset ostendi, quod sibi repugnet informare materiam."

[19] Wiggins, pp. 95-96.

[20] Janel M. Mueller, "'This Dialogue of One': A Feminist Reading of Donne's 'Exstasie,'" *ADE Bulletin* 81 (Fall, 1985), 41. Mueller goes on to posit an explication of the phrase "small change" in "The Extasie," which "would have the effect of ascribing to the speaker—and to Donne, at a further remove—the projection of male dominance as the mode of adjudicating sexual difference in the continuing existence of human souls in human bodies" (42). See also Thomas Docherty, *John Donne Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 77. For a more favorable view of the attitude toward love manifest in "Aire and Angels," generally compatible with the interpretation presented in this essay, see N. J. C. Andreasen, *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 210-15.

[21] Wiggins, p. 94.

[22] "Donne's 'Disparitie': Inversion, Gender, and the Subject of Love in Some Songs and Sonnets," *Exemplaria* ' (1989), 29, 33. As what follows in my text shows, I differ with Corthell regarding the "sort of ideological work" that is on display in Donne's poem.

[23] John Donne, *The Elegies, Songs, and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 205.

[24] *Summa Theologiae* 1-2:26:2 resp., II, 178: "Sic ergo, cum amor consistat in quadam immutatione appetitus ab appetibili, manifestum est quod amor est passio: proprie quidem, secundum quod est in concupiscibili, communiter autem, et extenso nomine, secundum quod est in voluntate."

[25] *Summa Theologiae* Suppl. 45:1c, V, 208: "*Matrimonium non facit coitus, sed voluntas*. . . . Ergo consensus facit matrimonium."

[26] *Summa Theologiae* 2-2:104:5 resp., III, 653: "Unde non tenentur nec servi dominis, nec filii parentibus obedire de matrimonio contrahendo vel virginitate servanda, aut aliquo alio huiusmodi."

[27] Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 219-22.

[28] "Donne's 'Disparities,'" pp. 34, 36. Some of the quoted phrases are borrowed by Corthell from Catherine Belsey and Frederic Jameson.