John Donne Journal
Vol. 9, No. 1 (1990)

Patriarchal Assumptions and Egalitarian Designs

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I would like to begin by stating my admiration for the clarity and erudition with which R. V. Young confronts this notoriously difficult poem. Because of his essay, I now know a lot more about Donne's reliance on Thomist definitions of angels than I did before; this knowledge genuinely enhances the way I read the poem. I also admire the way Young wears his erudition, always remembering that angelology is in this poem a vehicle for human love, not an end in itself. Identifying the poem as an epistemological battlefield between the Platonic assumptions of Petrarchism and the Aristotelian assumptions of Thomism, Young persuasively argues that Donne uses the latter to invert the spiritualizing tendencies of the former. Rather than a Platonic ascent from flesh to spirit, "Aire and Angels" moves decisively from spirit to flesh. In the process, it doubles and distorts the sonnet, the primary vehicle of Petrarchan sentiment in Donne's culture.

I am not persuaded, however, that the poem's account of gender relations can be stabilized by reference to patriarchal doctrine in the way that Young proposes. He dismisses too quickly Peter Wiggins's suggestive proposal that the phrase "my love" refers to the female beloved as well as to the speaker's affection for her in the line "So thy love may be my loves spheare."[1] I would argue instead that the phrase brilliantly invokes the confusion between male desire and its feminine object that the opening, with its diplomatic account of an active love that has not yet met its proper embodiment, emphasizes: "Twice or thrice had I loved thee, / Before I knew thy face or name." This confusion, moreover, is cultivated rather than abated by the rest of the poem, and in the process destabilizes the hierarchy of the sexes that Young finds the poem unequivocally to assert. In glossing the phrase *pinnace*, for example, Young appropriately suggests that it is a slang term for a prostitute in the period, but he ignores the assonance linking the word to the clinical term for male genitalia—penis—probably because it would require him to confront the same lability among gender characteristics that I am arguing imbues the syntactical parallels between "my love" and "thy love." If "love's pinnace" can be both female body and male phallus, both the object and the symbol of male desire, it truly is "overfraught" with opposing gender-specific meanings.

Likewise, Young is correct in asserting that the language of hierarchy invades the poem's close, but I am skeptical about his certainty over the direction of the

hierarchy. The syntactic parallel certainly asserts difference, "disparitie" between men's and women's love, but does not explicitly assign a direction to it: "Just such disparitie / As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie, / 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee." The poem indeed gives evidence of carnal experience in the male speaker's erotic past—"'Twice or thrice had I loved thee / Before I knew thy face or name"—but offers nothing which might impugn the purity of its female audience. The disparity, in other words, may favor the purity of woman's love over that of man. In the Renaissance, moreover, the superiority of male to female love was not the settled issue that Young implies, but rather the occasion of much dispute. Indeed, the very arguments used to assert women's inferiority are frequently deployed to affirm the superiority of their love. In Castiglione's *Courtier*, for example, Giuliano discovers a physiological cause for "woman's firmness and constancy" and "man's inconstancy" in the "fact" that "since the male is warm, he naturally derives lightness, movement, and inconstancy from that quality, while on the other hand woman derives quietness, a settled gravity, and more fixed impressions from her frigidity."[2] Thomas Laqueur has recently demonstrated how the physiological "fact" that women possess less "natural heat" than men was normally interpreted as a manifestation of female imperfection;[3] Castiglione's Giuliano shows how this fact may also render women's love more stable. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the Duke turns to psychology rather than physiology to make a similar point, declaring that "our [masculine] fancies are more giddy and unfirm, / More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn, / Than women's are" (2.4.33-35). In both cases, woman's superior capacity for fidelity is emphasized in the terminology of a patriarchal hierarchy which would theoretically deny any form of superiority to women.

Despite Young's assertion that the poem "from start to finish assails the Petrarchan / Neo-Platonic view of woman as angel," the thrust of the entire first stanza is to liken the female lover to an angel—a being unquestionably superior to men on the Thomist hierarchy of being Young invokes. On Young's reading, the speaker who had initially praised his beloved as an angel concludes by declaring unequivocally his own comparatively angelic nature. Petrarchism is supplanted not by active mutuality but rather by complacent self-flattery. Moreover, the fact that in the 1633 and 1635 editions of the *Songs and Sonets* the next poem is "Breake of Day"—a poem spoken by a woman and arguing the superiority of women's love to that of "the busied man"—indicates that some compiler, if not Donne himself, found a striking thematic continuity between the two poems. The disparity between men and women, then, may be central, but it is at the same time ethereal, perhaps as unavailable to mortal perception as are the differences between air and angels: "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." The syntactical difficulty of the utterance seems to mirror the perceptual difficulty of apprehending the difference between angels and the air that they assume in order to be perceived.

By invoking Ephesians 5:22-23, Young assumes that recourse to Pauline marital advice can eradicate any lingering instability in the poem's close. But even if one does grant the relevance of the masculinist hierarchy that the quotation from Ephesians 5:22-32 advertises—a quotation that seems to me somewhat inapposite to the poem, since its injunctions are explicitly nuptial, a relationship the poem does not specify, and since it is about the relative power, not the respective purity, of human marital relations—one is confronted with the potential superiority of women's love, because it is directed to a higher object: the male, who stands in relation to his wife as Christ to the church. Love, in other words, can be hierarchized by reference to its object as well as to its subject. Rather than Ephesians, though, one might want to look to Galatians 3:28 for Pauline commentary on the relative spiritual merits of the sexes: "there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Jesus Christ" (AV). Apparently immensely compelling to Donne, such a dissolution of sexual distinction is exactly what Donne describes as "one braver thing / Then all the *Worthies* did" in "The Undertaking," a vision available only to one who can "Vertue' attir'd in woman see, / And dare love that, and say so too, / And forget the Hee and Shee." Indeed, in "The Relique" Donne discovers in the behavior of angels—the primary metaphor engaged in "Aire and Angels"—the essence of such valiant amnesia about sexual distinction: "Difference of sex no more wee knew, / Then our Guardian Angells doe." For Young, though, angelic conduct establishes rather than repudiates "difference of sex."

Finally, Young is, I think, right to criticize the attempt to mitigate Donne's view of relations between the sexes by refashioning it according to what he terms "current ideological predilections." Such refashioning has marred many attempts to understand the Renaissance by rendering it more amenable to the present. We cannot save Donne from himself or his culture by making him more like us, but must confront both in all their striking differences. A number of Donne's poems are incorrigibly implicated in the most repressive forms of Renaissance patriarchy. I would also endorse Young's statement that we should not confuse our discomfort at the doctrines "Aire and Angels" espouses with aporia in the poem itself. But this does not mean that we should assuage our aesthetic or ideological discomfort with the poem by bestowing upon it a resolution it does not achieve. Nor does it require us to resolve the poem's complicated attitude to sexual relations by reference to doctrines of inequality—what I would call "past ideological predilections"—which the poem seems designed to query from within. As Ronald J. Corthell has recently argued, the poem "catches us out in our drive to resolve contradictions by seeming at once to interrogate and confirm normative structures of relations between the sexes."[4] Every time I read the poem I "despair" over locating precisely the "disparity" the poem asserts, and it is this resistance to univocal interpretation—a resistance built into the poem by a poet who brilliantly wielded obscurity and ambiguity as critical and analytical tools—that Young has not given enough attention to. Young has marshalled an impressive amount of

learning to stabilize the poem, but in my copy at least the conclusion continues to assert simultaneously the superiority of male and of female love, and in so doing installs a space for the imagination of sexual equality within a discourse of masculine hierarchy.

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Notes

[1] Peter De Sa Wiggins, "'Aire and Angels': Incarnations of Love," *ELR* 12 (1982), 94.

[2] Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* [1528], trans. by Charles S. Singleton (Garden City: Anchor, 1959), p. 218.

[3] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks through Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[4] Ronald J. Corthell, "Donne's 'Disparitie': Inversion, Gender, and the Subject of Love in Some Songs and Sonnets," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989), 27.