

## Donne's "Aire and Angels": Text and Context

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### Aire and Angels

Twice or thrice had I loved thee,  
Before I knew thy face or name;  
So in a voice, so in a shapelesse flame,  
*Angells* affect us oft, and worship'd bee,  
Still when, to where thou wert, I came 5  
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 subtile then the parent is,  
Love must not be, but take a body too, 10  
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.

Whilst thus to ballast love, I thought, 15  
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; 20  
For, nor in nothing, nor in things  
Extreme, and scattring bright, 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; 25  
Just such disparitie  
As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,  
'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.

The lyric entitled "Aire and Angels" included in John Donne's poems among the "Songs and Sonets" (a designation created in the 1635 edition of the collected poems) has caused considerable differences of interpretation, as the present gathering of essays attests. But its contemporary presence, its text, and its position among other Donne poems afford little substance for disagreements, although text and context influence interpretation. Perhaps its difficulty of meaning dampened miscellany copying, for it appears only in manuscripts which are or which include a longer collection of his poems. Such manuscripts have previously been associated as Groups 1, 2, 3, and 5, where the last is a miscellaneous categorization of manuscripts that further study may associate with one of the other three groups.<sup>1</sup> (Some suggestion of that recategorization will be advanced here, but must wait for fuller analysis of all the pertinent poems for corroboration.) The position of a poem alongside other poems may be meaningful, to the reader at least, even if not so intentionally arranged by an author. For as the reader moves from one poem—its subject, treatment, attitude, effect, language—to another, various comparisons or contrasts or developments of these poetic elements may be experienced, and thus its "context" rather than its being read in isolation may offer meaning. Such context may be defined by the group of poems in which a specific one occurs or simply by the poem preceding and/or following.<sup>2</sup> "Aire and Angels" thus may gain interpretation by its context, and certainly what text is read, and the instabilities of that text, will predicate its interpretive possibilities.

The text and context of "Aire and Angels" in the first edition of Donne's poems in 1633 derived from a Group 1 manuscript; that text reappears in the ensuing editions of 1635, 1639, 1649, 1650, 1654, 1669, with only a few verbal or insignificant alterations. Line 19 reads "Ev'ry thy haire" in 1633-39,<sup>3</sup> but this apparently struck the editor/compositor in 1649 as a confusion for "Thy every haire," to which he changed it. The editions of 1650-69 repeat this reading, and Giles Oldisworth made the same emendation in his 1639 text. In line 22 the word is given as "scattring" in 1633-35, but 1639 and the other editions expanded the word to "scattering," making the line hypermetric. All but two of the manuscripts, C57 and P, give the unelided form; apparently elision was expected as one read as seems demonstrated frequently in other lines in other Donne poems. It is interesting to note that 1633 has been speculated to derive not only from a Group 1 manuscript, but from the subdivision of that group including *Lec* and C57 (see Appendix A for symbols). However, the editor may have independently elided the syllable to fit the meter, as he has done in other instances. The edition of 1669, while using the previous texts of the poems in 1654, often alters spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the like, in a kind of "modernization," or revises lines to create what was clearly supposed to be a smoother rhythm. Here in this poem the 1669 edition makes three changes, two of which are independent (that is, they are not found in any of the known manuscripts): line 6, "I did" is reversed to "did I"; line 14, "lip, eye" appears as "lips, eyes"; line 27, "Aire" is given as

"Airs." The editor was apparently attempting to create a smoother line 6; perhaps reasoned that since lips and eyes are two, it was only logical to say "And fixe it selfe in thy lips, eyes, and brow"; and simply erred in the third case, in view of the title of the poem and the meaning of the word in the poem as single or as plural. The only manuscript backing (coincidental) is the reading "lips" (but not "eyes"), for the plural is found in Group 3 and some Group 5 collections.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand the manuscripts do present a few verbal differences that should be examined. The title is sometimes missing and the Phillipps MS gives "Fire an Angells," showing two slips of the pen. "Still" in line 5 is "Till" in two cognate Group 1 MSS and coincidentally in *Wed*, which makes errors in ll. 3, 15 (2), 21.<sup>5</sup> "Till" alters meaning and does not seem to be viable for the lines surrounding its appearance. "Assume" (a subjunctive) in line 13 is "assumes" (the indicative) in Group 1 and 5 MSS.<sup>6</sup> The difference between "assume" and "assumes" sets up subtleties of meaning, and the appearance of the indicative in various manuscripts gives one pause. Most important is its appearance in Group 1 MSS although 1633 seems to have been set from a manuscript of that grouping for this poem. But on the basis of the idea that in poetic textual variation the less common form would be the form more likely deriving from the poet, the subjunctive is preferable. "Wares" in line 17 appears as "warrs" (an obvious error altering the imagery, which was not discerned by the copyist[s]) in Group 2 and as "waves" in Group 3 MSS.<sup>7</sup> "Wares" is undoubtedly correct. Line 28 has been read to make the singular and collective word "love" plural and specifically referential in Group 3 and some Group 5 MSS. The line is "such disparitie / . . . Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee"; "womens loves" implies specific affairs of the heart (certainly there exists no possibility of reading "love" or "loves" as enthusiasms for inanimate things or attitudes of mind), and that further implies either "men's love affairs" or the Renaissance cliché that women were fickle (with many affairs) and men constant (with only one true love). The more generalized word "love" is consonant with the subject (the nature of love) and treatment of the full poem, and thus the variant should be rejected as a frequent error.

Linkages can be seen among some manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> That *JC* and *D17* are cognate is evidenced in ll. 3, 13, 28; that *O* and *P* are also, in ll. 12, 13, 15, 17, 22, 28; and that *Hd* and *K* are related, which has not previously been observed, is clear from ll. 8, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 22, 23, 25, 28. They differ, however, in two instances: *Hd* has the regular "wares" (17) and *K* has "warrs"; *Hd* has the regular "Angell" (23) and *K* has "Angles." A number of Group 5 MSS show some common progenitor: *S* joins *Hd* and *K* in ll. 9, 16, 17, 19, 23, 28, and in a way in 13 (see note 6); but only *Hd* with "wares" and only *K* with "Angells." The substitution of "patient" for "parent" in l. 9 is clearly an error introduced into the source for these three manuscripts, as well as for *O* and *P* and the mixed *HK2*. The orthographically understood replacement of "which" by "that" in l. 17 occurs also in *O* and *P*, which are cognate, and *B* and *S962*, which have been seen to be related (see note 4).

Deriving from a Group 1 text, it would seem from l. 13, are *S, Hd, K; O, P; JC, D17; HK2* and *Wed*; deriving from a Group 3 text, it would seem from l. 28, are *S, Hd, K; O, P; JC, D17; HK2* and *Wed* and also *S962*. It can also be determined from the above that *S* lies in a tradition, or helps create a tradition, which emerges in other manuscripts. It is dated 1620, the earliest of any of these manuscripts although others may date then or later (e. g., *Hd* [c. 1620s] or *JC* [c. 1620-25] or Group 1 [1620-33]) according to Peter Beal.<sup>9</sup>

The upshot of these data is that fairly well defined groups of manuscripts can be designated Groups 1, 2, 3, as in the past; that some of the so-called Group 5 manuscripts fall into subgroups, with most influence from the Group 3 tradition but possibly also with Group 1 in the background; and that some few are quite mixed and may include influence from Group 2. Numerous errors and inadequate readings exist in Group 2 and Group 3 MSS, leading to the conclusion that the text in Group 1 is best, if not without doubt the text closest to Donne. The 1633 edition, following that version, provides a reliable text, though it alters “assumes” to the subjunctive as in other manuscripts and elides the word to “scattring” as the meter requires. The punctuation of 1633 is often more meaningful than that in any of the Group 1 texts, despite one’s suspicion that the editor was responsible for at least some of it. Any interpretation must therefore be guided by this text, with recognition of the question of “assume/assumes.”

The position of “Aire and Angels” in all collections associates it with Songs and Sonets, although some other kinds make near appearances at times. The order in 1633 is that in Group 1 MSS; Group 2 rearranges the poems but “Aire and Angels” associates with some of the same items; Group 3 presents a varied but similar arrangement:<sup>10</sup>

<u>Group 1</u>	<u>Group 2</u>	<u>Group 3 (Luttrell)</u>
Triple Foole	Loves Exchange	The Dreame
Loves Infinitenesse	A Feaver	A Feaver
Sweetest Love	The Indifferent	The Flea
The Legacie	Valediction: Name	Lecture Upon the Shadow
A Feaver	The Legacie	Loves Growth
Aire and Angels	The Curse	~ Aire and Angels
Breake of day	~ Aire and Angels	Witchcraft by a Picture
The Prohibition	Loves Growth	The Extasie
The Anniversarie	The Dreame	The Funeral
Valediction: Name	The Prohibition	The Relique

The Group 5 MSS, aside from the cognate *JC* and *D17*, and *O* and *P*, also give similar but varied orders. Many of the same Songs and Sonets, that is, get associated by presentation in the manuscript collections; they are usually poems of “sincere” love but the cynical poetic voice also appears among them. The voices are thus contrasted, and an effect is that sincerity is emphasized through that

contrast. ("Aire and Angels" (and the same may be said of these other poems) does not travel specifically with any poem but is always one of a group of lyrics. Some of the sincerity in some of these poems in the 1633/Group 1 arrangement may be observed in those immediately preceding "Aire and Angels," which is generally read as "sincere," and some of the cynicism, in those immediately following.) (The arrangements of Groups 2 and 3 yield "sincere" and "cynical" poems both before and after "Aire and Angels.") Such cynicism comments on the last three lines:

Just such disparitie  
As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,  
'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.

Women's love is like air, which is not so pure as angels, who figure men's love. Indeed in the paradigm of elements—fire:air = air:water = water:earth (see S. K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* [San Marino: Huntington Library, 1974], p. 161)—man was associated with fire, angels being identified with fiery essence, and woman with water. Air, lying between these two elements, is moist and hot, being less "pure" than the dryness and heat of fire and thus here figuring women's love. (The ambiguities of the poem seem to be underscored by not only its imagery but also its positioning among the Songs and Sonets.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a listing of manuscripts in which the poem appears. It is included in all early editions, 1633-69.

<sup>2</sup> See my discussion of this matter in "The Arrangement and Order of John Donne's Poems," in *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. Neil Fraistat (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 119-63. The Songs and Sonets are discussed on pp. 136-40, but "Aire and Angels" is not specifically cited.

<sup>3</sup> This is the order of the words in all manuscripts, although "Ev'ry" sometimes appears as "Even" or "Ever," and "thy" is omitted once. See Appendix B for collation of all texts.

<sup>4</sup> There are often textual relationships between Group 3 and 5 MSS. Further study may suggest reassignment of some Group 5 MSS to at least adjunct relationship with Group 3, or possibly the conclusion that a Group 5 MS or the progenitor of some Group 5 MSS lies in the background of the Group 3 progenitor. Perhaps *B*, *HK1*, and *S962* have a similar progenitor to that of Group 3 MSS, as "lips" suggests. *B* makes obvious errors in ll. 5, 6, 11; *HK1*, in ll. 13, 18, 19, 21, 24; *S962*, in ll. 15, 25, 27. *S962* follows numerous other Group 5 texts, which have relationship with Group 3, in l. 28; it may follow Group 3 in l. 17 where the word is either "wares" or "waves." All three agree in l. 24 (and with two cognate Group 1 MSS); *B* and *S962* agree in ll. 5, 17, 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Wed* is in the tradition of Group 5 MSS with affinities to all three other groups: Group 1, l. 13; Group 2, l. 17; Group 3, l. 28.

<sup>6</sup> The Stephens MS reading "assures" is clearly an error, just one of many in that manuscript even though A. B. Grosart used it in his edition of Donne's poems to "correct" the printed editions. The word is the indicative, however, it should be noted. The Group 5 MSS giving the indicative reading show affinities as a group with manuscripts in Groups 1 and 3; see later.

<sup>7</sup> Two Group 5 MSS, *Wed* and *HK2*, follow Group 2 here (see note 5 for *Wed*); *HK2* shows the same variety of influences. The copyist of the progenitor manuscript of Group 3 probably misread "v" for handwritten "r," a very natural and common error. The problems of handwriting can be seen in the only extant poem in Donne's holograph (aside from book inscriptions and epitaphs), "A Letter to the Lady Carey, and Mrs. Essex Riche, From Amyens" (Bodleian MS Eng. Poet. d.197). Its transcription by Helen Gardner in *John Donne's Holograph of 'A letter to the Lady Carey and Mrs Essex Riche'* (London: Scholar Mansell, 1972) was corrected by Nicolas Barker in "Donne's 'Letter to the Lady Carey and Mrs. Essex Riche': Text and Facsimile," *The Book Collector* 22 (1973), 487-93. A continuing uncertainty, for one example, is the word "Religions" or "Religious" in l. 29; the printed editions give the former. C. A. Patrides reproduced this holograph text (with u/v modernized and superscripts reduced), opting for capital "of" (14, 53) though both are questionable, as well as "Religions," in his edition *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (London: Everyman, 1985), pp.303-06. The strangeness of such a text in terms of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation is immediately startling to the reader; it raises serious doubts about even authorial manuscript reproduction.

<sup>8</sup> Unimportant errors are found in *H40* (ll. 3, 24, 26), *N* (ll. 15, 21), *A18* (ll. 13, 15, 25), *S* (l. 8), *D17* (ll. 17, 21), *K* (ll. 5, 22, 24, 25, 27 [3]), and *P* (ll. 5, 8, 20). "Yet" for "it" in l. 24 links *Lec* and *C57*, and *B*, *HK1*, and *S962*; the alteration in *O* (yett > ytt) indicates the reason for the variation in the two subgroups. *D* and *SP* may be linked by the variant in l. 15; its appearance in *S96* may not be significant. Group 2 MSS give "warrs" in l. 17, as noted, and "should" in three of the collections; "inherit" for "inheres" appears only in these manuscripts; and "womans" links *TCD* and *N*.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Beal, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1980), Volume 1, Part 1.

<sup>10</sup> Luttrell has a spurious poem (Ben Jonson's "The Houre-glasse") after "Witchcraft by a Picture." The arrangement in *S96* is close to that in *H40*, adjunct to Group 1 but different from it. The arrangement in *DC* is different from other Group 2 MSS.

## Appendix A

“Aire and Angels” appears in the following manuscripts, with previously used identifying symbols and symbols used in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, forthcoming from the University of Missouri Press, indicated:

Group 1

Dowden MS, English poetical e.99, f. 111r-v (Bodleian) [D; O20]  
 Newcastle MS, Harley MS 4955, ff. 117v-118 (British Library) [H49; B32]  
 St. Paul's MS, MS 49 B43, ff. [87v-88] (St. Paul's Cathedral) [SP; SP1]  
 Leconfield MS (Percy MS), f. 82r-v (Cambridge University Library) [Lec; C8]  
 Cambridge Balam MS, Additional MS 5778, f. 57v (Cambridge University Library) [C57; C2]  
 Harley Noel MS, Harley MS 4064, f. 266v (British Library), associated with Group 1 [H40; B30]

Group 2

Dublin MS, MS 877, f. 84v (Trinity College, Dublin) [TCD; DT1]  
 Norton MS, fMS Eng 966.3, f. 68r-v (Harvard University) [N; H4]  
 Puckering MS, MS R.3.12 (James 592), pp. 106-7 (Trinity College, Cambridge) [TCC; CT1]  
 Denbigh MS, Additional MS 18647, f. 57v (British Library) [A18; B7]  
 Dolau Cothi MS, MS 6748, pp. 78-79 (National Library of Wales) [DC; WN1]

Group 3

Stowe MS, Stowe MS 961, f. 61v (British Library) [S96; B46]  
 Dobell MS, fMS Eng 966.4, f. 197 (Harvard University) [Dob; H5]  
 Narcissus Luttrell MS, f. 112v (Cambridge University Library)  
 [Lut; C9]  
 O'Flahertie MS, Eng 966.5, f. 139 (Harvard University) [O'F; H6]

Group 5 and Miscellaneous

Stephens MS, Eng 966.6, ff. 157v-158 (Harvard University) [S; H7]  
 Utterson MS, Eng 966.7, ff. 37v-38 (Harvard University) [Hd; H8]  
 John Cave MS, Cat. No. S191, Miscellanea, pp. 83-84 (Arents Collection, New York Public Library) [JC; NY1]  
 Nedham MS, Cat. No. 18 (Pressmark 25.F.17), f. 43r-v (Dyce Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum) [D17; VA2]  
 King MS, Osborn b 114, pp. 273-75 (Osborn Collection, Yale University) [K; Y2]  
 Wedderburn MS, MS 6504, ff. 32v-33 (National Library of Scotland) [Wed; SN4]  
 Haslewood-Kingsborough MS II, HM 198, Part II, f. 28 (Huntington Library) [HK2; HH5]  
 Osborn MS, Osborn b148, p. 108 (Osborn Collection, Yale University) [O; Y3]  
 Phillippis MS, English poetical f.9, pp. 104-5 (Bodleian) [P; O21]  
 Bridgewater MS, EL 6893, f. 9r-v (Huntington Library) [B; HH1]  
 Haslewood-Kingsborough MS I, HM 198, Part I, f. 167 (Huntington Library) [HK1; HH4]  
 Stowe MS, Stowe MS 962, f. 188v (British Library) [S962; B47]

There is also a manuscript emendation in l. 19 in Giles Oldisworth's copy of the 1639 *Poems*, owned by the Cambridge University Library [C10].

## Appendix B

Collation of the text of "Aire and Angels" follows. There are numerous variations in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization not reported; all verbal differences and all significant variations are recorded. Variations in indentation also are frequent, the title is often omitted, and the spellings of the variants recorded here are not necessarily consistent.

- title ffire an Angells *P*  
 3 shapelesse | sharpeles *H40*  
 flame | frame *JC, D17* frame [?] > flame *Wed*  
 5 Still | Till *Lec, C57, Wed*  
 when to | when and *B* when and *added over caret S962*  
 when twoo *K*  
 6 Some | So *P*  
 I did | did I *1669*  
 8 limmes | lambs *Hd, K*  
 and | or *S, P*  
 9 parent | patient *S, Hd, K, HK2, O, P*  
 11 wert | wast *B*  
 12 love | omitted *O, P*  
 13 assume | assumes *D, H49, SP, Lec, C57, JC, D17, K, Wed, HK2, O, P* assures *S* assum'd  
*HK1*  
 14 it | thy *A18*  
 lip | lips *1669; S96, Dob, Lut, O'F, B, HK1, S962*  
 eye | eyes *1669*  
 15 Whilst | Whiles *D, SP, S96* While *Wed, S962*  
 thus | thou *A18* that *O, P*  
 to | t'have *N*  
 ballast | ballance *Hd* ballace *K*  
 thought | had thought *Wed*  
 16 to | I *S, Hd, K*  
 17 wares | warrs *TCD, N, TCC, A18, DC, K, Wed, HK2* waves *S96, Dob, Lut, O'F, ?S962*  
 which | that *S, Hd, K, O, P, B, S962*  
 would | should *TCC, N, A18, D17*  
 18 loves | love *HK1*  
 19 Ev'ry thy | Thy every *1649-69* Even thy *B, S962* Ever thy *S, Hd, K* thy omitted *HK1*  
 20 much too | too too *P*  
 21 not | now *HK1*  
*first* nor | omitted *N, Wed* not *D17* or *HK1*  
 22 scattrng | scattering *1639-69; MSS minus C57, P*  
 can | came *K*  
 inherit | inherit *TCD, N, TCC, A18, DC* in here *K, HK2* in heere *O, P*  
 23 an | omitted *S, Hd, K* [undecipherable short word between "an" and "angell"] *P*  
 Angell | Angells *S* Angles *K*  
 24 not | and *H40*  
 as | & *K*  
 it | yett *Lec, C57, B, HK1, S962* yett > ytt *O*  
 yet | but *K*



- 25 my ] thy *A18, K*  
 loves ] lovers *Hd, K* loves spheare ] loue=spheare *S962*
- 26 disparitie ] disparities *H40*
- 27 As ] And *K* He *S962*  
 Aire ] Airs *1669*  
 and ] an *K*  
 Angells ] Angles *K*
- 28 'Twixt ] T'wixt *1633 uncorrected*  
 womens ] womans *TCD, N*  
 love ] Loves *S96, Dob, Lut, O'F, S, Hd, JC, D17, K, Wed, HK2, O, P, S962*