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Air, Angels, and the Progress of Love

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While lamenting that in the critical literature on "Aire and Angels" the actual text tends to get lost in "a fracas of conjecture about the nature of Donne's poetry," Peter De Sa Wiggins has complained that "no one begins at the beginning."[1] At the risk of seeming perverse, I want to begin at the end:

> Just such disparitie
> As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
> 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.[2]

The central problem presented by this poem notoriously riddled with interpretive difficulties is why these three lines are there at all. In spite of several puzzling features, the basic progression of thought until this point is clear: the speaker describes in chronological sequence the stages in his love for the woman he addresses. First, before he even knew her, he loved her as an angel-like spirit imperfectly manifested in other women:

> 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.

Even when he found her he saw only "Some lovely glorious nothing." Because the worship of abstractions however glorious is unsatisfying, he then directed his love to her personally and her body specifically:

> 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.

When love embodied proves equally unsustaining, he concludes that her love for him, less material than body but more substantial than pure spirit, is what his love seeks:

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.

He concludes, but he does not stop. He goes on to assert the universal and unalterable disparity between the purity of women's love and men's.

In the standard reading of "Aire and Angels" as a persuasion to love, the final lines are awkward. The critical strategies for getting over or around the stumbling block presented by this odious and apparently gratuitous comparison have been ingenious but not, I think, fully convincing. The usual approach is to explain that to tell someone she is necessarily less pure than you yourself are is not really to insult her. A. J. Smith, for example, offers two means of palliating the insult. First, the speaker does not say that women are grossly impure, just a little less pure than men, and second, "pure" in this context means active as opposed to passive: "It is simply that his love came first and compels her love by its ardor—he loves unprompted, but she loves only in return for love. . . . Here, presumably, in this mere passivity or initial neutrality, lies women's inferiority."[3]

The question of why a suitor would risk offending even with the relatively milder accusation of passivity is not pressing for Smith because he reads the poem primarily as a virtuoso display of wit rather than as a dramatic lyric. Arthur Marotti agrees with Smith in discounting the "slight complimentary love-plot on which the poem is threaded" and in interpreting the last lines as a portrayal of "men as active and women as passive in love," but he emphasizes the social context of Donne's lyrics and acknowledges that the final comparison is unflattering.[4] Arguing that "Aire and Angels" should be read in the context of patronage relationships, Marotti sees in its mixture of praise and criticism Donne's simultaneous use of and resistance to the conventions of encomiastic verse. The last lines constitute "witty antifeminist teasing," which, he speculates, "would have to have been communicable to a sophisticated reader like Lady Bedford, but the underlying resentment it implied would have remained hidden, perhaps perceivable only by the poet and by his friends."[5] Although I find it hard to imagine a woman (sophisticated or not) failing to notice hostility in these lines, the question is, as Alice said to Humpty Dumpty, whether you *can* make words mean so many different things. The *OED* lists a number of senses of "pure" potentially relevant to a poem concerned with love's steadiness and its degree of materiality ("unmixed," "uncorrupted," "innocent," and "chaste," for example), but "active" is not among them.

Wilbur Sanders also interprets the last lines in terms of a specific social context, postulating not an ambitious but resentful courtier and his patron but a sophisticated young couple who make love with an ironic wit that anticipates Kate Croy and Merton Densher in Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*. The final analogy, he concedes, speaks "the language of the war of the sexes and the competition of love," but it is actually complimentary:

> The note of dominance . . . is part of the total compliment, a tribute to her wit and detachment, her freedom from vanity—and a tribute, in that it offers to her, as part of his deeply civilized gallantry, the necessary ingredient of his own male egoism, the impulse to conquest which answers to her different woman's egoism, resonates with it, as it were.[6]

The woman Sanders postulates—who feels complimented by an assertion of dominance and male egoism (a necessary ingredient for men or for civilized gallantry?)—seems to me even less recognizable than Marotti's aristocratic patron who is flattered by jokes at her expense.

Recently Peter De Sa Wiggins has offered another solution to the problem of the last three lines of "Aire and Angels." Combining a hypothesis of a specific social context with what Harold Bloom might call a strong reading of the lines, Wiggins proposes that line 25, "So thy love may be my loves spheare," should be paraphrased: "So may *I* be *your* sphere."[7] In this reading, the speaker addresses a woman who loves him but who is reluctant to express her love sexually. His strategy of seduction is to compare the sexual union of a man and a woman with an angel's manifestation of itself in a body of air: "The lover is asking the woman, like an angel, to assume a body, his body, which is like air, less pure than hers, but not impure." Thus, the last three lines say that the "object of women's love—the male sex—will always, like air, be slightly less pure than the object of men's love—the female sex—which is angelic."[8]

This reading has the advantage of allowing the suitor to end on a note of praise rather than abuse. That the argument attributed to the speaker is sophistical need not disallow it, for, Wiggins contends, "since all that is required is to convince the beloved, persuasion alone is required, not proof."[9] Nevertheless, even if one assumes a beloved who wants to be persuaded, reading "thy love may be my loves spheare" as "So may *I* be *your* sphere" seems strained. Wiggins' interpretation rests on the crucial redefinition of love as the object of desire rather than the desire itself. Up to line 25, he argues, "love" refers to the speaker's emotion, and the poem is about the search for love's proper object. Line 25 discovers that the woman's manifestation of herself in physical love provides the medium in which the speaker's love can inhere. At this point she becomes his love and he hers, "cancelling at last any possibility at all that the word `love,' from line 25 to the end, can mean anything but the object of a passion."[10]

Although I cannot do justice to Wiggins' subtle argument, I find something circular in this justification of a new reading of the line in terms of that same interpretation. In addition, while this interpretation obliterates the puzzling transfer of the angel analogy from her to him, it does not provide a convincing explanation of why a poem that moves consistently toward the union of subject and object should end by emphasizing the disparity between them.

Thus the last three lines have driven the most influential interpretations of "Aire and Angels" to implausible readings and to postulating a female auditor too stupid to understand, too much in love to notice, or too sophisticated to mind that she is being insulted. Unsurprisingly, I have found fault with earlier readings in preparation for one of my own. I suggest that the fictive audience implied by the poem is not a gullible aristocrat, a coyly reluctant mistress, or a Jamesian heroine, but a woman, perhaps a wife, who has shared love with the speaker and who now accuses him of diminished romantic ardor. It is she who has initiated the making of comparisons, contrasting her undiminished devotion with his neglect. His final assertion of a universal and inalterable disparity between women's love and men's is a response to her charge of a particular and personal disparity. He explains his changing response as the adoption and rejection of inadequate theories of love and concludes by proposing a relationship based on his masculine superiority. By tracing the speaker's amatory progress, "Aire and Angels" displays a sequence of cultural paradigms of love, from Neo-Platonic and Petrarchan forms of romanticism to the emergent ideal of companionate marriage.

It has become standard to explicate the first lines of "Aire and Angels" with reference to "The good-morrow," where a lover similarly explains earlier loves as unsubstantial prefigurements of an ideal realized in the beloved: "If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee." But, while both poems offer a Neo-Platonic rationale for former loves, the differences between the poems are striking. At the beginning of "The good-morrow" a lover exclaims at awakening to a new self and a new world through love: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I / Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?" The reference to earlier sexual relationships comes as an afterthought, a curt, casual dismissal of an insignificant past. In contrast, the lover in "Aire and Angels" is not prompted to reflect on his past by wonder at the transforming power of love. He begins the history of his love for the woman he addresses calmly, apparently in response to something she has said. He uses the angel analogy simultaneously to compliment her and to represent his own early inconstancy as a serious quest for true love. But his main intention seems to be a careful, thorough explanation of a complex subject. He describes his past without the boastful swagger of "The good-morrow" ("any beauty . . . I desir'd, and got") and without apology. His first experiences of love were disappointing, but he does not dwell on the woman's inadequacy or on the quality of his emotions. Rather he emphasizes the reasons why these loves were necessarily transitory. The past was inferior to the present, but not trivial or unimportant. On the contrary, he offers analysis of the past as a means of understanding the present and of predicting the future. The implicit argument is that his romantic history reveals the nature of love, defining limits to love's possibilities and justifying his own changing behavior.

The changing focus of his desires, he argues, has been dictated by the nature of love. In the first stanza he explains his abandonment of love as a spiritual quest:

since love is the child of the soul and the soul is capable of acting only through the body,

> More subtile then the parent is,
> Love must not be, but take a body too. (9-10)

The speaker, "therefore," transferred his attentions to the beloved's body. In the second stanza, he explains the inevitable failure of love directed towards physical beauty on the basis of another generalization about love's inherent capability:

> For, nor in nothing, nor in things
> Extreme, and scattring bright, can love inhere. (21-22)

His proposal for the future is a response to this recognition of love's intrinsic limitation: "*For* . . . *Then* as an Angell . . ." (21-23, my italics). In describing both changes, he presents himself as reacting in the only reasonable way, given the nature of love, and adroitly manages to praise his auditor while explaining that neither her spirit nor her body can hold his love permanently. He is too rational and careful to make any binding promises, but he does suggest hope for the future. Although the woman he addresses cannot inspire his worship or admiration, it is possible that her love can sustain his love: "thy love may be my loves spheare" (25).

If, as some commentators have felt, there is a note of defensiveness in this account of love, the speaker proceeds on the assumption that the best defense is a good offense. The conditional "may" in line 25 is less entreaty than threat. In the beginning, the speaker's emotions were pure but fickle: "Twice or thrice had I loved thee." He controlled his platonic promiscuity by concentrating on the woman he now speaks to, only to find that she appeared to him as "Some lovely glorious nothing" (6). Hoping to "ballast love" and "so more steddily to have gone," he fixed love in her "lip, eye, and brow," only to discover that his love cannot "inhere" (14-16, 22). What has been at issue at each stage in the narrative and continues to be at risk is not the woman's response but the continuance of the speaker's love. Since he has rejected spiritual love because it did not go "steddily" and physical love because it did not "inhere," the love he seeks is presumably "fitter" (20) because it is more stable. But if he offers the possibility of a more constant love, he implies also that the alternative to change is ceasing to love.

Firmly, patiently, he explains how his love has changed and why another change is necessary. He represents himself as sometimes mistaken but always in control. He "bid Love" (12) ascertain who and what the woman was, and he decided to "allow" (13) love to assume her body. Now that unsubstantial love and embodied love have both proved unsatisfactory, he determines that another kind of love "must be sought" (20). "Must" offers no alternative to change. "May" in "thy love may be my loves spheare" (25) threatens loss of love while offering the possibility of permanence. This reading not only makes sense of the speaker's

tone, at once flatteringly conciliatory and coolly dispassionate, it also explains the confusing chronology whereby love's assumption of the woman's body is a state identified both as "now" (12) and as already discovered to be inadequate at some time in the past (18). This stage of our love, the speaker tells his lover, is now finished.

For the future he proposes not the woman herself but her love for him as the site of his love:

> 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. (23-25)

Her love, analogous to air, may enable his love to manifest itself like an angel assuming a body of air or inhabiting a celestial sphere. The woman becomes not the object of wonder and desire but the source of the conditions enabling his love to take form. As several commentators who have explicated the speaker's analogy on the basis of the literature of angelology have observed, the relationship he proposes is mutual but unequal. His love would control her love. This relationship, the speaker's argument implies, will be more stable than the earlier forms their love took because it is consistent with love's essential nature. Avoiding the extremes of pure unsubstantiality and pure materiality, love may find a permanent home in woman's love. The speaker concedes his interlocutor's charge that his love for her has changed. Instead of the adoration and wonder of his earlier love, he offers her the possibility of fidelity.

This conclusion makes clear that the love he has been defining, the love which cannot inhere "in nothing, nor in things / Extreme, and scattring bright" (21-23), is male love. The universal, as it turns out, is male; and in case she and we miss the point, the last three lines drive it home. A man's love, child of his soul, is incapable of acting in response to a woman conceived of as an ideal and is incapacitated by the demands of physical beauty, but it can become functional in the element of woman's love. Woman's love, which substantiates man's love, is less pure than his because it is both more material and more mixed, fixed in a particular man, soul and body. And this, according to the speaker, is the way it is and always will be:

> Just such disparitie
> As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
> 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee. (26-28)

Through charting the course of a single relationship from the male worship of an angelic mistress to angelic male control of inferior female emotions, "Aire and Angels" isolates and analyzes competing versions of love. The specific fictional

context, in which a man rationalizes his changing emotional stances, constitutes a brilliant strategy for examining disparate ways in which heterosexual relationships have been constructed in European culture. Attempting to justify his own behavior and to preserve his connection with his lover, the speaker provides a sympathetic interpretation of each stage of their love. But because he has been disappointed by traditional idealizations of women, he can diagnose the inadequacies of the codes of love he has tried to put into practice. And finally, his peremptory last move exposes the relationship of dominance and subordination masked by the rhetoric of mutuality. His individual voice, then, provides at once a vehicle for and a critique of various cultural discourses of love.

In the first stanza he braids together strands of Scholastic philosophy, the *dolce stil nuovo*, Neo-Platonism, and courtly gallantry into a composite discourse of Renaissance philosophies of love as spiritual quest. The account of his search for the inherently lovable demonstrates that this version of love provides both men and women with flattering self-images but is ludicrously inadequate in practice. The speaker is a devotee of the good, while his beloved, angel-like, inspires devotion. But, far from being able to follow her in a Dantesque pilgrimage to greater enlightenment, he has trouble finding her: one woman is apparently much like another as manifestation of divine beauty. And when he *does* come to where she is, he sees only "Some lovely glorious nothing." The anticlimactic "nothing" expresses not only the speaker's disappointment but the negation of the beloved. A woman conceived of as a vehicle for male aspiration towards the divine is denied corporeity and canceled as a person. Because she is no thing, she is nothing. Just as a soul "could nothing doe" without a body, so both lover and beloved are rendered directionless and powerless by his idealizing conception of love.

The language of Petrarchism provides a temporary solution to these problems. By assuming the role of a Petrarchan poet-lover the speaker attributes value to the woman's body and gives himself something to "worke upon." The account of this stage in their love story combines compliment with gentle mockery. The perfunctory listing of the beloved's "lip, eye, and brow" is faintly absurd. More seriously, stanza two demonstrates how the Petrarchan program of constituting male voice through admiration of female anatomy reifies and fragments the woman's body.[11] In "Aire and Angels" the woman's physical beauty becomes merchandise which overloads the ship of love:

> 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. (15-18)

The commercial connotations of "wares" hint at the self-serving economy of poetic praise and reveal the dehumanization of the woman as the object of desire. In addition, sexual innuendoes demystify the tradition of idealized female beauty.

Although Thomas Docherty's discovery of a pinnace/penis that abashes rivals into detumescence is unconvincing, certainly bawdy overtones resonate through these lines describing the sinking of love's pinnace and the failure of love to "inhere" in a woman's body.[12] The tone has none of the contemptuous harshness with which, for example, Thomas Carew's poet-lover jeers that he alone has created his mistress's attractions:

> Thy sweets, thy graces, all are mine;
> Thou art my starre, shin'st in my skies;
> Then dart not from thy borrowed sphere
> Lightning on him that fixed thee there.
> ("Ingratefull beauty threatned")[13]

Still, Donne's lover reminds his mistress that he has allowed love to attach itself to her body for his own purposes, and he suggests that images of female beauty as "things / Extreme, and scattring bright" are too exaggerated, destructive, and incoherent.[14] The woman, who had been perceived as "no thing," has been dispersed into brilliantly diffuse "things." She is without a coherent identity in which love can inhere.

While the poem's representation of the Petrarchan construction of love anticipates Nancy Vickers' analysis of how Petrarchan lovers objectify and fragment women's bodies, it does not illustrate her contention that the poet-lover empowers himself in the process. If Donne's lover "could nothing doe" when he thought of love as disembodied, he cannot do much for long while love is invested in each part of his beloved's anatomy. Although his dissatisfaction with this phase in love's progress is usually explained either as the degeneracy of love into lust or as the overwhelming of love by admiration, no expression of repugnance or self-disgust justifies invoking so judgmental a concept as lust. Nor does the pinnace metaphor represent the speaker as overwhelmed by admiration. Admiration is the sunk, not the sinker—a threatened casualty, not an overpowering emotion. A simpler and more obvious explanation of the ship of love sinking under the demands of female beauty is boredom. Rather like Andrew Marvell's lover who does not have a hundred years to praise his mistress's eyes, Donne's lover thinks that "Ev'ry thy haire for love to worke upon / Is much too much" (19-20).

In the last six lines, the speaker proposes to his lover a solution to the problems inherent in earlier stages of their love's progress. His proposal, figured in the air and angels analogy, consists of subordinating her within a relationship of mutual love, thus inverting the hierarchy implicit in the fashionable literary and philosophical models on which his former conceptions of love were based. Although Neo-Platonic and Petrarchan constructions of heterosexual relationships dehumanize women by projecting them as goals for men's spiritual aspirations and objects of men's desires, they also subordinate men to women. Both the Neo-

Platonic lover pursuing self-perfection and the Petrarchan lover pining with unrequited love profess humble subservience to an idealized woman. By elevating women, these traditions subvert the female subordination prescribed in legal, medical, and religious discourses and in social practice.[15] In contrast to these literary codes, which in theory, if not in practice, invert the gender hierarchy of their social context, English culture developed during the seventeenth century a conception of love that functioned to bring the sentiments of personal love into accord with prevailing ideologies and with social reality. This emerging ideal of affective bonding in what Lawrence Stone calls "companionate marriage" represents the permanent union of man and woman not merely as an arrangement for procreation and disposition of property but as personal, mutual affection. It also, as Stone observes, endorsed and strengthened the power of men over women, of husbands over wives.[16]

In the conclusion of "Aire and Angels," Donne's lover recommends this paradigm of mutual but unequal love as stable because it is in accord with reality. His accounts of both Neo-Platonic and Petrarchan love have shown the roles of men and women as asymmetrical but equally unsatisfactory. His proposal for the future assumes permanent love as a mutually desirable goal but acknowledges that it is the woman who will pay a price in its realization. His narrative is constructed not only to justify his past emotional vacillation but to provide a rationale for one more change. Justifying change as escape from change, he bases the promise of permanence on his demonstration of the essential natures of men and women. Since he recounts earlier emotional states from his present enlightened perspective, his narrative demonstrates the masculine superiority he now claims and his resistance to the subservience entailed in the traditional roles he assumed. As Neo-Platonic lover he believed that the woman deserved adoration, but his account makes clear that she did not receive it. By alluding to the Petrarchan "blazon of sweet beauty's best, / . . . of lip, of eye, of brow" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 106),[17] he identifies his earlier self as a Petrarchan lover, but he never represents himself as a subservient, love sick swain. Instead, he shows himself enacting the rationality and authoritative control his present claim to superiority assumes. In his earlier quest for love he was rather like Shakespeare's Duke Orsino, who, while professing love for an idealized woman, prides himself on both the passion and the changeableness of his masculine love.[18] Now, having progressed beyond wonder at female spirituality and beauty, he is rather more like Jane Austen's Mr. Collins in his overbearing complacency. He admits to love, but firmly puts his beloved in her place and assigns her to her proper function: providing the loving ambience that may possibly hold his love. And this disparity, he sternly warns her, "'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever be."

"Aire and Angels," then, through the progress of a love story, examines the decline and development of ways of loving among sophisticated men and women during the decades ending the sixteenth and beginning the seventeenth centuries.

It wittily mocks traditional idealizing modes of love that were becoming old-fashioned and increasingly appearing unrealistic, and it exposes the coercion embedded in the emerging ideal of companionate marriage, warning that, within a gender hierarchy presupposing female inferiority, the price women pay for love is condescension and subjection to control.

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Notes

[1] Peter De Sa Wiggins, "'Aire and Angels': Incarnations of Love," *English Literary Renaissance* 12 (1982), 87.

[2] I quote Donne from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York University Press, 1968).

[3] A. J. Smith, "New Bearings in Donne: 'Aire and Angels,'" in *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Helen Gardner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 177.

[4] Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 221, 338 n. 177; Smith, p. 176.

[5] Marotti, pp. 221, 222.

[6] Wilbur Sanders, *John Donne's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 94-95.

[7] Wiggins, p. 94.

[8] Wiggins, p. 94.

[9] Wiggins, p. 89.

[10] Wiggins, p. 97.

[11] Compare Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Women and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981), 265-79.

[12] Thomas Docherty, *John Donne, Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 196.

[13] *The Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Rhodes Dunlap (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), p. 17.

[14] I read "scattring" as having both transitive and intransitive force: causing dispersion; scattered or spread out (*OED* Scattering, *ppl.a.*1 and 2).

[15] See Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 184-86.

[16] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), pp. 123-24, 135-36, 202.

[17] Wesley Milgate quotes Sonnet 106 in "'Aire and Angels' and the Discrimination of Experience," in *Just So Much Honor*, ed. Peter Amadeus Fiore (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), p. 161.

[18] *Twelfth Night*, II.iv.29-39, 93-103, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Other readers have compared the speaker to Duke Orsino. The last three lines remind William Zunder of Orsino's self-satisfaction and Arthur Marotti of Orsino's comparision of male and female love. Zunder, *The Poetry of John Donne: Literature and Culture in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Period* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 29-31; Marotti, p. 222.