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Donne, the Idea of Woman, and the Experience of Love

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As guest editor of this special issue, I relish the opportunity to do what women in Donne's poems almost never get the chance to do—that is, to have the last word. The final lines of "Aire and Angels," with their assertion of difference between men and women, seem to call for a woman to respond. It is an invitation I cannot refuse, especially since I think that a female reader might perceive the poem differently. Far from hoping to "fix" this notoriously witty and difficult poem, so full of equivocation, I wish simply to add one further perspective, an alternative reading that concentrates on issues of gender implicit in what I see as the psychology of the poem.

In only two stanzas, "Aire and Angels" offers something of the variety of attitudes toward women that one encounters throughout Donne's *Songs and Sonets*. It moves from the attempt to idealize the mistress as angel and to worship her from a distance ("So in a voice, so in a shapelesse flame, / *Angells* affect us oft, and worship'd bee," 3-4), to a meditative response to the experience of loving one particular woman, and finally to a general definition of erotic love in terms that seemingly contradict the opening lines by appropriating angelic status to the speaker and associating the woman with the realm of matter. This reversal, with its implications of the superiority of men's love over women's, has bothered many of Donne's twentieth-century readers, and the papers in this issue seek variously to understand, question, destabilize, or even justify it. Though a shift in the speaker's attitude from reverence to condescension may be startling, psychologically the reversal is quite understandable—both in terms of Renaissance thinking about women and sex, and as a distinctly male response to the experience of sexual love that is not only the product of Donne's historical moment but recognizable today. Whereas some critics have effectively detached these last lines from the poem by focusing their discussion on them, I want to reconnect them to the poem.[1] This ending is, as I read it, almost inevitable as a culmination of the experience of love that the poem has been describing.

I see "Aire and Angels" as a "morning after" poem or, more precisely, a lyric with a "before and after" meditative structure. Like "The good-morrow," it contrasts the speaker's experience before he "knew" this woman with his new understanding of love. But whereas "The good-morrow" focuses on the male

speaker's sense of joy and completeness in discovering a new world, "Aire and Angels" explores the change in the lover's perception of the woman and an emergent feeling of "disparitie" (in several senses) in his relation with her. The poem articulates a difference in the way he viewed her before, and the way he does now.

Much of the trouble the poem causes readers comes from the fact that whereas the woman initially is compared to an angel, the final analogy compares the male speaker/lover to an angel, and the woman to "less pure" air. This is not the only poem of Donne's to end with a markedly different perspective than that with which it began. The element of surprise is a distinctive mark of seventeenth-century wit, and the shifts and changes in Donne's poems express a commitment to experience and discovery. Just as important, though, as the fact that the female beloved has descended, are the questions of how and why the speaker gets to his conclusion that reverses the hierarchy of the male/female relationship.

As an experiential definition of love, the poem offers a narrative charting the progress in the speaker's understanding of love and of women. It moves from the time before he "knew thy face or name" (1-6); to when he allowed love to "fixe it selfe" in this particular woman (7-14), thus fastening his love in her and giving it stability and constancy (*OED*, *fix*, I.1, I.2); then to his re-evaluation of love after his experience (15-22). That something is presumed to have occurred between the stanzas is indicated by the switch in verb tense from the present—"'and now / That it assume thy body, I allow, / And fixe it selfe in thy lip, eye, and brow" (12-14)—to the past tense—"'Whilst thus to ballast love, I thought . . . I saw . . . " (15-18).

As I suggested at the panel discussion of "Aire and Angels" at the 1990 Gulfport conference, what happens between the stanzas is crucial to understanding the change from the initial adoration of the woman as angel to the demotion of her in the last six lines to the less than angelic "air." As the child of his soul (which needs to take "limmes of flesh" to "doe" anything in this world), his "Love," now focused on this woman, has "take[n] a body." These lines (7-14) are usually read as meaning that his previously spiritual love has now assumed a physical form since it is specifically directed toward a woman with a visible, touchable face ("lip, eye, and brow"). But such an interpretation is too reticent. It seems obvious from the bawdy innuendoes of "take a body" and "assume thy body," which are amplified in the first half of stanza two, that the speaker and his mistress have had sexual relations.[2] Donne's words describing the action in which "Love" "assume[s]" her body—that is, takes it unto itself, adopts it into service, takes it as its own (*OED*, *assume*, I and III)—suggestively point toward the male lover's similar possession of her body. Once desire has been sexually consummated, his entire sense of the woman, and of his relation to her, has changed.

Though Donne in the first stanza diverges from Petrarchan figurations of desire by insisting on the necessity and value of sexual love, the language of the second stanza implies that with sexual enjoyment comes diminution of male desire

for the already attained mistress. In the second stanza, "love" is no longer capitalized, a sign that marks the change. Perhaps his ardorous pursuit has exhausted the energy of his passion. More importantly, the moment the woman yields to his desire, she has "fallen," for the actual woman cannot possibly live up to his ideal.

At first, having neither seen her face nor known her, he had "worship'd" her from a distance, adoring the pure unembodied angel-woman who was the creation of his fantasy, apprehending her only indirectly. It is at this point that the language of compliment predominates, though even here there are witty, sly insinuations (e.g., "Twice or thrice had I loved thee," [1]) that limit the praise. Then the object of his incarnate "love" became this specific, bodily woman, with "lip, eye, and brow"—in ways a more satisfactory object since now "Love" (and the male lover) could "doe" something and it had something to be "fixed" in, but also more limiting and limited, as the catalogue of body parts suggests by its very brevity.[3] Once the angel-woman assumed a bodily form, it was apparently but a short step to actual, sexual enjoyment. Through sexual relations, he had hoped to give love, previously spiritual, a necessary weight, solidity, and stability: "thus to ballast love, I thought, / And so more steddily to have gone" (15-16). But both the sexual experience (as intimated by lines 15-22) and the physicality of the woman threaten to "sinke" or extinguish his "admiration" of her, his love, and perhaps even his very "self," which includes his body but is not limited to it (7-8). While before he had "thought" that the physical, the "body," would "ballast" love, afterwards he "saw, I had loves pinnace overfraught, / Ev'ry thy haire for love to worke upon / Is much too much" (18-20). The language here suggests a male, post-coital feeling of exhaustion, the speaker's sense that the female body is overwhelming, and his own feeling of insufficiency. This sense of exhaustion is similar to the state of "sorrowing dulnesse" that seems the legacy of sexual love in "Farewell to love" or "Loves Alchymie." But in contrast to the note of disgust or revulsion in those poems, in "Aire and Angels" the male speaker's feelings of exhaustion are expressed more complexly and subtly in terms of a seeming compliment ("Ev'ry thy haire . . . Is much too much" [19-20]) that is also an insinuation of excess in the woman.

The idea that consummated love was destructive to men was, of course, legitimized by medical thinking, from Aristotle and Galen through the seventeenth century, that semen was the spirit or principle of life. Because semen was supposedly concocted from the blood, from the essence of life, the release of semen in orgasm lessened man's vigor, hence shortening his life.[4] As Donne put it in *The First Anniversary*, "We kill ourselves, to propagate our kinde" (110).[5] The sense that ejaculation diminishes man's life-spirit and vital energy was not limited to the conventions of Western culture from the ancient Greeks through the late Renaissance. Other manifestations of this belief were the nineteenth- (and even early twentieth-) century injunctions against masturbation and the advice restricting athletes' sexual activities immediately before competition. Though specific male

ejaculatory death fantasies are culturally constructed, the ubiquity of such fantasies suggests that there may be a biological basis for them as well. Lest we think that this sense of male loss through orgasm is simply a preoccupation of Western culture, I should point out that Taoist understanding of the physiology of sex prompted the development of specific tantric sexual practices, which aim to preserve and intensify male vigor through semen retention. The ancient art is still practiced, and books in English exist describing the theory and practice.

The second stanza expresses the male lover's fear of being absorbed in and depleted by the physical and emotional experience of sexual love. Quite unlike the lovers in "The Sunne Rising" or "The good-morrow" who wish to prolong intimacy and union, this speaker seeks to establish his separate identity and difference so as not to feel so engulfed by love. The poem's movement thus shows how this man's desire for love undergoes a change, a re-evaluation, as the desire for intimacy, at odds with a need to preserve individuality, gives way to a desire for separation. Emotional/sexual involvement is followed by withdrawal—literally, after the sex act, but also emotionally and intellectually. The poem enacts the fearful dance of intimacy—the pull between the strong desire for union, to "take limmes of flesh" (stanza one), and the perhaps equally strong need to maintain separate identity (stanza two).

This psychological movement of the poem fits what has been so commonly observed in our own society as to become a commonplace—that men and women respond to intimacy very differently, women seeking identity through intimacy, even fusion, and men fearing that intimacy will entail a loss or diminution of self.[6] Obviously, as "The good-morrow" or even "The Sunne Rising" indicates, Donne was able to imagine a longing for continued intimacy. But insofar as "Aire and Angels," spoken by a man, represents the familiar pattern of attraction and withdrawal, it expresses a gendered, male experience of love, a experience that often clashes with what are presumed to be women's desires. It is worth noting that a similar sense of a generic difference between men's and women's desires in love appears in Titian's famous painting of Venus and Adonis, which depicts Venus longing for the lovers' union to continue after sex while Adonis wants to be off to the hunt.

In "Aire and Angels" the speaker's need for distance, evident in his intellectual analysis of the situation in stanza two, is intensified by the fact that in the course of the poem he has progressively identified the woman with the body—an identification that expresses his desire, first, for union and then for detachment. Once love takes the tangible form of the individual woman ("assume[s]" her body), it becomes intensely physical in a way that suggests that woman is, long before the end of the poem, implicitly identified not with angels but with the material elements. Whereas in a Neo-Platonic scheme of love (like that presented by Bembo in *The Courtier*) woman had been associated with soul or spirit (in loving woman, the male lover aims at and ascends to an apprehension of soul, goodness, ideal

beauty), Donne's poem re-asserts woman's connection with the body, an association commonly made from classical times through the Renaissance, when thinking about generation and physiology was still dominated by Aristotelian tradition.[7] The association of woman and the body repeatedly, though not invariably, appears in Donne's poems such as "Communitie," "Loves Alchymie," and a number of the elegies. Though "Aire and Angels," like the "Extasie," assumes the interrelation and interdependence of soul and body as it argues in stanza one that love like the soul must "take a body," it is the female beloved far more than the male lover who comes to be defined in terms of the body in lines 13-22 (despite the possible pun on *pinnace/penis* that some readers hear).

As he describes what he "saw" and realized (that "Ev'ry thy haire for love to worke upon / Is much too much," that "nor in nothing, nor in things / Extreme, and scattring bright, can love inhere," 19-20, 21-22), the male speaker/lover, looking for something "fitter" for love to "inhere" in, places a distance between himself and the woman, and between himself and his body. This distance implies an emergent sense of his feeling of superiority rather than the posture of worship intimated in the first lines. The body and the pleasures of physical love, which have proved both so necessary and alluring and yet so threatening—"I had loves pinnace overfraught"—must, like the female beloved, be kept in their place while still valued, perhaps in order to be valued. And just as he now (20-23), after his sexual experience with this woman, desires to find some mean between the extremes of purely spiritual love and the overwhelmingly physical—the "right" relation between soul and body—so he tries once and for all to define or fix the relation between man and woman, between man's love and woman's love. And since he has through the poem increasingly associated woman with the physical, the definition of the relation between man and woman becomes inseparable from the definition of the soul/body, or spirit/matter relation. Hence the final analogy identifying woman's love with the physical element of air, and man's with the realm of spirit, the angel. Petrarchan idealization of women and Platonic dualism of body and spirit have been replaced with a relational model that is hierarchical in its definition of the difference between women and men, body and spirit:

> 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.

Though readers sensitive to the ways in which categories like "masculine" and "feminine" are culturally, socially determined have come to be suspicious of essentialist pronouncements, Donne's speaker feels no hesitation in distilling from

his personal, private experience a general "truth" about the nature of "mens" love and "womens" that is totalizing and universalist. While these lines are not, I think, *intended* as an insult to the woman, neither do I think their purpose is compliment. The double simile comparing women to air and men to angels "corrects" the speaker's early (mistaken) apprehension of his beloved expressed in the poem's first lines. Like the states and princes analogy of "The Sunne Rising"—"She's all States, and all Princes, I" (21)—the final comparison posits that women and "womens love" are necessary though lower than men and "mens love." The "fitter" object of man's love, which is woman's love, still includes bodily woman, but a woman understood as superior to and purer than the lower elements of earth and water. The analogy raises woman in the Aristotelian scheme, identifying her with the higher "masculine" element of air rather than the "feminine" earth and water, but it still follows the Aristotelian identification of woman with the material, physical realm, the world of the body, while placing man in the spiritual realm of angels. That man belongs in that realm is evident in that the speaker has all along displayed a keen intelligence, an analytical ability that implies that he is more than his body, from which he displays a certain detachment. The woman who would be the proper object of this man's love must be refined and pure, if she is to be worthy of him; hence her association with "air" rather than "earth." But she still belongs to the world of elements in a way that, finally, man does not, and thus she can never be "pure as" him. She is the bodily sphere to his intelligence, the "material girl" to his angelic spirit.

To Donne's speaker, woman's love is important in the sense that man's love needs to have an answering, responsive love from woman. But it is man's love that is active, woman's simply reactive, unable to initiate action, only to respond to his. Through the experience of love, the male lover has "advanced" in the poem from a humble worshipper to an angel-like being himself. Her love enables his; she is necessary for him to express himself, just as the air is the necessary materialization of the angel. But she, like the air to the angel, remains his *construction*, shaped by him to reflect his desire.

As I read it, the poem thus invokes traditional views of women and sex to represent a male experience of heterosexual love that examines Petrarchan formulations as it expresses a psychology of intimacy that implies men respond differently than women to emotional as well as sexual intimacy. It makes sense psychologically that the speaker of "Aire and Angels," wanting physical, consummated love rather than the endless deferral of desire in Petrarchan love, comes to redefine the relationship and love in ways that allow him to have a connection, an intimate relation, without feeling overwhelmed, or without feeling a loss of separate identity. Thus at the end the lover posits a new relationship that presumably will solve his problem. His subtle, intellectual analogy describes a relationship where he can enter and be embraced by her love (as the air becomes the sphere of the angel) but not be constrained or limited by it since he, like the

angel, can at his pleasure either assume her love (the body of air) or not. She may, as R. V. Young suggests, have the option of refusing him, but she is in the poem envisioned as responsive, receptive. Indeed, no active words are associated with her after line four. It is the male speaker who sets the boundaries of the relation, not only in the last tercet that points towards the future but at the beginning of their relation when he did "allow" or permit (*OED*, *allow*, III.8) love to "fixe it selfe" in her.

Even if one believes that the "disparitie" defined in these last lines is not terribly great, "disparitie" it remains. With difference in power to initiate action and difference in purity, however small, such a relation can appear mutual only insofar as it is looked at from the man's point of view. As I read it, the ending insists on difference and attributes a superior purity to the male. Much that has come before in the poem may call the ending into question, but the last three lines assert a hierarchically gendered disparity in love as absolutely, permanently true. Perhaps the absoluteness of the final pronouncement is itself a mark of how fragile and arbitrary the construction of "right" male/female relations is. But for me, the ending of the poem shows the difficulty of thinking about "difference" without seeing difference as involving inherent hierarchical distinctions of higher and lower, better and worse. The poem invites us to ask whether we can think of man's love and woman's love, of men and women, as being different without necessarily invoking the hierarchical discriminations involved in conventional distinctions between body and soul, air and angel. The poem also makes clear how difficult it is to love someone else for her(him)self, as (s)he is, rather than as a reflection or mirror of the lover's needs and desires.

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Notes

[1] Most notably, Christopher Ricks, "Donne After Love" (in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988], pp. 33-69), detaches these lines from the poem in his essay, arguing that Donne's poems are often obsessed with "postcoital sadness and revulsion" (33) and are driven to spoil themselves at the end. Ricks discusses only the last three lines, finding them "an offense--against women, against men, against love, and against the poem which it wantonly degrades" (38).

[2] On the sexual punning, see especially Albert C. Labriola's essay in this issue. William Empson, in "Donne the Space Man," *KR* 19 (1957), 337-99 (esp. 381-83, 389), anticipates my point that between the first and second stanzas the speaker has gone to bed with the mistress, but my reading of the poem is quite different. Few critics seem to have picked up on Empson's suggestion.

[3] Cf. Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981), 265-79, on the fragmentation of the female body in Petrarch's poetry as the male speaker's attempt to control the woman seen and to prevent his own fragmentation.

[4] See Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* [*Generation of Animals*], tr. A. L. Peck, Loeb Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 2.4.738, 1.2.716a, 1.18.725b. See also Thomas

Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks through Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 35-38.

[5] Cf. "Farewell to love": "each such Act, they say, / Diminisheth the length of life a day" (24-25).

[6] In her case study of the responses of boys and girls, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), has shown that the tendencies in men and women to respond differently to relational situations and experiences start very early, with men seeking separateness and women connectedness.

[7] See Aristotle's identification of woman with matter, the physical, in *De generatione animalium* (n. 4 above), 2.4, 1.2. Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (London 1615), which collects anatomical information from "the best authors" from Aristotle and Galen to Casper Bauhin and André du Laurens, frequently cites Aristotle's description of the womb as "the fertile field of Nature" (pp. 200, 221, 270). On Aristotelian ideas of sexual difference, see also Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), ch. 3. Despite Galen's "two-seed" theory, he essentially followed Aristotle in associating the female with the material, the male with the spiritual principle of life.