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Reading and Teaching "The Good-morrow"

Achsah Guibbory

The following three essays were originally presented in a panel that I organized for the eighteenth John Donne Conference, held in Gulfport, Mississippi, February 2003. Every year, the conference devotes a special session to a Donne text that is commonly taught, and this tradition has become one of the high points of the conference. Three or four panelists offer different perspectives on the poem; then the discussion opens up to include the other participants in the conference. Distinctions between "the panel" and "audience" blur as we all explore the text together. What is unique and particularly wonderful about these sessions is that they exemplify the ideal symbiosis between research and teaching: panelists offer new scholarly perspectives with the sense that their scholarship will make a difference in the ways we read and teach Donne's texts. The discussion itself allows a place for pedagogy, as people feel free to bring their experiences teaching Donne into the mix.

The poem for the February 2003 conference was "The Good-morrow," one of the most well-known, well-loved, and frequently taught of Donne's poems. Probably every one who teaches Donne includes this poem. For many of us, it has seemed an appropriate introduction to Donne, as if it were, somehow, the quintessential Donne. Within its three stanzas, "The Good-morrow" encapsulates something of the range and variety of tones of Donne's lyric poems, including wonder at the miracle of love, a

certain cynical (or boastful? realistic?) reference to the fact that the speaker has "had" other women before, and finally a hope that their love will not "die," tinged by recognition (or fear?) that it may, indeed, be vulnerable to the ravages of time. Still, this is one of the most "celebratory" of Donne's love poems, as the speaker expresses the feeling that a new world and perspective has opened up for him. Here, as in "The Sun Rising," the microcosmic world of love, at least for the moment, expands, becoming more important than the rest of the world, containing everything of value.

Earlier criticism, under the influence of the "new criticism," had much to say about this poem. Most practicing "new critics" offered readings of varying sensitivity and incompatibility. Arnold Stein, one of our finest readers, noted how the poem "immediately engages the reader; he is drawn into its action at once, but soon discovers that he must make his own exertions or fall behind." In the language of his time, Stein sought to capture the experience of the (male) reader, as well as the subtlety of the poem. He praised "the sustained imaginative power and imaginative consciousness we experience in the poem," and found great "intellectual modesty" in the ending of the poem. Donne was a poet who knew that "the alternative to the unity of love is the death of love."[1] Donald Guss admired "the flexibility of Donne's Neo-platonic posture" in "The Good-morrow," and Andreason thought that Donne had finally "created a lover who...is a convert...to Platonic love rather than Platonic friendship"—both readings which, it seemed, took the sex out of Donne's poem.[2]

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[1]Arnold Stein, *John Donne's Lyrics: The Eloquence of Action* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1962), pp. 65, 69, 77.

[2]Donald L. Guss, *John Donne, Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in the Songs and Sonets* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1966), p. 164. N.J.C. Andreason, *John Donne, Conservative Revolutionary* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 215.

But as new historicism and the interest in politics and the sociopolitical aspects of poems became dominant in the last twenty years, love poems like "The Good-morrow" have seemed critically less interesting. John Carey, significantly, mentioned the poem only twice in passing. Arthur Marotti, seeing Donne's poems as "coterie social transactions" rather than "literary icons," found more things to say about those poems that were tied to the Inns of Court or expressed concerns of patronage or ambition.[3] Lyric poetry has, generally, been less amenable to new historicist and post-structuralist approaches. New historicism has had much to teach us, but it has not always been commensurate with all of Donne's love poetry. Perhaps it will soon be time to revisit love and erotic poetry with new eyes, bringing with us all we have learned.

The three essays here present very different, fresh perspectives on Donne's famous love poem. The essays, respectively, determine the text, interpret the text, and suggest its enabling effect on twentieth-century lyric poets. Examining the variants in the poem, making discriminating judgments about what are likely corruptions or inferior versions, Lara Crowley offers a new, definitive text of "The Good Morrowe" that is arguably as close as we can come to the poem that "Donne wrote." Meticulously analyzing the various manuscript and printed versions of the poem, she makes a strong, convincing case for her textual choices, and gives us a "fitter" text that may well lead to new readings. Ilona Bell situates Donne's poem in the practices of Elizabethan courtship in order to offer a new reading of the poem as a "betrothal" poem, a "clandestine poem of courtship." In contrast to Arthur F. Marotti, who has influentially described Donne as a "coterie" poet addressing a primarily male audience (although Marotti too associates "The Good-morrow" with Donne's courtship of Anne),[4] Bell

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[3]John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 51, 265. Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 19.

[4]Marotti, p. 139.

personalizes the poem, insisting that the poem, in its dialogic interaction between male speaker and female addressee, articulates the relation between Donne and Anne just before marriage. Believing that poems emerge from and engage personal experiences (and not just sociopolitical, cultural ones), Bell attends to the private, the personal, seeking to bring together historical/cultural and biographical contexts, and reminding us that Donne is a *love* poet. Jonathan Post suggests that this is what later lyric poets have known. Post looks to the way Donne's expression of intimate feeling has had an afterlife in the twentieth century, and particularly in some of the most moving poems of Philip Larkin and especially Elizabeth Bishop, which would not have existed without Donne's poem. It is as if Donne's "Good-Morrow" helped them articulate something about love, reminding us that we live our lives and understand experience through the mediation of poets who have come before.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign