John Donne Journal
Vol. 22 (2003)

Betrothal: "The good-morrow"

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"The good-morrow" has been greatly admired and exquisitely explicated many times over–but the conditional syntax and opaque logic of the final lines continue to bother or baffle critics and editors alike. As Redpath remarks, "I cannot help feeling that something may have gone wrong, and prevented this otherwise magnificent poem from achieving a truly satisfying ending."[1] The dissonant elements of the poem, and especially the conclusion, make much better sense, emotionally, historically, and generically when "The good-morrow" is read as a poem of courtship. In particular, I want to argue that "The good-morrow" reenacts the three basic stages of a clandestine betrothal: 1. a pledging of troth; 2. a forsaking of all others; 3. a liminal state which looks forward to the time, when, in the words of the marriage ceremony, "thei two shalbe one flesh."[2] This reading depends upon the assumption that "The good-morrow," like "The Curse" or "The Flea," contains a private subtext which has eluded modern readers and critics but which would have been accessible to Donne's original female lyric audience. Let's call her ... Anne.

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[1]Theodore Redpath, ed. *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne.* 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 231.

[2]*The Book of Common Prayer, Commonly called The First Book of Queen Elizabeth* (Printed by Grafton 1559; rptd. London: Pickering, 1844), f. 99.

This private subtext begins immediately, for the phrase, "by my troth," contains a veiled meaning: to plight one's troth or to engage in a contract of marriage.[3] The surprising allusion to the other women "I desir'd, and got" becomes considerably less jarring when we realize that a promise to forsake all others was a requisite part of a betrothal. Donne acknowledges this in "Epithalamion made at Lincolnes Inne": "All yeelding to new loves bee far for ever, / Which might these two dissever"(11. 44-45).

By beginning with the phrase, "by my troth," and reiterating their mutual promise to forsake all others, "The good-morrow" reaffirms the clandestine marriage contract that presumably preceded the night of love-making which the poem celebrates or seeks, depending on whether you read it as an aubade or a persuasion poem. Either way, the sexual double entendres of the first stanza acquire particular import when we consider that a promise to marry, followed by coitus, constituted a legally binding, common law marriage.[4]

The second stanza begins anew, reverently proclaiming a spiritual reawakening that prefigures the mystical union of matrimony. Donne seems highly conscious of Anne's feelings as he promises that he will never again so much as notice another woman, "For love, all love of other sights controules." By closing their eyes to everything that lies outside this "one little roome" where "love, all love of other sights controules," Donne maintains that there *is* nothing to fear. Of course, if there were *really* nothing

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[3]Quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, edited John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Doubleday, 1967), p. 89.

[4]For more information on the history of courtship and marriage, see Bell, *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 3; John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985); Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1570-1640*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

to fear, he would not need to reassure her–or to convince himself. Clearly, this is a secret, risky love affair. The exuberance of the opening lines has dissipated, tempered by more solemn thoughts of everything that could ultimately destroy everything they currently enjoy.

What really worries Donne is not their love for each other but the rest of the world. The anaphora or parallel syntax makes the final line of stanza 2 seem inevitable: "Let sea-discoverers," "Let Maps," "Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one." At once a plea and a promise, this exhortation, addressed to them both, anticipates and yearns for a time when they *will* "possesse one world" because each will possess the other which is exactly how Donne describes the transformation from betrothal to marriage in the "Epithalamion at Lincolnes Inne":

> And these two in thy sacred bosome hold,
> Till, mystically joyn'd, but one they bee;
>
> All yeelding to new loves bee far for ever,
> Which might these two dissever,
> Alwaies, all th'other may each one possesse.
> (11.38-39; 44-46)

Notice the link to "Let us possesse one world." In "The good-morrow" Donne can only anticipate the time when marriage will mystically transform "these two" into "one." For the moment, as the self-correcting syntax acknowledges somewhat regretfully, "each hath one" world and "is one" world.

Stanza 1 poses a series of questions which Donne hastens to answer; in stanza 3 he poses another question, a rhetorical question that offers the solace it simultaneously seeks:

> Where can we finde two better hemispheares
> Without sharpe North, without declining West?

Donne used the same image in the Sommerset epithalamion to represent the zenith of married love: "May never age, or error overthwart / With any West, these radiant eyes, with any North, this heart" (11. 180-81). There is no need to explore the far reaches of the world because Donne and his beloved already inhabit their own private golden world.

Many readers and critics have wished John Donne had found a way to express a radiant clarity and warmth of this kind at the end of "The good-morrow." By comparison, the conclusion seems disturbingly provisional and opaque:

> What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
> If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
> Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.[5]

The premise upon which the conclusion rests is usually explained theologically or alchemically, the basic idea being that if two separate substances (such as skim milk and cream) are so thoroughly mixed that the particles are evenly diffused or united,

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[5]The variant, "If both our loves be one, or, thou and I / Love just alike in all; none of these loves can die," doesn't exactly change the meaning, although it lessens the separation between the lovers and simplifies the situation by removing the alternative that their loves might not be one. But that makes it very difficult to explain why the sentence begins with "if" in the first place. Here as in "The Dampe," the variant eliminates the sexual pun. It also seems much less plausible since two lovers can never "love just alike in all." Redpath, who prefers the Group I readings, suggests that Group II must be an earlier version that Donne revised and improved. It seems equally likely that someone else altered it, or that Donne himself rewrote it (perhaps when he was thinking about publishing the poem) to make the language less racy and the relationship more stable. Love "so alike that" acknowledges that there will always be some difference; they need only enough agreement to keep the love alive.

the resulting substance will be stable and inseparable (like homogenized milk).[6]

Alternative meanings of the word "mixt," which modern editors have overlooked, create even closer connections to the preceding lines and the clandestine betrothal they secretly represent. The symbolic meaning of "mixed"–to unite persons in the interchange of glances–evokes the beginning of stanza 3, the emotional climax of the poem, and one of the simplest, clearest moments of openness and trust in the entire corpus of English Renaissance love poetry: "My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares / And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest." Equally apropos and to my mind even more intriguing, "mixed" also means to join hands, the conventional symbol of betrothal and marriage. Indeed the popular term for betrothal was *handfasting* because the betrothed coupled joined hands, literally and symbolically, as they pledged their troth and solemnly committed themselves to marriage where (in the words of the prayer book) "the man [is] to take the woman by the right hand, and so either to geue their trouth to [the] other."[7] Thus the poem ends as it began, with a veiled allusion to the lovers' clandestine betrothal, "mixed equally," Donne hopes, by an interchange of hearts and eyes and a symbolic joining of hands. "Mixed" also meant comprising individuals of different birth, rank, character. Renaissance marriage doctrine vehemently opposed any significant disparity in age, social rank, wealth, or religion: as Cleaver's marriage manual explains, "when we say, meet & free to marry one with another, there wold be a wise & holy regard had of the qualitie in yeares, of agreement in religion, of similitude in

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[6]Citing Aquinas, Herbert J. C. Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), vol. 2, p. 11, explains that pure bodies (God, angels, heavenly bodies) are immortal, whereas the human body is mortal because it is comprised of mixed elements. Both Redpath and Gardner repeat Grierson's gloss. Shawcross, p. 89, simply notes that "[t]he belief was alchemically commonplace."

[7]*Book of Common Prayer*, f. 96v.

nature, and maners of outward estate, condition and qualitie of person, & such like necessarie circumstances."[8] In the case of Donne's clandestine betrothal and marriage to Anne More, all these impediments pertained, although his Catholic faith posed the most serious obstacle: "As we should not be yoked with Infidells, so we should not be yoked with Papists," Henrie Smith's *A Preparative to Mariage* explains.[9]

Finally, and to my mind, most notable of all, the Elizabethan word, "mixed," could also mean: to unite persons, to join in sexual intercourse. The concluding lines draw on this meaning to suggest that Donne and his beloved have affirmed–or should affirm–the strength of their emotional bond through their physical relationship.

The more intimate, sexual meaning of "mixed equally" is wonderfully apt since it connects the conclusion to the erotic core of the poem. All three of Donne's epithalamia suggest that the marriage will succeed if and only if the bride and groom enjoy their conjugal bliss "equally," a presumption that carries even greater weight when we recall the common medical belief of the day that a woman could only conceive a child if she reached sexual orgasm.

No sooner does "The good-morrow" present its climactic scientific formula than the diction and syntax dissolve into ambiguity and uncertainty:

> If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
> Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.

The conditional grammar suggests that a final accounting has yet to be made. As Henry Swinburne explains in *A Treatise of Spousals, or Matrimonial Contracts,* "By Marriage the Man and the Woman

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[8]Robert Cleaver, *A godly form of hovseholde gouernement: for the ordering of priuate families, according to the direction of Gods word* (London, 1598), pp. 127-28.

[9]Henry Smith, *A Preparative to Mariage* (London, 1591), pp. 47-48.

are made one Flesh, so are they not by only Spousals" (or betrothal).[10] The quandary that concludes "The good-morrow" can only be resolved by the marriage ceremony after which it will no longer "be lawfull to put a so[n]der those whome [God] by matrimonie haddest made one."[11] The transformation of two into one was fundamental to the culture's understanding of marriage, and it seems to have had particular import for John Donne, for all of his epithalamia represent the moment of marriage as the mystical transformation of two into one.

"The good-morrow" ends with a disconcerting sense of vulnerability and uncertainty, held at bay by the sheer force of Donne's rhetoric which strives to unite the two lovers in poetry until they can be joined in law. Far from being a disappointing poetic failure, the provisional formulation is the most logical and honest way for a clandestine poem of courtship to conclude. The mixture of qualification and assurance is dramatically apt and emotionally resonant precisely because it seeks but does not blithely assume a unity of thought and feeling. Chastened by his earlier self-satisfaction, Donne does not project his feelings onto Anne, nor does he force her into his image of her. In the end, only she can affirm that their "two loves" are essentially "one" now that their clandestine marriage contract has been–or is about to be–consummated. "If" his love for her is matched "equally" by her love for him, "none," neither one, "will slacken" until they reach sexual climax together (since "die" was slang for reaching sexual climax.[12] But even more important, "if" his love for her is matched "equally"

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[10]Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals, or Matrimonial Contracts* (London, 1686), p. 16. Although the treatise was not published until the latter seventeenth-century, it was written during Donne's lifetime.

[11]*Book of Common Prayer*, f. 98r.

[12]Redpath worries about whether "none" refers to the lovers or their love. Although there may be a syntactical ambiguity, and other meanings are always possible, according to the syntax and grammar "none" refers primarily to "thou or I," meaning, neither one, nor neither thou or I.

by her love for him, "none, " neither one, "will slacken" in his or her resolve until they are officially joined in marriage.

Earlier critics were unwilling to associate "The good-morrow" with John Donne's courtship of Anne More because the poem's language and dramatic situation imply a sexually intimate love affair. Whether an aubade or a persuasion poem, it embodies the two most important conventions of the genre of a poem of courtship: first, its private lyric audience is the woman whom the poet/lover is wooing; second, its outcome is hers to decide, once the poem comes to a close. "The good-morrow" ends as poetry of courtship must, with a conditional conclusion that depends on the female interlocutor's answering response. As Donne informed Sir George More once their clandestine marriage was a *fait accompli,* "We adventurd equally."[13] No matter how forcefully Donne's stanzas, tropes, and rhetoric strive to diminish the external pressures that threaten to separate the lovers, the grammar and syntax of his poetry, like the integuments of his courtship, are contingent on forces and events Donne strives to shape but cannot entirely foresee or fully control. Donne's assertions of oneness quickly dissolve into an acknowledgement of twoness, into a recognition that the poem is only one side of a complex, ongoing lyric dialogue between two individuals who have not yet been transformed by holy matrimony into one. Their two loves and two worlds will only become one, truly and forevermore, "if"–and the word is pivotal though not conclusive–"if" Anne remains "equally" committed to their troth plight. That remains for her to say and prove once the poem ends.

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[13] *The Loseley Manuscripts*, ed. Alfred John Kempe (London 1836), p. 328.