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Fall and Decline: Confronting Lyric Gerontophobia in Donne's "The Autumnall"

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In what the *Donne Variorum* editors speculate was perhaps his first surviving epigram—and therefore among his earliest surviving poems—John Donne targets the antiquarian proclivities of one Hamon: "If in his study, Hamon hath such care, / To hang all old things, let his wife beware."[1] In subsequent versions of the text, "old things" expands into "old strange things," an amplification as deft as it is nasty. The original epigram had been content to redirect its satirical roguery from the antiquarian collector (already a butt of literary abuse in the 1590s[2]) to his spouse; the redaction enlarges, by means of this adjectival insert, into a poem about "estrangement" and the objectification that

[1]All quotations from Donne's poems refer to the corresponding volumes of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al.: vol. 8, *The Epigrams, Epithalamions, Epitaphs, Inscriptions, and Miscellaneous Poems* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and vol. 2, *The Elegies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[2]See, for instance, Thomas Nashe's caricature of the antiquarian in his *Pierce Penniless* of 1592: "A thousand gewgaws and toys have they in their chambers, which they heap up together with infinite expense and are made believe of them that sell them that they are rare and precious things. . . . It argueth a very rusty wit so to dote on wormeaten eld" (*Selected Works*, ed. Stanley Wells [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964], p. 44). Everard Guilpin's *Skialetheia* (1598) offers a similar picture of the "foppery / The Antiquary would persuade vs to" in his satire 1.136–142 (*Skialetheia, or A Shadowe of Truth, in Certaine Epigrams and Satyres*, ed. D. Allen Carroll [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974], p. 67).

comes with age. As the erotic intimacies of youth fade, the couplet sardonically implies, familiar people inevitably devolve to the status of strange things. The antiquary's wife need beware the dusty knick-knacks cluttering her husband's ridiculous displays less because of the penury such extravagant purchases typically threaten, than for their human cost: specifically, the emotional displacement configured by these gathered curiosities, among which she now takes her unremarkable place. In old age, the lover comes to look upon his previous object of affection as (at best) a grotesque artifact worthy of inclusion in his museum, itself representative of a pathetic desire to recover and reconstruct a now-remote past.

This early epigram's concern for the disengagements threatened by time's physical effects would itself mature to preoccupy much of Donne's verse.[3] But nowhere does the poet confront the topic more frankly and provocatively than in his elegy commonly titled "The Autumnall," dated variously from the late 1590s to the time of Donne's own death over 30 years later.[4] In some respects, the elegy endeavors to reverse the decline that the epigram had mocked: far from alienating people, age may actually refine intimacies. Yet, in its attempt to repair this breakage, the poem discovers a dividedness all its own. After challenging youth's prevailing "springe" and "summer" vanities in favor of an "Autumnall" subject's superior beauty for thirty-six lines, the poet shears abruptly into a devastating reflection on the bodily decay awaiting a "winter" of advanced senescence. The apology for age's discrete charms ends up foregrounding—as apologies so often do—the objectionable characteristics it struggles to ameliorate.[5] Although readers have long

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[3]See especially Anne Ferry's chapter in *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 67–125; and John Carey's sequence of chapters—"Bodies," "Change," "Death"—in his *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber, 1981), pp. 131–230.

[4]For a survey of efforts to date the poem, see the commentary in the *Variorum: Elegies*, pp. 836–841. I prefer to follow those who place "The Autumnall" amid Donne's other late Elizabethan elegies, although questions about precise dating do not significantly affect the present reading.

[5]Cf. J. L. Austin's observation about how "the average excuse gets us only out of the fire into the frying pan," quoted in Margaret W. Ferguson, *Trials of*

admired the lyric's refreshingly novel celebration of a beautiful elder woman, thought by many since the seventeenth century to be Lady Magdalen Herbert, even the most sympathetic find it awkward to negotiate what remains an essentially fractured performance. Uncomfortable suspicions linger that "The Autumnall" falters as an encomium gone awry amid its own earnest but risky strategies, or a sophistic paradox whose cleverness cannot effectively redeem its crueler impulses.

In order to appreciate more fully the poem's remarkable achievement, I think we need to concentrate precisely upon the glaring fault lines to which the poet deliberately draws our attention, rather than trying to talk around or explain these away. Donne's central purpose as I understand it is to force a confrontation with the very ambivalence afflicting our regard for old age, something he boldly dramatizes in the performance. Any effort to refamiliarize an audience with the substantial graces that late life potentially harbors will also, he intuits, bring to the surface deeply sublimated anxieties about age's corrosive effects on the body, and the social consequence of these changes. As he does frequently in the poems, Donne holds up for scrutiny his own speaker's professed attitudes, along with the cultural mores that give them shape. Though the aging woman's beauty transgresses against time's caustic threats to inspire his self-consciously unorthodox apology, it also reawakens anticipatory fears over a deferred yet immanent decrepitude that proves far more unnerving than death itself. Initial efforts to suppress this darker perspective can result, he realizes, in the explosive re-assertion of a gerontophobia—the psychologically and socially ingrained repugnance for the aged body[6]—that compromises his more benign intentions. This divided experience will further bring the speaker to terms with the equally unyielding limits

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Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 139.

[6]For a discussion of this problematic term, see Kathleen Woodward's entry in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 145–148. I use it here to encompass both the (deeply interrelated) exterior and interior sources for the antipathy to old age. See also Richard Freedman, "Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia in English Literature," in *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*, ed. Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, and David D. Van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), pp. 49–61.

of his larger poetic ambitions. Neither a perversely ingenious homage to the late splendors of Herbert's (or any other individual's) enduring attractiveness, nor a glib satiric indulgence, "The Autumnall" boldly anatomizes impulses that its persona at once challenges and betrays.

Predictably, the radical internal disjunction folding "The Autumnall" back against itself has annoyed efforts to formulate a unified critical response. Any immediate reflex to dismiss this feature as one more example of Donne's trademark delight in paradox fails to address the excessive brutality it indulges.[7] The generic mockery directed at old age in the poet's formal paradox "That old Men are more Fantastique then younge" strikes us, by contrast, as good-humored to the point of benignity.[8] Perplexed by the elegy's severity, readers have often ventured outside, seeking to mend its weird disparity with the convenient patch of biographical surmise. Mary Alice Greller, for instance, offers a representative view that Donne's insensitive allusions to age's impending ravages in the poem actually presented "a compliment to Mrs. Herbert's intellectual and aesthetic perceptiveness, to her sense of humor, her appreciation of wit, her relish for irony, above all, to her realistic and mature acceptance of the stage of life in which both poet and patroness found themselves"; supposedly, "she would have enjoyed the understated compliment of this elaborately wrought conceit much more than fulsome and unambiguous praise."[9] Besides asking a great deal of the patroness's taste or generosity towards the full and unambiguous revulsion for aged flesh ultimately expressed in the poem, such an approach builds its case upon a dangerously speculative foundation. Even Arthur Marotti, our most formidable advocate for the "coterie" setting of Donne's *oeuvre*, disputes the Herbert connection.[10]

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[7]The best assessment of Donnean paradox remains Roaslie L. Colie's *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), esp. pp. 96–141.

[8]*Paradoxes and Problems*, ed. Helen Peters (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), pp. 4–6.

[9]"Donne's 'The Autumnall': An Analysis," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 9 (1975): 7.

[10]Marotti points out that "the evidence for this social context is weak," and further concludes that the poem "lacks the signs of direct or indirect complimentary purpose" (*John Donne, Coterie Poet* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986], p. 52). For a history of the poem's association with

Somewhat more plausibly, others examine the poem's surface for clues. Alan Armstrong explains the disjointedness in formalist terms. He reads the sharp turn toward extreme old age's debilities as part of the structural symmetry integral to the paradox artist's witty display: Donne plots to distinguish his autumnal subject from this bleaker "third state" which contrasts her visage just as the "youthful beauty of the earlier movement had done."[11] This argument likewise proves unsatisfactory, however, since it is the evident *im*balance of the life course so aggressively sketched out in "The Autumnall" that renders the poem's argumentative design so deeply problematic. For all the heady excesses of youth's "inflameing tyme," the "growing beauties" nonetheless retain their own undisputed virtues, and at least anticipate the prospect of one day knowing a more temperate season's joys, in harsh contrast to the emphatically irreversible and terminal miseries to which our "winter" existence is subject. Were symmetry the principal concern here, surely the poet might have tempered his characterization of life's final stage to bring it in line with his regard for youth's significant (if lesser) delights, and so offset more gently and effectively the middle ground he celebrates. Instead, sensual, intellectual, and spiritual joys are utterly canceled in his bitter portrait of elderly decrepitude. This foreclosure of all promise in time overshadows the rhetorical effect monstrously, blocking efforts to explain the disruption simply as a structural device.

Those few who have delved further into the persona Donne crafts for his idiosyncratic presentation have come closest to grasping the elegy's fuller complexity. In her suggestive effort to place Donne's poem amid the "ugly beauty" tradition available to his generation, Heather Dubrow proposes that the speaker's "largely successful" attempts to stave off fears of decay and death by means of the poet's "usual linguistic games" focus his own empowerment: "the emphasis on the speech acts of naming and

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Herbert, see the notes in the *Variorum: Elegies*, pp. 280–282, 288, and 836–841. The titles ascribed to the elegy in several of the early manuscript groups take Herbert as the intended subject, a presumption that Walton would go on to authorize in his 1670 *Life of Donne*. The linkage has, since the late nineteenth century, troubled efforts to date the poem. From at least 1933 on, such commentators as Alec Brown, Roger Bennett, Alan Armstrong, John Carey, and John Shawcross anticipate Marotti's dismissal of the biographical reading.

[11]"The Apprenticeship of John Donne: Ovid and the Elegies," *ELH* 44 (1977): 438.

calling reminds us that the poet himself is engaged in such acts, with his ability to name and call, rather than any objective assessment, determining how this autumnal beauty is viewed. Donne at once expresses and contains anxieties that an autumnal beauty is in fact, or will soon become, wintry—and does so by drawing attention to his own ability to construct that beauty as he pleases."[12] But even Dubrow's sensitive interpretation ultimately misreads his gestures, since it remains, as I will argue, the speaker's *failed* presumption to rhetoricize age away that animates his performance. He deploys his considerable verbal talents to counter the gerontophobic prejudice that would disqualify his subject from such praise, only to have this very bias reassert itself with a vengeance, from within the reservoir of prejudice he shares with those whom he would challenge. The persona's ultimate engagement with his own shortcomings completes a rich psychological drama that marks the elegy as one of Donne's most sophisticated accomplishments.

Before evaluating the contraventional stance that "The Autumnall" assumes, we must first recover those conventions against which it ostensibly reacts. In the philosophical and clinical literature on the topic at his disposal, Donne might have found easy sanction for the divided conceptualization of old age that marks his poem. Among the various models of life's multiple stages that had survived and developed from antiquity, the progress traced from "springe" and "summer beautie" that the poet qualifies, to the "Autumnall" moment he valorizes, to the "winter" he abhors finds uncontroversial sanction in Donne's day.[13] Beyond the general sequence sketched in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 2.13, where a suspicious, frail old age counterbalances volatile, undisciplined youth to offset the more desirable traits of our "prime," classical and early modern theorists further graduated the life course's final movement into "green" and "decrepit" stages. "The Autumnall" could have drawn some of its sentiment directly from Seneca's twelfth epistle, where the philosopher celebrates the penultimate phase of our experience as one of life's

[12]"Donne's Elegies and the Ugly Beauty Tradition," in *Donne and the Resources of Kind*, ed. A. D. Cousins and Damian Grace (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), pp. 60–61.

[13]On the compartmentalization of the life course into a series of "ages," see Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 46–52.

supreme moments: "Let vs then embrace and loue" old age, he proclaims, "it is wholly replenished with agreeable delights, if a man know how to make vse of it. The Apples are neuer so good then when they begin to wither and ripen. Infancie is most agreeable in the end thereof." Yet he closes with a somewhat nervous qualifier—"The age that declineth is also most agreeable, when as yet it is not wholly decrepit and spent."[14] The final clause's admonition anticipates the darker moment that it leaves undeveloped. In his *Gerontocomia* of 1489, the Italian physician Gabriele Zerbi retails for a contemporary audience the well-established theory that "When men become old, in the first part of old age they understand more perfectly and fully because the intellect in us when we become old is more efficient," only to observe how this yields, in turn, to a final period "full of many great and continuous ills," when the mind as well as the body breaks down, so that "Old men are called thus (*senes*) because they know not (*nesciant*)."[15] In Donne's own day, Henry Cuffe's *Differences of the Ages of Mans Life*, composed sometime during the final years of the sixteenth century and released posthumously in 1607, exploits the seasonal analogy, eliding autumn and moving directly from the late summer of "our *Manhood*, the most constant and setled part of our life," to winter, subdivided into "degrees or parts":

> the first wherein our strength and heat are euidently impaired, yet not so much, but that there remaineth a will and readinesse to bee doing . . . . The second part of this last part of our life, which they call decrepit old age, is when our strength and heat is so farre decaied, that not onely all abilitie is taken away, but euen all willingnesse, to the least strength and motion of our bodie: and this is the conclusion and end of our life, resembling death it selfe, whose harbinger and fore-runner it is.[16]

Even for those hardy or fortunate enough to enjoy the gradual, virtually "insensible" attrition of physical capabilities into late life, a more sudden

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[14] *The Workes of Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, trans. Thomas Lodge (London, 1614), p. 180.

[15] *Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged*, trans. L. R. Lind (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988), pp. 30–31.

[16] *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* (London, 1607), p. 120.

moment of catastrophic decline awaits. At most, glorification of life's autumn—what we now colloquially term "Indian summer"—only defers, and so potentially compounds, the anxiety threatened by age.

While the respect owed to the elder in society, which compensates for whatever physical disadvantages might come with time, endures throughout western culture on the broadest public and private registers as one of the most ardently preached ethical values, practical implementation of this ideal was seldom a matter of course. The social and psychological factors conditioning attitudes toward old age bedeviled the ideal. Modern studies affirm how the classical world's express veneration of the elder's elevated social position cloaked grimmer experiences of marginalization, indifference, or even disdain with which the aged actually had to deal. While admitting that documentary sources on the subject remain vague, for example, Tim G. Parkin proposes that enough evidence of the elder's plight in classical Rome survives to afford "a necessary antidote to the long-standing myth that in past cultures, both in antiquity and in more recent history, older people enjoyed a life of prestige, comfort, and respect. . . . That some did is certain. That most did not should be recognized."[17] Little had changed by Donne's own day, as Keith Thomas reminds us: "the picture of old age yielded by contemporary literature is frankly pessimistic. Most writing addressed to the aged took it for granted that their readers were persons to whom life had become a burden. No one doubted that old age was a wretched time of physical deterioration."[18] This larger gap between theory and social

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[17] *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 226. See also the findings in Karen Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2003); and Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach* (London: Routledge, 2002), esp. pp. 117–131.

[18] "Age and Authority in Early Modern England," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 62 (1976): 244. See also Steven R. Smith's assessment of the "ambiguities" characterizing responses to age in the 1600s in his "Growing Old in Early Stuart England," *Albion* 8 (1976): 125–141. Offering the recent evenhanded appraisal that "early modern literature, like that of other periods, presents not a uniform representation of old age as gloomy or otherwise, nor clear shifts in dominant perceptions over time, but rather a generally realistic representation of the variety of experience of old age," Pat Thane nonetheless acknowledges how this "combined with an intriguing vein of satire of the

practice, moreover, traces back to—and, in cyclical fashion, further reinforces—deep psychological conflict. Again, from antiquity to modernity, discontentment with the very longevity that we covet will find depressingly familiar expression. A staple of humanist curricula, Isocrates' *Panathenaicus* voices the ninety-four-year-old orator's sentiment that "Although I have been blessed with all these gifts . . . I am not content to live on these terms; on the contrary, my old age is so morose and captious and discontented that I have oftentimes before this found fault with my nature, which no other man has contemned, and have deplored my fortune, although I have had no complaint against it."[19] The folk wisdom distilled in Timothe Kendall's 1577 epigram, "Olde age longed fore, yet lothed," offers a more colloquial version of this perpetual ambivalence:

> Eche one doeth seeke and wishe for age, all while it is awaie:
> And fewe doe come for to be olde, which for olde age doe praie.
> When age yet comes, eche doeth it lothe, and all do it deteste:
> So still we lothe our present state, deming the absent best.[20]

A source of simultaneous desire and terror, age comes to figure the ultimate challenge to the composure and continuity of one's self-image.

Finally, any poet who dared celebrate the attractiveness of an older individual would have to contend, as Donne well knew, with our enduring cultural impulse to de-eroticize age. Nowhere were the social or psychological consequences of late life more dramatically pronounced than in matters of sexual conduct; whatever indignities the old had to tolerate, few were more unequivocally enforced than the strictures against erotic desires that survived, if not beyond the subject's capability, at least beyond the act's alleged propriety. As Leslie Fiedler has observed, early modern social mores granted elder men the possibility of phallic potency

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gloomier representations of old age," to preserve the spirit of controversy that surrounds the topic (pp. 64–65).

[19]Citation from the Loeb edition of Isocrates, 2 vols., trans. George Norlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2:377–379.

[20]*Flowers of Epigrammes* (1577; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), pp. 150–151.

only to deny its seemliness.[21] The object of disgust and derision, sexual desire among the elderly was reviled in the *senex amans* tradition reaching back to antiquity. And while the randy, aging male suffered caricature in the poetry of Plautus and Terence, Juvenal and Maximianus, the elderly female paramour endured an even more pervasive scorn. The *carpe diem* pose endemic to lyric practice down to the Renaissance exploited, in Cathy Yandell's words, "an implicit terror concerning the future" by threatening "the young woman addressee with the literal or implied portrait of her withered old age, which is presented as the alternative to her loving the poet now, while she is still beautiful."[22] Horace's odes and epodes provided especially fierce (and widely emulated) models of the lustful old woman. A register of all physical infirmity, the caricatured aging body served as an ultimate anaphrodisiac for the poetic milieu in which Donne wrote. Fulke Greville's *Caelica* 19, which opens by asking "Ah silly *Cupid*, doe you make it coy / To keepe your seate in *Cala's* furrowed face?," reduces the entire prospect of aged sexuality to a circus spectacle of "traffique" between ludicrous elders.[23] In his *Idea*'s sonnet 8, Michael Drayton grieves that his premature undoing will likely deprive him of the opportunity to witness his mistress's senescence, which he nonetheless imagines in grim detail:

> That where those two cleare sparkling Eyes are plac'd,
> Onely two Loope-holes, then I might behold.
> That lovely, arched, yvorie, pollish'd Brow,

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[21]"More Images of Eros and Old Age," in Kathleen Woodward and Murray M. Schwartz (eds.), *Memory and Desire: Aging—Literature—Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 48. See also his earlier "Eros and Thanatos: Old Age in Love," where he notes the sure (if unspoken) mandate that "the older generations withdraw from sexual competition and prepare for death, learn, in short, to be *properly* old" (*Aging, Death, and the Completion of Being*, ed. David D. Van Tassel [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979], p. 236).

[22]"Carpe Diem, Poetic Immortality, and the Gendered Ideology of Time," in *Renaissance Women Writers: French Texts/American Contexts*, ed. Anne R. Larsen and Colette H. Winn (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 122.

[23]*Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke*, 2 vols., ed. Geoffrey Bullough (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 1:83.

> Defac'd with Wrinkles, that I might but see;
> Thy daintie Hayre, so curl'd and crisped now,
> Like grizzled Mosse upon some aged Tree;
> Thy Cheeke, now flush with Roses, sunke, and leane,
> Thy Lips, with age, as any Wafer thinne,
> Thy Pearly Teeth out of thy Head so cleane,
> That when thou feed'st, thy Nose shall touch thy Chinne.[24]

In the hands of the post-Petrarchan lover, age becomes an especially effective instrument of spite and self-vindication. The stark contextual juxtaposition we encounter in "the Autumnall" suggests a speaker—and by extension the milieu he represents—caught in the double clutch of an *Ars amatoria* that seeks to embrace every type of conceivable partner in its omnivorous sexuality, and a *Remedia amoris* that looks to cancel affection by focusing the most distasteful characteristics of any match. It is as if Donne's persona can justify his obsession with this "vintage" figure, but can just as readily disengage by contemplating what she will become.[25] The few surviving counter-instances acknowledging an aging female's enduring sexual charms, available to Donne in translated excerpts from *The Greek Anthology*, did little to hold back the prevailing tide.[26] In Parkin's assessment, the "handful of poems *in praise of* older women highlights the very atypicality of such an approach; this is the novel point of such exercises, attempting to persuade the reader of the possibility of finding such women sexually attractive."[27] Rather, the rare classical portraits of loving relationships among the aged—such as Ovid's tale of Baucis and Philemon in *Metamorphoses* 8, or Ausonius's epigram 40—

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[24]*The Works of Michael Drayton*, 5 vols., ed. J. William Hebel (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1961), 2:314.

[25]In this, he participates in a long tradition of misogynistic visual artistry that mocks the mythic warriors who gave all for the likes of Helen of Troy or Cleopatra, by suggesting that to preserve themselves they needed only to envision the sagging figures into which these women would one day age. On this, see (for instance) Mary D. Garrard, *Artimisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 144.

[26]On this, see E. E. Duncan-Jones, "Donne's Praise of Autumnal Beauty: Greek Sources," *Modern Language Review* 56 (1961): 213–215.

[27]Parkin, pp. 86–87.

notably abjure any reference to sexual union between the partners; abstemious reverence takes the place of bodily impulse, precluding any need to envision the subjects' fleshly contact with one another.

Fully cognizant of the constraints these circumstances placed upon his undertaking, Donne manages the delicate adjustment in his poem's opening movement. From its earliest gesture, "The Autumnall" preemptively qualifies its subject's erotic allure by translating venereal attraction into a decorous "reverence": "If t'were a shame to loue, t'were here noe shame," the poet proclaims, "Affection here takes reverences Name" (4–5). He cautiously disentangles the pleasure one takes in this woman's company from all fleshliness: her presence, where one may enjoy "noe voluptuousness, yet all delight," instead excites a more cerebral array of pleasures from which to choose. Mature attractiveness more precisely resides in the distinctive charm of the masculine persuasive force he attributes to her tempered appearance: "Yong beauties force your loue," he insists, "and that's a Rape; / This doth but Councell, yet you cannot scape" (3–4). Beyond the violence of youthful passion, her charismatic appeal at once confirms her own intellectual agency, and in turn grants a greater sense of agency to the audience since her (no less profound) magnetism asks them to think, in the speaker's assessment, rather than merely to feel. "In all her words, vnto all hearers fitt / You may at Reuells, you at Councell sitt" (23–24). The dignified praise he forges effectively subtends the epiphany for which his argument reaches at lines 33–36, providing a cheerful rejoinder to the kind of somber outlook expressed in Kendall's epigram:

> If wee loue things long sought, age is a thinge
> Which wee are fifty yeares in Compassinge.
> If transitory things, which soone decaye,
> Age must bee loueliest at the latest daye.

In many respects, the passage's benign wisdom constitutes a perfect aphoristic *dénouement* to the entire performance.

The poet's effort to read his subject's seductive intelligence on to her material being—the peculiarity of this "one Autumnall face" that marks his encomium's point of departure—itself faces challenges that soon significantly tax his ingenuity. The seasonal analogy from which his presentation derives its grace cannot altogether mask the indelible

physical signature of time that his culture regards with such trepidation. In the words of a sixteenth-century German proverb, "'Das Alter hat den Kalender am Lieb' (age has the body as a calendar)," and the vulnerable corporeality highlighted in this notion cannot for long be denied in Donne's construct.[28] No sooner does he allow his imagination to play across the very skin that, as Elizabeth Harvey has recently argued, "provides a more complex border between inside and outside, one that emphasizes the shifting, dynamic relation between the two," than the poet's expression begins to lose its own elasticity.[29] The literal texture of her aging visage inspires metaphors whose cosmetic effects fail to eclipse an instinctual impulse to align these features with references to sickness and death that intrude well before the poem's explicit "turn." Though the woman's "Faire eyes" emit only sufficient heat to sustain the "habitable Tropique Clyme" of advanced age (10), he declares "who askes more heat then comes from hence, / Hee in a feauer wishes Pestilence" (11–12). Couched sufficiently in the qualified manner of Petrarchan convention, the reference seems innocuous enough. In the ensuing lines, however, the encomiast's inability to dissociate age and decline becomes evident in his peculiarly defensive compulsion to rehabilitate the significance of her tempered "habitable" appearance. "Call not those wrincles Graues," he instructs; instead, we must regard the pronounced age-lines to which he calls attention as trenches where Cupid stations himself "like an Anachorite" (13, 16). Not content to de-eroticize the woman, the poet recommissions the god of love himself, who trades in his weapons for implements better suiting his peculiar change of vocation: "And here, till her, which must bee his, death come, / Hee doth not dig a Graue, but builde a Tombe" (17–18). Retired to the convent of her chaste older appearance, Cupid abjures the indignity of grave-digging duties, opting instead for the more distinguished yet no less unwonted pastime of erecting mausoleums. However witty, the architectural transition from graves to tombs hardly obscures the more unsettling mortal thoughts that

[28]Cited in Robert Jütte, "Aging and Body Image in the Sixteenth Century: Hermann Weinsberg's (1518–97) Perception of the Aging Body," *European History Quarterly* 18 (1988): 261.

[29]"The Touching Organ: Allegory, Anatomy, and the Renaissance Skin Envelope," in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 85.

her furrowed skin evidently provokes for the speaker, and (he presumes) anyone else who might behold her.

Between the genteel opening tribute and the sententious resolution of lines 33–36, a figural static comes to distort the poet's edgy metaphors, down to the dissonant analogy of the Platane tree and its representation of "Ages glorie, Barrennesse" (32). Nothing quite prepares us, however, for the precipitous fall into what Seneca had called the "decrepit and spent" state that the poem so abruptly takes at line 37:

> But name not winter faces, whose skinn's slack,
> Lanke, as an vnthrifts pursse; but a soules sack,
> Whose eyes seeke light within, for all here is shade,
> Whose mouthes are holes, rather worne-out, then made,
> Whose euery tooth to a seueral place is gone,
> To vexe their soules, at Resurrection;
> Name not these liveing deaths-heads vnto mee,
> For these not antient, but antiques bee. (37–44)

Especially for one who professes in the next line to "hate extreames," the severity of his imprecations against the superannuated human body disables any suppositions about the passage's playful intentions. The fragile earlier compliments shatter frightfully against this extravagant description of physical breakdown. Retrospectively, the placid, sententious wisdom offered in the lines immediately preceding comes to sound almost sophistic; it cannot compete with the palpable emotional disgust suddenly unleashed in this brutal dismissal.

Most interestingly, the outburst's invective recapitulates only to invert the argument's previous images and allusions, suggesting that these anxieties which now rush to the surface had always been present, only suppressed. First, his earlier imperative to "Call not" this woman's wrinkles unsightly echoes more distressingly in his repeated preemptory injunctions to "Name not" the grisly winter visages whose identities he refuses to acknowledge even as he so brutally anatomizes their features. In stark contrast to the "one Autumnall face" he singles out for praise, their plurality blurs into a grim generic face*less*ness: even gender distinctions collapse in the passage's pronominal neutrality. Next, where the alluring "wrincles" of his autumnal subject had retained sufficient firmness to serve as Cupid's "standing house," winter flesh distends into a mere "soules sack," barely fit for habitation by the wizened spirit dwelling

feebly within. Moreover, if the "Golden age" of youth had earlier found itself reinvested in an autumnal state of "gold oft try'ed, and euer newe" (7–8), the old discover themselves in time's bitter economy irreversibly spent, "Lanke, as an vnthrifts pursse," altogether non-negotiable. Likewise, the "Faire eyes" of the first movement, which warmed those upon whom they gazed with a temperate heat, are blinkered by the literal and figurative "shade" of blindness and neglect. Desperately seeking light "within," they go without their society's sympathy, finding comfort (if at all) only in being spared a glimpse of their own deformity. Desiccated dwellers-in-darkness, they ironically parody the happier autumnal state of "noe voluptuousness, yet all de[-]light." Finally, the previously-endorsed eloquence of "her words, vnto all hearers fitt," where "You may at Reuells, you at Councell sitt" (22–24), fades into the toothless mumble of "worne-out" holes over which their passive owners, denied even the agency to "make" their own mouths, exert no human control.

In short, upon closer scrutiny we discern how the lines' explosive spontaneity discovers a rather precise undoing of the earlier presentation's witty defenses. Beyond the revelry and counselor sobriety that lingers on in the elder woman's face lurks the darker solemnity of funereal decline that will not for long be kept at bay. Bitterly figuring the dispersal of these decrepit characters' teeth as a breakdown of physical integrity that will "vexe their soules, at Resurrection," this speaker suggests that his fear of old age far outstrips his fear of mortality. The ghostly prospect of what comes after the grave (which as his audience well knew might yawn unexpectedly before any individual, regardless of age) at least held out the solace of potential spiritual redemption and rejuvenation; but in the mortality that their *memento mori* faces presage, the undeniable afflictions threatening age were, by contrast, all too palpable. In the consolatory literature of the period, one of death's abiding virtues was its promise of release from the infirmity of age.[30] Carried on the wings of unmitigated disgust, this speaker conspicuously invokes the "soul" twice, and the day of Resurrection itself, only to add greater ferocity to his ridicule. So exclusive is his fixation upon time's

[30]See Steven R. Smith's "Death, Dying, and the Elderly in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Aging and the Elderly Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*, ed. Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, and David D. Van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), pp. 205–219.

decimating power over the human form that it obscures any vision of release for these bodily vexations on a day of spiritual rejuvenation, the only real event left for these benighted "antiques" to look forward to. Revealingly, the offhand allusions lock us ever more depressingly into the kind of sentiment expressed in Erasmus's poem on senescence, published in his *Epigrammata* of 1518, that "before his fleeting years have finished the fifth decade, old age does not hesitate to assail the immortal part of a man, the part descended from the heavens; even this she boldly challenges and has no fear of assaulting the sacred sinews of his inner nature" (46–51).[31] Mocking the retreat to a glowering "light within" that age allegedly compels, the poem simultaneously betrays its own darker inward turn, to a state of mind where compassion subsides as spirituality itself degenerates into a joke.

In his closing command to "Name not these living deaths-heads *vnto mee*," the speaker revealingly puts his signature to the preceding gerontophobic rant. This "personalizing" gesture reaches back to the individuated perspective announced at the start—"Noe springe, nor summer beautie, hath such grace / As *I* haue seene in one Autumnall face." On the threshold of the final stand succeeding the turn and counterturn of the poem's earlier movements, the culminating effort to discriminate dismissively between the "antient" he reveres and the "antiques" (punning on antics or grotesques) he despises sounds glib and feeble. Though the earlier tribute had dramatically traced the cosmetic power of verse, capable of translating boldly invoked "wrincles" into Cupid's "trenches," the more disturbing later movement discovers the limits of poetic resourcefulness in his imaginative incapacity to locate some redeeming quality in the deep winters of our existence, should we find ourselves so unfortunate (in his implied view) to survive into such a state. Compelled to glance upon the picture of bodily decomposition graphically alive in his mind's eye, the poet experiences a furious reassertion of barely suppressed anxieties over the devastating effects of age. In light of the abrupt about-face that the poem unexpectedly undergoes, we come to realize with violent immediacy that the speaker's efforts to compartmentalize the life course serve less to flatter his aging subject than to pacify his own less easily appeased anxieties about an

[31]Erasmus, *Collected Works: Poems*, trans. Clarence H. Miller, ed. Harry Vredeveld (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 15.

inevitable fall into a bitter twilight of physical decline, and the loss of identity that attends it. These fears can be contained only briefly and at great expense, before they violently reclaim the imagination, as they do here. Like the "Rape" that a young beauty metaphorically enacts upon the erotic imaginations of her audience, the more literal carrying-off of physical sensation becomes for him a plight we "cannot scape," except through the dubious channel of premature demise.

The rigid demarcation between autumnal splendor and winter disgrace set down by the speaker brings him into stark confrontation, in other words, with the boundaries of his own rhetorical capacities: his contraventional valorization of later life cannot hope to prevent—or even defer—a physical debility more intimidating than the prospect of death itself. If death can take no pride in its presumed mastery over all things mortal, as one of Donne's most famous Holy Sonnets will protest, age can inspire a dread far more substantial, because palpable (ironically) for everyone but the vegetating elder him- or herself. And just as the very inefficacy of that sonnet's arguments "improves the poem," as John Carey has so provocatively argued, "for it shows how little its reasonings have impinged on the speaker's basic fears," so does the elegy's argumentative dissolution enrich rather than compromise its effectiveness.[32] However creatively he may convert wrinkles into Cupid's "Graue," the encomiast's writing cannot effectively compete with the chiaroscuro artistry of the supreme destructive agent, time itself, whose physical inscriptions on the surface of the subject's aging skin will always prevail. He cannot, that is, *en*grave her well-preserved attractiveness against the lines time will continue to engrave ever more deeply in her skin, or delay the grave significance of this inscription for long.

Working on twin registers determined by the persona and the poet who fashions him, "The Autumnall" enfolds a dual intention to console and chasten its audience with the prospect of time's effect on sexuality, prestige, and the self-image grounded in these social experiences. The speaker's contraventional gesture first holds out confidence that time need not diminish us—since even a woman (he intimates), whose appearance determines so much about her position in the masculinist world she inhabits, can continue to exert an allure into advanced years—

[32]Carey, p. 199.

only to terminate this hope in the terrifying caricature that he abruptly and impulsively sketches. The poem's chief dramatic effect lies in his very inability to sustain a complimentary sense of "reverence" for long, as his endeavor of encomiastic persuasion or self-reinforcement cracks beneath the weight of disgust he cannot at last shirk. As is typical of Donne—especially Donne of the *Elegies*—the speaker's naked psychology takes center stage, exposing our deepest fears of the aged state we struggle to deny. When the would-be celebrant of age resigns himself with the words "I hate extreames; yet had I rather staye / With tombes, then cradles to weare out a day" (45–46), he transparently confesses that his resolution at best makes a virtue of necessity. After the ringing disparagement unleashed in the preceding passage, as graceless as the face he had set out to honor was purportedly graceful, he surrenders himself to a "descending" love, "ebbing" on the road back to a home that promises little reassurance. Sadder and perhaps wiser as the result of his previous efforts, he betrays in the "naturall lation" or process to which he refers a poignant disenchantment:

> Since such Loues naturall lation is may still
> My love descend, and iourney downe the hill
> Not panting after growing beauties, soe
> I shall ebbe on, with them whoe homeward goe. (47–50)

We may find in these words a tacit concession that "ancient" and "antique" states know a much greater proximity within the scope of life's "natural" process than he had attempted to deny. Refusing to embrace our existence's terminal stage, he had essentially devalued the autumnal moment whose enchantments he set out to promote; affirming at last the unretouched verity of his own breathless "descent," he departs with a sobered, far more substantive tribute to the capacities and the dignity of late life. In this fashion, the final movement brilliantly refocuses the speaker's polarized impulses, imparting to the poem a profoundly emotional, dramatic completeness.

These closing lines display both a recovered composure and a chastened perspective, available only through the poet's frank confrontation, face to aging face, with his complicity in the gerontophobia he had set out to oppose. An awareness, however

begrudging, tempers the passage and (retrospectively) the entire performance: the "extreames" of cradle and tomb, between which we all wear out days that in turn wear us out physically, mark the essential though unsettling termini of our experience. Only by acknowledging the terrors of our own decline that refuse to be rhetoricized away, and the defensive cruelties to which these drive us, can we savor more fully the fall beauty this woman embodies. Yet the larger effect Donne achieves in "The Autumnall" transcends even this *carpe vesperum* advisory to cherish life's penultimate moments while we may, to realize the urgency of a more inclusive fellowship, especially with those who are as we may one day be. Unlike the Hamon epigram, "The Autumnall" will escape the estrangement from other and self threatened by age, precisely through the speaker's parting determination to keep company "with them" whose fate, however unnerving, he consents to share. If the chillier shade of winter fails to afford as much shelter as "Zerxes strange Lydian Loue, the Platane tree" (29), it offers as much as we can hope for along our "barren" path leading to the security of a final "home." The oft-tried counsel he discovers for himself at last, like the conciliation it enables, can prove ever-new and just valuable enough to sustain the most destitute unthrift.

Acutely sensitive to matters of corporeality and appearance, as critics have long observed, Donne's companion Ben Jonson was as aware as his fellow poet of the limits that age placed upon the individual. At the beginning of his play *Epicœne*, Jonson ironically appropriates his friend's expression to mock "the grave and youthful matron, the Lady Haughty": "A pox of her autumnal face, her pieced beauty," the character Clerimont exclaims (1.1.80–81). Moreover, opening his lyric collection *The Forrest* with the poem "Why I Write Not of Love"—perhaps a good-humored swipe at his colleague, whose secular poetry spoke of little else—Jonson grounds his recusancy in his agedness: "Then wonder not," he advises, "my numbers are so cold, / When *Loue* is fled, and I grow old" (10–12).[33] However interested Jonson was in the pretenses we mount to preserve dignity and self-esteem amid the attrition of age, "The Autumnall" suggests that Donne was supremely eager to confront that most suppressed of all "natural" and inevitable apprehensions. His elegy

[33]Passages cited refer to *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–1952).

engages and reconfigures, in candid terms, the gerontophobic urges that subtly and overtly plagued the sensibilities of his day, and our own.[34]

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