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Erotic poetry

Even after four centuries, Donne's love poetry strikes us as fresh and immediate, with its urgent rhythms, its irregular, frequent stresses communicating the sense that passion cannot be contained within regular iambic feet. He insists that, unlike poets who "have no Mistresse but their Muse" ("Loves growth," 12), he is describing love as it really is. Yet, lines or even poems remain uncertain, endlessly intriguing, like puzzles where a piece seems missing, or where there's a surplus. We try to stabilize his elusive meanings, much as he sought to capture that most unsettling and mysterious experience of human life: love.

The voice is usually male, though a few adopt a female voice. To the extent that men and women experience desire differently, Donne expresses a distinctly male perspective. He writes as if discovering a new emotional world of desire, one whose terrain has never before been explored. Yet women as well as men recognize it at once – most of us have been there, or hope to be. Donne philosophizes about love, trying to define it, but even when he soars, he brings love's philosophy down to earth, grounding it in concrete (if imagined) material experience that prompts him to revise conventional wisdom, and even sometimes his own pronouncements.

Donne's interest in the dynamics of desire extends beyond the love lyrics. Verse epistles to friends and patrons employ a hyperbolic language of love; poems to God draw analogies from secular amatory experience. "Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle Soules," he writes in a poem "To Sr Henry Wotton" (1). A homoerotic note sounds in devotional sonnets that address God as the beloved ("What if this present were the worlds last night") or beg God to "ravish" him ("Batter my heart," 14). Clearly, *eros* was, for Donne, the driving force of life, affecting most relations, and spiritual and sexual desire not as sharply segregated as we might think.

Strictly speaking, Donne's love poetry encompasses the *Elegies* and the *Songs and Sonets*, poems marked by an energetic, often bawdy wit, a new explicitness about sexual desire and experience, and an irreverent attitude

towards authority figures. Neither the *Elegies* nor the *Songs and Sonets* were published in Donne's lifetime. Rather, these poems circulated in manuscript among "coterie" audiences that might be expected to understand Donne's wit, specific personal or social references, and even share his values. Donne's reluctance to give his poems to a large, public audience suggests not only gentlemanly reserve but also his recognition that there was a dangerous aspect to his writing, and not only his satires.

Elegies

Perhaps the *Elegies* seemed particularly dangerous, and not just because their sexual explicitness would have been indecorous for a man seeking public office, or, later, for the Dean of St. Paul's. Several were not published in the first editions (1633, 1635) of Donne's *Poems*: "Variety" did not appear until 1650; "Going to Bed," "Loves Progress," and "His parting from her" not until 1669. The number of Donne's *Elegies* is disputed – twenty or fewer poems; some editors have doubted that "Sapho to Philaenis" is by Donne. His *Elegies* are about love (not dead people) and take their generic name from Roman amatory poems written in elegiac meter.

Donne most likely wrote these poems when he was a young man in his early twenties, attached to the Inns of Court. Elizabeth was queen of England and Petrarchan poetry was popular. Petrarch, the fourteenth-century Italian poet, had written a sonnet sequence describing the progress of his love for the unavailable, chaste Laura, and analyzing his interior, emotional life. Later poets found that the narrative of Petrarchan love could express the dynamics of the court, where courtiers served a powerful monarch or patron (remote, distant, elevated), proclaiming their constant "devotion," hoping to receive "grace," and complaining about their lack of "reward." As amorous courtship became the language of courtiership, Petrarchan language of "service" was used in the court of Elizabeth, the unmarried "virgin" queen, who encouraged her courtiers' devotion while retaining power. But Petrarch was not the only model for love poetry when Donne was coming of age. In the 1590s, witty, ambitious young men at the Inns of Court imitated Ovid, whose wit and detachment in describing the male lover's aggressive pursuit of women and attainment of his goals seemed a more attractive model than Petrarch's submissive, yearning, endlessly devoted, and frustrated lover.[1]

Echoing Ovid's representation of male/female relations and even situations in *Amores*, Donne's *Elegies* are dramatic addresses of a man to his mistress (the exception is "Sapho to Philænis," in which Sapho addresses her absent female lover) – although occasionally other objects are addressed (a perfume rhetorically identified with the woman in "The Perfume," himself in "Variety," Night

in "His parting from her," or another man in "The Comparison" and "The Anagram"). The relations depicted are clearly sexual, sometimes illicit or adulterous ("Iealousie," "The Perfume," and the elegy beginning "Natures lay Ideot.") Whereas Petrarchan poetry idealized women and spiritualized desire, Donne's Ovidian *Elegies* flaunt the speaker's sexuality as he describes his escapades.

Mocking notions of constancy and faithfulness, these poems are irreverent, and their anti-authoritarian stance creates ripples beyond the poems. The speaker is often disgruntled or angry. He rails against authority figures – the "Hydroptique father" and "immortall mother" of his mistress who oppose their love ("The Perfume," 6, 13); the "loathsome" husband of his mistress ("Iealousie,"7). Satire intrudes into elegy, as the speaker in "Loves Progress," arguing that only "one thing" in "woman" (10) should be valued, compares his love of woman's body to our love of gold, not for its "wholsomness" or "ingenuitie" or purity but simply because "'tis made / By our new nature (Use) the soul of trade" (13, 15–16). For all the witty glorification of sex and women's "Centrique part" as especially "worthy" of men's love (36, 37), the poem critiques the materialism of English society, presents women as tricksters, and voices disappointment that women are no more "wise and good" (22) than men – that this is an imperfect world.

Donne's *Elegies* disdain the constancy Petrarchan and courtly devotees profess. "Variety" insists that even "The heavens rejoyce in motion" (1). Constancy to one woman is unnatural, and nature is the law according to which man must run. The elegy "Change" seems an exception, as the paranoid speaker rails against his mistress, fearing that she, like "Foxes, and goats," will "change" lovers when she pleases (11). But at the end he changes his opinion (demonstrating the truth that change rules the world), refusing the "captivitie" (29) of monogamy and embracing the serial polygamy of the river which "kisse[s]" one "banke" and then the "next" (33–34).

With their libertine wit asserting (male?) fantasies of liberty,[2] Donne's *Elegies* remove woman from the pedestal on which she had been adored in courtly and Petrarchan poetry. Instead, he compares women to animals, fields, land, and their bodies are imperfect and open, unlike the perfect, classical, closed bodies of statues. "The Comparison" contrasts the "sweat drops of my Mistris breast," which seem "pearle" necklaces, with the "ranke sweaty froth" that "defiles" the brow of his companion's mistress (4, 6, 7). Whereas the Petrarchan blazon described the face and the higher, more spiritualizable parts of the woman's body, Donne focuses on bodily fluids and goes for the vagina, demolishing the statue-like image of woman. The "cherishing heat" of his mistress's "best lov'd part" (38) contrasts with the other woman's genitals, which are like "the dread mouth of a fired gunne" (39).

Repulsion about the female body spills over, contaminating the supposedly beautiful, desirable mistress.

The misogynous wit of these poems expresses frustration about the difficulty of controlling women, even as these speakers seek control. In "Change," he worries that women, like the "sea" which "receives the Rhene, Volga, and Po" (20), are open to multiple men. The speaker in "Natures lay Ideot" is furious that his mistress has used arts she learned from him to find other lovers. These angry diatribes express the man's desire to control women (and perhaps the larger world) and frustration at his inability. The elegy beginning "Come, Madam, come" (commonly titled "Going to Bed") seems different – there is no anger, just the pleasures of a male erotic fantasy. The poem describes the beloved as an "Angel" who brings "A heaven like Mahomets Paradise" (20–21). But within the seductive flattery lies desire for dominance. He asks her, like the Queen, to "License" his "roaving hands" to explore his "new-found" "America" (25, 27). But once license is given, she becomes territory to be possessed and "man'd" as he goes "Before, behind, between, above, below" (28, 26). After a series of arguments offered to convince her to reveal all, he concludes, "To teach thee I am naked first; why than / What needst thou have more covering than a man" (47–48), suggesting (in a witty revision of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:3–7) that she needs no more clothes than he does, and that his body is the only "covering" she needs – an apt image for showing that man should be "on top." All of this mastery may be something hoped for not attained. Still, this poem, like Donne's other elegies, expresses a fantasy of male power that may also have sociopolitical significance, obliquely articulating discomfort with serving a woman monarch in a patriarchal society.

The *Songs and Sonets*

Donne's *Songs and Sonets* express a more diverse range of attitudes towards women and the experience of love. Comprising fewer than sixty poems, it is a highly inventive collection, varied in stance and tone as well as stanza forms. Although we cannot date individual poems, Donne probably wrote most of them over a period from the 1590s into the first decade of the seventeenth century. His friend Ben Jonson insisted that a stable voice is the mark of a virtuous man, constant in a mutable world; but the *Songs and Sonets*, with their variety of personas or "voices," present a self whose identity is fluid. Donne tries on various roles, expressing the mutability of the world and the instability of desire even as he seeks permanence and stability.

Some lyrics adapt Petrarchan conventions. "The broken heart" anatomizes the pain of heart-break. "Loves Deitie" complains about loving "one which did scorne" (4). "The Dampe" imagines himself dead, "Massacre[d]" (8) by his disdainful mistress. Other *Songs and Sonets* share the *Elegies*' sensibility, as an arrogant, emotionally detached male speaker flaunts his sexual freedom, refusing to be tied down. "The Indifferent" responds to a woman's desire for constancy by insisting that he can love "any, so she be not true" (9). As in the *Elegies*, satire intrudes when Venus says she had not heard till now anyone who wanted constancy – as if a constant woman is a strange aberration in this inconstant world. Inverting traditional values (political, religious, and amorous), playing with notions of "true" and "false," Donne's speaker boasts that he is committed to being inconstant or "false" (27).

Other poems echo the cynicism of "The Indifferent." "Womans constancy" and "Confined Love" embrace inconstancy and change, and feature women speakers. "Communitie" has a decidedly male speaker who views women as "indifferent" things (neither "good" nor "bad") – mere commodities that can be "use[d" by "all" and then discarded (lines 3, 8, 12). Economics and erotics intertwine, as the speaker envisions a society with no individual ownership or property. Love is mere appetite, and, far from being worshipped, woman is demoted beneath the level of the human or even the animal. As in so many *Songs and Sonets*, the speaker's impulse is to generalize, to make a definitive statement that will be contradicted by other poems, which also adopt seemingly definitive stances, and that the poem itself complicates or undermines. Here the speaker dismisses the possibility of emotional attachment as he strips woman of a human soul.

"Loves Alchymie" is out to dispel the illusions of men who think they can find the "Elixar" (7) in loving a woman. Drawing an analogy between love and alchemy, boasting of his sexual experience as he claims that no one has "deeper digg'd loves Myne then I" (1), the speaker concludes that there is no "centrique happiness" (2) or perfection to be found in love. Bitter and mocking, he attacks those who glorify their experience; the "dreame" (11) of love contrasts with the disappointing reality. Disappointment in love, which is only sex, produces misogynous dismissal of women as mere bodies, inert matter, at best medicinal: "Hope not for minde in women; at their best / Sweetnesse and wit, they'are but *Mummy*, possest" (23–24).

Other *Songs and Sonets*, however, celebrate love as the supremely fulfilling experience. In these lyrics, we seem to have entered another world. "The good-morrow" and "The Sunne Rising" voice a joy and sense of fulfillment in intimacy that the speakers of other poems disdain or fear.

Here, the particular, singular woman is essential for the man's fulfillment. In contrast to the libertine poems, poems on "mutual," reciprocal love describe love as an antidote to the impermanence and mortality that characterize the rest of the world. Obsessed with change and decay, Donne desires permanence and stability, and sometimes thinks he has found it in love.

Although it is tempting to try to find a pattern in the *Songs and Sonets*, the poems defeat such an attempt. They are not arranged in a sequence like Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, or Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. We cannot certainly say that the libertine, cynical poems are early, and the poems about mutual love later, as if Donne matured into sincerity and stability. Still, we find a notable difference: in Ovidian, libertine poems, where the speaker appears most distant from his desire, women are debased; in those poems where the speaker embraces his desire, woman is specially valued.

Readers have long identified the "mutual love" poems with Donne's secret courtship and marriage to Anne More. Manuscript evidence suggests that some poems had a very limited circulation, as if Donne considered them particularly private.[3] Certain lyrics that privilege the sacred space of clandestine love and describe the world's opposition fit with what we know of Donne's situation at the time. Yet so long as we lack evidence for the dates and occasions of Donne's lyrics, poems like "The Relique" or "The good-morrow" must frustrate the autobiographical readings they invite.[4]

Love, politics, and the public world

Donne explores the relation between the private experience of love and the public, outer world. Elegies about "love" and erotic desire are often also about politics, and not just the politics of the bedroom. Sometimes the difficult argument and resonant language make us feel the poem is about something other than love. In "The Bracelet," the speaker complains about the loss of his mistress's chain but also about the "bitter cost" of the twelve coins or "righteous Angels" (punning on the name for an English gold coin) which by her "severe Sentence" have to "beare" the "great burden" of his "sins" (8, 9, 17–18). In Donne's language and his depiction of the mistress as a "dread judge" (18) who extracts payment from him, we sense a hidden subtext (Catholic "recusants" who did not attend Church of England services had to pay a fine).[5] The mistress here demands the obedience due only to God; and Donne's description of her unbending will ("thou art resolute; Thy will be done," 79) seems to express reservations about the power claimed by monarchs (or popes?) over religious as well as temporal, secular matters.

Donne brings politics and religion into his erotic poems. This complex intertwining appears in the elegy beginning "Oh, let mee not serve so," where amatory, political, and religious discourses are so interwoven that the reader is challenged to decipher the poem, and determine what Donne might be saying about the service of love and about political and religious service.

The elegy begins with the speaker renouncing his unrewarded service to his cold Petrarchan mistress.

> Oh, let mee not serve so, as those men serve
> Whom honours smoakes at once fatten and sterve;
> Poorely enrich't with gret mens words or lookes; ... (1–3)

Comparing his fruitless devotion to the service of unrewarded court flatterers, his extended analogy collapses the two realms so that it is difficult to tell whether Donne is talking about amorous or political experience. The third term, religion, enters the poem as the speaker refuses to be one of "those Idolatrous flatterers" (5) and speaks of his mistress as his "Purgatory" (13). She has been not only "faithlesse" (13) (inconstant? lacking the true faith?) but "traiterous" (28) and destructive, burning or drowning the victims she lures with her embrace. As he describes her victims, we hear echoes of martyrdom that was a trope for love-suffering but also a reality for some persecuted Catholics, including members of Donne's own family. The speaker ends warning the mistress not to let her "deepe bitternesse [i.e., coldness] beget" "despaire" and "disdaine" in him (35, 36, 38).

> ... I shall
> As nations do from Rome, from thy love fall.
> My hate shall outgrow thine, and utterly
> I will renounce thy dalliance: and when I
> Am the Recusant, in that resolute state,
> What hurts it mee to be'excommunicate? (41–46)

Without her subject's love, the mistress/Prince has no power. The political implications are radical, suggesting that monarchs (like beautiful women) only rule by the consent of their subjects, not by any divine right. Donne's lover envisions himself breaking free. Threatening to rebel, he figures himself as a "Recusant," a term designating Catholics who refused to attend the Church of England (*OED*, meaning A.1). A sharp political and religious stance seems encoded in the flippant hostility of the poem's conclusion. Yet the analogy is confusing, for it identifies the woman with Rome, and the speaker with Protestants breaking from Rome. Knowing something about the political/religious conditions in late sixteenth-century England and Donne's own personal history (he left the Church of Rome in which he was

raised), we are left wondering whose service Donne is renouncing and what the religious implications might be. This elegy frustrates our effort to construct a consistent political subtext, even as it raises intriguing possibilities.

In the *Songs and Sonets*, the relation between love and politics shifts to a different register. In "The Indifferent," as in the Ovidian *Elegies*, Donne's speaker adopts a libertinism that makes a political statement, as he refuses to remain the woman's "fixd subject" (18). In the mutual love poems, however, the world of the lovers opposes the public, political sphere, constituting a separate, alternative sphere and locus of value. "The Anniversarie" announces that "All Kings," indeed everything,

> Is elder by a yeare, now, then it was
> When thou and I first one another saw:
> All other things, to their destruction draw,
> Only our love hath no decay. (4–7)

The experience of love – transcendent, durable – contrasts with the mutable public world, dominated by time.

The world of the lovers contrasts with that of "Kings," yet Donne's argument depends on the public analogy. The fact that Donne's private world of love is described in terms of kings, court-apprentices ("The Sunne Rising"), and worldly enterprises ("The good-morrow," "The Canonization") has led some critics to suggest that Donne was attracted to the absolutist ideology of James I.[6] Yet the monarchy of love Donne establishes is oppositional. The harmless lives of lovers contrast with the "Lawyers" and "Soldiers" who "finde out warres" ("The Canonization," 16). Repeatedly, the public world seeks to intrude, like the sun in "The Sunne Rising." The speakers of "The Relique" and "The Canonization" ask to be left alone as they glorify an experience of love that constitutes a world of its own.

The autonomous, private world of love

In presenting the experience of love as the most interesting, important part of life, the *Songs and Sonets* voice ideas that have become so powerful in our modern world that we must remind ourselves how bold and revolutionary they were in Donne's time. Some of his most memorable lyrics argue that personal fulfilment can only be found in love, and that the realm of sexuality is autonomous, private, self-sufficient.[7]

"The good-morrow" begins with a sense of wonder: the speaker, waking in bed with his beloved, has just made a discovery about himself and their relation that makes the discovery of "new worlds" (12) like America pale in comparison. Although Donne's poetry often assumes the inequality between

men and women that was part of early modern English culture, here the lovers are "two hemisphaeres" (17), equal, neither sufficient without the other. There is a sense of completion, as if the lover has finally found what was missing from life, his other half.

"Soules" awake as well as the bodies ("The good-morrow," 8), as if called by love from the sleep of ordinary life and mere lust. The experience of loving and being loved offers a feeling of integration that contrasts with the fragmentation and corruption the speaker finds in the world. Hence we find circles, images of perfection and wholeness, in the "mutual" love poems. Love "makes one little roome, an every where" ("The good-morrow," 11); its walls become the "spheare" of the sun, while the lovers' bed remains its "center" ("The Sunne Rising," 30). The public world – of courts, kings, lawyers, adventurers – is worthless compared with the riches these lovers contain. "Looke, and tomorrow late, tell mee," he challenges the sun,

> Whether both the'India's of spice and Myne
> Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with mee.
> Aske for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
> And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay.
> She'is all States, and all Princes I,
> Nothing else is. (16–22)

That last, remarkable line obliterates everything outside. Whereas Donne's libertine poems assert the speaker's autonomy, his self-possession (unruled by either his desire or a woman), here that autonomous sphere expands to include the beloved, as the two lovers constitute a self-sufficient, all-powerful world.

There is an awareness (never entirely suppressed) that this is fantasy, that the outer world has not really disappeared, that the sun, in fact, will not stay in the bedroom, that there are no absolute assurances that love will last forever. And yet Donne brilliantly captures the feeling of those rare moments in (new?) love, when it seems that a world has opened, that nothing else matters, that this is perfection.

It is often said that erotic love, or sexual desire, requires or presupposes a certain lack – the Greek word *eros* denotes "'want,' 'lack,' 'desire for what is missing'."[8] Obstacles, absence, or frustration seem built into desire, for we can only long for what we do not, at the moment, possess – whether it is another person or God. Donne is keenly aware of the instability of desire, of the conflict between our longing to dissolve the boundary between self and other and our impulse to withdraw and reassert the self's separate identity. Yet a few of Donne's love poems imagine desire as fulfilled and, miraculously, persisting, as if in defiance of natural laws. "Loves growth" assures his

beloved that his "encrease[d]" love will not "abate" (28), any more than princes "remit" "New taxes" (27). "The good-morrow" argues (by means of a phallic image of undiminished desire) that their love will continue: "if none doe slacken, none can die" (21). The claim is an assertion of faith, in the face of so much evidence of instability and decay in the world.

Despite this brave defiance, fear of death haunts Donne's love poems, even as they claim that love endures, constant, untouched by time. Death, the ultimate rupture of love, stands behind the "Valediction" poems. As the opening of "A Valediction: forbidding mourning" suggests, the parting of lovers is analogous to death. We never know if we'll meet again. Still, Donne has his travelling speaker promise, through his final compass conceit, that the circle won't be broken. Moreover, Donne often gives his lovers a kind of afterlife: the power to affect the world after death. The speaker of "The Relique" imagines that in times to come, his arm bone, encircled with the bracelet of his beloved's hair, will be taken to the "Bishop" and "King," and the lovers "adore[d]" by "all women" and "some men" (19, 15). The last stanza of "The Canonization" envisions a future audience invoking the lovers as saints.

Love and religion

Erotic love here takes on religious significance. Donne overturned conventional pieties with his witty libertinism, but his boldest intervention was representing erotic love as a spiritual experience that provides fulfillment the public world, and even its religious institutions, cannot.

The *Songs and Sonets* flirt with blasphemy, connecting sexual, consummated love with spiritual matters. The elegy "Going to Bed" had compared sexual to spiritual joy, but sexual conquest was the goal, religious analogies simply the means. "The Extasie," however, argues that love engages bodies and souls, and that the body and sex are the medium for the work and union of souls. The first part of the poem describes the conversation of the lovers' "soules," which have "gone out" (15–16) of their bodies as the lovers lie on a "pregnant banke" (2) in spring. In their ecstasy, these lovers learn that their "mixt soules" have been "mixe[d] againe" by "Love," making "both one" (35–36). Were the poem to stop here, we might read it as extolling Neoplatonic transcendence, in which the body and senses are left behind as the lover ascends to the spiritual in the process of loving. Donne, however, challenges the Neoplatonic body/soul dualism at the heart of Petrarchan love, as he argues that the lovers must "turne" to their "bodies" (69). Only through the material ("ayre," 58, or "bodies") can souls "flow" (59) into each other. "Loves mysteries in soules doe grow, / But yet the body is his booke" (71–72).

"Love must . . . take a body," as Donne says in "Aire and Angels" (10), recalling the Incarnation of the divine in Christ, which provides justification for his logic. Donne's belief that body and soul are interdependent is not just part of his logic; it even affects the ways his conceits and metaphors work. The literal, bodily "vehicle" of the metaphor is essential to the meaning or "tenor" of Donne's analogies, just as the body is essential to the operation and life of the soul. We might think of the comparison of the lovers to saints in "The Canonization": Donne's figurative language makes sexual love sacred, suggesting that it offers an experience of transcendence, a taste of the divine. In contrast to his Ovidian poems, where sex is a matter of the body and women interchangeable, poems celebrating the sacredness of erotic love depict lovers who are committed to each other in an exclusive relation that doesn't need the church. They are the true clergy of the world, taking the place of ordained priests. In "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," the lovers would profane their love if they were "To tell the layetie [of] our love" (8) by weeping. Donne extends the religious language of Petrarchan poetry, making it ecclesiastical and pushing it to new, provocative heights, as he describes the ennobling power of erotic love.

Religious – and sometimes specifically Catholic – images appear in these poems.[9] In "Aire and Angels," the lover worships the woman as an angel, at least before he embraces her. To imagine the woman as angelic, worthy of worship, is Petrarchan, but the Reformation had rejected the worship of saints and angels. Donne's poems are populated by terms that in post-Reformation England look decidedly Catholic. In "The Funerall" and "The Relique," the bracelet or wreath of her hair and the bones of the dead lover are imagined as "Reliques," worshipped and revered by those who come later ("The Funerall," 20). In "The Canonization," Donne's lovers are saints and martyrs who "at our own coste die" (21); monastics, severed from the world, they have made each other their "hermitage" (38). Future lovers will "invoke" them in prayer, asking them as intercessors to "Beg from above / A patterne of your love" (45). In "The Relique" the lovers perform "miracles" in loving "well and faithfully" (31, 23). "The Canonization" (27) and "The Funerall" identify love with "mystery" – a word that meant in Donne's time not only something "secret" but also something known only through divine revelation, or a rite of the Christian church, specifically the Eucharist (*OED*, meanings 2a, 3, 5a). In all these poems, the experience of love transforms the lovers, conferring on them a kind of grace.

Donne captures the truth that there is something mysterious about intimacy. Love, like birth, feels miraculous. But there is also a historically specific dimension to the fact that Donne made love "sacramental" during a period when the sacraments were contested, a site of religious conflict.

The Reformation had reduced the sacraments from seven to two (Baptism and Communion), redefined them as "signs" rather than instruments of grace, abolished monasteries, got rid of saints, and forbade the worship of saints, relics, and images. All of these appear in Donne's celebrations of love. The experience of intense, reciprocal, committed erotic love offers spiritual fulfillment and access to the divine, much as in the Roman Catholic Church the sacraments provided avenues for grace. Donne's representation of love as both sexual and spiritual is an erotic reworking of the Catholic understanding that body and soul, material and spiritual are inseparably linked in the world, in devotion, and in the Sacrament. His poetic representation of love evokes the Protestant/Catholic conflicts of his time, while suggesting that only erotic love (and the bedroom) is a site of peace and unity, a "temple" ("The Flea.")

This vision of love and his lovers, set against a divisive world, resonates with what we know of the clandestine courtship and marriage between the (formerly?) Catholic Donne and the firmly Protestant Anne, in which secrecy played a role, and in which perhaps he saw a hopeful image of religious unity. Yet the polemically charged religious language of these *Songs and Sonets* raises other intriguing interpretive questions. Did Donne write these poems when he was still a Roman Catholic, or after he had conformed to the Church of England, or was he "between" churches? Is Donne creating what M. Thomas Hester has called a "recusant poetics" in which poetry becomes a safe place for expressing Catholic sentiment?[10] Or is Donne standing apart from all institutions, suggesting that love offers an alternative, providing access to the divine presence, making other clergy unnecessary?[11] We can, as yet, only speculate. But one thing is clear. As erotic love assumes a spiritual function, it takes the place of religion, anticipating the modern privileging of romantic love. The poems are deeply anti-institutional and radical (clergy, kings, universities are unnecessary) as they locate supreme value and happiness in private, interpersonal relations and imagine erotic experience as capable of fulfilling the whole person, soul and body, and spiritual as well as sexual desires.

Donne's celebration of erotic love as a transcendent spiritual experience was boldly revolutionary not only in its anti-institutionalism, but also because it opposed a long-standing Christian tradition that distrusted the body and sexuality. Paul, and later the Church fathers, had associated sin with sexuality and the corruptible body. In the traditional Christian view, *agape* (divine love, God's constant love for "man") contrasts with *eros* (human sexual desire, self-centred and inconstant).[12] In the New Testament, Paul opposed "spirit" to "flesh," defining "spirit" as the essence of the human being, and identifying "flesh" with death, the body, sexuality,

and all that draws man from God (see, for example, Romans 8:13). Although Paul valued marriage as a "great mystery ... concerning Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:32), he exalted celibacy, setting the stage for Augustine and other Church fathers, who identified the Fall with sexuality and forged a link between sex, sin, and death that continued to be influential long after the Reformation supposedly demoted celibacy and placed new value on companionate marriage.

When Donne celebrates sexual love as a spiritual experience, he radically defies this Christian association of sexuality with sin. The lover in "The good-morrow" tells his lover, with amazement, that they have progressed from their former "childish" pleasures to this moment in bed when their "soules" are finally awake: "my face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares" (3, 9, 14). We hear an echo of Paul's description of divine, agapic love: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (I Corinthians 13:11–12). Something miraculous has happened between Donne's lovers, for his speaker feels what Paul said humans would only experience in heaven with God. At moments like these, moments of physical, sexual, and emotional intimacy, *eros* merges with *agape*. Walls collapse, the veil parts, we know as we are known; our deepest, truest selves exposed.

And yet we sometimes glimpse traces of the negative evaluation of *eros* in Donne's poetry. "Each such Act, they say, / Diminisheth the length of life a day," the speaker in "Farewell to love" says (24–25), repeating the commonplace notion that orgasm shortens man's life. Having discovered that there is no "Deitie in love" (2), he seeks to avoid "things which had indammag'd me" (34). Behind the cynicism of this poem, and others, lurks a suspicion that sex and women are dangerous. Even poems exalting love suggest that erotic experience is self-destructive. Although the speaker in "The Canonization" sees his ruined fortune and grey hairs as signs of privileged martyrdom, they also show the self-destructive aspect of a life devoted to erotic love. Here society and physiology are at fault. Yet perhaps Donne did not quite cast off the legacy of a Christian tradition that associated sexual love with sin, and that would assume a more insistent voice in Donne's later sermons and some divine poems, which seem to recant his earlier celebration of erotic love.

Still, for all the moments of uncertainty, Donne's love poetry embraces human sexuality and celebrates the experience of love. And perhaps that is, finally, the most dangerous aspect of his erotic writing, as it strains against the constraints of the Christian society in which he lived and eventually preached as Dean of St. Paul's. One can "moralize" Donne's love poetry,[13] much as the Middle Ages did Ovid – and much as the early rabbis and the

Christian Fathers moralized the Song of Songs – but Donne's *Songs and Sonets* ultimately resist such moralizing.

His conviction (or hope) that erotic love is the fullest expression of a human nature made in the image of God appears even in that desolate poem, "A nocturnall upon S. *Lucies* day." Anatomizing his grief at the death of his beloved, the speaker, in a display of hyperbolic wit, shows the cost of intimacy, when it feels as if another person has become essential to our life, someone we cannot live without. With her death, he has become an object of "study" (10) for surviving lovers, but the lesson is grim,

> For I am every dead thing,
> In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
> For his art did expresse
> A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
> From dull privations, and leane emptinesse:
> He ruin'd mee, and I am re-begot
> Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not.

Having created him, Love has now destroyed him. The speaker has been transformed, not into something higher, but lower (though even here Donne finds himself distinguished, unique) – made by her death "the Elixer" of "the first nothing" (29) – the *nihilo* out of which Augustine said God created the universe. The love that made each of them sufficient to the other has left him devoid of life, now that she (his soul) has departed. Perhaps his expression of unrelieved grief suggests that such all-consuming love has left no place for God. At the end of the poem, the speaker turns to heaven, much as Petrarch did at the end of his sonnet sequence. Yet Donne turns not to God but to the beloved woman, now a saint in heaven: "Let mee prepare towards her, and let mee call / This houre her Vigill, and her Eve" (43–44). It seems too narrow to interpret the poem, as some have done, simply as an exposé of idolatrous love. For all its awareness of the Church's teachings that human love can be a fearful, seductive idolatry, "A nocturnall" refuses to give up either the beloved or the conviction that, despite proscriptions by institutions and human authorities, love between two human beings remains, as the biblical Song of Songs 8:6 put it, "strong as death," an inextinguishable "flame," the experience that gives life its meaning and, if anything does, connects us with the divine.

NOTES

1 See Arthur F. Marotti, "'Love is not love': Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order," *ELH* 49 (1982), 396–428; Achsah Guibbory, "'Oh, let mee not serve so': The Politics of Love in Donne's *Elegies*," *ELH* 57 (1990), 811–33; and

Jim Ellis, *Sexuality and Citizenship: Metamorphosis in Elizabethan Erotic Verse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

2 I am indebted to Joshua Scodel's paper, "'None's Slave': Some Versions of Liberty in Donne's Secular Poetry," presented at the 2003 John Donne Conference, which examined the connection between libertinism and the concern with political liberty.

3 This information comes from Gary Stringer and Ted-Larry Pebworth, editors of the Donne *Variorum*.

4 See M. Thomas Hester (ed.), *John Donne's 'desire of more': The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware, 1996), especially essays by Ilona Bell, "'if it be a shee': The Riddle of Donne's 'Curse,'" pp. 106–39; Dayton Haskin, "On Trying to Make the Record Speak More about Donne's Love Poems," pp. 39–65, and Maureen Sabine, "No Marriage in Heaven: John Donne, Anne Donne, and the Kingdome Come," pp. 228–55.

5 M. Thomas Hester describes the Catholic subtext in "'Over Reconing' the 'Undertones': A Preface to 'Some Elegies' by John Donne," *Renaissance Papers 2000* (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), pp. 137–53.

6 Carey, *Donne*, pp. 113–15; Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne and their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 210–19.

7 Anthony Low, "Donne and the Reinvention of Love," *ELR* 20 (1990), 465–86; Richard Halpern, "The Lyric in the Field of Information: Autopoiesis and History in Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 6 (1993), 185–215.

8 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986; rpt: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), p. 10.

9 M. Thomas Hester, "'this cannot be said': A Preface to the Reader of Donne's Lyrics," *Christianity and Literature* 39 (1990), 365–85.

10 Hester, "'this cannot be said,'" 365–85.

11 Achsah Guibbory, "Donne, Milton, and Holy Sex," *Milton Studies* 22, ed. Albert Labriola (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 3–21.

12 See Alan Soble, *Eros, Agape and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love* (New York: Paragon House, 1989); Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988); Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

13 Moralizing readings include N. J. Andreason, *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1967), and Judy Sproxton, *The Idiom of Love: Love Poetry from the Early Sonnets to the Seventeenth Century* (London, Duckworth, 2000), ch. 6, pp. 117–42.

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