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The Dynamics of Male/Female Relationships in John Donne's Love Poetry

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Chapter I: John Donne's Ovidian Influence

In creating poetry that seems to demonstrate intimate relationships between men and women, seventeenth century poet, John Donne has often been criticized for being crude. His use of detailed descriptions of women's bodies has caused him to pick up much negative criticism. As critic Andrew Hadfield explains, because of its content, Donne's work was not always readily accepted. In taking his inspiration from the Roman poet, Ovid he at times wrote with what Hadfield refers to as a "frantic lust" that kept his work from being published and distributed.¹ However, as his uncensored work has since been made available to readers, Donne's Ovidian style has been the source of much criticism, some of which I will address in this paper. Major critics include Ilona Bell, Anthony Low and Achsah Guibbory.

In conjunction with the work of Guibbory and Low, my essay will argue that Donne's poetry does not demean women but in fact acknowledges and appreciates all of their capabilities. He accomplishes this by describing not just the physical aspects of lovemaking but the spiritual and intellectual sides of intimacy. In my readings of Donne's poetry, I will be mainly looking to the critical work of Guibbory and Low. I take into great consideration Low's claim that Donne had a hand in reinventing love during Renaissance England by writing in a way that revisits Ovidian lyric. In doing so, he "invented a new kind of private love" that discredits older ways of loving that highlighted desire and "terrible longing for the

absent and unobtainable” lovers of the poets.² I also heavily look to Guibbory’s readings and criticism of Donne’s work as she urges not to dismiss its misogyny as a mere need to shock readers but instead to look at it as a tool in creating a new space for mutual love in amorous lyric poetry.³

During a time in which women were not seen as inferior to men, Donne’s speaker takes on the voice of a man torn between feelings for a woman and his position in society as a superior male. At times he seems to be a blatant sexist and at others his affection for his muse. By adding a level of complexity to the portrayed relationships in his poetry, Donne’s speaker abandons a Petrarchan position of flattery. As Guibbory explains it, the Petrarchan position promotes “idealized women and spiritualized desire”.⁴

Donne’s speaker loves his muse but he also loves his masculine power and by showing her faults, he can also highlight his own strengths. In poems in which he addresses his male peers his tone is confident and at times belittling of women but in poems addressing the woman directly, the voice either becomes playful, inviting the woman into a back and forth of game of wit, or softens and becomes sensitive and serious. Donne does this by rejecting a Petrarchan position on love and instead uses one that reflects the poetics of the Ovid. In this way he can express both his concern about the woman’s power as well as a fondness for the subject of the poem.

Anthony Low, in the second chapter of his book The Reinvention of Love further describes the Petrarch influenced lover as one who endlessly courts a woman he watches from afar but will never have for his own. It resembles the work of the Italian poet, Petrarch who “was probably the most influential poet in the Renaissance Europe” and a “significant model for English poets to imitate”.⁵ This poet is smitten with and remains dedicated to a woman he barely knows and writes his poetry to reflect a relationship that expresses more of an obsession with the woman than a well-rounded love.

Petrarch had an influence on Renaissance England that created a wave of poetry that portrays the speaker as a “submissive, yearning, endlessly devoted, and frustrated lover” who idealized an unattainable and chaste woman.⁶ He had a huge presence in Elizabethan poetry that influenced the Petrarchan subject position, an element of poetry that expresses a particular, uneven relationship between the speaker and his beloved. By rejecting this Petrarchan subject position and instead using Ovid’s influence, Donne used intimate details about women’s bodies to portray an intimacy that is both physical and spiritual. The Petrarchan subject position causes the poet to bypass getting to know his beloved and instead prematurely fall in love with her based on her physical beauty. She is unobtainable to him, but still he is obsessed with her beauty, making it an act of love without conclusion.

While other writers of Renaissance Europe adapted their work to match Petrarch, opting for a yearning love to longingly write “elaborate poems about remote ladies who had enormous power over their lives”, Donne, quite revolutionarily, rejected the common poem and wrote in such a way that represented “women at times as equals, at others as despicable creatures” rather than “perfect and distant beauties who can ennoble their men”.⁷

In the poems of Donne’s Petrarch influenced peers, woman is placed upon a pedestal on which she is adored for her soft bosom or her fair head.⁸ But how can a lover become acquainted with a woman who sits so far out of his reach? By rejecting the Petrarchan subject position, Donne shows us. His work reflects the beliefs of a man who believes this type of empty adoration should be abandoned and replaced with intimacy. What makes Donne so innovative is the way his poems describe an intimacy between the speaker and the muse. He does this through his detailed descriptions of women’s bodies (as in “The Comparison”) as well as in poems in which he focuses on their spiritual connection (which I will further discuss in chapter 3).⁹ By instead comparing women to “animals, fields and land” and highlighting that “their bodies are imperfect and open, unlike the perfect, classical, closed bodies of statues”, Donne’s break from the popular trends at the time led to controversy.¹⁰

Ilona Bell has credited Donne’s Ovidian influence as the reason for his negative reputation as “a misogynist who loathed women’s bodies and scorned

their minds; a metaphysician less interested in emotions than intellection; an egoist and careerist who used women for his own advantage; a wit willing to say anything for the sake of the poem”.¹¹ These varying titles portray the varying attitudes held about his poetry. His elegies have a “persistent misogyny, indeed a revulsion at the female body” but as Guibbory notes, that hatred for woman has been identified by some as “an example of Donne’s desire to shock or his outrageous wit” rather than a representation of his own personal feelings.¹² It is present, but not in every poem. Different audiences and situations affect the portrayed points of view and because they change so rapidly it is difficult to place Donne’s opinion of women. Bell writes, however, that much of the emotion about women portrayed in Donne’s poetry is influenced by “the beliefs of early modern English society... about women and gender”.¹³

Donne’s lover speaks from a time in which women were not at all socially or politically equal to men. Though Elizabeth was the monarch at the time, her position in power was unusual in his patriarchal culture that viewed women as subordinates. Not only did tensions rise surrounding the idea of the male population submitting to a female ruler but her ability to rule was also questioned. In defending her abilities Elizabeth famously drew on the doctrine of the king’s two bodies to validate herself. In a speech to her troops at Tilbury in 1588 she claimed, “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king”.¹⁴

Although a capable monarch, she continually felt as though she had to prove herself to be more masculine in order gain the respect of her followers and to ease their doubts. It is unknown whether or not Donne shared the beliefs of the majority that women were completely subordinate to men but his poetry suggests that he did indeed share their uneasiness about losing power to women. “Tensions over submission to female rule are strikingly evident in Donne’s representation of private love relationships,” explains Guibbory in her essay “Oh, Let Mee Not Serve So”: The Politics of Love in Donne’s Elegies”.¹⁵ As a result, the voice in many of his poems struggle with the power within male/female relationships. Neither has the dominate role in the relationship and the result is a frustrated anxiety.

It is that anxiety that is the underlying tone in some poems where the woman’s flaws are put on display as in “Loves Progress” (which I will further discuss later in this chapter). It is impossible to live in a society and not be affected by its beliefs and for this reason I agree that much of what has earned Donne the accusations of being a misogynist is a result of the patriarchal society in which he lived. His work reflects the tensions associated with submission to a woman during a time and culture in which “power and authority were invested in men”.¹⁶ The flaws he describes express these tensions but they serve as more than a way to diminish the view of woman. They remove the woman from the Petrarchan pedestal and also express the speaker’s intimacy with the woman.

By rejecting the Petrarchan position using Ovid's influence, he manages to bring the woman closer to a space where the speaker implies actual contact with the beloved. Within the type of relationships that Ovid's work portrayed there was no place for an "enslaved lover" and it instead asserts that "love is an art with the lover in control rather than ruled by his passions and mistress".¹⁷ There are no remote longings but instead a personal love. This removes him from his position beneath her pedestal from where he gazed up at her adoringly and places him, instead, eye to eye with her. Here, he is allowed to get to know this woman specifically and make note of traits that stand out to him as an equal counterpart but also an opponent in a playful argument or competition, such as in Donne's popular poem "The Flea". In it, he clearly discusses the mingling of blood and bodily fluids.¹⁸ He refers to the act of "swelling" with not so subtle innuendoes and there is discussion among critics of his playing around with the letters "s" and "f" in referring to the flea that "sucks" both of their blood.¹⁹

Beneath the overtly sexual surface, readers can find competition between the speaker and his addressed lover and find themselves asking who will win the debate: him, who gives such witty reasons as to why she should not kill the flea and make love to him, or her, who in her refusal to be swayed by his tactics causes him to go back and rework the way he makes his argument?

This interaction is one between equally intelligent persons, each one challenging the other playfully in the midst of their romance. Though there is only

one speaker, her silent voice booms. She holds her own in this game and keeps him on his toes in a humorous competition between lovers.

Anthony Low refers to such competitiveness within Donne's work as "Ovidian game-playing" between the male and female.²⁰ He further goes on to explain that once they get over their problems of position within the relationship, they have the potential to "marry and live happily ever afterward".²¹ Although the relationship is not without conflict based on societal gender positions Low refers to Donne as "a pioneer of mutual loving"²², who introduced a love that was "romantic, mutual, and transcendent in feeling" and "far ahead of its time"²³. Low's reading (like Bell's) of Donne's poetry expresses that however innovative it was, it "portrays [and] shares in the general corruption of society".²⁴ His metaphors, says Low, "reduce the woman to an object... and then seek to explore, lay bare, and fully possess that object"²⁵ because his peers looked to marriage as a "social...contract" that was meant to "regulate sexuality, produce children, and bring them into society".²⁶ On the other hand, "his most idealized love-lyrics" demonstrate a union that is sacred, spiritual and mutual.²⁷ As it is a mutual relationship rather than one based on thwarted desire and obsession, each lover can both the great aspects as well as the fluxes in each others' personality.

These varying attitudes and portrayals of the woman represent the male/female relationship as mutable, frustrating and also rewarding. Donne writes about normal day-to-day changes and interactions between men and women within

a relationship, in which some days, the woman is seen as sweet and smart but, on others, she annoys or upsets the man. At times the speaker, (who is usually the man) is “disgruntled or angry”.²⁸ Other times, as can be seen in some of his poems, Donne’s lover is grateful for the way his spirit and that of his lover’s are able to connect.

Like Low, I, in reading Donne’s poetry, identify a more earthly depiction of love that differs from the Petrarchan obsession that claims to be love yet makes a way for men to further keep women silent but shadows it with flattery. Although within the Petrarchan subject position, the poet claims to love his muse, it is a ‘fruitless wooing’ that will never amount to anything substantial for either lover.²⁹ His physical attraction towards her is the basis on which he writes but the descriptions create the image that she is more of a statue than a companion³⁰. In one interpretation, the rude descriptions reiterate a patriarchal belief of women. At a closer look, readers can find that these descriptions indicate a familiarity with this muse. Instead of simply offering compliments about her physical beauty, he provides proof that he has been attentive to her and knows her well. He’s been intimate with her, and is now not only familiar with her body but also her mental capabilities.

This way in which Donne can remain in tune with his society’s norms as well as provide a new type of flattery for the woman who can find it within the lines is what Low believes has allowed him to aid in creating a “reinvention of

love”. By acknowledging her normalcy and recognizing her shortcomings and less-than-perfect qualities he humanizes her and shows that she is someone with whom he is personally familiar. Rather than expressing distant longings for an unfamiliar woman he praises a personal face-to-face relationship with the woman that he loves. A review of “The Good Morrow” and “Air and Angels” in chapter 3 will suggest that the relationship between Donne’s speaker and his lover is based on a more spiritual intimacy and compatibility.

Guibbory writes that in describing “love as it really is” *Eros* drives Donne towards “discovering a new emotional world of desire”.³¹ In this world of desire Donne does not separate spiritual and sexual longing but it is through erotic desires and fantasies that Donne finds mutuality between the two lovers. While the sexual and spiritual aspects of the relationship between Donne’s speaker and his beloved are certainly related, there is also a focus in some of Donne’s poetry that is more on the spiritual closeness than their sexuality when the poem is written to the muse directly (as in the two aforementioned poems). When addressing fellow male companions, Donne’s descriptions are crude and his tone reflects frustration, such as in poems like “The Comparison” and “Love’s Progress”.

Moving along the continuum of poems, I’ve selected to examine, readers find tones of discontent in addition to tones of gratitude for the change he has found in his life since she has become a part of it. We find Donne’s speaker highlighting the woman’s flaws, like “the short swell’n fingers of thy gouty hand”

and later expressing the reasons why he's so fond of her, one being the way in which their "two loves be one"³². This vacillation of tone and opinion reflects the complexity of Donne's speaker's position as a man living within a patriarchal society and a man who loves and respects a woman. The fact that the woman is a capable individual serves as both a reason for his love and a threat to the security of his masculinity. She is "lovely enough to stop, but not stay at"³³ because her beauty has the potential to cause his "fall"³⁴ and therefore reduce his masculinity.

In the poems "The Comparison" and "Loves Progress" Donne's speaker discusses women less than favorably. He gives extensive descriptions of the woman's flaws and then discusses the way in which women can cause a man's downfall. Like a heated feud between debaters, Donne's portrayed relationships between a man and a woman is political. Critic Arthur Marotti argues that Donne uses love as a metaphor for politics in his poetry.³⁵ Guibbory took his argument further to say that it is not a metaphor for politics but that "love in itself is political".³⁶ I agree with the argument that Donne creates for his readers a demonstration of a battle for power between man and woman. Furthermore, I find that Donne's speaker fights this battle because of his admission that woman is a worthy equal. "To His Mistress Going to Bed" begins to display the woman's independence and equality within her relationship with the speaker.

The represented misogyny in Donne's work "shares in the general corruption of [his] society" but contradicts the praise of mutuality found in the

poems I will later discuss.³⁷ Because the woman poses a threat to his superiority as a male, this misogyny that Bell mentions in her essay becomes less of an outward hate for women than a sort of frustrated lashing out against the threat of a woman's power. A peculiar power, it is reason for further exploration which leads to Donne's use of metaphors of discovery and exploration.

Repeated references to 'discovery' and new 'lands' have also contributed to some of the criticism of Donne's work. He has been accused of alluding to the conquering of woman, as if she were a new place to explore at his pleasure. Low, for example, brings up the "obvious... attitude of male dominance and the reduction of the mistress to an object or series of objects: he is the king, she is the kingdom; he is the explorer, she is the land explored".³⁸ Though historically discovery of new worlds have lead to conquering those worlds, the woman in this poem has been given too much autonomy to be taken over as a conquest. As she is land that he has never before been explored, she is fascinating and new, worthy of exploration.

The speaker's confusion about his feelings for the woman is portrayed in the way that "his attitudes towards women shift so quickly, sometimes within a single poem or line".³⁹ The portrayed confusion is the result of being both the lover to a woman and a peer to men. As she is capable of posing a threat to his male superiority, Donne's lover cannot allow her to do so and uses the poetry as a way in which he can show her to be the lesser of the two. He refuses to idealize

woman in the Petrarchan manner. However in “The Good Morrow” and “Air and Angels” he shows a love and respect for the woman addressed. These poems prove the lovers’ relationship to be spiritual, serious, and as Low describes, “private and modern”.⁴⁰

This variety of emotions across his poetry represents the push and pull of male and female interactions – from the struggle a man has with the power of woman’s “gnawing kisses”, to the joy of finding a woman with a soul with whom his has “mix’d equally”.⁴¹ It shows the unpredictability of love and for this reason, Donne’s lover, especially in his Elegies, rejects a constant sort of fairy tale idea of love in which the woman is beautiful and perfect and the man simply loves her. This type of flattery, according to Donne is “poorly enrich’d with great men’s words or looks” with nothing to substantial to go along with it.⁴² It mocks “notions of constancy and faithfulness” almost in such a way that Donne’s lover seems to pity the type of lovers that are caught up in an obsession with a woman who they do not really know and therefore cannot truly love.⁴³

Donne’s lover rejects superficial relationships between men and women. He focuses on a serious relationship between mutual adults. In refusing to romanticize woman, he can view her as an equal. Down from off of a pedestal she is at his level, worthy of respect and mutual interaction as an equal lover. The two affect each other reciprocally. However, mutual in their private love does not

necessarily mean equal in all aspects of life and therefore it cannot escape the “mutable public world” that “seeks to intrude” on their relationship.⁴⁴

**Chapter II: Donne's Speaker and his Lover in "The Comparison",
"Loves Progress", and "To His Mistress upon Going to Bed"**

In his 5th Elegy, Donne begins by saying "oh, let not me serve so, as those men serve/ Whom honor's smokes at once fatten and starve" (1, 2). He looks down on those "idolatrous flatterers" (5) who provide adulation that both fattens and starves their muses. It fattens with its abundance of words but starves because the words lack substance. Such airy flattery does no good to either the man or the woman. By believing in the compliments he throws at her, he is setting himself up for disaster if and when he finds out her true potential. Like a "giddy fly" lured by her amorous twinkling he will burn "his wings" (18, 9) or as do "careless flowers strow'd on the water's face" he'll end up in a whirlpool that will "suck, smack, and embrace, /yet drown" him (15, 6). In attempts to avoid such a fate, Donne's speaker familiarizes himself with the woman and highlights the found faults.

"The Comparison" is a prime example of how Donne describes those faults. Although the poem is a contrast of two women, the poet's and his friend's and although it is not one of Donne's love poems, it can be used to present the types of descriptions that have given Donne the label of a misogynist.⁴⁵ The poem discusses the differences between the two women's bodies openly and without qualms. In comparing the two women, Donne's speaker attempts to insult his companion by proving that his woman is the better of the two.

In one sense it could be seen as an example of two vulgar men discussing their women's bodies disrespectfully in jest. However, it is also destroying the picture of a woman as an idol, which is an image that can be as equally, if not more, offensive. An idol, though sacred and worshipped, is just an object or a lesser representation of something more sacred. There has been much written about Donne's change of religious orientation, but in the interest of this paper, the focus will remain on his iconoclastic approach to problems within amorous lyric that idolizes the beloved.

From her "lamentable" skin (32) to her "filthy" (43) kisses, the speaker offends the other man's lover in "The Comparison". In insulting *her* body, however, he is showing just how much his own lover is worth to him. She's a source of pride and he explains just how so by describing her very human body. He presents her bodily functions and secretions while at the same time, he uplifts her. She sweats, her body is warm beside his, and she is not a distant idol, but someone who is human just as he is. He has been intimate enough with her that he realizes her flaws and the beauty in them.

"As the sweet sweat of roses in a still...
 As the almighty balm of th'earthly east,
 Such are the sweat drops on my mistress' breast?
 And on her neck her skin such luster sets,
 They seem no sweat drops, but pearl carcanets"
 (1, 3-6)

By revealing such detailed traits of her body he is revealing her humanness and, in turn, her similarities to him. Though it may be unconventional, it is

flattery. Her sweat is presented in such a way that it becomes a string of pearls around her neck rather than a foul smelling bodily fluid. Literally speaking, however, it is still sweat and therefore implies that she is not an idol or a trophy at which he ganders but someone with whom he enjoys being close.

Further along in “The Comparison” are more specific descriptions used to describe his companion’s lover. Although Donne’s lover is not speaking specifically of his own woman, the depictions demonstrate the way in which Donne contrasts traditional flattery in the love poetry of his time:

“Rank sweaty froth thy mistress’ brow defiles
Like spermatic issue of ripe menstruous boil.
Or like the scum.../
And like vile lying stones in safronn’d tin,
Or warts, or wheales, they hang upon her skin”
(7-9, 13-4)

He has diminished any idea of either woman as an idol, but instead emphasizes her humanness by using “disgusting descriptions” that “contaminate the idealized representation of woman”.⁴⁶ This example of descriptions as well as others, as Guibbory has stated, makes “it difficult to worship or adore women” and therefore “reconstructs male/female relationships... to confirm a hierarchy in which the male remains superior”.⁴⁷

While such depictions do indeed taint any positive view of women it does not necessarily make her inferior. The two women here are portrayed with all of their flaws and bodily functions blatantly displayed but still the speaker can

account for his lover as being “fair” and “sweet” despite those things. By bringing her down from her pedestal, he brings her closer to him, which allows him to love her better.

Furthermore in her interpretation of this elegy, Guibbory suggests, that Donne’s speaker is not describing two individual women, but in fact just one only seen in two different ways. If that is the case, Donne’s acknowledgement of the different phases of a woman further proves her to be less of an idol and more human-like. Contrasting descriptions express her different moods and different reactions to different circumstances. While at times she can be like a “white beauty-keeping chest” (23) where gods’ “best fortunes” (34) are kept, other times she must be approached fearfully “as one which gath’ring flowers, still fears a snake” (46). While she is beautiful, perhaps even delicate and sweet smelling like a flower, she can cause harm to a man if she’s not approached and attended to with care. Her various qualities and ability to change express that she is not just a face to be worshiped but is an individual with a personality and changing moods who is at times loveable yet still at other times may not be so appealing.

She has warts and wheals that that “hang upon her skin” (14). Her kisses at times can be “as filthy, and more, / as a worm sucking an envenom’d sore” (43-44). Donne’s focus on bodily fluids, smells and blemishes indicates his ability to love her despite her imperfections. If there are indeed two compared women in the poem, despite these imperfections his beloved still the better of the two. She is

important enough to the speaker that he chooses to defend her in a competition with his peer, who in failing to recognize the multiple layers of his woman has set himself up for trouble.

“Loves Progress” works as a warning to keep men from finding themselves in such trouble with women. By comparing a relationship with a woman to a journey on a ship, the poem explains that idolizing a woman on the basis of her looks alone, like an inexperienced lover may, is taking a risk that may leave him shipwrecked. It advises against only admiring the woman’s face and physical attributes because without getting to know her, a man will never fully understand what she is capable of.

As in an interpretation of “The Comparison” that displays only one woman, “Loves Progress” is also highlighting the different moods of a woman. Sometimes she is composed and calming but then, with a furrowed brow, she can cause great distress. For a man who claims to love her based on a far-away obsession, this can be even more harmful than to a man who loves Donne’s way because he doesn’t expect it. By focusing just on her “face and brow” and without intimately knowing the woman, the inexperienced poet sets himself up for disaster by means of a submissive defeat to the woman. He is unsuspecting of her ability and power and can therefore be blindsided:

“The brow becalms us when ‘tis smooth and plain.
 And when ‘tis wrinkled, shipwrecks us again
 Smooth, ‘tis a paradise, where we would have
 Immortal stay, and wrinkled, ‘tis our grave.”

(43-6)

Furthermore, her hair is a forest of ambushes, her cheek is a “rosy hemisphere” (49) off of which he can fall and she sings a “siren’s song” (55) that will eventually lead him to his death.

“Loves Progress” is a warning to those men so distantly infatuated by their muses from a far. Guibbory suggests the speaker’s intent is to say that “men should pay no attention to the face and those higher parts of the female body” because they are “dangerous distractions that threaten... men on their journey to the harbor of love”.⁴⁸

“Who ever loves, if he do not propose
 The right true end of love, he’s one that goes
 To sea for nothing but to make him sick:
 Love is a bear-whelp born, if we so o’er-lick
 Our love, and force it to new strange shapes to take,
 We erre, and of a lump a monster make”

(1-6)

Idolization and faraway pining does not allow man and his woman to arrive at the “right true end of love”. Instead it cannot even be called love. It benefits no one just as if one were to go out to sea and accomplish nothing but only becomes sick out on the waters. He explains that “loving” this way is harmful and furthermore and dramatically a “monstrous perversion”.⁴⁹ “If worshipping woman from a distance and praising her” is a monstrous innovation then Donne’s

speaker, by truly loving her for who she is, rather than who she seems to be, is advocating and taking part in “correct amorous relations.”

Although Anthony Low notes that Donne’s speaker’s advice to men is to “value women... as one values gold ... for immediate practical reasons” (40) such as sexual relations and Diana Treviño Benet echoes him by claiming that “Loves Progress” defines the woman by her sexual organs, my interpretation is that it is not only sexually that Donne wants to be with this woman. There is a great deal of importance on her sexuality but the poem also discusses other characteristics by which she can be appreciated. He, for example, considers her “words and heart, /and virtues” (42).

We must also keep in consideration the poem’s intended audience. This poem seeks to relate to its audience. Unknowing of the true woman he dwells on her sexuality. “Her swelling lips, to which when we are come, /We anchor there, and think ourselves at home” (53-4) but then because they are misinformed “some do shipwreck, and no further get” (43).

Using images of destruction at sea, he predicts an ignorant man’s fate if he allows himself to be captured by his obsession with her body. Guibbory argues that “seduction becomes...potential entrapment for the... male. The female body he traverses actively seeks to thwart him” when she, as a person with a personality is ignored.⁵⁰ A man who simply sees her physicality will inevitably be directed toward a harmful “fall”.

“Most of Donne’s poems are not only designed for a particular occasion and audience or audiences” but rather they vary from poem to poem addressing different audiences.⁵¹ Although addressing a male audience inevitably influenced the tone and even the general message of a poem, that influence is not an indication that Donne was lying. Instead, it implies that tweaks were made in order to please his readers. Furthermore, a number of Donne’s work was left unpublished and private until after his death, which could further imply that the content was not meant for just anyone to pick up and read. Bell reminds us that what we read in anthologies and out of context to Donne’s situation may take on new meanings for us today. These works express themes that were “both deeply private and culturally situated”.⁵² His unwillingness to give his poems to a public audience suggests “his recognition that there was a dangerous aspect to his writing”.⁵³ What he said his poetry would seem to be a reflection of his beliefs and therefore affect him and his position in his society. Arthur Marotti, in the third chapter of his book John Donne, Coterie Poet, discusses the influence Donne’s peers had on his work. He notes that “Donne’s friends were aware that he longed for the kind of social and political involvement that could bring ‘wealth’ and ‘honor’”⁵⁴

Upon first glance, “Loves’ Progress” seems to generalize about women, looking deeper into it, however I agree with Benet when she says that Donne was more “concerned with the immediate impression he was making on peers or social

superiors” than expressing his own personal beliefs about women.⁵⁵ In speaking directly to the woman as he does in “To His Mistress”, he does not only explain that her intelligence and wit matches his own but shows how it does so, in a conversation of which we are given one side. In “To His Mistress” the misogynistic belittling found in “Loves Progress” is abandoned for a more playful competition with the woman. The poem shows that the two are equal in power.

Addressing the woman directly, but still speaking of her power over him, Donne’s speaker in “To His Mistress” has a more playful tone that implies that her independence and power does not instill deep fear in him but instead is appreciated. Marotti notes the way that “Donne’s lover plays with his mistress emotionally and intellectually more than sexually: the erotic gestures are accompanied by humorous commentary...”⁵⁶ The witty exchange between the speaker and his lover showcases that he realizes her capabilities. He first urges “come, madam, come” (1) and demands that she take off “that girdle” (5). Later on in the poem he again demands her to “unlace herself” (9) but this time because the chiming of bells tells him that “now ‘tis your bed-time” (35).

Rather than being fearful of this woman who can both keep up with his witty games and challenge him, he wants to explore her. He expresses that through metaphors of discovery and exploration. “My new found land” (27), he calls her. “How blest I am in discovering thee” (30) and although he, in jest, demands that she undress, he later asks for her permission. Reading through each invitation to

bed, the approach seems to change, as if he were reacting and adjusting his techniques until she complies. In making him adapt his methods, she is the one in power of this “conversation”.

Only one side of the conversation between the lovers is portrayed but the implied second party has a strong presence in which she does not give in to Donne’s lover’s longings for control but demands to be honored. She wants respect but not idolatry, and an acknowledgement that she is worthy of conversation, debate and negotiation.

He begins by commanding her to undress. “Unpin that spangled breastplate” (7) he demands and then “off with that happy busk”. This first effort is Donne’s attempt at establishing the male position of power that is expected of him. By insisting these things of her, he hopes that she will comply, but when that technique is unsuccessful, he tries asking her. Power is transferred from the woman to the man “who hopes to possess her” and back again but by asking he admits to his realization that ultimately it her decision whether or not they sleep together.⁵⁷

Still, he asks for permission to take control. “Licence my roving hands, and let them go/behind, before, above, between, below” (25-26) he requests. By admitting that it is only within her power that he will obtain the license to explore her, he hopes that she will find the situation to be more appealing because they are now under her own terms. However, he continues the back and forth jesting by

referring to her as his “kingdom” (28) and “empire” (29). These titles could be flattering, implying that she is as important to him as the land over which he rules, but they also propose a sense of his control over her. As her king or emperor he would have power over her.

Though the tone is light as it allows the two to play with their positions within the relationship, the influence of a patriarchal society is fully present. Guibbory, Low and Hadfield have all interpreted this elegy to be one that ultimately places the man as the dominator over the woman. Guibbory states that Donne’s speaker holds on to a “desire to possess and thus master the colonized woman” and that by giving up the license to rove she “loses her sovereignty. The man becomes not only explorer but conqueror, and she becomes *his* land and kingdom”.⁵⁸ She argues that the speaker has “dethroned the woman” and become the monarch.

While complimenting her, the other side of the compliment, argues Guibbory, is “the desire to possess and thus master the colonized woman”.⁵⁹ First she is in power as the one from which he asks permission but then she loses the position to license him when he regains power as her emperor. Hadfield parallels this argument by stating that “the lover casts himself as the imperial ruler; the lady becomes the conquered territory”.⁶⁰ Low’s interpretation echoes this in saying that Donne’s speaker has an “eagerness to dominate” the woman about whom he writes.⁶¹

Donne's speaker, however, explains that in exploring "behind, before, above, between, below", he is, as he proclaims, "blest... in discovering" her. Perhaps he sets out with intentions to dominate her and to place his "seal" upon her but in the act of roving he can better discover, learn about and understand her. She has granted him permission to discover her but still is in control because like Atlanta, the man can be distracted and outwitted by her at any moment.

Donne uses allusions to the Greek myth about Atlanta to suggest how a man's distraction could cause his demise:

"...Gems which you women use
 Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,
 That when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem,
 His earthly soul may covet theirs...
 Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings"
 (35-9)⁶²

Though controlling the woman would alleviate some of the struggles he has with their relationship, this passage seems to imply that in the same way Atlanta defeated so many of the men who courted her, this muse has the possibility to do the same. She is not just a woman to gawk at, but one with whom he is equal and can engage in a mutual relationship.

Donne's speaker acknowledges her potential power and gives her credit for it. By admitting to the way she has tricked him, he compliments her. He knows her and knows what could occur and therefore is not caught off guard. He may

have been distracted but he chooses to partake in these competitive games because it is part of the reason why he loves her.

He's accepted that he cannot be in control in the relationship. How can he be when she is just as powerful as he is? In realizing their equal capabilities there is an awareness that the two are necessary for each other. By putting aside their competitiveness, they can instead work together and balance each other out. It is here where they find themselves to be equal halves of the whole that makes up their relationship. They are both equally necessary to the other partner and they connect spiritually.

Chapter III: A Spiritual Connection between Donne's Speaker and His Muse

In the previous chapters I've discussed how Donne breaks down the empty feelings of the Petrarchan subject position and how by doing so has allowed his speaker to discover and find appreciation in the authoritative personality of his lover. In the "The Good Morrow" and "Air and Angels" we find a depiction of a mutual loving relationship from which he seems to benefit because she has spiritually awoken him and has become a necessary part of his life.

Like "To His Mistress," "The Good Morrow" and "Air and Angels" are written as if the speaker is directly addressing his lover, however, we find a completely different tone in these elegies. Donne has eliminated the outside societal influences of patriarchy and instead focuses on just the relationship at hand and how it affects the two involved.

These poems are sensitive accounts of a spiritual connection between the two lovers as they interact within a perfect world. Donne also acknowledges her sexuality but refrains from physical descriptions as seen in the previously mentioned poems. He focuses, instead, on the way in which their souls interact. In addressing this interaction, he compares his life before his relationship with his beloved to where he now finds himself in life. Before, he was incomplete but now, with her, he has gained more in life. The women who may have come before did not fulfill the expectations he had about the full potential of love and he is extremely thankful and grateful to his current lover.

“The Good Morrow” focuses on how the two, as two halves of a whole, are equally integral parts of their relationship. And though critic R.E. Pritchard discusses the poem in his essay “Dying in Donne’s ‘The Good Morrow’” as one that is comparing sexual experiences instead of spiritual connection, in addition to sex, there is an emphasis placed on their relationship as a whole.⁶³ Sexuality is a part of that relationship but their spirituality is the integral factor in making the union fulfilling in a way that the speaker has never before experienced. She has, in a sense, completed him. He says to her:

“I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
 Did, till we loved? Were we not wean’d till then?
 But suck’d on country pleasures sillily?
 Or slumber’d we in the Seven Sleepers’ den?
 (1-4)

Not only does he question the significance of his own existence before her, but he also asks of hers before him. He wonders that if she, like him, was incomplete, foolishly enjoying childish pleasures, asleep and unaware of how a life together could be better.

Spiritually, they awaken each other and bid good morning to the new souls that they have found within the relationship (8). In slumber their souls were dormant and unable to feel fulfilled. They remained but half of what they would end up being together. “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’”.⁶⁴ In contradiction to the defamation of women in previously

mentioned poems, here the lovers are equal and demonstrate a “sense of completion, as if the lover has finally found what was missing from life, his other half”.⁶⁵

Donne’s poem “The Dream” also reflects an awakening brought about by his love with the woman: “Therefore thou wak’dst me wisely” and by “thine eyes, and not thy noise” (12). In using her eyes to wake him she has connected with him on a level that far surpasses anything physical. She need not touch him to wake him but used her own spirit to connect to him.

In his essay, Pritchard brings up the story of Aristophanes, the ancient Athenian playwright who wrote that human beings were all one half of a loving sphere and living in constant search of their other half. “The Good Morrow” depicts a reunion of two of these halves. Donne uses the image of two hemispheres making up one whole world to further illustrate their equality and dependence on each other.

“Let us possess one world: each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
 And true plain hearts do in the faces rest.
 Where can we find two better hemispheres
 Without sharp north, without declining west?”
 (14-8)

The earth is made up of two hemispheres, each one an exact half of a spherical whole. Like the earth, Donne’s speaker and his lover are one complete whole

while separately they were only fragments.

Furthermore, the circular image of a sphere introduces the idea of continuity. There is no definitive beginning or end of a circle just as there are no definitive positions or roles that the lovers hold. One is not greater than the other, but they both share power and responsibility. A sphere is continuous and rotates as the two work and rotate together in conjunction. In the contexts of philosophy, a sphere or circle “is often invoked as a symbol of perfection”.⁶⁶ Not only is their sphere of love complete, but also it is perfect on multiple levels. Physically, spiritually and emotionally they are a perfect fit. Together, they “possess one world” and allow each other to be possessed by the other, as well in a way that gives up the self to the other. In this sense, there is a great deal of trust exchanged between the two of them.

Before the two created one sphere, life as a half was frivolous. Now, however, he has found the other half that completes him and even in one little room, he feels as though, because she is with him, he is “everywhere” (11) he needs to be. Their relationship as an “everywhere” portrays its magnitude. By emphasizing that the space that they inherit together to be everywhere is everything, he rejects not only the faraway love of the Petrarchan subjection position but also claims of his misogyny. He underlines the idea of a mutual love. In that room he is content in simply being there and watching her not “out of fear” (9) but because their love provides him with all that he needs. Bell also offers the

possible interpretation that suggests that by closing their eyes to anything that lies outside of the safety of their little room Donne's speaker assures that there is nothing to fear.⁶⁷

Furthermore, in looking into each other's eyes, they can see themselves, not only literally in a reflection but they can see hints of themselves within each other through similarities between them. They are extensions or representations of each other. The interlocked gaze that the lovers hold with each other represents mutuality. If he can see himself in her, he holds her to high regards. He holds her to the same heights to which he holds himself. He has found himself in a relationship with a woman he respects as much as he respects himself and together they create a whole.

Additionally the poem is written in the 3rd person plural, using "we" or "thou and I" as it's subject to refer to "our" relationship. It does not only say that "I" singular and completed by "you" singular but stresses that "we" interactively complete each other, highlighting unity and harmony as the two interact in accord with each other. The speaker doesn't only reflect alone on the relationship but he includes his beloved in the description.

While Pritchard does believe that Donne is referring to sex with other women, he writes that in referring to the speaker's beloved, Donne is not only concerned with the sexual act but instead the "discovery of reality, the establishment of true faith, a replacement of the familiar world, an image of

perfection and eternity”.⁶⁸ Their unity and perfection causes them to be completely happy and content. So much so that it prevents death. Even more powerful in describing their relation to each other is the very end of the last stanza when he says “Whatever dies, was not mix’d equally; / If our loves be one, or thou and I/ Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die” (19-21)

The implication of these last lines is that because they are so compatible with each other, their life together is now perfect and they can never die. It is extremely personal in the way that it highlights his experience with her as the most important he’s had. Before her, there was nothing even slightly as fulfilling as the relationship they now have with one another. Though their flesh may die, their spirits will forever be entwined within the sphere of their love.

“Air and Angels” further lays emphasis on the deep connection in which the lovers have found themselves. Discussing spirituality and physical interaction, the spiritual connection is recognized as the basis for their deep connection and can often be portrayed through their physical intimacy. Like in “The Good Morrow”, the speaker makes mention of a sphere in line 25 when he says: “So thy love may be my love’s sphere”. They complete and encircle each other. They are each other’s worlds when it is just the two of them and they are away from the distractions and influences of society. In their “everywhere” he knows that he loves her completely and that she is just as essential to his life and he is to hers. Any of the gender differences that society has placed upon them are

constructed and not naturally inherited and therefore cannot affect their natural spiritual love.

Despite the emphasis on spirituality, Camille Slights argues there is a presence of misogyny within the poem by explaining that in confessing such an intense spiritual love, the focus is taken away from the woman as individual and placed instead on her spirit that could have manifested itself into anybody just so happened to find hers.⁶⁹ My interpretation of the poem however is that her spirit is a part of who she is as an individual, and along with her other attributes make up the woman with whom Donne's speaker is in love. She is a unique person who is conscious of and drives that spirit. Her personality isn't coincidental but is a part of her interaction with him. This interpretation further works against misogyny because it promotes a view of the woman as an individual, someone worthy and capable of being Donne's speaker's equal.

"The Dream" further rejects this notion of the speaker's love for the woman being beyond her and easily interchangeable. At lines 19 and 20 he specifically acknowledges her and only her as the one who brings him so much joy. "I do confess, it could not choose but be/ Profane to think thee any thing but thee". He longed for a spirit like hers and the reason he was never before able to find it was because it didn't and could not exist within anyone but her. Any relationship he may have had with other women before her failed to meet his needs in the way his relationship with her does. "Twice or thrice had I lov'd thee, /

Before I knew thy face or name; / So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame” (1-3). He may have even thought that he loved them but it was not until he found his beloved specifically that he was fully satisfied. He explains that he loved her before he knew her. He could only do this by being with other women. When he met her, however, the search ended.

In the middle of “Air and Angels” Donne explains just how their soul, bodies and love interact within the relationship. Love is the child of his soul and being that it is delicate, it had to take the form of flesh, which it did within her: in her “lip, eye, and brow” (14). To be more overtly romantic, she *is* love. In both poems, Donne discusses a progression of their love. In “Air and Angels”, he longed for her having had loved her “twice or thrice” before he knew her face or name, then “to where thou wert I came, / Some lovely glorious nothing I did see” (5-6). He found her but does not know that he loves her until his soul “takes limbs of flesh” (8) and they become intimately acquainted. In “The Good Morrow”, Donne’s speaker and his lover are asleep until their souls awake to one another. It was only over time that they were able to come to a relationship as spiritually matured as theirs. Taking time to together develop a mutual love contradicts an imaginary faraway love.

By discussing both the past and present and setting up a scene for comparison he is able to demonstrate the changes in his life that have occurred since the woman has come into it. Though he loved her before he knew her, when

he first saw her, it seemed to be “some lovely glorious nothing” (6). It was not until he knew her personally that he found in her the substantial love that he had been searching for. The aggression he showed in other poems has disappeared to introduce the compassionate lover that participates in a spiritual relationship safe from judging eyes.

In both “Air and Angels” and “The Good Morrow” Donne’s speaker describes his experiences with earlier lovers as unsubstantial. Using those relationships as a basis on which he can compare his present love. She has awakened him both emotionally and spiritually and furthermore their physical relationship has benefitted. She is the only one who has had such an effect on him and is also the only one he has truly loved.

Conclusion

As there is not much information about Donne's wife, Anne More, there is no clear picture of John Donne as a husband or lover. This leads us to look to his written work as an examination of his personal life. The variation of criticism and interpretations alone shows just how unreliable that strategy is. Though his collection of poetry expresses ideas and techniques that are sometimes witty, misogynistic, egotistical, sensitive and attentive to women, we will never be able to conclude that Donne the man was any of the things. I have, however, concluded that his work reflects that of a man who took an innovative position to express complicated feelings about a woman with whom he was spiritually connected and sometimes found himself in a social competition.

Though the Petrarchan subject position at times is terribly flattering to the muse, in comparison to Donne's love poetry, it is but a look on the surface and ignores any positive nonphysical characteristics that the woman may have. Words from the Petrarchan position "fatten and starve" and fail to imply any significant love between the writer and his muse. Donne both emphasizes and pays tribute to a profound love that goes beyond a distant love based on a woman's sweet perfume.

Though Donne's poetry suggests that he did not love all women, it also shows that he certainly did not hate them all, either. Mixed in with the defamation of the lover of the speakers' companions is the uplifting of his own. She is one

very specific woman and by singling her out and speaking to her directly, he expresses both admiration and respect.

Donne's work represents the earlier stages of a move towards a more current type of love poem that emphasizes mutuality as a result of an intimate connection between two individuals. It provides a multifaceted look at a relationship with ups and downs and complicated issues. Donne could not escape the influence of social roles and therefore he could not ignore them in his writing. Although it is present, however, his poetry does not shy away from exalting a love that challenges that influence and speaks with an enthusiasm about mutual love. Like Low explained, it took over three centuries for his love poems to be appreciated as they have been by readers today.⁷⁰ They respond to the demands of today's woman for equality and an acknowledgement as a man's equal. By discussing both the spiritual connection between the speaker and his beloved and the strains exerted on their relationship by society and gender roles, Donne presents a panoramic view of a relationship.

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- ¹ Ibid. Hadfield writes that Donne pursues a route that reflects an attempt to “capture the immediacy of Ovid’s poems of frantic lust”.
- ² Anthony Low, The Reinvention of Love (Great Britain: Cambridge UP, 1993) 12.
- ³ Achsah Guibbory, “‘Oh Let Mee Not Serve So’: The Politics of Love in Donne’s Elegies,” ELH, 57.4 (1990) Guibbory’s criticism are based on a feminist view of Donne’s work that deals with the evident misogyny in Donne’s poetry rather than ignoring it as she states other critics often do. I will further refer to this article as OLMNS to distinguish it from Guibbory’s other article with will be cited as EP.
- ⁴ Achsah Guibbory, “Erotic Poetry,” The Cambridge Companion to John Donne, ed. Achsah Guibbory (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006) 135.
- ⁵ Andrew Hadfield, “Literary contexts predecessors and contemporaries,” The Cambridge Companion to John Done, ed. Achsah Guibbory (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006) 56.
- ⁶ EP 135.
- ⁷ Ibid. p, 57
- ⁸ EP 135.
- ⁹ GM 214. Guibbory quotes Donne’s poem “The Extasie” in describing the ways his poems revolutionized the portrayal of love in poetry. “Donne’s most daringly innovative poems describe an intimacy between the speaker and the ecstatic “mutuall feeling” that embodies and constitutes an extraordinary, unprecedented “dialogue of one”.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ilona Bell, “Gender Matters: the women in Donne’s poems,” The Cambridge Companion to John Donne, ed. Achsah Guibbory (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006) 201. I will further cite this source as GM to distinguish it from a later cited Bell source.
- ¹² OLMNS 812.
- ¹³ GM 214.
- ¹⁴ “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury,” 1588. Luminarium: Anthology of English Literature <<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/tilbury.htm>>
- ¹⁵ ‘OLMNS 813.
- ¹⁶ OMLNS 813. Guibbory notes that under the rule of Elizabeth “for men there were tensions inherent in submission to the authority of a queen”.
- ¹⁷ Ibid 819.
- ¹⁸ John Donne, “The Flea,” John Donne’s Poetry, ed. Donald R. Dickson (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007) Line 3
- ¹⁹ Hadfield, for example, discusses this on page 51.
- ²⁰ Low 38.
- ²¹ Ibid 31.
- ²² Ibid 39.
- ²³ Ibid 3.
- ²⁴ Low’s reading of Donne’s poetry resembles that of Ilona Bell as she explains it in GM. This quote comes from page 38 of Low.
- ²⁵ Ibid 39.
- ²⁶ Ibid 63.
- ²⁷ Low 60.
- ²⁸ EP 135.
- ²⁹ Arthur Marotti. John Donne. Coterie Poet. (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986). 57. To distinguish from LNL, this work will further be cited as CP.
- ³⁰ In referring to statues I am referencing Guibbory’s quote as mentioned on page 4.
- ³¹ EP 133.
- ³² John Donne “The Comparison” line 34. John Donne “The Good Morrow” line 20.
- ³³ John Donne “Loves Progress” line 76.
- ³⁴ Ibid line 49-51 reads: “...a cheek, a rosy hemisphere, / On either side, and then directs us where/ Upon the Islands Fortunate we fall.”
- ³⁵ Arthur Marotti, “Love is Not Love”: Elizabethan Poem Sequences and the Social Order,” ELH, 49 (1984) 396-428. To be further cited as LNL.

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- ³⁶ OLMNS 811
³⁷ Low 38.
³⁸ Low 39.
³⁹ Bell 201.
⁴⁰ Low 33.
⁴¹ John Donne "Elegy 5" line 27. John Donne "The Good Morrow" line 18.
⁴² Elegy 5 Line 3.
⁴³ EP 135.
⁴⁴ Ibid 140.
⁴⁵ Diana Treviño Benet, "Sexual Transgression in Donne's Elegies," Modern Philology 92 (1994) 12-35. Benet defines the characteristics that frame a love poem and uses them to note which of Donne's elegies are and are not amatory.
⁴⁶ OLMNS 817.
⁴⁷ Ibid 816.
⁴⁸ Ibid 818.
⁴⁹ Ibid
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ GM 203.
⁵² GM 202.
⁵³ EP 134.
⁵⁴ CP 156.
⁵⁵ Treviño Benet 34.
⁵⁶ CP 54.
⁵⁷ OLMS 821.
⁵⁸ Ibid 822.
⁵⁹ Ibid 822
⁶⁰ Hadfield 53.
⁶¹ Hadfield 39.
⁶² The Stuart Edition of Donne's complete work explains that in mythology, the runner Atlanta lose a race to Hippomenes after Venus throw golden apples into the path of the race as a distraction.
⁶³ R.E. Pritchard, "Dying in Donne's 'The Good Morrow'," Essays in Criticism. 35 (1985) 213-220.
⁶⁴ EP 140
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⁶⁶ Stanley Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power," Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry, Elizabeth D. Harvey, et. al. (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1990) 225
⁶⁷ Ilona Bell, "Betrothal: 'The Good Morrow'" John Donne Journal. 22 (2003) On pg 24 Bell writes "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".
⁶⁸ Pritchard 220.
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⁷⁰ Low 3