

**The Female Body as Represented in John Donne's Poetry**

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### The Female Body as Represented in John Donne's Poetry

C.S. Lewis once criticized John Donne as the “saddest” and “most uncomfortable of our poets” whose verse “exercises the same dreadful fascination that we feel in the grip of the worst kind of bore – the hot eyed, unescapable kind” (Mousley 157). One of the most controversial poets in the history of English literature, Donne is best known for his metaphysical poetry on topics as diverse as lovemaking, infidelity, and religion. Neglected for nearly two centuries, Donne was ‘rediscovered’ by, and strongly influenced, 20th-century poets such as W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden (Galens). In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Donne's unpublished poetry was highly praised within his small literary circle, but to the masses, Donne was considered controversial, uncouth, and blasphemous. The first collection of Donne's poetry, titled simply *Poems*, was published two years after his death and prefaced with elegies by Izaak Walton, Thomas Carew, and other contemporaries who admired his work. Donne's strong voice and metaphysical conceits continued to influence poets such as Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughn, and George Herbert some thirty years after his death. However, as the seventeenth century progressed, Donne became increasingly out of

fashion, and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Donne had largely disappeared from the public and critical eye. No other poet has seemingly fallen from favor for so long and been so condemned as inexpert and rough. The 'rescue' of Donne in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries has affected continued interest unabated to the present (Parrish).

However, not all of Donne's contemporaries were captivated with his work. Ben Jonson appreciated Donne's early poetry but also expressed frustration, stating, "Donne, for not keeping accent, deserved hanging" (Galens). Toward the end of the seventeenth century, John Dryden characterized Donne as more a wit than a poet, and indeed, Donne was often accused of exaggerating his wit. In the eighteenth century the essayist Samuel Johnson wrote a scathing critique of Donne's poetry in which he used the term "metaphysical" to describe poets who flaunted their genius to create eccentric ingenuity and unusual contradictions (Galens).

Contrary to his contemporaries, the early nineteenth century Romantic poets were struck by how Donne's poetry exhibited an agile mind at play. The poet Robert Browning also admired Donne, but not until the 1890s was Donne's poetry celebrated by avant-garde writers such as the Symbolists. Donne became a popular figure in the 1920s and 1930s when Modernist poets Eliot and Yeats discovered in Donne's poetry the fusion of intellect and passion that they desired in their own work. Eliot argued that Donne and the Metaphysical poets had written "complex, emotionally charged celebrations of the joys, sorrows, and dilemmas of their own age" (Galens). While modern criticism of Donne's poetry has not been universally favorable, since the first half of the twentieth century Donne has maintained high esteem in the canon of English literature. Donne is

acknowledged as an accomplished and versatile poet who has profoundly influenced modern poetry.

Curiously, Donne's influence on modern poetry and criticism was based upon his accused misogynistic tone yet uncontrolled obsession with writing about women, both echoing and challenging the gender stereotypes of his day. In one motion, Donne will beautifully expand the female body and mind beneath an exploring, scientific eye, familiar bits of body acquiring geographical dimensions, and in another motion, Donne will degrade and disparage the female on the grounds of familiar Renaissance mentality (Carey 137). However, one aspect remains constant: Donne rarely lingers over the woman's physical appearance, and leaves the reader to assume that the woman in Donne's poems is a shadowy figure, the object or reflection of male desire, or a sex object to be circulated for the titillation and amusement of Donne's male coterie (Guibbory 201). According to Carey, beauty was simply a thing that happened by chance and is consequently, as Donne concludes, of no real worth (134).

Not only was beauty of no real worth, but neither were the females themselves. Though Donne wrote profusely about women, overwhelming Renaissance era ideals bewildered his subconscious. When Donne did fall into such a mentality, critics were led to christen Donne a misogynist. These ideals were set forth primarily by medieval and early-modern Christians, who found several justifications for women's inferiority in the stories of Genesis and the New Testament: 1) woman was created after man, and therefore man must be more perfect; 2) Eve's role in the fall suggests pride, that she was governed by passions, and that women's beauty and sexuality made them potential corrupters of man; 3) women were clearly expected to be subservient to their husbands;

and 4) as the ‘weaker vessel,’ women possessed not only less physical, but less mental strength than men (Shoemaker 17). Though there were so many arguments against the female sex, the female physical (not necessarily sexual) body and soul was held in the highest regard, especially the abovementioned idea of the female as “vessel.”

John Donne expanded this idea in his poetry, writing about women in a way that degraded their physical body, their mental and emotional capabilities, and their relation to the male sex. Women, in John Donne’s eyes were seen as a necessary part of the male-female, body-soul connection but were dangerous as well. Women, though not wholly revered in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were believed to carry just as much truth – and secrecy – as men. Women were vessels that could be filled (with anything); this capacity for malleability not only made women appealing, but made them incredible agents of any force, good or bad.

The relationship between body and soul – a relationship Donne regarded as one of mutual necessity – was the defining bond of his life. His experiences (of friendship, love, health, illness, work, leisure) were all conditioned by the interactions between the two parts of the self. As a poet and a pastor, the physical and the spiritual, the male and the female, the secular and the divine were inexorably linked for Donne, and were always carried into his poetry (Targoff 1).

To obtain further evidence of how Donne, as well as his speakers, views the female body, one must look closely at his poetry; for example, Donne’s poem “Air and Angels.”<sup>1</sup> A two stanza poem of fourteen lines a piece, this poem addresses the conflict of Love within the spirit and the body. The poem begins: “Twice or thrice had I loved<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Full poems “Air and Angels,” “Lecture Upon the Shadow,” “Witchcraft Upon a Picture,” “Love’s Alchemy,” and “On His Mistress Going to Bed” can be found in the Appendix.

thee,/ Before I knew thy face or name;/ So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame” (1-3). We see in Donne’s poem “The Extasie” an important line that translates well into “Air and Angels.” In “The Extasie,” Donne states that “Our soules, (which to advance their state,/ ere gone out,) hung 'twixt her, and mee./ And whil’st our soules negotiate there,/ Wee like sepulchral statues lay” (15-18). Asserting this prior belief that souls/spirits can leave the body to mingle with other souls, Donne carries this trope to the lines in “Air and Angels.” Perhaps how he ‘met’ his lover, their souls negotiating far from their physical bodies, Donne’s speaker in “Air and Angels” believes his spirit met his lover’s spirit (a voice or shapeless flame) while their bodies lay elsewhere. Despite the speaker’s declaration that the female was disembodied and “shapeless,” and just as souls are required to take a body, the speaker needs to concentrate upon the human form (as merely an empty outline/container) in order to fill it with whatever he chooses, in this case his love. The female lover addressed is the concrete embodiment required to complete this relationship (Louthan 109).

The speaker describes the finding of the physical being and their first meeting in the fifth line: “Still when, to where thou wert, I came,/ Some lovely glorious nothing did I see” (5-6). When the speaker came (physically, or perhaps an ejaculation pun) to where his female lover was, a “glorious nothing” did he see. This interesting line becomes a sexual pun regarding the female genitalia. If we look back at Galenic theories of fetal development, (Galen, a prominent Roman physician, philosopher, and accomplished medical researcher) we find that 2<sup>nd</sup> century physicians believed that the female was an inferior version of the male. Despite multiple reasons for this, one reason was universally accepted; the female was an “undercooked” male for the parts that are inside in woman

are outside in man (May 629). The emergence of the penis in male fetuses was an expression of “doneness” in fetal development. Since the vagina remained inside the female fetus, Galen and colleagues understood this to mean the female fetus was not “done.” Therefore, the female genitalia were nothing, a “glorious nothing,” and an interestingly present absence.

As a result, the speaker deems that he must fill that empty space, that absence, within this lover’s body. He utters, “Since my soul, whose child, love is/ Takes limbs of flesh and else could nothing do” (7-8). Because the child of the soul is Love, Love needs a corporeal body; a home. Love must take a body, so the speaker asks Love to “assume thy body, I allow,/ And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow” (12-14). Her body is the container for Love, and the speaker must come to recognize and love her physically.

Other terms throughout the poem that suggest her body is merely a container are “ballast” (stabilizing weights/cargo) and “pinnacle” (a small boat) as in: “Whilst thus to ballast love I thought,/ And so more steadily to have gone,/ With wares which would sink admiration,/ I saw I had love’s pinnacle overfraught” (15-18). In the poem, Donne expresses that the speaker’s love is too much for the female; that he invades her and “love’s pinnacle is overfraught” (18). What should have been a stabilizing weight (Love) was emotionally unmanageable for the tiny vessel. The speaker had intended to stabilize love’s boat (for smoother sailing) with wares which would sink an insignificant ship of mere admiration, but instead had overloaded even Love’s ship (a more powerful abstraction than mere admiration), unbalancing the very Love which he meant to keep safe (Louthan 109, Nutt 22). The concrete and physical particulars were too overwhelming for human love, which cannot inhere (be part of something natural and

integral) in disembodied spirits. Here, Donne reasserts his passionate belief that one can be neither only matter nor only spirit; one must capture both. Therefore, neither can Love find its permanence in “nothing,” nor in the extremity or brilliance of passion or beauty as the speaker states, “For, nor in nothing, nor in things/ Extreme, and scattering bright, can love inhere” (21) (Nutt 24). In the final lines: “Just such disparity/ As is ‘twixt air’s and angel’s purity,/ ‘Twixt women’s love, and men’s, will ever be” (26-28), Donne stresses the Elizabethan opinion that there will forever be a dichotomy between a man and a woman’s love. A woman’s is more fleeting and sacred, yet harder to capture and more widely sought after, therefore, less “bodily” and more “spirit-like.” These factors also make her love less stable. A delicate balance is required to not only keep Love afloat, but to not overburden it as well; even the most carefully placed, but lopsided ballast can easily tip the pinnacle of Love.

In “Air and Angels,” the female body is extremely misunderstood, and described as a mere container for Love to occupy. Although admiring woman for her possession of a sacred and widely sought-after Love (mentioned in lines 26-28), the entire poem relies upon the female form and the fact that it is uninhabited and can easily be filled with a variety of things. The transforming gaze of the spectator, Jonathan Sawday argues, need not be constrained by an existence outside the body. In imagination at any rate, it might be possible to voyage into the body which could thus appear as a place of infinite space, a place with infinite possibilities (140). Sadly, this filling is not done of her own volition, but of the male speaker’s; she must endure his manipulation and idealistic view of love, and gain nothing in return save an overfraught pinnacle. And in Donne’s poems, we rarely hear the female voice, or learn of Love from the female perspective.



In the majority of Donne's poems, the speaker is male, and the audience is predominantly male. John Donne was a coterie poet, meaning that he wrote to a select group of close friends, most likely poets themselves. Writing in an era where a female was deemed a lesser being than a male, Donne was solely following the conventions used by other coterie poets by composing misogynistic writings about women from a hyper-masculine point-of-view. And though he rarely wrote about Love itself, he did write about Love in the sense that it was an abstract male-female connection. Barbara Warren even stretches this notion to contest that woman's experience has interested man only as it has involved himself, and he has defined her experience on the basis of his encounters with the women in both his real life and his fantasy life (1). A principal example of this conviction is Donne's "Lecture Upon the Shadow."

"Lecture upon the Shadow" is a 2 stanza poem, of 13-lines a piece, this poem dramatizes the conflict of love. A shift in tone within the second stanza, referring to the different stages of the day (morning, noon, afternoon), cleverly represent the different stages of love. In the morning, everything is fresh and new, just as at the beginning of a relationship, when love is new. The two lovers in the poem are seen walking, talking, in the "three hours that [they] have spent" together (3). In the poem, noon is representative of the one instantaneous moment of true love, when each other's faults are accepted openly and without hesitation. "But now the sun is just above our head,/ And to brave clearness all things are reduced" (7-8). At noon, shadows have disappeared and all is cast in a brilliant, clear light; a figuration of unity and supreme purity, untainted by the imperfections of shade (MacKenzie 85). The end of the first stanza leaves the lovers at the perfect time: Noon.

However, noon is short-lived. The speaker mentions that unless “our loves at this noon stay,/ We shall new shadows make the other way” (14-15). Unless times were to stop and leave the lovers in this perfect state, noon, new shadows will begin to form in the opposite direction, shadows not of light ethereality, but shadows of darkness and dilemma. Some could consider this line, “stand still,” to be romantic; that the speaker is telling his lover to not move in order to extend their profound love affair, that their romantic love may be eternalized. But others could interpret that line as an order, “stand still,” perhaps because the speaker has little faith in their relationship (1). Further along in the poem, we see the speaker's tone shift, and his fear of the formation of new shadows; “So whilst our infant loves did grow,/ Disguises did, and shadows, flow/ from us and our cares; but now ‘tis/ not so” (9-11). The shadows which one removed all of their cares and cautions, continue to grow as the “morning shadows fade away [as] these grow longer all the day” and the lovers will be reduced to hiding in shadows in their “westerwardly decline” (22-23, 19). While their morning shadows were light and ephemeral, offering protection, their afternoon shadows are threatening and reduce them to formlessness. This travesty, from the speaker's perspective, is detrimental; it might as well be night, and the relationship might as well be over.

Like a mirror reflection, or the north and south poles, the poem immediately doubled upon itself, shifting from descriptions of beautiful “infant loves,” and “brave clearness.” Now the speaker alludes to the fact that “Love's day is short.” He remarks, “if love decay[s]” and since the natural rhythm of love in this poem “decays” from the stage of true, understanding love to the stage of un-accepting, false love, in only 12 lines, love's day is short (24). The faults and shortcoming of the lovers are readily noticed and

dismissed by the other; their shadows are no longer protection from the cruel particulars, but magnify the darkness in each of them: “To me thou, falsely, thine/ And I to thee mine actions shall/ disguise” (20-21). And just as noon lasts for one brief moment, true love is brief as well; it does not last. “Love is a growing, or full constant light,/ And his short minute, after noon, is night” (25-26). One minute after noon is no longer noon, but afternoon. In the final line, night begins and love falls apart. The differences once accepted, are no longer, and love, just like the day, is over. Just as in “Air and Angels,” the speaker reveals that Love is nothing, but something worth fighting for. Though the lovers submit to the rise-and-fall of feelings associated with Love, the speaker conveys a sense of urgency to the reader about the importance of perfect Love.

Congruent with the concept of shadows as formlessness, is the recurrent idea of the female body as vessel, or empty container. The suggestion of the speaker that shadows, empty and formless in themselves, could hide or protect a physical body, is a perfect juxtaposition with the Elizabethan idea of imbuing meaning upon the female frame or outline, deemed as empty and formless. Though the poem’s superficial trope is Love, we see that the female body is easily found within its lines as well. The body, cunningly aligned with transient shadows, has become supplementary, neither wholly present nor wholly absent, just as liminal shadows. The female body within this poem is confined, ignored, yet remains at the edge of visibility (Barker 63). The female body undergoes another such demeaning act in Donne’s poem, “Witchcraft by a Picture,” where Love also meets another untimely end. In this 14-line poem, two lovers are detaching themselves from one another, but physically and emotionally in a fascinating example of male-female connection.

The first lines of “Witchcraft by a Picture” illustrate two lovers facing each other. Assumedly, the female speaker is crying, (whether of anger or sadness) and the male is gazing upon her. The speaker states “I fix my eye on thine, and there/Pity my picture burning in thine eye;/ My picture drown’d in a transparent tear/ When I look lower I espy” (1-4). Here the speaker sees his own reflection in the glossy surface of his lover’s eye. For some reason, whether sadness or anger, she is crying, drowning his “image” (read: reflection) in the tears welling up in her eyes. When he “looks lower,” or looks slightly below the sightline of her pupil to her lower eyelid, he sees transparent tears welling up, overcoming his tiny reflection.

In the following lines, the speaker realizes the power of the woman’s tears. “Hadst thou the wicked skill/ By pictures made and marr’d, to kill,/ How many ways mightst thou perform thy will?” (5-7). The female lover seems to want the speaker dead, or so he thinks. Therefore, he comments that she had the “wicked skill” to make pictures (reflections), and mar and kill them. How many other ways might she perform her will? There was once an Elizabethan commonplace that “looks could kill;” the mythological basilisk as a prime example. A small snake, reputed to be king of serpents, is said to have the power to cause death with a single glance. Returning to the poem, we find the speaker gazing upon his weeping beloved. “But now I’ve drunk thy sweet salt tears,/ And though thou pour more, I’ll depart;” (8-9). Though the male speaker sees her pouring out more “sweet salt tears,” he does in fact, leave her. “My picture vanished,” he states, “vanish all fears/ That I can be endangered by that art” (10-11). His picture has vanished, has been completely obscured by her tears, and he is no longer afraid of the female’s “art” and aforementioned “wicked skill.” He knows he is in no danger, since his reflection

drowned, but he remains alive and apparent. Unlike Donne's idea of the female body, in which her external and internal bodies are not resolutely physical, the male body is. His body is of determined purpose and not even the tears of his beloved can move him; his body is not disappearing in any way, shape, or form. This stoic superiority of the male speaker is the common conception of the male-female connection, and one that Donne easily employs in his poetry.

The speaker also remains alive figuratively, in his lover's heart: "Though thou retain of me/ One picture more, yet that will be,/ Being in thine own heart, from all malice free" (12-14). The speaker's image has moved from the external site of the eye, to the internal site of the heart. Elizabethans believed that the eyes were the portal to the heart, and any images the eyes took in were immediately branded on the heart. They also believe that the heart was the site of ultimate truth. The woman's body, then, incarnates some of the particular privileges and paradoxes of Renaissance subjectivity. On the one hand she is constituted as something predominantly *seen*; the typical focus of the male gaze. At the same time her interior "difference," her lack of visibility, becomes a trope of resistance to scrutiny, of an inner truth not susceptible to discovery or manipulation from the outside (Turner 273).

This movement from the external eye (a place for hatred to manifest itself in the form of tears) to the internal site of the heart (a place of absolute truth), allows us to see the metaphysical male invasion of the female. The entrance into her body, and access to the site of her innermost emotions, allows the male to dismiss her outwardly expressed emotions. He begins to take comfort in his assumption that the heart only sees absolute truth, and that the heart will only remember the time when she loved him. Interestingly

enough, while the female genitalia were viewed as imperfect, the female heart and soul were revered as the sites of absolute truth and sincerity.

By moving from the physical genitalia to the ethereal heart and soul, an acquisition of knowledge is noted, first described as such in the teachings of Plato, and named the “Ladder of Love.” In *Symposium*, a “lover” is defined as someone who loves and to love is defined as a desire for something that one does not have. According to this ladder model of love, a lover progresses from rung to rung from the basest love to the pure form of love (Bloom 70). The hierarchy is as follows: *a beautiful body* - the lover begins here at the most obvious form of love; *all beautiful bodies* - if the lover examines his love and does some investigating, he/she will find that the beauty contained in this beautiful body is not original, that it is shared by every beautiful body; *beautiful souls* - after most likely attempting to have every beautiful body, the lover should realize that if a single love does not satisfy, there is no reason to think that many ones will satisfy. Thus, the “lover of every body” must, in the words of Plato, “bring his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or of no importance.” Instead, the passion is transferred to a more appropriate object: the soul; *the beauty of laws and institutions* - the next logical step is for the lover to love all beautiful souls and then to transfer that love to that which is responsible for their existence: a moderate, harmonious and just social order; *the beauty of knowledge* - once proceeding down this path, the lover will naturally long for that which produces and makes intelligible good social institutions: knowledge; *beauty itself* - This is the platonic “form” of beauty itself. It is not a particular thing that is beautiful, but is instead the essence of beauty. It is this “essence” which forms imperfectly embody.

Plato describes this level of love as a "wondrous vision," an "everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor ages, which neither flowers nor fades." It is eternal and isn't "anything that is of the flesh" nor "words" nor "knowledge" but consists "of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it" (Bloom 71-72). This ascension from the physical to spiritual beauty itself, is found often in Donne's poetry, as is Donne's affinity for abstractions. Due to Donne's belief in the body-soul connection, as well as Donne's views of female beauty, his poems flourish into something more significant as he and his speakers climb Plato's ladder to supreme knowledge.

Returning to "Witchcraft by a Picture," the poem's opening, the male fears how the female's emotions and "wicked skill" could harm him. Once he sees that her tears do nothing to harm him, he does not regard the external female body as a viable liaison of feeling and emotion between the internal and external realms. Rather, the speaker scorns emotion; the knowledge that the speaker has acquired in shifting his focus from the female genitalia to the internal site of truth – the heart – has allowed the speaker to do so. By the poem's closing, the male speaker appears to only admire the internal body, the heart and the soul, because he assumes they will do him no harm. As we have seen, female beauty was a fearsome thing, the exterior female body was despoiled to nothing but a meager container, and female emotions and intelligence were utterly disregarded. But women must have possessed something great to allow them a significant place within the male-female connectedness binary: the female body contained the heart – the ultimate site of truth and secretness.

In the English Renaissance, the creative imagination was also commonly associated with the female body. In the first sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella*, Philip Sidney describes himself as “great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes.” Quickly, Sydney overcomes his labor pains, shuns external aids and begins to look deeper, prompting himself to “look into thy heart and write.” This male acknowledgement of the heart as something more significant than the corporeal body gave females in the Renaissance a fighting chance. From reading “Witchcraft by a Picture,” we also discover that the internal physical female body contains something counter to the innocence and absolute truth: the dangerous power to procreate. For some men, conception and pregnancy is a welcome blessing. For others, such as the speaker of “Love’s Alchemy,” pregnancy is not readily greeted.

In “Love’s Alchemy,” a two stanza poem of 21 lines each, the overall tone is a bitter one. The word “alchemy” essentially means “a transformation;” the concept fitting for this poem and its theme of pregnancy. The speaker begins: “Some that have deeper digg’d love’s mine than I,/ Say, where his centric happiness doth lie” (1-2). Another adventure into the female body, the male speaker is “digging into the female self” to find where her centric happiness lies. He is also digging deeper into the formless essence that is Love in order to locate where a couple’s/ individual’s happiness in love comes from. He continues: “I have loved, and got, and told, But should I love, get, tell till I were old,” (3-4). The speaker moves from being a lover, giving and receiving Love, to an assumed father giving loving and [be]getting a child. The poem’s theme shifts from the speaker dreaming of sex to the shock and reality of pregnancy. “So, lovers dream a rich and long delight,/ But get a winter-seeming summer’s night” (11-12). The lovers delight in sex,



possibly expressing some disappointment with physical love, and then suddenly realize the possibility of, and implications of, pregnancy. The winter-seeming night could be anything from sexual dissatisfaction, to discovering the pregnancy, to the death of the mother during childbirth. If we consider this poem written from an autobiographical standpoint, the mother's death during childbirth in the poem is a feasible suggestion.

When John Donne married Anne More in 1601, she was between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. It was known that Anne Donne birthed a child almost every year of their marriage, and in 1617 died giving birth to the couple's 12th child. Though the composition date of this poem is unknown, to assume death during childbirth an option is not as outlandish as it may seem. Both Donne and his speaker in "Love's Alchemy" experience loss. Pregnancy, usually associated with abundance and growth, here is tied to loss.

This dissatisfaction continues in the following lines of the poem in which we find the speaker's bitter disposition at its fullest, and with good reason: "Our ease, our thrift, our honour, and our day,/ Shall we for this vain bubble's shadow pay?" (13-14). The speaker remarks that for this vain bubble's shadow (the pregnant belly), the two lovers must relinquish their ease, thrift, honour, and day. The male speaker seems to very much despise and regret the fact that his lover is pregnant. However, there are also speculations that the female trapped her lover into helping her conceive, and that she was rude about it: "Ends love in this, that my man/ Can be as happy as I can, if he can/ Endure the short scorn of a bridegroom's play?" (15-17). A supposed reference to the male lover's penis, pregnancy ends Love. In the short amount of time it took the pair to conceive, it is alluded to that the man and his attached genitalia received little pleasure once conception

and pregnancy became apparent. The reference to happiness is ironic; one implication could be that the bride scorns the shortness of the bridegroom's organ (Louthan 158). Such ridicule from the female justifies the bitterness felt by the male speaker. The "shortness" could also reference additional implications concerning human mortality. However, the note on which the poem ends is not one of *carpe diem* (Louthan 158). Allusions within the poem suggest that the speaker actually abstains from love-making rather than indulging deeper. Unlike the Cavalier poets who embraced the idea of *carpe diem* and lovemaking as frequently as possible, Donne's metaphysical background gives many of his poems an air of negativity.

Donne's negativity and the speaker's sense of loss fuel that remaining lines of the poem, the speaker's belief in the intellect as triumphant over the body is evident as the speaker continues: "Hope not for mind in women; at their best,/ Sweetness and wit they are, but mummy, possess'd" (23-24). Disappointment in love, which in the poem is simply sex, produces a misogynous dismissal of women as mere bodies, inert matter, medicinal at best (Guibbory 137). As "mummy's," women are nothing but fleshy, half-human creatures; their sole purpose to be "mummy's" to their children. 'Love's Alchemy' speaks of sonneteers who consider love the marriage of true minds (such as Shakespeare) however it compares the lovers' desire for eternal happiness to the elixir of the alchemists which is nothing more than a disappointing dream since women, like mummies, are void of wisdom and spirit: "And as no chemic yet th' elixir got/ But glorifies his pregnant pot,/ If by the way to him befall/ Some odoriferous thing, or medicinal,/ So, lovers dream a rich and long delight,/ But get a winter-seeming summer's night" (7-12).

While I agree with Achsah Guibbory that Donne's overall disappointment with love compromises our view of the Renaissance female, in his twentieth elegy "To His Mistress Going to Bed," Donne does instill a female character with some sense of agency. Rather the opposite of the previously analyzed poems, this elegy expresses the speaker's love of the female body, rather than the disgust exemplified earlier.

Elegies are now regarded as poems written to lament the dead. However, when Donne was writing, the term had a broader meaning, referring instead to poetry of a reflective nature. The possibility that this poem was written for wife Anne More Donne, a very young girl when she and John married, is supported by multiple lines in the poem. Perhaps the poem presents a wedding night between the speaker and his beloved, and it is their first night spent together. Or perhaps, based upon the female's dress, she could also be a member of the court. No matter the occasion, the male speaker as always, declares his dominance over the tiny female.

"Come madam, come," the speaker begins, "all rest my power defy:/ Until I labour, I in labour lie" (1-2). Until he labours in making love to the young woman, he has to endure a different kind of labour, and Donne almost expects the reader to associate the word 'labour' with additional meanings such as 'hard labour,' 'labour of the artist,' or 'labouring in vain.' Just as Sydney labored in *Astrophil and Stella*, Donne's speaker labors as well; over what we do not yet know. But, notice too how compact the lines are, how not a word is wasted, how even the "briefest images can blossom into the most complex thoughts:" "Come, madam, come, all rest my powers defy;/ Until I labour, I in labour lie" (1-2)(Nutt 10). His succinct argument is awfully persuasive and he declares his intent immediately: sex. Analyzing his use of language, the words "come" and

“labour” could allude to another ejaculation pun, and the idea of labour could be the speaker’s sexual tension; until he labours (ejaculates, or engages in the act of intercourse), he lies in labour (sexual tension/readiness).

Persistent in proclaiming his objective, the speaker continues: “the foe oft times, having the foe in sight,/ Is tired with standing, though he never fight” (3-4). An obvious metaphor for the male speaker’s readiness to have sex with his new mistress, this pun compares the speaker ‘standing’ to watch his mistress undress with a soldier ‘standing’ waiting for battle to begin. The pun also links the word ‘standing’ with the speaker’s erect penis (Nutt 10). This battle metaphor enforces the suggestion that intercourse may involve more risk than pleasure for the woman. Feeling frustrated with pent-up desire, he continues, issuing numerous commands to his mistress: “off with that girdle,” he cries, “Unpin that spangled breast-plate, which you wear” (5, 7). Reviving the suggestion of sexual warfare with the word “breastplate,” the speaker continues to assault her. Slowly inventorying her pieces of clothing, he calls her to bed: “Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime/ Tells me from you that now it is bed-time” (9-10). This undressing combined with the expedient nature of the speaker’s requests allows for reader access to the female body. Whether or not these instructions are being followed, or even whether they are being heard; the licentiousness of the speaker is the only certainty (Hattaway 217).

An allusion to a wedding night is found in the next few lines when the speaker mentions “[Her] gown going off such beauteous state reveals” (13). Seeing her beautiful body beneath her gown, he begs her to undress, beckoning off her “coronet” (a small crown), her hose and shoes, and her “white robes” (15-19). Eager about a night of

unrestricted exploration ahead of him, the speaker daydreams and pleads with his beloved: “Licence my roving hands, and let them go/ Before, behind, between, above, below” (25-28). “Roving,” according to Albert C. Labriola has a two-fold significance: wandering and robbing. Intrusion and invasion are implied, and the non-cooperation of the woman remains, assailed again and again by the male’s relentless fantasies (Hattaway 218). He remarks what an amazing sight her nude figure will be and likens it to “America,” a “Newfoundland” (27). While the female seems somewhat commodified in this poem, being compared to the New World, a kingdom “safest,” (and likely most pure), “with one man mann’d,” Donne surprisingly exceeds expectations as well as his reputation as a misogynist (28-29). The speaker’s tone becomes much more reverent when he cries: “How am I blest in thus discovering thee!” (30). Fraught with a tone of male supremacy and ownership, the speaker clearly admires his new wife/mistress and claims that to “enter in these bonds,” (most likely the bonds of marriage and/or adultery), “is to be free;/ Then, where my hand is set, my soul shall be” (31-32). The speaker relationship with his mistress seems to be one of utmost adoration and devotion. He feels free though held fast by “the bonds” of marriage. And wherever his hand lies, wherever he touches, so to does his soul. By laying his hand on different parts of the female body, the speaker fills her as one would an empty vessel. By placing his soul in the female body, the male can once again invade the female, Donne and his speaker asserting their male dominance over the “glorious nothingness” which is the female form.

Donne’s speaker revels in the “business of undressing his mistress in stages, his excitement mounting as she acquiesces until the climactic exclamation, ‘Full nakedness!’”(32)(Nutt 8).The young mistress is completely unclothed and the speaker is

overjoyed! In response, he remarks: “as souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be/ To taste whole joys” (32-35). Here, the body is comparable to the soul in that they both want freedom. Referring back to “The Extasie” and Donne’s idea that souls/spirits can leave the body to mingle with other souls, the speaker notes that for the body to “taste whole joys” as disembodied souls do, the bodies must be just as naked and vulnerable; unclothed. Joe Nutt, author of *John Donne: The Poems*, stresses that evidently Donne feels no need to be decorous. Again, Donne wrote for a very limited coterie of friends, and it is possible that this “erotic” poem was not meant for publication. Donne seemed to have little time for the chivalrous poetry which was plentiful in Elizabethan England, and was always conscious of his own uniquely rough voice. “In fact,” Nutt writes, “Donne openly decried his own poetry as trivial and insignificant, and kept few copies of his poems” (9). Returning to the poem, now most openly expressing a lustful tone, Donne uses the classical conceit of Atlanta for the speaker to convince his mistress that external beauty (costuming) is nothing compared to the beauty of nudity. “Gems which you women use/ Are like Atlanta’s ball cast in men’s views.”

To correctly read and understand this line as Donne meant it to be read, one needs some background information. In ancient mythology, Atlanta was a very beautiful Greek princess, and could run faster than any man in Greece. However, she was forbidden from competing in the Olympic Games. Angered, she refused to marry until she found a man that was speedier than she; any man who could not keep up, would be killed. However, there was a man Hippomenes, who so desperately wanted to marry Atlanta, that he consulted the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite, for help. Aphrodite gave Hippomenes three golden apples, instructing him to throw the apples in Atlanta’s path as she ran.

Distracted, Atlanta would stop to observe them and Hippomenes could run past, winning the race, and the heart of Atlanta. It took all three apples and all of his speed, but Hippomenes finally succeeded, winning the race and Atlanta's hand. Donne's use of this conceit further commentates on the vanity of the human, especially the human in love. Gems which catch a man's eye are likened to the golden apples thrown in the path of Atlanta; they are meant to distract. When a "fool's eye lighteth on the gem,/ His earthly soul might court that, not them" (37-38). A foolish man's earthly, and in Donne's opinion, shallow self might focus solely on the beauty of the gem, like one would focus on "pictures, or...books' gay coverings," rather than the beauty of the female herself. Despite this intricate pun, this conceit could also be a compliment to his lady; the speaker is willing to twist entire myths just to compliment his lady. The troublesome apples of Atlanta form a neat tie with the contest won by Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love who aided Hippomenes. Aphrodite was the winner of the golden apple awarded by Paris in Homer's *The Iliad*. Both poems (Donne's and Homer's) have this object in common directly, as well as two fixed contests - one of speed, the other of beauty.

Unfortunately, Donne realizes that women are "mystic books" and will only reveal themselves by choice, hence the badgering the speaker must do to persuade his mistress into undressing (41). To Donne's speaker, and possibly to Donne himself, the female body is a text to be read. With the body textualized, one can more easily read into the erotic sphere, especially "reading" into body language. Just as in "Witchcraft Upon a Picture" when Donne's speaker "reads" his lover's face, here the speaker reads his lover's body. Those to whom these women choose to "impute their grace upon" are merely bystanders, but recognize the grace dignified upon them when the book is opened and the

contents revealed (42). The speaker continues his praise of the woman's body as something mysterious, complex and desired by finalizing his persuasive metaphors with a simile. Comparing himself to a 'midwife,' a relationship any woman would recognize as ultimately intimate, he asks his mistress to reveal herself, "as liberally as to thy midwife show" (44). "Cast all, yea, this white linen hence;/ There is no penance due to innocence" the speaker calls. The request to remove the white clothing simply because it is inappropriate - the woman is not innocent or penitent in this situation - is a viable translation of these lines, as well as another version implying that the act about to be committed is so pure that no penance is needed, hence the white cloth isn't needed either. To demolish the last of her moral reservations and/or nervousness, Donne simultaneously focusing upon the abstract idea of penance and the physical removal of garments. In doing this, Donne's speaker sustains a duality within the poem that assumes him higher, and more realized, than his female counterpart.

He continues this sense of superiority, and tone of urgency and eagerness, in the closing lines: "To teach thee, I am naked first; why then,/ What needst thou have more covering than a man?" (47-48). The poem's end lines are an ambiguous pun: a woman needs no more covering than a man does, and a woman needs no more than a man to cover her. The idiom derives from the seventeenth century meaning of the word "cover," "to inseminate" (Hattaway 222). The poem was not written to a woman, is not a negotiation with a woman, but is an exploration of a paradigmatic confrontation between the overt, obvious sexuality of the man and the elusive and inscrutable object of his desire. Exuding the same confidence and strength throughout the poem, Donne's speaker is incapable of settling for mere beauty, and interestingly we end up no wiser about her



looks or character than we began (Nutt 46). The woman is an objectified body at which speech is aimed, and this poem is no exception to the idea that many Jacobean texts disintegrate under the twin drive to represent and destroy women (Barker 94).

As presented by Donne's poetry, his love of dualism between male and female, body and soul caused the Jacobean poetic body to be at once sacred and profane, tortured and celebrated in the same gesture (Barker 24). Donne's life and energy were dependent on paradoxes, the material and the immaterial. Thus we see Donne's influence on modern poetry based on a misogynistic tone yet an uncontrolled obsession with women, echoing and challenging stereotypes. An interesting endnote, a few months before his death, Donne commissioned this portrait of himself as he expected to appear when he rose from the grave at the Apocalypse. He hung the portrait on his wall as a reminder of the transience of life. This trope regarding the body-soul connection followed Donne throughout life, onto his death bed. By commissioning a portrait of his dying body, Donne was able to distance himself from the corporeal and focus on the ethereal. By acknowledging his soul's priority throughout life, Donne created for himself a seemingly peaceful death experience. His body was a vessel for something more sacred; and his soul was a filling for the form that is the body. Rather than placing a mirror in front of his death bed, Donne desired a peaceful, complacent view of his soul exiting the body. His body and soul must be perfect for his rising at the Apocalypse; he must exhibit a perfect union between body and soul at the Second Coming. Something that Donne strove for in his poetry, as well as in life, a strong, balanced body-soul connection was in his eyes was the most imperative aspect of human life. And not only within males, but females as well. Because Donne was male, he could easily interpret and gather



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**AIR AND ANGELS**

TWICE or thrice had I loved thee,  
 Before I knew thy face or name ;  
 So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame  
 Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be.  
 Still when, to where thou wert, I  
 came,  
 Some lovely glorious nothing did I see.  
 But since my soul, whose child love  
 is,  
 Takes limbs of flesh, and else could  
 nothing do,  
 More subtle than the parent is  
 Love must not be, but take a body too ;  
 And therefore what thou wert, and  
 who,  
 I bid Love ask, and now  
 That it assume thy body, I allow,  
 And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow.

Whilst thus to ballast love I thought,  
 And so more steadily to have gone,  
 With wares which would sink  
 admiration,  
 I saw I had love's pinnacle overfraught;  
 Thy every hair for love to work upon  
 Is much too much; some fitter must be  
 sought;  
 For, nor in nothing, nor in things  
 Extreme, and scattering bright, can love  
 inhere;  
 Then as an angel face and wings  
 Of air, not pure as it, yet pure doth wear,  
 So thy love may be my love's sphere;  
 Just such disparity  
 As is 'twixt air's and angels' purity,  
 'Twixt women's love, and men's, will  
 ever be.

**A LECTURE UPON THE SHADOW**

STAND still, and I will read to thee  
 A lecture, Love, in Love's philosophy.  
 These three hours that we have spent,  
 Walking here, two shadows went  
 Along with us, which we ourselves  
 produced.  
 But, now the sun is just above our head,  
 We do those shadows tread,  
 And to brave clearness all things are  
 reduced.  
 So whilst our infant loves did grow,  
 Disguises did, and shadows, flow  
 From us and our cares; but now 'tis not  
 so.

That love hath not attain'd the highest  
 degree,  
 Which is still diligent lest others see.

Except our loves at this noon stay,  
 We shall new shadows make the other  
 way.  
 As the first were made to blind  
 Others, these which come behind  
 Will work upon ourselves, and blind our  
 eyes.  
 If our loves faint, and westerwardly  
 decline,  
 To me thou, falsely, thine  
 And I to thee mine actions shall  
 disguise.  
 The morning shadows wear away,  
 But these grow longer all the day;  
 But O ! love's day is short, if love decay.

Love is a growing, or full constant light,  
 And his short minute, after noon, is  
 night.

**WITCHCRAFT BY A PICTURE**

I FIX mine eye on thine, and there  
 Pity my picture burning in thine eye;  
 My picture drown'd in a transparent tear,  
 When I look lower I espy;  
 Hadst thou the wicked skill  
 By pictures made and marr'd, to kill,  
 How many ways mightst thou perform  
 thy will?

But now I've drunk thy sweet salt tears,  
 And though thou pour more, I'll  
 depart;  
 My picture vanished, vanish all fears  
 That I can be endamaged by that art;  
 Though thou retain of me  
 One picture more, yet that will be,  
 Being in thine own heart, from all malice  
 free.

**LOVE'S ALCHEMY**

Some that have deeper digg'd love's  
 mine than I,  
 Say, where his centric happiness doth  
 lie.

I have loved, and got, and told,  
 But should I love, get, tell, till I were  
 old,  
 I should not find that hidden mystery.

O ! 'tis imposture all ;  
 And as no chemic yet th' elixir got,  
 But glorifies his pregnant pot,  
 If by the way to him befall  
 Some odoriferous thing, or medicinal,  
 So, lovers dream a rich and long  
 delight,

But get a winter-seeming summer's  
 night.

Our ease, our thrift, our honour, and our  
 day,  
 Shall we for this vain bubble's shadow  
 pay?

Ends love in this, that my man  
 Can be as happy as I can, if he can  
 Endure the short scorn of a bridegroom's  
 play?

That loving wretch that swears,  
 'Tis not the bodies marry, but the minds,  
 Which he in her angelic finds,  
 Would swear as justly, that he  
 hears,  
 In that day's rude hoarse minstrelsy, the  
 spheres.

Hope not for mind in women; at their  
 best,

Sweetness and wit they are, but  
 mummy, possess'd.

**ELEGY XX  
 TO HIS MISTRESS GOING TO BED**

COME, madam, come, all rest my  
 powers defy ;  
 Until I labour, I in labour lie.  
 The foe ofttimes, having the foe in sight,  
 Is tired with standing, though he never  
 fight.

Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone  
 glittering,  
 But a far fairer world encompassing.  
 Unpin that spangled breast-plate, which  
 you wear,  
 That th' eyes of busy fools may be  
 stopp'd there.

Unlace yourself, for that harmonious  
 chime  
 Tells me from you that now it is bed-  
 time.

Off with that happy busk, which I envy,  
 That still can be, and still can stand so  
 nigh.

Your gown going off such beauteous  
 state reveals,

As when from flowery meads th' hill's  
 shadow steals.

Off with your wiry coronet, and show



The hairy diadems which on you do  
grow.  
Off with your hose and shoes ; then  
softly tread  
In this love's hallow'd temple, this soft  
bed.  
In such white robes heaven's angels used  
to be  
Revealed to men ; thou, angel, bring'st  
with thee  
A heaven-like Mahomet's paradise ; and  
though  
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know  
By this these angels from an evil sprite ;  
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh  
upright.

Licence my roving hands, and let  
them go  
Before, behind, between, above, below.  
O, my America, my Newfoundland,  
My kingdom, safest when with one man  
mann'd,  
My mine of precious stones, my empery  
;  
How am I blest in thus discovering thee !  
To enter in these bonds, is to be free ;  
Then, where my hand is set, my soul  
shall be.

Full nakedness ! All joys are due to  
thee ;  
As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed  
must be  
To taste whole joys. Gems which you  
women use  
Are like Atlanta's ball cast in men's  
views ;  
That, when a fool's eye lighteth on a  
gem,  
His earthly soul might court that, not  
them.  
Like pictures, or like books' gay  
coverings made  
For laymen, are all women thus array'd.  
Themselves are only mystic books,  
which we

—Whom their imputed grace will  
dignify—  
Must see reveal'd. Then, since that I  
may know,  
As liberally as to thy midwife show  
Thyself ; cast all, yea, this white linen  
hence ;  
There is no penance due to innocence :  
To teach thee, I am naked first ; why  
then,  
What needst thou have more covering  
than a man?