

The White Linen Fence in Donne's "Elegy XIX"

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Although John Donne is well known for his employment of biblical terminology and allusion in the prose and poetry of his later life, the way he used biblical terminology and allusion in his amatory poems is generally not so well known. No doubt, one reason for the neglect of this consideration is that Donne's love poems are such fine examples of "the anti-Ciceronian revolt against flowering rhetoric in an attempt to create a medium fitted to render the realistic questioning, complexities of private experience in a world of changing values" (Bush 132), that their importance as such excellent expressions of this attempt eclipses any effort to tie their content to biblical themes. Moreover, readers of these poems look no further than Douglas Bush who simply sees the writer as one who "outdoes the Petrarchans in glorifying love and his mistress with argumentative hyperbole" (161) and C.S. Lewis who sees in them, and those poems of other metaphysical poets, "a design to produce poetic shocks" which would give pleasure "rich in tragic or comic possibilities" by breaking the rules of organized sensibility (Lewis 540). Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of any confirmation from these two outstanding authorities on Donne, it seems that in at least one of his love poems, "Elegy XIX," Donne has developed a classical biblical theme which is revealed only by his rather subtle use of theological terms and biblical allusions.

Donne's "Elegy XIX" "To His Coy Mistress Going to Bed" depicts the process of sexual conquest in bold, military terms. The first four lines of this dramatic monologue introduce the persona as an expeditionary in search of a new empire to conquer and to possess. The first sentence, "Come, Madam, Come,"

an imperative tmesis,¹ reveals the speaker who is now ready to carry out his strategy. His hypallagic,² paronomasic³ play on words and meanings in these lines: "Until I labor, I in labor lie. / The foe oftimes having the foe in sight" (11. 2-3), clearly set the shocking, satiric tone of self-centered, irreverent sensuality. The fourth line, "Is tired with standing though he never fight," concludes the prelude to his conquest and cloaks his sexual imagery with classical military personification.

We have learned from these four lines, then, that the speaker will not tolerate any resistance from his mistress, that he has labored to constrain the unleashing of his powers for as long as he can, and that he views his sexual encounter as a foe meeting a foe. The double entendre in "Until I labor, I in labor lie" and "The foe oftimes, having the foe in sight" (11. 2-3), plus the phallic imagery in "Is tired of standing though he never fight" (1. 4), are highly effective in providing an imaginative background for his intense concentration on directing his mistress's disrobing.

The next sixteen lines that complete this twenty-four line stanza are, in reality, a poetic strip-tease which is directed by the poet-persona; however, the poet's use of figures of speech and thought enables him to expand the concept of the comic world of carnal teasing into a more serious theological consideration of the place of physical love in the natural world. The process of this command performance is punctuated by lines that begin with imperative verbs and either a spondaic or a trochaic foot. Commencing with "Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glittering, / But a far fairer world encompassing" (11. 5-6), the poet establishes the comparison of the physical world of sexual pleasure with the more spiritual world of love which is only known through his oblique allusion to "heaven" and that "far fairer world."

Therefore, it is in the assertive voice of a conqueror that the poet commands his mistress to "Off with that girdle" (1. 5), "Unpin that spangled breastplate" (1. 7), "Unlace yourself" (1. 9), "Off with that happy busk" (1. 11), "Off with that wiry coronet" (1. 15), and "Now off with those shoes" (1. 17). His

choice of the order of the removal of her love armor, her clothing, not only reveals his rebellion against the accepted rhetorical rule of orderly describing a person which had been recommended by Geoffrey of Vinsauf in his *Poetria Nova* and had been utilized by writers of love poetry since the Middle Ages, but his choice of order also reveals the primary focus of the poet's attention to his mistress's body. He commands her to remove her clothing in this order : girdle (scarf from around the waist), breastplate (brooch from her bosom), bodice (a laced-up, outside corselet), busk (undergarment which had been stiffened with whale bone or metal), then gown, the cap, and last of all, the shoes. At one time, he has her standing before him as a vulnerable, ridiculous figure attired only in her "wiry coronet" and her shoes. This is indeed not the portrait of a woman whom he loves and respects, despite his exaltation of the paradise which he believes lies beyond the portals of her nakedness. This almost ridiculous portrait is one of a conquered foe.

In each of his commands to remove a particular article of clothing is juxtaposed an element of his carnal desire. With the command to take off her girdle can be felt his lustful anticipation of more sexual stimulation; with the unpinning of her "breastplate" can be understood his jealousy that the eyes of no "busy fool" may see what he is about to see; and with the unlacing of her bodice an adumbration of the climax is connotated in that "harmonious chime" which it generates (1. 9). He envies her busk because it stands so near to her body; he is caught up with rapture as her nakedness reveals the full glory of physical womanhood. Though he pauses to worship for a moment, he is immediately drawn back to his sovereign purpose: he must conqueror be! His command to take off the wiry coronet is especially significant when one considers that a coronet is a small but inferior crown worn by a noble person who exists under the aegis of a sovereign lord. She had been stripped down to that primitive common denominator, nakedness, while he surveys his kingdom of pleasure.

His last command, "Now off with those shoes," opens up a new vista of his estimation of her relationship to him and also of our understanding of it. This line 17, "Now off with those shoes, then safely tread" is an allusion to the experience which Moses had in his encounter with God at Mt. Sinai. Moses had been herding his father-in-law's sheep in the lonely region around Mt. Sinai when suddenly he saw a burning bush which continued to burn without being consumed. He turned aside to marvel at what he saw :

And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses, and he said, Here am I. And he [God] said, Draw not nigh hither : put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground! (Ex. iii. 4-5)

The implication of this allusion is that his mistress must approach the bed upon which he is ensconced in a spirit of worship because it is "love's hallowed temple." With these words, a direct parallel is drawn between the physical love-relationship of a man and a woman and the love-relationship of man and God; however, in the poet's list of priorities, he has made himself the more-than-equal partner of the woman in the sense that though she is "white robed like an angel," she must provide a "heaven like Mahomet's paradise" in deference to his physical and spiritual superiority.

The allusion to a paradise where women are only admitted in order to provide pleasures for the men is a far cry from the Old Testament concept of connubial love portrayed by Solomon in his Song of Songs. In Solomon's story of human love, which is an archetype of God's love for redeemed man, the bride and bridegroom come together in mutual exaltation of each other and conjoin in a consumation of that love which Solomon describes in this manner :

Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountains of myrrh [the Venus mound] , and to the hill of frankincense [another reference to the

Venus mound] . Thou art all fair, my love ; there is no spot in thee. (Song of Sol. iv. 6-7)

Though Solomon's love for the Shunamite maiden would have served as a sensual model of physical pleasure, and though the poet has already alluded to an Old Testament story in order to express himself to his mistress, he deliberately chooses Mahomet's paradise of pleasure instead of Solomon's garden of spices (Song. Sol. iv. 16) because of his emphasis on the sovereignty of his aggressive male role.

The eight-line stanza that follows this long twenty-four line stanza contains not one religious or militant word. It is an expression of his exultation in possessing her as his realm of delight. The first line of this stanza begins with his last command : "License my roving hands, and let them go" (l. 25). This line and the following line, "Before, behind, between, above, below" (l. 26) are characterized by long vowel sounds, nasal sounds, and the sounds of the beautiful parachesis⁵ of the last line. These sounds slow the movement of the rhythm and thought down to a pace of musing wonder. His shout of victory, "O my America, my new-found-land" (l. 27) is emphasized by its metrical cadence : two dactyls, an iamb, and a spondee. The poet then quietly glories in his kingdom using the language of a king who is surveying a realm of which he is the absolute lord.

In the last full stanza of the poem, the poet-persona philosophically examines his address to his mistress in order to speak to "full nakedness" to whom he attributes his joys since he sees a relationship between "unbodied souls" and "unclothed bodies" (expressed with a polyptoton⁶). He then resumes addressing his mistress. The poet's use of iambic pentameter, rhymed couplets enhances the quiet conversational tone of this stanza as he muses to her that "you women" use jewels to entice men to covet not the gems but the women who wear them. He tells her that women are like books designed for laymen : the cover is made especially attractive for the purpose of inviting attention to their more mystic contents (l. 41). So, women are books with attractive covers and

mystic contents, and the only way that men may know these contents rests in the women's willingness to "impute grace" unto the suppliant men. In other words, the woman has the power, like God, to bestow grace (unmerited favor) on whomever she will so that this favored man might see her nakedness "revealed" (l. 43). Continuing with his logical progression, he reasons with her, "Then, since that I may know, /As liberally as to a midwife show/Thyself, cast all, yea, this white linen hence" because "there is no penance due to innocence" (ll. 43-46). This attitude of the poet and the nature of his reasoning is didactic.

Clearly, then, the object of the poet's didactic approach to physical love is a theological one. In order to understand natural love in a natural world, he concludes in ll. 33-35 that full nakedness is essential in order to "taste whole joys." Furthermore, he reasons that if women so use material beauty aids in alluring men to themselves and that if women "do impute grace" to men to whom they elect to reveal themselves, then there is no need that the white linen barrier of religious prohibition or restriction should hinder the revelation of their full, sensuous capabilities even to the extent that the lover sees the woman in her most vulnerable and painful position of birthing new life into the world. The visual hindrance of the white linen and the poet-persona's admonition to "cast all, yea, this white linen hence" is an allusion to the white linen fence which was erected around Moses's tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex. xxvii. 9-18). Its symbolism is that of a fragile wall of purity which keeps the impure from approaching the sacred dwelling place of the presence of God and indicates that the only way man can approach God is by way of the altar of burnt offering where sacrifices for sins are made. It is interesting to note that before a sacrifice for sin could be made, the ritual of purification had to be observed. Two requirements were mandated in this ritual: the washing of clothing and three days of sexual abstinence (Tenney 832 and Ex. xix. 14).

The poet is, in reality, refusing to acknowledge that sin is involved in this kingdom of sensual delights, and he rebels against

any religious hindrances of his full possession of them because he reasons that "There is no penance due to innocence" (l. 46). In this line he is alluding to the tragic consequences of Adam's sin.

And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him,
Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the
garden of Eden or paradise and was afraid, *because I was
naked* [my emphasis]; and I hid myself. And he said,
Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of
the tree, whereof I commanded that thou shouldest not
eat? And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to
be with me, she did give me of the tree, and I did eat.
(Gen. iii. 9-12)

So, with this allusion, he really is trying to undo the sinful nature which he inherited from Adam and the judgment of God on Adam's sin, thereby returning to the paradise of God without coming to grips with God's judgment which is implied in the white linen "fence" which hinders the full revelation of his mistress's nakedness with all its unbridled licentious possibilities. The judgment of God upon Adam and Eve which drove them out of the garden in the first place was brought about because of their loss of innocence, knowing right from wrong, which is indicated in the purity of their original nakedness. With the loss of innocence came the loss of paradise and the loss conscienceless nakedness.

Finally, three aspects of the poet-persona's theology of love become clear. First, while the poet-lover would like to return to the pristine innocence of the garden of sexual delight, he is not willing to forsake the titillating naughtiness which accompanies the sexual appetite of fallen man. Next, although he has reasoned with his mistress that she should not hesitate to return to the state of innocence enjoyed by Eve in the garden because there was no "penance in innocence," he quite obviously does not want her to remember that her mother, Eve, before her fall was not under the express dominion of Adam since the judgment of God on her was that she should be ruled by her husband (Gen. iii. 16). Third, the whole of the poet's address to his mistress reveals that though he

is trying to return to the paradise of man's first innocence, her return should not be as complete as his should be. She would still have need of assistance in childbirth (a midwife); she would still be "covered" by him. There is no presence of God in the paradise to which he wishes to return; there only he is sovereign and lord. He will teach her to be innocent again (ll. 47-48).

In the light of Donne's rebellious effort to return to Eden's pleasure without appropriating the blood sacrifices of the second Adam, Jesus, it is no wonder that God would have used such tactics with him which would cause him to cry out later :

Batter my heart, three-personed God ; for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend ;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
(Donne 757)

It seems that battering was the only way God had of getting Jack Donne's attention before He returned him to a paradise where the temple of love was but where the joys of the spirit were more precious.

“Elegy XIX”
To His Coy Mistress Going to Bed

Come, Madam, come ! All rest my powers defy ; 1
Until I labor, I in labor lie. 2
The foe oftimes, having the foe in sight, 3
Is tired with standing though he never fight 4
Off with that girdle, like heaven’s zone glittering, 5
But a far fairer world encompassing. 6
Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear, 7
That th’ eyes of busy fools may be stopped there. 8
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime 9
Tells me from you that now it is bedtime. 10
Off with that happy busk, which I envy, 11
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh. 12
Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals 13
As when from flow’ry meads th’ hill’s shadow steal. 14
Off with that wiry coronet, and show 15
The hairy diadem which on you doth grow. 16
Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread 17
In this, love’s hallowed temple, this soft bed. 18
In such white robes heaven’s angels used to be 19
Received by men ; thou, angel, bring’st with thee 20
A heaven like Mahomet’s paradise ; and though 21
Ill spirits walk in white, we eas’ly know 22
By this these angels from an evil sprite : 23
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright. 24
License my roving hands, and let them go 25
Before, behind, between, above, below. 26
O my America, my new-found-land ! 27
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned 28
My mine of precious stones, my empery, 29
How blest am I in this discovering thee ! 30

To enter in these bonds is to be free ;	31
Then where my hand is set my seal shall be,	32
Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee !	33
As souls unbodied, bodies unclouted must be	34
To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use	35
Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views	36
That, when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem,	37
His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them.	38
Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made	39
For laymen, are all women thus arrayed ;	40
Themselves are mystic books, which only we	41
Whom their imputed grace will dignify,	42
Must see revealed. Then, since that I may know,	43
As liberally as to a midwife show	44
Thyself ; cast all, yea, this white linen hence ;	45
There is no penance due to innocence.	46
To teach thee, I am naked first ; why then,	47
What need'st thou have more covering than a man ?	48
	(Donne 757)

Notes

1) For the reader untrained in classical rhetoric, I shall provide definitions of rhetorical terms I have used which are not generally found in smaller dictionaries. All definitions are taken from Richard A. Lanham's *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, published by the University of California Press at Berkeley in 1968.

Tmesis ([t] ME sis) Greek. A cutting. Repetition of a word with one or a few words in between : "my heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed" (Lanham 33, 93).

2) Hypallage, n. hypallagic, adj. (hy PAL la ge - hy PAL la gic) Greek. Interchange, exchange. Awkward or humorous changing of agreement or application of words, as with Bottom in *Midsummers Night's Dream*, v. i :

"I see a voice. Now will I to the chink

To spy and I can hear my Thisby's face" (Lanham 56).

3) Paronomasia (par on o MAS i a) Greek. Punning ; Playing on the sounds and meanings of words similar but not identical in sound (Lanham 73).

4) All biblical references are from the King James Version of the Bible.

5) Parachesis (par e CHE sis) Greek. Likeness of sound. The repetition of the same sound in words in close or immediate succession (Lanham 72).

6) Polyptoton (pol lyp TO ton) Greek. Employment of the same word in various cases.

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