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Donne's "Elegy 19": To His Mistress Transcending the Bed, Femininity, and Gender Distinction

Criticism on Donne's poetry, let alone his Elegies, has come up with a few answers to the poet's depiction on women. One group ignores it entirely, chalking up any female misanthropy to nothing more than his era; to them, he merely reflects common gender roles, and any cries of misogyny are too focused on constructing a flaw which doesn't exist.

Another group of critics draw that male chauvinism out and portray it as the central feature of Donne's works. He reinforces stereotypes, they say; he feels threatened by femininity and wishes to relegate them to a lesser position; he asserts male dominance and authority, belittles women, and reduces them to a body and a source of pleasure.

The third group attempts to blend these two, accepting that there are misogynistic tendencies in Donne's poetry but they are placed alongside blurred gender roles, a phenomenon that complicates a simple reading as Donne being anti-feminist. It's this group that comes closest to capturing the complexity inherent in Donne, a complexity that the others miss in their oversimplifications. But this section of criticism, too, often stops short. They point out Donne's paradoxes, his gender juxtapositions, and the contradicting pro- and anti-feminism, but they seem to overlook one key element of Donne's writings. In addition to the blurring of gender roles and dynamics, there is also a blurring of spirituality alongside gender. The sacred combines with sexual union, and as a result, gender stratification breaks down.

Achsah Guibbory argues that the Elegies suggest that the poet was “deeply disturbed by the sense that the old hierarchical order was threatened by a blurring of gender and sex distinctions” (829), that the juxtaposition of femininity onto masculinity (and vice-versa) serves to reprove the woman. Viewed in this light, “Elegy 19”’s colonial metaphor, for example, is fairly straightforward. The speaker wishes to conquer the woman and, momentarily weakened by her beauty and his desire, reclaim his dominance over her.

Rebecca Ann Bach also calls forth Donne’s misogyny. She writes that Donne adheres to “the principles that women are naturally inferior to men,” a notion in line with Guibbory’s reading. Bach then goes on to say that Donne’s poetry orders relationships into three tiers: first, man’s relationship with God, followed by his relationship with men, with sexual relationships with women coming in third (263). But “Elegy 19” rejects these tiers. While these separate relationships may exist and they may very well be distinct from one another, they are not rigidly stratified in this way. There is room for movement between these relationships; the lines between men and women may become blurred, as well as those between women and God.

Thus, any purely anti-feminist reading of the poem undermines itself and reveals, underlying the male chauvinism, a deeper sense of pro-femininity. Considering both of these views, the poem breaks down gender divisions and calls for a spiritual transcendence past such distinctions, equating the union of “man and woman” to be much more than the joining together of two sexes.

For this reason, labels such as “anti-feminist” are oversimplifications. Yes, the poem is misogynistic. Yes, the speaker commands his subject, orders her to strip down, takes away her liberty and reduces her to little more than a body for his carnal enjoyment. It’s dehumanizing, it’s

disrespectful, it's chauvinistic. It's a product of Donne's time. And it's a dangerously cursory reading.

The speaker begins outright with a command. In the first line, he beckons her, "come, madam, come" (Donne 1) and the rest of the poem is structured around his instructions to remove her clothes. In the first stanza alone, there are at least seven instructions for the woman's undressing, and despite being the subject, the woman is rather absent. The poem is very strictly from the man's point of view and he very clearly has no regard for whether or not the woman desires to remove her clothes. With all of the beauty that lies beneath those garments, the "far fairer world" (6) deserves to be freed. The speaker treads a line between desperate, entertaining, and romantic, but it's decidedly chauvinistic either way.

That anti-feminist attitude only heightens when the speaker clearly begins to depict all women as Others, rather than just the subject. He refers to "you women" (15) and distances himself from his mistress. At this point, there is no equality between the man and the woman. She is a being outside of him, in both a physical and a spiritual sense. Then, "which only we...must see revealed" (7). Women are not included in the plural subject; women are the 'them' to his 'we' and, initially, that distinction seems unwavering and irrevocable. Not only is the woman destined to be separate from the speaker, but she is also an object in their encounter; this is for his 'enlightenment' as he "see[s her] revealed," and she seemingly cannot receive the same sort of benefit.

In continuing the idea of Otherness, of something exotic and (to borrow concepts from the anthropological sense of Otherness) savage, the speaker sees the woman as something to be conquered. He compares her to America; his "new-found-land" (27), with she as his "empyry" (29). She belongs to him and she's a wild, untamed land to be discovered and reigned in. The

plea here is not simply to enjoy the woman but to conquer her. So far, a misogynist viewpoint stands firm, as the speaker not only places the woman beneath him but also strips away her humanity and independence.

But two lines in this stanza undermine this reading and contradict its arguments. First: the speaker commands that the woman “license” his roving hands (25). He’s asking for permission so that he can, to continue the earlier metaphor, “discover” her (30). At this point, it can hardly be considered a command; the power lies in the woman. Or, alternately, the speaker specifically wants the woman to relinquish herself unto him. He’s not content with taking her but instead wants her to enjoy their passion just the same. So while, yes, there’s a sense of misogyny still present, it’s hardly of the degree implied by “my empery” (29).

The second line of note, “to enter in these bonds is to be free” (31), introduces a sense of spirituality not present in the earlier colonial language. The line holds dual meaning: it certainly refers to freedom in a slave-master, colonized-colonizer sense; at the same time, it refers to a spiritual freedom, an almost-transcendental unbinding that the speaker claims their encounter will bring. As we will see, this spirituality surfaces throughout much of the poem and, in some regards, overtakes the misogyny.

It’s difficult to embark on reading the poem as strictly anti-feminist because that reading ends up working against itself. If we are to read into that colonial metaphor, then we must also accept that the woman ‘frees’ the man, which implies that she held him captive and held power over him. Which, then, defeats the idea of the man domineering the woman. For every case of misogyny, there is a deeper, pro-feminine equivalent.

This self-defeating misogyny continues through the poem. The reference to Atalanta (36) is a particularly strong example, highlighting Donne’s ability to complicate seemingly simple

metaphors. According to myth, Atalanta agrees to marry only a man who could beat her in a race. Hippomenes, with the help of Aphrodite, distracts Atalanta with three irresistible apples (“Atalanta’s balls,” in Donne, 36). He drops them during the race, becomes the victor, and marries Atalanta. Through deception, Hippomenes is able to ‘conquer’ Atalanta and claim her as his bride. It aligns, then, with a reading of “Elegy 19” as misogynistic; the man holds power over the woman and he determines to whom she gives herself.

In the poem, though, the man is not the one using trickery. It’s the woman’s jewelry which is “like Atlanta’s balls, cast in men’s views” (36), and, presumably, the woman is the equivalent of Hippomenes. The myth is reversed; the woman holds sway over the male speaker and she is the one deceiving him. Of course, one image is not enough to undermine the entirety of the poem.

Just as it’s difficult to write off the poem as misogynistic, it’s an oversimplification to merely claim the opposite. Still, such examples point to the folly of writing off Donne’s poetry as purely misogynistic, product of the period or no. As the Atalanta and America lines reflect, there is a much more complicated gender dynamic than one of simple male authority. The poem exhibits both misogyny and feminism; it simultaneously stands and breaks under scrutiny from both lenses. It’s a paradox, to be sure, but Donne reveals that he’s all-too-familiar with working with paradox. From even the opening lines of “Elegy 19,” we see an example: “Until I labor, I in labor lie” (2). Ignoring the play on words, the speaker is in a state of both laboring and not laboring; he is both and neither.

As well, the very subject of the poem exists in a contradiction. The speaker seems to be in the throes of passion, excitedly calling for his muse to strip down. But he’s not calling for her to spontaneously remove her clothes and join with him; rather, he systematically instructs her to

remove each piece. When she's done so, he asks for permission to allow his "roving hands" (25) over her body. It hardly sounds like an excited man unable to control himself, but the repeated prepositions in the very next line suggest that he *is* lost in his passion (Bell 208).

So when even the core situation of the poem is riddled in contradiction, it's problematic to view gender too simply. Consider the line, "the foe oft-times having the foe in sight" (Donne 3): it's this paradox that sheds light on the gender divisions within the poem. There is no distinction between foe and its opposite; to one, the other is always the foe. Similarly, the division between man and woman in the poem is an arbitrary one. Both are in control, both hold power, both are subject to and dominant over the other. Arguing simply one or the other is a fruitless endeavor.

The poem does not offer a concrete solution to these issues nor does it portray a clear definition of male-female relationships; instead, it underlies these distinct gender roles with spirituality. At the same time as the possible degradation, there is an elevation of the woman. She is placed on a pedestal which no one could feasibly reach, but there's no sense of mockery in the speaker's tone. The girdle glistens "like heaven's zone" (5), but its removal reveals "a far fairer world" (6) than heaven. The woman is so revered that she surpasses even paradise. Furthermore, she brings with her "a heaven like Mahomet's Paradise" (21); she holds dominion over the heavens themselves and is a matriarch in the strongest sense.

Though, in line with the other allusions, "Mahomet's Paradise" also complicates a pure reading of "Elegy 19." Is the woman, then, one of the beautiful virgins accompanied by this Islamic heaven, and the speaker the faithful? Note that, in the same sentence, he addresses her as "angel" (20). She is a messenger from heaven, and he does not ask her to *become* Paradise but to *bring* it, to deliver it unto him. She is merely the means to paradise, and the moment of

transcendence is closely tied to it specifically being “Mahomet’s.” It is a paradise based around sexuality and intercourse, and by entering into a sexual union, the couple can achieve that perfection.

This transcendence is necessitated by a domineering force on both the man and the woman. Though the colonial metaphor calls into question whether male dominates female or the other way around, there is also the oppression brought forth by clothing. Their garments offend freedom of the soul - “As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be” (34). Only by shedding these clothes can the man and woman make their way towards a true liberation. In a way, too, adornment taints freedom. It corrupts natural beauty, which approaches perfection without the needs for dressing-up. The speaker, addressing women in general and hence giving a broad diatribe, says “that when a fool’s eye lighteth on a gem, / his earthly soul may covet theirs, not them” (37-38). It is foolish to admire the jewelry, especially when it is set against a backdrop as lovely and beautiful as the woman’s body.

Which, it’s important to note, means that the body is a very important part of the poem’s worldview. It is not secondary to the soul, and the fact that the majority of the poem deals with the speaker’s desire for the woman’s physical body points to this. Rather, the poem attempts to bridge the disconnect between body and soul, linking them through both metaphor and paradox; the former through this aforementioned “America, my newfound homeland” (26) image, the latter due to the fact that the soul and body *are* distinct and *are* separate at the same time as being connected. As an extension of this, gender roles within the poem are embedded in a similar paradox. And to reconcile this, the poem also breaks down their rigidity.

Critics have pointed to this blurring of gender roles, but much of this criticism has focused on the social implications; the couple in the poem is “transgressing against the sexual

roles assigned by their culture” (Benet 35). I argue that they are not “transgressing” anything - the word implies violation, a sense that they are doing something that is not allowed. And while that may be true in a social context, focusing on this idea leads one to believe that Donne is calling for reformation or an outright rejection of those differences. Rather, he is fully acknowledging them and, in doing so, setting up the gravity of the ensuing union. Freed from their clothes, the couple in the poem *transcends* these boundaries, but does not transgress them. It is a beautiful act, a spiritual act, and a liberating act - but not a violating one, in either a social or spiritual context.

Note that, at the poem’s end, both the speaker and the subject (at least, in the speaker’s hopes) are naked. Sandy Feinstein explores this in a lengthy essay about the role of the busk in “Elegy 19” (one of only a few detailed essays working specifically with this poem) and recounts that, in Donne’s time, the busk was a garment which “may have been seen as heralding...a woman’s control over her body, if not sexuality” (68). It stiffened the upper body, covered the woman, and became “a militant form of transference” (67). By removing this busk, then, the woman is highlighting her differences from the male. At this point, though the speaker calls for them both to be equally naked, the differences between he and subject are at their most apparent.

This serves a dual role in the poem: on the one hand, it adds to the sense of paradox, because they are at both the height of their similarities and the height of their differences. In an essay on gender roles in Donne’s poetry, Susannah Mintz writes that his poetry often “offers the possibility of both identification with women and a recognition of their separateness” (580). We see that in effect here, and Mintz goes on to explore this dynamic in “The Flea,” “The Good-Morrow,” “A Valediction: Of Weeping,” and “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” She does not examine “Elegy 19,” however, and thus misses a key aspect of this paradox.

She concludes that, in Donne, “acts of identification become ways of questioning - transgressing - the very terms of being male, being a self, and loving an other” (603). Again, the word “transgressing” is problematic, this time because the answer leaves out any idea of spirituality. It’s incomplete without this, especially considering it’s discussing a man as religious as Donne, and “Elegy 19” helps complete this explanation.

We return back to the idea of the busk and its removal. It, like the jewelry, takes away from beauty rather than adds to it, and thus is just as oppressive on the soul. By removing it, the speaker and the subject make efforts to free themselves in body and, in doing so, in soul. But this is clearly not enough, because the line speaking against the gems occurs *after* the command to remove the busk and the rest of the clothing. Only by joining together can they complete the liberation. Only then is the gap between body and soul closed.

Because the nudity highlights the differences between male and female, we are acutely aware that the speaker and the subject are separate beings. It is when they join together - and only when they join together - that they will transcend labels, distinctions, etc. As Jalen Mueller writes, it is “inconceivable that such equality might hold elsewhere than in the most intimate aspects of the man’s and woman’s love” (147). She points out, as well, that there is a “spiritual counterpart of this equality” (146). Body and soul, at this moment, are equivalent. Both shed their old forms and, through the union of man and woman, take on new identities. Even the phrase “union of man and woman” is inaccurate, because at this point they no longer are “man” and “woman.” They are something different, something indefinable.

The sense of indefinability is an organic one in the poem, and it grows as the woman undresses. As pointed out in Machado's exploration of eroticism in "Elegy 19", the poem shifts from being sight-focused to touch-focused around line 25 (201). But while that essay does not delve much further than the obvious erotic nature of the poem, there are spiritual implications to this progression. The speaker moves from observer to participant, but these cannot fully encapsulate the power of the subject. He moves on to the colonial metaphor which is, again, abandoned after a few lines. The sensory focus, followed by the colonialism, both fail to express his subject.

Then, immediately after, he shouts out the exclamation "Full nakedness!" (Donne 33) and begins speaking in abstractions, dedicating the poem to the concept of 'nakedness' and then to women in general before returning back to the subject. We're also hit with a flurry of spiritual language: "earthly soul" (38), "imputed grace" (42), and the stanza's end line, "There is no penance due to innocence" (46). The speaker's ability to describe the woman has failed and, as a result, he calls upon spirituality in order to capture his muse - and, more importantly, his intended union with her.

We run into trouble with the last line, however. The speaker, having shed his clothes, asks the woman, "what needst thou have more covering than a man" (48)? It can be read in two ways, both equally valid: the first as 'I have shed my clothes, so why should you have more covering than I do?'; the second, 'Why would you need anything more covering you than me?' implying that the speaker himself is acting as her cover.

Obviously, this second reading complicates the idea that the poem is not simply misogynistic. It reinforces the idea that the man is dominating her, that the woman is something to be conquered. Or, alternatively, he could be covering her in terms of protection, instilling the

idea of misguided male chauvinism and depicting the woman as frail and weak. Either way, this reading of the line seems to solidify the poem as sexist, oppressive, and in full support of gender stratification.

The first interpretation, that the man asks the woman to match him in (lack of) clothing, suggests the opposite. It reflects a sense of equality and union. It's in line with the aforementioned blending of power dynamics between the genders and it helps in a reading of their union as being transcendent. It's a more comforting interpretation.

Both readings, alone, are insufficient, and to understand why we must again return to the sense of paradox. It's important that this divisive line ends the poem, because by this point the reader should be so aware of Donne's frequent paradoxes as to avoid taking the ending at face value in either direction. The man and woman are, at the same time, equal and unequal, the same and different.

It's through this final paradox that we can finally understand the nature of that transcendence. Sex becomes the ultimate method of purity, a purity that cannot be contained by clothes, cannot be tainted by jewelry, and cannot be defined by labels - regardless of whether or not those labels exist outside of the union (and they do). In that moment, man and woman cease to adhere to both those specific categories and to the whole idea of categorization.

Some have pointed to Donne's portrayal of sex as sinful; Bach claims that his poetry presents a world in which "sexual desire is sinful, a worldly result of the original sin of our first parents" (263). But in "Elegy 19," the speaker assures the woman that "there is no penance due to innocence." Should she reveal herself, she has nothing to atone for. The sexual union is a joyous thing, a sacred thing and, being without sin, it's an act that presumably allows the couple

to ascend directly to paradise. There is nothing sinful about it; in fact, by revealing herself, the woman is “dignify[ing]” (Donne 42) the man.

The speaker reminds us that only an undefined “we” are permitted to understand the “mystic books” (41) that are women, and there’s an intellectual elevation implied alongside the aforementioned spiritual and physical ones. But, only a few lines earlier, the speaker calls up the image of “Atalanta’s balls” (36) - apples. Juxtaposed against the speaker’s adamancy that he deserves to understand those “mystic books” (“since that I may know” in line 43), the images indeed harken back to the “original sin of our first parents” that Bach mentions. Is the act a dignifying, just thing? Or is it the goal of the speaker’s blasphemous desire to eat the apple from that tree of knowledge, to join his soul to that of the woman and achieve that transcendence? As always in the poem, the answer is not clear, and it’s likely that both are true at the same time.

With these paradoxes, it’s important to step back from abstraction and re-enter the concrete situation of the poem. It is, after all, a man’s plea for a woman to remove her clothing. So, after establishing that the poem is both misogynistic and pro-feminist; that it elevates femininity and sexuality to spiritual realms; and that the union between the couple transcends, rather than transgresses, definition and gender distinctions, and takes on spiritual characteristics; an obvious question remains. Are these contradictions and spiritual implications nothing more than the speaker’s ploy? Are they smoke and mirrors, romantic fluff that he tells his subject to convince her all the more?

The idea is a bit reductive, but it would certainly undermine any feminism in the poem. And, considering that Donne’s erotic poetry is frequently thought of as being shared with his coterie to be enjoyed, it’s an idea worth considering. Brilliantly, though, the poem makes this a moot point: we are never given the woman’s response to these pleas. We get only the man’s

point of view and, at the end of the poem, he is the only one whom we know *for sure* is without clothes. If the sanctity inherent in the poem is nothing more than an elaborate line, the possibility exists that the woman sees right through it and, in this case, we can take the poem as Donne's mockery of such drawn-out pleas. If, on the other hand, she accepts, then we can rather definitively conclude that the poem is indeed misogynistic.

But since both possibilities are nothing more than conjecture, the poem must exist as both, and the paradoxes hinge on that ambiguity. It exhibits chauvinism, feminism, spirituality, and mockery simultaneously; and, since the couple in the poem cannot adhere to any of these labels, they transcend the need for them. By coming together, and by embodying so many contradicting concepts, the man and woman eliminate the need for distinction. In their union they become a spiritual being that transcends not simply definition, but the very need for definition to begin with.

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