THE TREATMENT OF THE FEMININE IN DONNE'S LOVE POETRY: SOME TRACES OF THE ROMAN ELEGY

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That John Donne's writings are, even nowadays, subject to controversy is eloquently demonstrated by the tremendous amount of criticism they generate, and the state of productive, dynamic perplexity that characterizes such criticism.[1]

This controversy is also open as far as women and the treatment they receive in the texts are concerned. In this regard, studies on gender construction during the Renaissance have recently raised special interest as an interdisciplinary field which offers new approaches to the literary work and also provides an account of the cultural history, the ideology and the structures of power that inform the text.[2]

Taking some Latin love elegies as his primary literary sources, John Donne recreates an image of woman that serves several purposes at once. On the one hand, it helps to subvert the codes of the extended idealized notion of the lady in an unrequited relationship; on the other, it achieves the goal of entertaining an audience that was likely to enjoy these kinds of compositions and that could, somehow, be mirrored in the experiences depicted in the poems. This point is meant to move beyond the idea of the text as a *well wrought urn*, and explore the environment in which such texts were produced, locating them, in Arthur Marotti's words, "in the Elizabethan and Jacobean sociocultural contexts that encoded the literary genres, modes, conventions, and language that Donne used [...] to (re)read his work in relation to the general and specific social, economic, and political contexts within which he lived, acted and wrote".[3]

The Roman elegy often presents women as subject to the male, always in a subordinate position, wherein love is reduced to mere sexuality[4] and women reduced, therefore, to a mere "object of male wit".[5]

The goal of this paper will be thus to explore the role of woman and the specific treatment the feminine figure receives in one of the elegies, ***Jealosie***, and some early Songs and Sonnets; how the male speaker's attitude toward her reflects a relationship of power and tension between the speaker, his world, and the woman addressed. The poetical discourse works, thus, as a dialectical space for an exercise of power.[6] Some contextual aspects that surround Donne's poetical production might help us to understand this disdainful treatment of the feminine.

First of all, we deal with early compositions. Helen Gardner tentatively dates them between 1592-1600, just before Donne married Ann More and when he was at the Inns of Court. She also cites the vogue of the Roman Elegy during this time as a phenomenon frequently overlooked, since it hardly went beyond the circulation of manuscripts among very exclusive social groups.[7] This refashioning accords with a reaction against the conventional aesthetics of the unattainable lady, and works, therefore, as a subversion of this code. But it also poses provocative questions about the kind of society that received these texts.

I assume, as Marotti does, that these compositions were written during Donne's Inns of Court period and were thus intended for a readership of men-about-town, as Donne himself was eager to hear poems that would mirror their own sexual adventures and desires.

On the other hand, the contemptuous attitude toward women of a male speaker, who constantly boasts of his power over her, also represents a radicalization of structures in a society in which "biological differences between the sexes have been translated by social institutions into codes of behaviour and law that privilege men over women irrespective of class".[8] Lawrence Stone, Joan Kelly-Gadol and Jonathan Goldberg, among others, have studied the increasing reinforcement of the structures of patriarchal society during the end of the 16th and the first half of the 17th Century.[9] The degree of autonomy women enjoyed in the late Middle Ages was diminished, and this regression also affected their sexual roles and status in the love relationship. It is in this gradual strengthening of patriarchal structures that the radicalization of the treatment of women might be discovered.

Donne's elegy ***Jealosie*** is the first poem we are going to examine. Ovid's ***Amores*** I, 4 is recognized as the source that inspired the dramatic situation of the poem. Both depict a scene of jealousy involving the lover, his

mistress and her husband. This adulterous love is far from the Neoplatonic ideal: Ovid's speaker instructs his mistress in the art of making love before her husband's eyes. He warns her of the attitude she must adopt, and tells her what she has to do: "But how thou shouldst behave thyself now know" (IV, 11),[10] and specifies what her behaviour should be in order to develop a secret code of communication: "[...] there before him be/ [...] view me [...]/ [...] strike on the board like them that pray for evil."(11, 14, 17, 27). He shows anger at a situation he dislikes: "Shall I sit gazing as a bashful guest,/ While others touch the damsel I love best?" (IV, 3-4), and he also reveals his fear at the possibility of the woman yielding to her husband: "Yet this I'll see, but if thy gown aught cover,/ Suspicious fear in all my veins will hover./ I have been wanton, therefore am perplexed,/ And with mistrust of the like measure vexed."(41-42, 44-45).

The actions explicit in both poems are similar. The speakers allude to a secret code in the language of love in order to allay the husband's suspicions.[11] However, while in Ovid's poem this training in the new code of language constitutes the theme, in Donne's poem it appears as a motif, taking for granted her awareness of the code: "Not at this boord together being satt/ With words, nor touches, scarce looks adulterate" (19-20).[12]

The figure of the husband and his presence is also cursed in both cases, but in Donne's poem it is not the male speaker but the woman -through the male's voice- who both curses her husband and celebrates the thought of his death: "Thou would'st not weep, but jolly and frolick bee/ As a slave which tomorrow should be free" (11-12).

Ovid's and Donne's speakers share, in their voices, a conviction of male superiority over the woman. She is commanded and, of course, judged as far as her moral integrity is concerned. Ovid's speaker wonders about her loyalty to him : "Then will he kiss thee, and not only kiss,/ But force thee give him my stol'n honey bliss" (lines 63-64). Donne's opening address, "Fond woman, which would'st have thy husband die,/ And yet complain'st of his great jealousie" (1-2) imputes to the mistress her implicit desire for her husband's death, and the subsequent depiction of his demise serves the end of emphasizing the dark duplicity of her evil nature. (Cf. Parfitt, 35).

Donne's approach to this point is distinct from Ovid's in that his speaker is primarily concerned with emphasizing the woman's attitude toward her husband. The image of the male speaker cursing the husband's presence

suffers a distortion in Donne's hands; now it is the lady who, by implication, denounces the husband. The male lover stands apart, aloof and unindicted.

There is a shift of responsibility, of moral duty from the speaker to the woman in depicting her lack of scruples before the image of her dying husband. The speaker is distant and untouched by the scene of jealousy. The woman is responsible, the one the audience would be most likely to condemn. As Helen Gardner has remarked "the masculine persuasive force of the language and the reckless, overbearing argumentativeness match an arrogance that amounts to a brutal contempt for the partner of his pleasures". (Gardner, xxiv-xxv). The male speaker's contempt is further stressed by his cynical, complacent enjoyment of the situation.

In Ovid's poem, women are treated respectfully and enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. The speaker's inability to win her whole attention, to secure her devotion, provokes the rise of tension when he desperately searches for signs of response in her behaviour. He eagerly orders, anxiously commands, fearful of receiving no reply. Inherent in this fear and distrust of her, is a lack of confidence and trust in his own abilities: "I have been wanton, therefore am perplexed,/ And with mistrust of the like measure vexed" (44-45). This troubled attempt to mold the situation to his own satisfaction suggests, as Irving Singer observes, a vision of the "participants in love as selfish opponents both jockeying for power over one another". (Singer, 145).

Nothing of the kind takes place in Donne's poem since no alternative is offered to the woman. While Ovid's speaker labours to control the situation, in an obvious struggle between his desires and the lady's will, Donne's speaker seems perfectly in charge. The woman is in a subordinate position and the speaker quite skilfully loads his arguments with a clear depiction of her faults. The "jockeying for power" in Ovid's poem is absent from Donne's, since there is no possibility of replying on the woman's side: she is not allowed to utter a single word.

Therefore, a radicalization in the treatment of the feminine takes place in Donne's Elegy ***Jealosie***, in which the woman is deprived of authority and dominated by the male speaker's voice. A similar shift is also apparent in some of his early Songs and Sonnets, which recall the elegies of Ovid and Propertius. Here, the female shortcomings are contrasted to the male virtues in the frame of the love relationship.

In *A Jet Ring Sent* a ring that the woman had given to the speaker works as a motif to throw into relief her inconstancy and unreliability vs. his natural constancy and honesty in love. In *The Legacie*, through the common motif of the exchange of hearts between lovers, the speaker questions the existence of a heart in woman, remarking on the strange qualities of changeability in his beloved's heart. *The Message* also plays with this image of the exchanging of heart and eyes, contrasting again her untrustworthy behaviour with his unblemished mind.

To the speaker of *A Jet Ring Sent*, the woman is brittle and false before the blackness -the sign of truth- that characterizes the male attitude: "Thou art not so black, as my heart,/ Nor halfe so brittle, as her heart, thou art" (1-2). In *The Message*, the woman's heart is liable to "[...] cross both/ Word and Oath [...]" (14-15), and her eyes are the learners of "[...] forc'd fashions,/ And false passions" (4-5). In *The Legacie*, the speaker calls into doubt the very existence of a heart in women. In its place he finds: "something like a heart,/ But colours it, and corners had,/ It was not good, it was not bad,/ It was entire to none, and few had part" (17-20).

In all these poems, the nature of woman is depicted only insofar as it has a bearing on the love relationship. The speakers are purely concerned with the issue of her inconstancy as a response to the male's loyalty and fidelity.

Propertius, in *Elegies, II, 5*, also complains of the duplicity of his mistress. What she says, as in *The Message*" is weightless though her beauty is overwhelming: "Lovely she looked, but false was all she said".[13] In II, 9 he worries about her fickleness and contrasts her inconstancy with the steadfastness of some feminine figures from Greek mythology. His mistress's falsehood is expanded to encompass all womankind: "What tales you'd have contrived! What skilful lying!/ No woman ever failed to learn that art" (31-32). In the same way, Donne's speaker in *Song, Goe and Catche a Falling Starre* affirms that "No Where/ Lives a woman true, and faire" (17-18).

The speaker in Ovid's *Amores* III, 11 also complains about "her vain tongue's filthy lies,/ And to my loss, god-wronging perjuries" (21-22). The imputed treachery of the woman contrasts with the male speaker's fidelity: "When have not I, fixed to thy side, close laid?/ I have thy husband, guard, and fellow played" (17-18), in the same way as the speaker's heart, in *The Message*, "[...] no unworthy thought could staine" (10).

In these poems wherein a masculine force of virtue is explicitly opposed to a feminine weakness of spirit, there is also an overt desire of revenge. The male ego is offended by her denial of his love. Donne's male speaker's self-esteem has been seriously injured, thus he rationalizes that his mistress can be turning him away only to accept another lover "[...] that will [...]/[...] prove as false as thou art [...]"; (***The Message***, 23-24).

Thus, the woman's heart in ***The Legacie*** "was entire to none, and few had part" (19), in the same way as Corinna in Ovid's ***Amores***, III, 11 has betrayed the male speaker by not devoting herself to a single lover. Likewise, Cynthia, in Propertius' ***Elegies***, has deceived the male speaker with some other man: "What he is now, I was, and he, like me,/ will be rejected when she tires of him." (II, 9. 1-2). Clearly, the speaker is not so much concerned with the perfidious nature of woman, as with the degree to which her innate duplicity can damage his ego.

The trope of rejection is commonly accepted within the Petrarchan tradition as a sign of the lady's preservation of virtue and affirmation of her chastity. It serves to idealize the lady and to sublimate love. But in these texts the woman's scorn toward the lyric "I" implies the acceptance of some other lover, to the detriment of the former. His superiority has been, therefore, seriously questioned. It is this feeling of being defied in their authority over the love relationship and over the woman herself, that provokes such anger in the male speakers, and results in their condemnation of the woman's behaviour. As Virginia Woolf observes, women:

> almost without exceptions are shown in their relation to men through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose. Hence, perhaps, the peculiar nature of women in fiction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity.[14]

The argument of blaming woman for being promiscuous in love is reconfigured in some of Donne's poems to become the basis for praising inconstant and unfair women insofar as they are reduced to objects for the male speakers of the poems to enjoy without moral restraints. It is easy to see how

this topic could please Donne's audience at the Inns of Court. The reduction of woman to an object of pleasure, subject to male longings, is clearly expressed in ***The Indifferent*** and its Latin models: Propertius, II, 22[15] and ***Amores***,II, 4. The leitmotif of the poems is similar: the I of the poems feels inclined to love all kinds of women. All have something he feels attracted to, despite condition or appearance. He introduces the subject in terms of the Catullan *odi et amo*, women as creatures to be hated and loved at the same time, an idea that also emerges in *Amores*, III, 11B where he eagerly desires the woman, despite her frivolity and deceitfulness.

Both Propertius and Ovid's speakers complain about their terrible weakness toward women and how this promiscuity makes them suffer: "I cannot rule myself, but where love please/ Am driven like a ship upon rough seas" (II, 4: 7-8), and Propertius complains about his inability to escape love: "But every man is given a vice by nature:/ Mine -this is simple- is to be in love." (II, 22: 17-18). They pretend to show what their weakness is the attraction to all kind of women, depicting the qualities of each. It is a misfortune not to be able to control one's feelings. In this way, they grant themselves release from the burden of immoral actions, since they have been so framed by *nature*, no other course is available to them. The first stanza of ***The Indifferent*** is clearly inspired by these Latin elegies:

> I can love both faire and browne,
> Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want
> betraies,
> Her who loves lonenesse best, and her who maskes
> and plaies,
> Her whom the country form'd, and whom the town,
> Her who beleeves, and her who tries,
> Her who still weepes with spungie eyes,
> And her who is dry corke, and never cries;
> I can love her, and her, and you and you,
> I can love any, so she be not true. (1-9).

Though grounded in the same motif, the argument here is more elaborate and goes further in involving the woman within the argumentative game: "I can love any, so she be no true" (9). It is a conditio *sine qua non* for

the lover to be able to love freely and without restraints. He develops the argument in the following stanza. Unlike the voices in the poems of Ovid and Propertius that speak to a friend or to an indefinite audience, the subject in ***The Indifferent*** addresses a woman, a fair woman, and with the clear aim of persuading her to relinquish her attitude to become like the rest of womankind, subject to changeability and fickleness. This leitmotif of the classical erotic elegy,[16] is turned by Donne into a more complex image which inverts the conventional code of the Petrarchan poetry at the same time that it underlines the speaker's struggle to gain control, both physically and morally, over the woman.

Stella P. Revard has suggested that the speaker's image of the true woman "unmasks the man who boasts of his inconstancy because he fears that, as he can be constant to no one, no one can be constant to him" (Revard, 73). Though this reading is suggestive, I prefer to think that the speaker is concerned about his loss of control and authority in the situation. The constant woman, loyal and faithful, poses an obstacle to him. He reacts, in the following stanza, by citing the widespread misogynist assumption of fickleness as inherent in the very nature of woman; he attributes to her "mothers" the inherent, generic attitude of her gender. But it is line 13 that is really startling: "Or doth a feare, that men are true, torment you?" Here it seems that the speaker is projecting his own fears onto the woman's attitude. He, after all, was the one who was seriously disturbed by the woman's constancy.

The resistance she exercises -playing strikingly with the reversal of the convention- so upsets the speaker that he is in the necessity of making explicit his superiority by reminding her of her sinful nature: "Must I, who came to travail thorow you,/ Grow your fixt subject, because you are true?" (17-18). As a recent approach to the poem points out, "the woman's resistance to his libertinism is just another manifestation of her wilful nature".[17] Regarding this troubling nature, the speaker of this poem attempts to demonstrate her inadequacy in being true, and to that end Donne employs one of his favourite devices; he creates a plurisignative tension by bringing together the authoritative evidence of women's inferiority and the subtle suggestion of a sexual subordination of the female to the "masculine persuasive force".

The inversion of the code has already taken place. The speaker encourages the woman to be inconstant, making inconstancy, variety in love and

philandering the principles that rule this new order. This idea is made explicit in the final stanza, where Venus, the goddess so praised by the ideal lovers, is addressed as a principle of authority: "Venus heard me sigh this song,/ And by Loves sweetest Part, Variety, she swore,/ She heard not this till now; and't should be so no more" (19-21).

Here, the orthodoxy becomes the heterodoxy, and the values praised by the Petrarchan and Neoplatonic discourse become, by this inversion, the very heretics of love: "[...] some two or three/ Poor Heretiques in love there bee,/ Which think to establish dangerous constancie" (23-25).

In order to transgress the orthodox cultural code of behaviour in love, the speaker has created another code which, by its very effective imposition, has punningly become the orthodox when compared to the now heterodox practice of those "which thinke to establish dangerous constancie" (Corthell, 21). In this inverted universe, the treatment of the feminine also suffers an alteration. The fair woman appears as a dissident from the established order and this heresy further emphasizes womanhood as unfair and fickle before an audience that takes it for granted.

The woman is urged to be untrue and inconstant since these qualities affect the masculine experience of love positively. She is a figure created solely for his benefit, for his aims and in accordance with his perspective of love. However, she opposes him with enough strength as to provoke a tremendous tension in the male speaker's discourse of love. This is true of ***The Indifferent***, ***The Message*** and ***The Legacie***, those poems in which women's treachery and fickleness were so ostentatiously depicted. In ***Jealosie***, the radicalization of the treatment of woman is so extreme that she scarcely has a voice to respond. Her subordination is absolute.

As we have seen, Donne dwells with particular interest on this aspect of the transformation in the treatment of the feminine. The image of woman in the poems I have discussed is that of an object of pleasure, created both by and for men's sake and always in a subordinate position to men. In the Roman elegies, even though the feminine figure is always treated as an inferior being, the implicit contempt that appears in Donne's poetry is absent. Though she is always seen through male eyes and for male purposes, she is not deprived of her own identity. The contempt for the feminine so frequently displayed by Donne's speakers suggests not only that the sphere of power enjoyed by women

was considerably diminished, but that the "masculine persuasive force" was exercised most potently.

NOTES

1.- John R. Roberts, John Donne. ***An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism***, 1968-1978. (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1982); for a review of the different, often contradictory approaches of modern scholarship to Donne's treatment of woman, see Deborah Aldrich Larson, ***John Donne and Twentieth Century Criticism***. (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), esp. 136-45.

2.- Louis Montrose attempts -and succesfully I think- to bring together the theoretical assumptions on new historicism and those of gender construction during the Elizabethan period in his article, "***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power and Form." ***Rewriting the Renaissance. The discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe***. eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986) 65-87.

3.- Arthur F. Marotti, ***John Donne. Coterie Poet***. (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) 23. For a recent discussion on the attempt to reduce the isolation of the literary text, see Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," ***Literary Theory Today***. eds. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer Ryan, (London: Polity Press, 1990), 74-90.

4.- About the vision of love in Ovid's works, cf. Irving Singer, ***The Nature of Love. From Plato to Luther***. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), esp. 124ff.

5.- Cf. George Parfitt, ***John Donne. A Literary Life***. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), p. 34.

6.- Ovid's influence on Donne's Elegies -especially elegies XIX and XX- has been broadly analyzed by Roma Gill, "'Musa Iocosa Mea'. Thoughts on the Elegies," ***John Donne: Essays in Celebration***. ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1973), 47-72; R. J. Frontain, "Donne's Erotic Spirituality: Ovidian Sexuality and the Language of Christian Revelation in Elegy XIX," ***Forum***, 24 (4) Autumn 1984: 41-51. Other commentaries on Ovid's influence on Donne's Elegies are those of Alan Armstrong, "The Apprenticeship of John Donne: Ovid and The Elegies," ***ELH*** 44 (1977: 419-442); A. J. Peacock, "Donne's Elegies and Roman Love Elegy," ***Hermathena***, 119 (1975: 20-29); and A. LaBranche, "'Blanda Elegeia': The Background on Donne's 'Elegies'", ***Essential Articles for the Study of John Donne's Poetry***, ed. John R. Roberts (Hamden, Conn: Archon, 1975).

7.- John Donne, ***The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets***, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) xxxiii, n°. 4. Marotti also mentions the presence of these miscellanies as an indication of "a lively interest in erotic and sexually realistic poetry" (72).

8.- Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, eds. ***Rewriting the Renaissance. The discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe***. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), xxi.

9.- Lawrence Stone, ***Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800***. (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?," ***Becoming Visible: Women in European History***. eds. Renate Bridental and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977); Jonathan Goldberg, "Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images," ***Rewriting the Renaissance***, 3-32.

10.- Christopher Marlowe, ***Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Poems and Translations***. ed. Stephen Orgel (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 117. Quotations from Ovid's ***Amores*** will follow the text of Marlowe's translation.

11.- This secret language of hands and eyes is also present in the Elegy ***His Parting From Her***, 45-52.

12.- John Donne, ***The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets***, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 9-10. All quotations from this edition.

13.- Propertius, ***The Poems of Propertius***, trans. Constance Carrier (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963) 70.Quotations from Propertius will follow this edition.

14.- Virginia Woolf, ***A Room of One's Own*** (London: Grafton Books, 1977), p. 79.

15.- About the connection between Porpertius's Elegies, II, 22 and "The Indifferent", see Stella P. Revard, "John Donne and Propertius: Love and Death in London and Rome," ***The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne***. ed. Ted Larry Pebworth and Claude Summers (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 69-79.

16.- This topic is frequent in the Hellenistic Epigram, and also appears in Lucretius, Ovid's ***Ars Amatoria***, II: 656-662, and ***Remedii Amoris***

17.- Ronald J. Corthell, "Donne's Disparitie: Inversion, Gender, and the Subject of Love in some Songs and Sonnets." ***Exemplaria***, 1989, Spring 1 (1): 17-42, p. 22.