Critical views of John Donne

Erotic poetry - Achsah Guibbory

Even after four centuries, Donne's love poetry strikes us as fresh and immediate, with its urgent rhythms, its irregular, frequent stresses communicating the sense that passion cannot be contained within regular iambic feet. He insists that, unlike poets who "have no Mistresse but their Muse" ("Loves growth," 12), he is describing love as it really is. Yet, lines or even poems remain uncertain, endlessly intriguing, like puzzles where a piece seems missing, or where there's a surplus. We try to stabilize his elusive meanings, much as he sought to capture that most unsettling and mysterious experience of human life: love. The voice is usually male, though a few adopt a female voice. To the extent that men and women experience desire differently, Donne expresses a distinctly male perspective. He writes as if discovering a new emotional world of desire, one whose terrain has never before been explored. Yet women as well as men recognize it at once - most of us have been there, or hope to be. Donne philosophizes about love, trying to define it, but even when he soars, he brings love's philosophy down to earth, grounding it in concrete (if imagined) material experience that prompts him to revise conventional wisdom, and even sometimes his own pronouncements. Guibbory, Achsah. "Erotic poetry." The Cambridge Companion to John Donne. Ed. Achsah Guibbory. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

The social context and nature of Donne's writing: occasional verse and letters – A. F. Marotti

John Donne preferred known readers for his writing and, at least initially, controlled its dissemination in the manuscript medium. Almost all of his poetry and a great deal of his prose were composed for restricted audiences in a series of social environments in which he functioned through his secular and ecclesiastical careers. These included the Inns of Court and London in the 1590s; the late-Elizabethan court and government during his service as a secretary to the Lord Keeper, Sir Thomas Egerton, from 1598 to 1602; the early Jacobean social circle surrounding his patroness Lucy, Countess of Bedford; the single-sex environment of politically active men associated with the meetings at the Mitre and Mermaid taverns; and the socially mixed environment of the Jacobean and Caroline courts. He circulated his work in manuscript both as single items and as groups of texts. For example, he sent individual verse epistles to friends and patrons. He enclosed prose paradoxes or problems in some of his letters; in others sermons. He let his close friend Ben Jonson forward his five satires to the Countess of Bedford, and he himself gave some of his holy sonnets, along with a complimentary poem, to the Earl of Dorset. He allowed such friends as Henry Goodyer and Sir Robert Ker to see large collections of his poetry. Although Donne regularly showed his writing to individuals within the social circles to which he belonged, in the processes of manuscript transmission his poems only really reached a wider audience in the 1620s, eagerly received by students at both universities and by others compiling manuscript anthologies of verse. Marotti, Arthur F. "The social context and nature of Donne's writing: occasional verse and letters." The Cambridge Companion to John Donne. Ed. Achsah Guibbory. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

John Donne - Achsah Guibbory

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Donne's poems expressed a strong and independent spirit. For all their indebtedness to literary traditions and conventions, they took a sceptical stance toward many received ideas and seemed written in a 'new made Idiome'. The importance of his innovation was recognized by Thomas Carew, who praised Donne as the monarch of wit who 'purgd' 'The Muses garden', threw away 'the lazie seeds / Of Servile imitation ... And fresh in written in a 'new made Idiome'. The independence of his analysis was acknowledged by Thomas Carew, who praised Donne as the monarch of wit who 'purgd' 'The Muses garden', threw away 'the lazie seeds / Of Servile imitation ... And fresh in concrete (if imagined) material experience that prompts him to revise conventional wisdom, and even sometimes his own pronouncements. Guibbory, Achsah. "John Donne." The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry, Donne to Marvell. Ed. Thomas N. Corns. Cambridge University Press, 1993. Bell, Ilona. "Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems." The Cambridge Companion to John Donne. Ed. Achsah Guibbory. Cambridge University Press, 2006. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. 12 November 2009

Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems

Ilona Bell

For Donne as for us, gender matters, deeply, passionately, disturbingly. Donne is constantly writing about women and gender roles, both explicitly and indirectly through analogy and metaphor. Yet unlike his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare, Donne rarely lingers over the woman's physical appearance. For this and other more theoretical or ideological reasons, twentieth-century critics generally assume that the woman in Donne's poems is a shadowy figure, the object or reflection of male desire, a pretext for self-fashioning, a metaphor for the poet's professional aspirations, a sex object to be circulated for the titillation and amusement of Donne's male coterie. In the last two decades, as feminist critics have re-examined Donne's attitudes towards women, it has become clear that it was not Donne but the critics who disembodied
and disregarded the women in Donne's poems. Donne has been termed many things: a misogynist who loathed women's bodies and scorned their minds; a metaphysician less interested in emotion than intellection; an egotist and carreerist who used women for his own advantage; a wit willing to say anything for the sake of the poem or a rhetorician undone by his own verbal power; and a poet/lover (I wish to stress) who was supremely attentive to the woman's point of view. Donne's poetry and prose contain such a wide variety of genres, viewpoints, and personae, his language is so enigmatic and metaphorical, his attitudes towards women shift so quickly, sometimes within a single poem or line, that it is difficult to say exactly what Donne himself thought, all but impossible to identify an abiding or systematic view of women or gender.

The Elegies encourage women's sexual freedom, and challenge the patriarchal control of women by fathers and husbands. Yet they also seek to use the poet's "masculine persuasive force" ("By our first strange and fatal interview," 4) to assert his power over his mistress. In the elegy beginning "Come, Madam," Donne conducts a hot and heavy sexual seduction as if it were a military campaign. The language becomes increasingly graphic as the poem unfolds, culminating in an image of geographical exploration that is as unconventional as it is audacious:

\[
\text{Licence my roaming hands, and let them go,} \\
\text{Before, behind, between, above, below.} \\
\text{O my America! my new-found-land,} \\
\text{My kingdom, safest when with one man man'd,} \\
\text{My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie . . . (25–29)}
\]

Having politely asked permission to explore every part of her naked body, Donne gets carried away. The outpouring of prepositions, one following another in quick, rhythmic succession, says it all. As the thrill of discovery tears the sentence apart, making the rules of grammar seen as constraining and irrelevant as the clothing the lovers discard, the rhetoric is almost irresistible. At the same time, however, the imagery betrays Donne's masculine desire to conquer and control.11 If the woman is his kingdom and his empire, he is her king and emperor, reveling unabashedly in his masculine dominion over her.

So what can we conclude? Yes, gender does matter. When we give Donne's ambiguous, enigmatic language the close attention it demands, his attitude towards women, sexuality, and gender becomes more multi-faceted, more complicated, and less predictable than it might at first seem. The inter-animation or cross-pollination of sacred and profane, the refusal to simplify or suppress thoughts or feelings for the sake of clarity or consistency, the readiness to challenge orthodoxy and to shock the reader into a more open, inquiring, unconventional point of view – these impulses continue to disturb and unsettle any position Donne might take on love, women, and gender. Depending on which poems or lines one chooses to quote and, even more importantly, depending on how one chooses to interpret and evaluate the lines one selects, one can see Donne as a witty misogynist, a great devotee of women, or a lover willing to risk everything for the woman he adores.

Readers and critics can choose to ignore the women in Donne's poems, focusing instead on Donne's self-analysis or self-fashioning. They can allegorize the woman, turning her into a metaphor for Donne's professional advancement, or they can objectify her, turning her into a sex object to be circulated among Donne's smirking male coterie. Nonetheless, a remarkable number of Donne's love poems are, first and foremost, poems for and about women and the relations between men and women and the social roles played by men and women. Misogyny and male domination are fundamental to Donne's poetic and cultural inheritance. Not surprisingly, therefore, Donne's poems acknowledge the sexual stereotypes and the gender hierarchy that subordinated early modern women to men through primogeniture and marriage; however, his poems also dramatize the ways in which Donne and his mistresses – above all and most importantly, Anne More – challenged, even if they were powerless to overturn, the patriarchal polity and society into which they were born and died. Donne's most daringly innovative poems describe not only male desire but intimacy itself, the ecstatic "mutual feeling" that embodies and constitutes an extraordinary, unprecedented "dialogue of one" ("The Extasie," 74).

When Donne argues that it is not virtue or honor but the "Centrique" part that makes women, women ("Loves Progress"), when he "forget[s] the Hee and Shee" ("The undertaking") and reminds us that women like men have "two lips, eyes, thighs" ("Sapho to Philænis"), he is anticipating the modern conception of gender which argues – biology being one thing and gender another – that sex differences are not natural or universal but culturally constructed and constantly changing. Inevitably, the rules of the genre, the demands of the situation, and the beliefs of early modern English society shape what Donne writes about women and gender; at the same time, however, his poems, "In cypher writ, or new made Idiome" ("A Valediction: of the booke," 21), also reconfigure poetic and social conventions, thereby reconstituting what poets and readers can say, even as the poems prophesy what poetry and society will one day do.