JOHN DONNE'S SONGS AND SONNETS
A REINTERPRETATION IN LIGHT OF THEIR TRADITIONAL BACKGROUNDS

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

by

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To Professors: Leonard

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This thesis having been approved in respect to form and mechanical execution is referred to you for judgment upon its substantial merit.

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Approved as satisfying in substance the doctor thesis requirement of the University of Wisconsin.

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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

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INTRODUCTION

One can hardly begin to write about John Donne at this date without a word of explanation and apology. There is a general feeling that our age has said its say about him, and that only time and a new revolution of taste will make it possible to add something new. The scholars opened up the field; the artists and critics turned upon it their heightened contemporary sensibility; and now the scholars have returned once more to footnote the perceptions of that sensibility. We seem to have reached an impasse; even Mr. Eliot, who, for better or worse, has become the very symbol of our understanding of Donne, has twitched his mantle blue and threatens to be off. The academic approach grows ever more trivial; the aesthetic ever more vulgar. Is there then nothing more to be said?

I cannot help thinking that there is a good deal to be said. In the first place, we must remember that in being adapted to our contemporary needs and values Donne has become a myth. The poet in whom the "metaphysical" writers of our own time have found inspiration, and around whom Mr. Williamson

has recently rewritten English literary history[1] -- we have invented. He is not, of course, less important or less "real" for that; and even if we do not quite realize what we are doing, it is hard to see how we can come to any great harm. If we do not know that in a great many of our critical discussions we have been talking about ourselves, that fact will be clear enough to the next generation. The test of the validity of our theories about the unity of sensibility and intelligence, or our judgments about the relative merits of Donne and Milton must in the long run be operative. They will stand or fall with the literature and criticism produced by those who start from them as assumptions.

Not all our modern misinterpretations, however, are between the covers of The Donne Tradition. There is everywhere a tendency to re-evaluate and recreate the poet's experience in terms of our own needs and standards; and where that tendency is most eclectic, where it lacks not only a system and point but even self-consciousness, it is most dangerous. Where we are furthest from Donne we are likely to think ourselves closest, and it is his love poetry which is most remote from our traditions and our values alike.

None of the great Donne scholars has given us a full-dress treatment of his erotic verse. Some of them have referred to it casually or in passing, and where they have

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[1] The Donne Tradition.

touched upon it they have been most the victims of their time. Out of a hundred casual remarks a tradition has been evolved, the tradition of Donne as a great rebel in love, blasting the sugared lies of Petrarchanism in the interests of "truth" or "realism". We have come to see him as a sexual emancipator, a sort of seventeenth century D. H. Lawrence, a herald of the theory of passion as a self-justifying force. Even Professor Grierson[2] has been influenced by this view, and even he, as we shall see, has played a part in forging the view of Donne's love verse as the product of a strange and sudden parthenogenesis, his impulse arising from no tradition but rather from his single and peculiar heart.

Now the simple fact is that Donne's verse stands at the culmination of a long and clearly defined erotic tradition which is essentially medieval and at odds in all its assumptions with the love-theories of the twentieth century; that Donne's "revolt" against Petrarchanism was completely unconscious, representing, in so far as it exists at all, a return to the Middle Ages in search of a love-philosophy, more congenial perhaps, but just as traditional, and which has nothing in common with our modern views; for, as we shall see, our own views have been evolved from precisely those elements in the thought of Donne's contemporaries with which he was least in sympathy.

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[2]Grierson, Donne's Poetical Works, Vol. II, pp. xii-xlv, passim.

How then have we gone so far astray? What change has there been in our attitudes toward love so profound and utter that we have consistently misunderstood the moral and affective experience of a fellow man less than five centuries dead?

We live in a world where on all sides we are exposed to the idea that love, and particularly its consummation in marriage, is the supreme good in life. From children's story books to the latest best-sellers, over the radio and on the screen, that concept is propagated in a hundred forms. Even the sexual revolt of the last generation did not challenge that notion in any fundamental way. It modified it, to be sure, with its phallic mythos, but it still insisted that love was the ultimate end of living. In a sense even the emphasis on its independence from marriage or other customary social sanction was only a logical extension of the basic creed. Conventionally or in revolt, we have been unable and unwilling to break through the old circle.

Despite churchmen and an occasional dissenting philosopher, for the majority of us that secular ideal remains unchallenged and unchallengeable. When we are told, "They lived happily ever after," we know what is meant. Happiness is inevitably and quite simply <u>sexual</u> happiness, boy gets girl, if you please. None of us, whatever our intellectual point of vantage, can quite escape the all pervading influence. Our "respectable" literature is no more immune than the popular

magazine. Among most of our poets from Spenser to Edna St. Vincent Millay the idea is central. In the novel it is no less important; here Richardson and Fielding agree for once and join hands with Hemingway and Fanny Hurst. And, let us not forget, literature, if we make the term wide enough to include the movies and the tabloids, has come to be our only generally respected source of moral instruction.

The poets of the Romantic movement, of course, represent a high point in the development of this concept of love. Just as we inherit from them our unconscious poetic bias, so we derive from them our understanding of love and our attitudes toward it. We have been recently confronted with the necessity of recognizing and re-examining our aesthetic preconceptions in our efforts to read Pope and Dryden intelligently; we have not yet learned to do as much for our emotional preconceptions.

Instead we have been content to read our point of view into everything, whatever the warrant for doing so, for we are most of us quite simply unaware that there <u>is</u> any other point of view. And yet the thought and art of the Middle Ages is based on a philosophy in which the love of man and woman is subordinate or even inimical to the primary ends of life: the knowledge of God and the salvation of one's soul. Our lack of perception of this fact (we have often observed it but seldom felt it) has led us into innumerable, and by now conventional, misunderstandings of medieval literature.

We select from the Chanson de Roland for our anthologies the quite incidental tears of "la belle Aude" rather than examples of the basic play of Feudal loyalties which we have never been able to experience emotionally. When we recall the Divine Comedy we are likely to think first of Paolo and Francesca, finding in ourselves more sympathy for the damned loves of Hell than for the ultimate, and to us forever remote, vision of Paradise.

Always as we read the center is shifted; the trivial becomes critical; the critical is ignored. We are in the habit of smiling at the artist of the Middle Ages for dressing the heroes of antiquity in the garb of his own time -- but we sin equally if more subtly in this respect. And if we misunderstand the medieval point of view we misunderstand Donne, for he belongs in many respects to the Middle Ages and is comprehensible only against its background of tradition and belief.

In my discussion of the Songs and Sonnets I shall try to show that John Donne by virtue of his aristocratic aspirations, literary sympathies, philosophical background and, more particularly, his early Catholic training developed views upon the worth and place of woman, the moral significance of the sex act, and the nature of its relationship to marriage and to God which were essentially medieval.

I shall try to show further that his attitude toward the production of verse and his understanding of its social func-

tion were those of the Middle Ages, and that therefore any understanding of his poetry must begin with an understanding of the central aesthetic traditions of that period. I shall attempt to demonstrate how Donne's development as an artist and man recapitulates the unfolding of medieval love philosophy in its search for a stable synthesis.

More precisely, I shall try to show that Donne's poetry in its dialectical method and form, as well as in its imagery drawn from "science", the terminology of the schools and the jargon of the courts of law, stands at the end of a clearly defined and continuous tradition that begins in Provence and can be traced through the bourgeois Sicilian school of the early thirteenth century to the poets of the dolce stil nuovo, through whose works its influence reaches Donne.

I shall sketch the origin and development in the Middle Ages of both the "cynical" and "idealist" strains in Donne's erotic verse, the humoristic tradition on the one hand, the Plotinian on the other, and shall demonstrate how and why they came to be joined both in Donne and certain of his predecessors in what appears to us so incongruous a union. I shall, in addition, suggest possible traditional sources for some of Donne's more characteristic conventions and images, as well as his use of the Religion of love, and shall indicate what appear to me to be the controlling factors behind his choice of subject, metaphor and technique.

In order to do these things it will be necessary for us

first to consider against its historical and social background the development of European love philosophy from its inception in Provence toward the end of the eleventh century to the form it had assumed at the end of the sixteenth century in England. It will then be possible to analyze the views of the "kidnappers" of Donne, and to pass beyond them to a more fruitful understanding of the poet's "revolt" as a return to a remoter medieval tradition rather than a foreshadowing of our modern codes and conventions.

THE EVOLUTION OF COURTLY LOVE

The problem of the origin and development of love as it is understood in the western world today is difficult and confusing. It has rarely even been defined in terms capable of solution, for it is, oddly enough, primarily an aesthetic question and its treatment has been left in the hands of the sociologists, the psychologists and the historians. In a certain sense the problem of the origin of our philosophies of love is synonomous with the problem of the origin of modern European literature.

Both were born in Provence at the end of the eleventh century,[1] both the products of a society simultaneously representing the peak of feudal development and shadowing its imminent decline. Only in the moment before its disintegration was Feudalism able to produce a leisure class capable of refining into words the conflicts between its values and its drives, and possessing time, over and above that needed for the basic business of staying alive, in which to enjoy those

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[1]For many of the basic ideas on the development of love used here I am indebted to C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love.

refinements. It is at the moment when Chivalric society yields to Courtly society that love and lyric literature achieve their simultaneous birth. When the focus of interest had passed from the struggles for land and wealth and the loyalties necessary to a society organized for those struggles, attention was transferred to the process of consuming the spoils already attained and to the etiquette of that consumption, to courtly life and courtly manners.

Lyric literature was from the first associated with both these aspects of courtly existence, since it was first of all a form of conspicuous consumption, the obviously non-productive consumption of time that only the wealthy could afford, as well as a further adornment to stand in the halls of the Barons beside the jewels and the gold, the tapestries and the silks. But literature was also an adjunct of etiquette, a guide to the ritual of courtesy and an integral part of that ritual.

The older poets of Provence were aware and proud of their roles as mentors and guides, and alongside their pride a certain snobbishness soon became apparent, a conviction that only those who knew and loved verse were truly noble, or conversely, that only the noble were worthy of their art, and a contempt for the unlettered laity. In addition, however, to being the menders of manners -- and, as time went on, more and more exclusively, the poets became the singers of

amor and *domnei* and *joi*.[2]

What these terms meant and how the concepts they describe came to be the essential matter of the lyric is a complex but by no means insoluble question. If we translate *amor* simply as love we are likely to be led astray, for in our use of that ambiguous word we tend to equate the feeling it describes with others in fact quite different. But *amor* is a new thing under the sun and one whose appearance we can date with precision, the end product of a revolution in human sentiment taking place in historical times. It is not to be confused with anything in antiquity; it differs equally from the domestic loyalty of a Penelope, the fatal madness of a Medea, or the mingled need for the slaking of physical passion and intellectual stimulation that brought the Greek to the hetaera.

It is a feeling equally unknown, let us note, to the men of the earlier Middle Ages, remote from the experience of the primitive Romance and Germanic worlds alike. The passions that motivate, let us say, *Romeo and Juliet* would have been quite as incomprehensible to the author of *Beowulf* or the maker of the *Roland* as to Homer or Ovid. Our modern concept of love demands the pre-existence of *both* Christianity and a

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[2]The classic work on Provencal poetry is Alfred Jeanroy, *La Poésie Lyrique des Troubadours*. The translation of the key terms in Provencal love theory is by no means simple. *Domnei* is in German *Frauendienst* and is best rendered in English by "love-service." *Joi* stands for the ecstasy and bliss of the lover and is only mistranslated by its cognate "joy"; often it is best translated simply as "love".

leisure class.

The church imposed upon men a dual ethical concept under the stress of which the first love philosophies were evolved. It insisted first of all upon the dichotomy of body and soul and upon the superiority of the latter, and in the second place it demanded that somehow and at last the demands of the two be synthesized. Once man became aware of himself as a living battleground of flesh and spirit, the single passion of the pagan world was forever impossible.

Indeed the Church maintained that all sexual desire was evil. The sex act under any circumstances could not be considered a good. In marriage it was permitted as a necessary consequence of the Fall, a punishment for sin that kept unbroken the line of sin. The only recognized ends of marriage were social, the propagation of children for the commonweal. It was better perhaps to marry than to burn, but best of all was virginity, the utter denial of the flesh. Love was never mentioned by the Fathers, because love in our sense for them simply did not exist. Until the turn of the eleventh century it had not even been invented, and after that it remained for the Schoolmen and the devout a fiction, a sinful and obvious lie.

From the clergy these concepts passed to the people and among them continued to flourish, let us remember, long after courtly love had made its way everywhere. In a French work dating from the beginning of the thirteenth century we find

the old bitter indictment of sex reasserted in its most extreme form: the man who loves his own wife too much, who performs his marital rites more as pleasures than as duties, is guilty of adultery!

> Il appert doncques que l'on ne doit mie user de mariage principaument pour déléctation trouver, ne luxurieux délitz saouler...Celui est avoultr en sa femme qui est ameur trés ardent...Il n'est rien plus puant que amer sa femme comme adultre....[3]

The Church taught men, too, contempt for women. It portrayed them as inferior beings, subordinated to their mates by divine plan, evil and not to be trusted. It pictured them as motivated by lust and passing fancy, the very symbols as opposed to men of passion opposed to reason. Jerome had taught that woman sinned from weakness in the face of temptation, man from weakness in the face of woman. "Uxoriousness" caused the downfall of Adam, and when man permitted himself to be ruled by his moral inferior he recapitulated that fall. Always in the medieval mind the theory of woman's inferiority remained an article of faith.

> la femme est de l'omme et non mie l'omme de la femme, ne l'omme n'est mie fait pour la femme, maiz la femme pour l'omme. Pource, doit la femme estre subjecte a l'omme, car l'omme est chief de la femme....[4]

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[3]"Le livre du régime de Princes" in Louis de Backer, Le droit de la femme dans l'antiquité et son devoir au moyen âge, p. 111. A translation of this passage and of all succeeding quotations in foreign languages will be found in a special section at the end of this study.

[4]Ibid., p. 112.

To say, then, that from such concepts of sex and marriage arose the beginnings of romantic love looks at first glance like a paradox. But we must consider the second element we have mentioned above; for it is only when it is joined to the mores of the courtly world that Christianity breeds courtly love.

The Barons of the Middle Ages, occupied as they were with the primary activities of war and rapine, left to their wives the inferior task of conducting and maintaining the household. But as the demands of pillage grew less pressing and the Feudal way of living more leisurely, these households became more and more the center of society, and in this arena the lords of the manor found themselves unwilling and unable to play the leading role. Quite accidentally the guidance of society fell into the hands of women.

Concomitant with this change, an ever-growing group of young men, the technological unemployed of an age that demanded fewer warriors, came to circulate about the ladies of the local courts, upon whose generosity and pleasure the manner and mode of their daily existence depended. This social situation was described a number of years ago by Mrs. Vernon Lee in a way that can hardly be improved upon.

> We must picture a castle which is a little island of comparative leisure and luxury... in a barbarous countryside. There are many men...and a very few women--the lady and her damsels. Around them throng...the inferior nobles, the landless knights, the squires and the pages...feudally inferior to the

> lady as to her lord--her men, as the feudal language had it. Whatever 'courtesy' is in the place flows from her: all female charm from her and her damsels....[5]

It was these ladies, lonely and bored under the haughty mechanical caresses of husbands to whom they were completely subservient and who were concerned only with the speedy production of an heir, who found in the young men of the court affection and flattery and service. They demanded from this dependent and competing male entourage not only love but melodious and metrical praise. They were perhaps not quite young and beautiful but in the verses of their servants they were without equal forever.

These flirtations were soon elevated to the level of etiquette and frozen into ritual so that they could be played at openly before the husbands,who found them rather more flattering than anything else, being humanly pleased at the praise of their possessions. The flirtations became etiquette and the etiquette became verse, just why it is hard to say. Perhaps there was in the difficulty and adornment of poetry an appeal to the snobbishness and a sop to the insecurity of those but a few removes from barbarism.

At any rate, the forms and techniques of vernacular verse were already in existence among the folk. The young maidens and wives of countryside and village had come to

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[5]Paraphrased in Lewis, op. cit., p. 12.

celebrate the Mayday with songs of passion and joy at their release from the surveillance of parents and husbands, granted at the springtide celebration of the fertility of the fields.[6] It was these songs that may have first suggested to the courtly dames or to their courtiers the possibility of singing in the vernacular about love, that reinforced the adulterous and secular tone of lyric verse, and that set its subject matter once and for all. But the songs of the people were simple and almost brutal; they turned about a few conventional themes: the parting of lovers, the lament of the unhappily married wife, the plea of the young girl in love; and they were always placed in the mouths of women.

The songs of the court on the other hand were from the beginning more subtle, more artificial, more varied in form and technique; and they were, with a very few exceptions, directed to women and sung by men. It is from the fundamental social situation described above that their three fundamental characteristics arise: the frank avowal of adultery, humility before the beloved, and obedience, unquestioning and enduring. This basic trinity of Adultery, Humility, and Obedience came into conflict with prevailing religious dogma and out of that conflict further typical elements were evolved. Strangely enough, the very thoroughness of the Church's opposition to sex, its blanket disapproval

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[6]See Gaston Paris, Mélanges de la littérature française, p. 609 ff.

of passion under all circumstances, tended to facilitate the acceptance of Adultery as a part of the love tradition. If marriage is no sanction for love, the line between marital and extra-marital relations, so important in our civilization, becomes of little significance. As a matter of fact in the face of medieval doctrine all the distinctions made in our modern world between carnal and "spiritual" love, between sincere passion and philandering etc. are meaningless. However refined the love of man for woman may become it is still unalterably opposed to the love of God.

When we have understood this we are able to understand the mingling from the very beginning in Provence of the frankly sensual and idealistic erotic strains to us so utterly incompatible, for both are equally sinful sub specie aeternitatis. Let us note that the earliest love lyrics are quite unambiguously physical. There is a good deal of indulgence in fine phrases, and a willingness to deny the flesh temporarily for the sake of a future reward, but that reward is flesh and blood, "the kiss upon the mouth so hard that its mark remains for a month." The importance of this fact in the work of Donne we shall have occasion to notice later.

Humility and Obedience to woman are no less opposed to the teaching of the medieval church; for woman, the Fathers insisted, was man's natural subordinate and "uxoriousness" was a sin. The material and social reasons for the undoctrinal subservience of the troubadours to their ladies, as we

have seen, could not be denied, but even in yielding those early poets felt a need of a rationalization, some ideal explanation compatible with their other values. The church had accomodated its dogma to the earlier feudal loyalties, but it could not bend to Frauendienst without breaking. Mohamet had to go to the mountain. Some of the attempted rationalizations are ingenious in the extreme, attempting to deduce the service of woman from the very fact of her inferiority. This view is perhaps best summarized by Jehan Petit, who tells us that we must offer woman our devotion and tenderness because

> De toute cose ki est dite et faite, ki plaist au talent de son courage, li samble boin et raisonable soit boin ou ne soit. Et pour chou ke femme ne connoit nule cose par droit ne par raison, fors ensi ke es corages s'esmuet tenrement....[7]

and indeed there is more than a little truth in the contention that the woman worship which the Middle Ages found it possible to grant the sex implies a view of its worth that is scarcely complimentary. Excessive idealism and complete cynicism, as has been often noted, are not incompatible but complementary.

Domnei soon became formalized and exaggerated. The lover was expected to suffer endless torment, to accept coldness and contempt as his due and to offer in return unques-

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[7]"Le manuscrit de Jehans Petis d'Arras" in Backer, op. cit., p. 82.

tioning and unfaltering faithfulness. One can not help being a little suspicious of this apotheosis of pain. The account given by one of the imaginative biographers of the Troubadours, telling of a poet who, for his lady's sake, mangled his face, chopped off one of his fingers and part of his lip, may be fictitious, but the relish of the medieval mind for such a tale is real. There is in l'amour courtois a deep-seated and essential masochism, a reflection on the literary plane of the desire to suffer pain that haunted the Middle Ages, and that arose under the influence of a religion which taught that pain was a purifying force, a necessary way to salvation. To suffer at the hands of a woman made the torture all the more delicious for the same men who delighted to hear of Aristotle on all fours being ridden by a whore.

The pattern of torment and endurance soon achieved conventionalization in the process of becoming a part of courtly behaviour and an aspect of art; the lover was expected to swoon, to weep, to be sleepless and to refuse food, to turn pale at the lady's glance and to follow a score of other fixed reactions taught by literature to life. The absolute rigidity of formula we find later in northern France is at first not present, but a tendency toward such rigidity is to be descried quite early. In Provence the lover-lady relationship becomes fixed first in the realm of art, with the setting of a typical pattern for the canso: the lover weeping against the background of spring and the blossoming wood (we remember the first

vernacular songs were of May and fertility), the cruelty of his beloved. This background never changed; it was the aesthetic assumption of an age and within its framework the artist found scope for variation and individuality. At our distance, and to a cursory glance, almost all Provençal poetry seems to be alike, for we see only the resemblances which to their framers were the inevitable accompaniment of verse and therefore hardly noticed unless they were missing. It would have been as easy to conceive of verse without words as a canso without the Maytide and the unyielding beloved.

But love-theory as a philosophy rather than an aesthetics remained among the poets of the langue d'oc very largely eclectic. There was no set psychology and no metaphysics. Love, to be sure, came to be thought of as arising from the influence of the lady's eyes; it was even occasionally suggested that the noble-hearted only could love; but these ideas rose casually without plan, and whatever resemblances there were from poet to poet owed there existence to a common fund of experience. Because the word amor was in Provençal feminine, love was personified first as a woman, hardly to be distinguished often from the object of the singer's devotion; but what symbolism there was never passed beyond the obvious.

The poets were primarily concerned with their music, with the technical intricacies of composition and performance, the discovery of new and difficult rimes -- in short, with

the production of ever more startling tours de force. The emphasis on form was inevitable. Their poetic matter, after all, was supplied the troubadours by their social situation, and their preoccupation with skills enabled them to forget that, in the final analysis, they were singing for their suppers, and to assert their superiority over those they were forced to praise in the very act of praising them. But out of their practices a theory of art emerged that was to characterize the whole aesthetic approach of the lyric in the Middle Ages: poetry was unconcerned with "truth"; it avoided equally realism and expressionism; no personal document or frank avowal of passion, it was rather a testament to ingenuity working within an accepted framework of convention. It was from precisely such aesthetic assumptions, as we shall see later, that Donne was to start five hundred years after.

The poet starting with such a view came to consider obscurity as a virtue, or at least to regard clarity as non-essential; and the snobbishness we have spoken of before served to reinforce his resolve to be always something less than transparent. There were three attitudes toward this problem among the troubadours: the followers of the trobar clus made obscurity their end; they were subtle and intricate and unclear by choice. The poets who espoused the trobar ric devoted all their energies to the pursuit of involved patterns of sound, of rare words and increasingly difficult forms; to

them obscurity was a byproduct of a search for richness. Even the proponents of the trobar leu, who railed against their contemporaries for lack of clarity, seem to us hardly less difficult. Their obscurity arose despite their own wishes and out of the very nature of their craft.

But despite their preoccupation with form, there was forever pressing at the rim of men's consciousness the awareness of a dual conflict: the clash between the courtly codes and the demands of feudal society on the one hand, and between those codes and the doctrines of the church on the other. Particularly when the upper nobility, kings, dukes and princes, began to take up in sport as an added charm to dalliance the poetic formulae developed by the landless knights, did those problems demand an answer. How to bring the theories of love into accord with current social and ecclesiastical values? That question has continued to shape our thinking on this subject these nine hundred years.

So love passed from the realm of social etiquette to that of the myth or social rationalization, an attempt, continually frustrated and continually changing, to subsume under the social and religious order a primal urge of man that had been cut off from acceptance by society and banished to the outer darkness by an all-inclusive Christian Church.

We are so accustomed today to think of sexual passion as justified by its institutionalization in marriage or by its connection with the family, that we are likely to forget

that once sex in any form was afforded no place in the hierarchy of values to which all men were expected to conform. But such was the case in the medieval world, and it was a world, let us remember, that admitted no denial. One chose the world as it was and the church as it stood, or one chose--nothing. There was nothing else.

Let us imagine, if we can in these days of divided loyalties, a society completely under the rule of an all-powerful church, a church to which men are bound not only by emotion and faith, but by the same system of organized fealty based on land and personal service which unifies political life; and let us imagine that this church, whose edicts we dare not question, has branded the love of man for woman as an evil to be tolerated, and only tolerated, when devoted to the production of children. Yet this is an emotion incapable of being supressed by most men, forever doomed to come into recurring conflict with a set of values otherwise completely accepted. What then is the solution?

The answer of the Middle Ages was to find some divine or pseudo-divine sanction for such a feeling, to legalize it in imitation, or even parody, of the only forms universally respected, those of the church -- in short, to forge a Religion of Love. And this is the first element in the myth erected around their feelings by men who could not deny the flesh, but to whom the inadequacy of naturalism was apparent.

Love was considered a God, his followers clergy, those who denied him heretics. A whole love service complete with church and saints was organized -- a procedure that was at once a tribute to religion and a threat to its hegemony.[8] Those who consider the religifying of love tend to overlook one or the other of these factors, but both are important. The tone of the love-religion was often mocking, and it was perhaps revolutionary in its implications, but it was at the same time a gesture of respect toward the very values it menaced.

The transfer of religious terminology to the love-myth was facilitated by certain sexual elements present in religion itself, particularly among the folk for whom Mary had always possessed certain attributes of the Aphrodite they were forbidden to worship, and by the masochism common to both. But this accomodation was at best only temporarily satisfying, for the religious impulse in courtly love tended always to overflow the banks of pious or playful imitation, and become a caricature, a paganisation of Christianity, or even a denial of the dearest tenets of the church. The clergy were always aware of this implicit threat to their power, and when the princes of Provence were stripped of land and life in the Albigensian Crusade, leaving the patronless troubadours

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[8] See Eduard Wechssler, Das Kulturproblem des Minnesangs, Vol. I, Minnesang und Christentum (only volume which appeared).

to seek support at the hands of the bourgeoisie, who were more securely under the thumb of the church, the priests and prelates lost little time in exerting pressure that finally stripped the cansos of all physical passion and turned them into pious allegory.

The poets themselves were not unconscious of the unsuppressible contradiction beneath their works, but they developed early the power of shutting off conflicting spheres of value into airtight compartments. Of course there remained for the sensitive and religious, when vigor and inspiration had run low at life's end and the thought of death blotted out all but the church's creed, terror and recantation -- but the temporal demands of love and art had meanwhile been served.

The Provençal poets did not stop with the sanctification of love. In addition to justifying sex by endowing it with a clergy, deities and a theology to prove it no disruptive force, they went on to depict passion as an ennobling force which strengthened men in the performance of precisely those duties most demanded by the society in which they lived: loyalty, gentilesse and courage. Love, the poets asserted, taught the faithful obedience to their superiors, respect for the courtly codes of conduct (and there is nothing which gives a society a surer feeling of immunity to change than the persistence of ritual) as well as added vigor in the old chivalric duty of hacking off inimical heads. And in this practice, we

shall see later, they were followed up to the time of Donne.

Such a procedure leads eventually to the feudalization of love, and it is strengthened in its progress toward this end by a tendency implicit in the social situation out of which the love-myth arose. The poet addressed the lady as midons (which means etymologically my lord); he is her man, giving to her "service" and demanding of her his feudal rights. Out of this double-barreled legalization of love comes the characteristic imagery of the poets of Provence, ecclesiastical and feudal. There is little imagery drawn from classical sources, an occasional substitution of the winged boy of the Romans for the native female deity of love. Though Ovid had been used, misunderstood or re-interpreted, as you please, by the medieval mind, to fill in the rules which guided the lover's behaviour in quest of his lady's favors, he was little drawn on for rhetorical material. The only other source represented at all, and this, though important for our purposes, confined to the work of one poet, of whom we shall have occasion to speak later, was the "science" of the time, in particular the animal lore of the Bestiaries.

> Atressi cum l'orifans,
> que, quan chai, no·s pot levar,
> tro l'autre, ab lor cridar,
> de lor votz lo levon sus....[9]

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[9]Richard Barbezieux, Appel, Provenzalische Chrestomathie, p. 70.

It will pay us to consider in conclusion a typical Provençal poet; for in his life we shall find not only a summation of a school of verse, but, more important, the first example of a pattern that was to persist among the singers of earthly love down through the Middle Ages and to set its stamp upon that belated medieval, John Donne. William IX, Count of Poitou,[10] is sometimes called the first of the troubadours, which he surely is not; but his work is the earliest which has survived, and in it the whole gamut of Provençal verse is represented in amazing completeness and with every essential detail of the tradition.

He produced four <u>cansos</u>, lovely pieces set against the conventional vernal background, in which the devoted and long-suffering lover makes his debut with all the formal and idealistic machinery that is to accompany him,

> Ab la dolchor del temps novel
> foillo li bosc, e li aucel
> chanton, chascus, en lor lati,
> segon lo vers del novel chan;
> adonc esta ben c'om s'aisi
> d'acho dont hom a plus talan.
>
> De lai don plus m'es bon e bel,
> non vei mesager ni sagel,
> per que mon cor no•m dorm ni ri,
> ni no•m aus traire ad enan
> tro que eu sacha ben de fi
> se•l es aissi com eu deman.
>
> ...

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[10]Jeanroy, <u>op. cit.</u>, Vol. II, pp. 6-12.

Enquer me membra d'un mati,
que nos fezem de guera fi
e que•m donet un don tan gran:
sa drudari' e son annel.
Enquer me lais Dieus viure tan
c'aia mas mans soz so mantel!

Qu'eu non ai soing de lor lati
que•m parta de mon Bon-Vezi,
qu'eu sai de paraulas co•m van
ab un breu sermon que•s espel
que tal se van d'amor gaban,
nos n'avem la pessa e.l coultel.[11]

seven other poems ranging from the impudent to the obscene, and at the last one song of repentence and refuge in God in which he abjures all the rest.

De proeza e de joi fui,
Mais ara partem ambedui;
Et eu irai m'en a scellui
on tut peccador troban fi.
...
Aissi guerpisc joi e deport
E vair e gris e sembeli.[12]

At the very beginning the configuration is set once and for all: the mingling of the brutal and the ideal and the ultimate denial of both. We shall see it again and again, and find it at last in Donne.

Lyric verse arose suddenly in the south of France and just as suddenly died. When the Albigensian Crusade had impoverished and killed the most generous of the patrons of verse, the troubadours scattered to Spain and to Italy and to the

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[11]Appel, op. cit., p. 51.

[12]André Berry, Florilège des troubadours, p. 50.

North, but the roots of invention seemed to dry up once they were transplanted. There was some attempt on the part of the burghers, who took advantage of the confusion and misery of the war to seize power, to keep alive the tradition of the canso. They tried to capture ponderously and by rule the singing glories that were gone. But the aspirants for the prizes of the Consistoire de gaie Science were no longer gay nor quite poets.

Courtly love was dead in Provence. It was to bloom again elsewhere. In the northern part of France it was to find a great codifier in Andreas Capellanus and a great poet in Chrétien de Troyes; in Spain its traditions were to be assimilated and extended; but the particular line of development which we must follow takes us next to Sicily.

The troubadours had enjoyed great popularity in Italy; indeed one of the finest of the later singers in the Provençal tongue had been the Italian, Sordello. But in northern Italy the langue d'oc was easily comprehended, and so there was little incentive to produce a literature in the native dialects. In Sicily, however, the situation was different; the linguistic difficulties were greater, so that the poems of the troubadours had to be translated to be understood, and there appears to have been an especially rich popular literature in the vernacular.[13]

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[13]See G. A. Cesareo, Le origini della poesia lirica...and Adolph Gaspary, Storia della Letteratura Italiana, Vol. I, pp. 47-90, for the development of Sicilian poetry.

In the early thirteenth century the Svevi came to the Sicilian throne and the Emperor, Frederick II, who was interested in literature, and who was engaged in a struggle with the Pope, welcomed to his court poets fleeing the rage of the Church. Many troubadours took advantage of the imperial hospitality, and brought to the learned men Frederick had collected around him their first glimpse of a genre already past its point of perfection. A number of these courtiers were intrigued enough with the new form to try their hands at reproducing its effects in their own tongue. But these new practitioners of the art of trobar were different men from their predecessors in Provence. In the place of the gay hangers-on of the local courts were sober men and scholars; in the place of the landless knights and the declassed nobility were lawyers and jurists, proud of their studies and of their bourgeois origin. Giacomo di Lentini, who signed himself with pride "the Notary", Guido delle Colonne, a judge, Pier della Vigna, secretary of the court, whose letters still remain a monument of style and erudition, into such hands the old frivolous tradition was passed.

Indeed, the whole social situation was different in the extreme. In the first half of the thirteenth century Sicily possessed a bastard civilization in which were mingled elements of the Byzantine, Arab and Roman worlds. The habits of Frederick were in some respects oriental; while surrounding himself with the poets of courtly love and even himself

occasionally singing the service of women, he kept a seraglio guarded by eunuchs. To him and to his followers l'amour courtois was a fiction, a thing of literature only, and as such to be imitated superficially, its conventions learned by rote.

By the time the tradition of domnei had reached southern Italy it had already been changed; with the thinning out of inspiration and the exaggerations of form, had come a toning down of the underlying strain of physical passion, a disguising of the essential situation, born of a vain effort to win the favor or sufferance of the church. This shift in emphasis was carried further by the pious and basically moralistic bourgeois with whom the emperor had surrounded himself. Many of the elements in Provençal poetry appeared to these solid and middle class bards incompatible with their ways of living, and meaningless in terms of their experience. They were quite unable, for instance, to understand the function of the feudal imagery in the cansos, and they speedily replaced it with figures drawn from the realms in which they were accustomed to move. For the chivalric and the feudal they substituted the "scientific" and the philosophical. Giacomo di Lentino, in particular, realizing that if his verse and that of his countrymen was to have any reality and life it must reflect the mode of existence which they knew best, turned to the new sources of material.

It was a time of intellectual ferment in Sicily. Under

the sponsorship of the emperor scientists had been gathered together from all over Europe, from the Christian and the Moslem worlds. A score of projects were under way; Frederick had called Michael Scot to his court to do a work on Physiognomy; he had planned a translation of Aristotle, and the Arab scholars were already at work; Sicily had become one of the great scientific centers of the time, and it was from this Sicily, from this meeting point of research and philosophical speculation, that Giacomo hoped to draw new blood for the poetry of love.

> In oltre Giacomo escluse da' sonnetti quanti di imagini...poteva accordarsi soltanto con lo spirito cavalleresco e feudale. Considerando che un certo linguaggio poteva convenire a'...baroni, vasalli, non conveniva...a poeti della corte siciliana, uomini di studio al par di lui, cercò un materiale meditativo e rettorico...nella scienza delle scuole: nella filosofia, nella fisica, ne' Bestiari, ne' Lapidari, nelle Moralizzazioni....[14]

For such a course the Sicilian poet was able to find precedents here and there in the works of the Provençal Bertran de Born, Americ de Pegulhan, and especially Richart de Barbézieux, who had been particularly mentioned by his biographer as one who

> delectava fort de dire en sas cansos similitudines de bestias e d'auzeds. e del solelh e de las estalas, per dire novellas razos c'autre non auges ditas ni trobadas....[15]

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[14]Cesareo, op. cit., p. 345.

[15]Ibid., p. 346.

But the time was not yet ripe for the complete reforging of the imagery of the erotic poem. The completion of that task had to wait on the prerequisite synthesis of Aquinas. Giacomo's contemporaries, where they did not ignore him altogether, imitated what was non-essential and superficial in him. Most of the Sicilian poets engaged in the production of incredibly fleshless lyrics, whose scrupulous adherence to the courtly codes was matched only by their lack of passion. One element of Provençal verse appealed particularly to the legal minded Sicilians, the argumentative or dialectic strain especially strong in the tensos, debates in verse on moot points of the love code. The realistic emphasis on physical passion is found, as we should expect, only in the verse of the King and an occasional member of the upper nobility; the bourgeois writers shun it altogether in favor of the spiritual and the allegorical.

From the Sicilian court the new poetry was carried to the law school at Bologna by the young men of the South, who appear to have devoted no less of their time to the propagation of the courtly tradition than to the pursuit of their studies at the University. Their truancy was no doubt disturbing to their earnest elders, but it served to transmit the love-myth and its poetry to the north. The role of law students in the spreading of erotic verse may seem to us at first a surprising phenomenon, but when one reflects that the schools of law were the only havens for young men seeking knowledge and not desiring to enter the church, it is not too

difficult to understand. At any rate, the aspirants to the bar, moving northward from Sicily, carried with them the two strains of love poetry developed by their countrymen, the didactic and the lyrical, and at Bologna both were taken up and at length merged in a new and fruitful synthesis by the greatest of the forerunners of Dante, Guido Guinicelli.

As a student in Bologna Guido had learned the warm and superficial gaiety of the lyric style of Sicily, and later through the intermediary figure of Guittone d'Arezzo the sober earnest of the didactic school; both are joined in the verse of his maturity, the calore of the former and the subtlety of the latter blended in poetry at once passionate and intellectual.

But even in the world of Guinicelli the courtly conventions were foreign and remote. If the feudal world had seemed strange and distant in a Sicily with its remaining traces of Norman culture, how much more did it seem so in the north with its great Communes, its triumphant and powerful bourgeoisie. To the young men of Florence and of Bologna the courtly myth could be understood only as allegory or jest. The light-hearted played at the codes of love as at a game; they imitated with grace and without conviction the externalities of Provençal verse; they pursued the esoteric and the obscure. Gathered in their mock academies, the Fedeli d'Amore competed in trials of dexterity and wit at manipulating the imported art forms. The sons of wealthy merchants, they strove to forget their

fathers' grubby pasts in what seemed to them aristocratic wantonness; the turning of a pretty verse was to them no more or less important than the squandering of wealth or the conducting of a successful seduction. One group of youngsters would amuse itself by spending 216,000 Florins in ten months, another by imitating the canso. When these Falcons, or Lions or Knights of the Table Round (the names are indicative both of their spirit and the limitations of their imagination) grew weary of posing as suffering lovers, pledged to the ungrudging and devoted denial of the flesh, they sang songs of contempt for women, turning to the humoristic tradition that had come down to them from Provence in the verse of Macabrun or the Monk of Montaudon. The pious Sicilians had tried to forget that the troubadours were on occasion cynical and obscene; the sons of the rulers of the Communes took great delight in remembering that fact.[16]

Their ingenuity and gaiety, their contempt for the staid morality of their class and their knowledge of the older traditions became for these spoiled young men the key by which they entered the chambers of the remnants of the old nobility whom their fathers had battled and despised. The humoristic tradition they espoused, and the social uses to which they turned its wit and its denial of ethical values are alike important to our understanding of the poetry of John Donne, as

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[16]Gaspary, op. cit., p. 186 ff.

a sample of its characteristic manner and tone will indicate.

S'io fossi fuoco, arderei lo mondo,
S'io fossi vento, io 'l tempesterei,
S'io fossi aqua, io l'allagherei,
S'io fossi Iddio, lo mandere' 'n profondo.
...
S'io fossi Cecco, com' io sono e fui,
Torrei per me le giovane leggiadre,
Le brutt' e vecchie lascerei altrui.[17]

The problem of the more serious poet, however, was by no means so simple. Guittone d'Arezzo had begun by singing in ingenious if heavy-handed lyrics the praise of love as the begetter of excellence, but had ultimately turned in bitterness against his own work, essentially chaste as it was beneath its eccentricities, calling it the product of pride and folly. Leaving his wife and children he submitted himself to the discipline of the Frati Gaudenti, and in those holy ranks returned to verse to forbid men to read his earlier pieces, and to declare that the praise of love, however pure, was inimical to sanctity and salvation.

Arid and pompous as was Guittone's later verse, it provided a cue for Guido Guinicelli, who took up where the older poet had failed, substituting for the uneasy combination of Provençal elements and piety a new love synthesis parallel to the philosophical synthesis attained by Aquinas and drawing on the latter for its metaphysics.

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17 Ibid., p. 191.

The older compromises had proved inadequate; the feudalization of love was meaningless in a new social order; the Provençal religion of love too obvious and naive for the men of Florence in the midst of a local "scientific" renaissance under the leadership of Brunetto Latini and deriving ultimately from the scholastic movement. To the ancient problem of subsuming love under the ethical pattern of society and church was added a new one, to fit love into the ordered universe of the schoolmen and bring it into accord with the findings of the new psychology. To do this it proved necessary to emphasize the symbolic aspects of the love-myth, to make woman an angel and love an emanation from the living God. This was the task of Guinicelli and of the school of the dolce stil nuovo that followed him, and its influence on John Donne we shall have an opportunity to consider at another point.

Many of the traditional ideas remained unchanged by the new synthesis: love was still considered the spring of valor; the humble and long-suffering lover persisted along with the conventional beloved, beautiful, cold and cruel; secrecy, faithfulness and obedience remained the basic virtues of an aspirant for love. But there had been fundamental changes, too. There was a new metaphysics, for the first time complete and systematized, a new mythology and a new source of imagery. The trend, begun by Barbézieux and carried forward by "the Notary", was at last completed -- imagery and

inspiration were drawn from a single source, contemporaneous "science".

> ...la sua novità [il dolce stil nuovo] fu di considerare l'amore e la donna come suggere il movimento scientifico e filosofico contemperaneo...E i nuovi poeti, movendo dal concetto, dominente nelle scuole poetiche anteriori, della donna specchio di bellezza e di valore...e volendo far rientrare l'arte loro nell' ordine universale già supposto della filosofia, nella donna intravidderò un angelo e nell' amore un raggio della virtù di dio....[18]

New mythological concepts were introduced beside the older gods of love; the "noble heart" made its first appearance, and the "spiriti" entered the world of art, personifications of psychological faculties which the poets had discovered in the medieval physiologists, particularly Albertus Magnus, and which we shall find hereafter in the Songs and Sonnets.

The reform of the stil nuovo began with a reform of metaphor and diction, but was extended finally to a revolution in aesthetic theory and in the codes of love. Out of the theory of suffering for the sake of an ultimate reward at the lady's hands was evolved the theory of suffering for its own sake, of love and its discipline as an absolute good. It mattered little whether woman were in reality treacherous and ignoble, the passion in the lover's breast was in itself

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[18]Liborio Azzolina, Il "Dolce Stil Nouvo", p. 234. For my description of the "sweet new style" I have drawn on this and Karl Vossler, Die philosophischen Gründlagen zum "süssen neuen Stil".

worth while, for through his martydom in love the poet ascended a step nearer to God.

The central emphasis was shifted more and more to the symbolic level, the lady of flesh and blood being forgotten in favor of the lady as a sign of salvation. At the beginning and at the heart of the whole movement stands Guinicelli's great poem, Al cor gentil, in which the concepts and "metaphysical" method alike of the dolce stil nuovo are given memorable form. It is a poem about the theory, beloved by Dante, of the "gentle heart", the theory that only where love exists potentially can it come to exist in fact. It is perhaps a poem of snobbisme, with its emphatic distinction between the vilano and the gentil, but it is a poem in whose dialectic construction and scientific imagery there is a key for those who will use it not only to an understanding of the "sweet new style", but of an essential, and otherwise incomprehensible, aspect of the love poetry of John Donne.

Al cor gentil ripara sempre Amore
Come a la selva augello in la verdura:
Nè fe'Amore avanti gentil core,
Nè gentil core avanti Amor, Natura;
...
Foco d'amore in gentil cor s'apprende,
Come vertute in pietra preziosa:
Chè dalla stella valor non discende,
Avanti 'l Sol la faccia gentil cosa;
Poi che n' ha tratto fuore
Per sua forza, lo Sol ciò che lì è vile,
La stella 'i da valore. . . . .
Così lo cor, ch' è fatto da Natura
Schietto, pur e gentile,
Donna, a guisa di stella, lo innamura.

Amor per tal ragion sta in cuor gentile,
Per qual lo fuoco in cima del doppiero
Splende allo suo diletto, chiar, sottile:
Non li staria altrimenti, tant' è fero!
...
Amore in gentil cor prende rivera
Per suo consimil loco,
Com' adamas del ferro in la minera.
Fere lo Sole il fango tutto 'l giorno:
Vile riman, nè il Sol perde calore.
Dice uom altier: Gentil per schiatta torno;
Lui sembra 'l fango, e 'l Sol gentil valore.
...
Splende in la Intelligenza della cielo
Dio creator, più ch' a' nostri occhi il Sole:
Quella 'ntende 'l suo fattor oltra 'l velo;
Lo ciel volgendo, a lui ubidir tole,
E consegue al primero
Del giusto Dio beato compimento.
Così dar dovria il vero
La bella donna, che negli ocche splende,
Del suo gentil talento,
Chi mai di lui ubidir non si disprende.
Donna, Dio mi dirà: Che presumisti?
Sendo l'anima mia a lui davanti:
Lo ciel passasti, e fino a me venisti,
E desti in vano amor, me per sembianti;
Ch' a me convien la laude,
E alla Reina del regname degno,
Per cui cessa ogni fraude.
Dir li potrò: Tenea d'Angel sembianza
Che fosse del tuo regno;
Non mi sie fallo, s' io le posi amanza[19]

There are other minor elements of this new erotic myth that might be discussed; the theory of love as a union of the lover and the beloved, the concept that true love demands "correspondency", Amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona, the subtle speculation about the efficacy of the ladies eyes and of her smile, the theory that love is born at the meeting

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[19]Quoted in LaVita Nuova di Dante Alighieri, edited by Kenneth McKenzie, pp. 104-5.

of two glances etc. But what we must chiefly remember is the basically systematic nature of this approach and its final substitution of "scientific" for feudal elements in the imagery of amorous verse.

In a sense, the poetry of the stil nuovisti and the burlesque pieces of the fedeli d'amore represent together a single revolution in European love philosophy, the dual impact upon its conventions of a triumphant bourgeoisie. Indeed, some of the older scholars of Italian poetry used the term stil nuovo for the products of both schools. Such poets as Rustico di Filippo wrote indiscriminately in the two strains, and, let us not forget, that for a brief moment of his youth even Dante tried his hand at the scurrilous and the gross.

Between Dante, who represents the culmination of the "sweet new style", and the pioneer figure of Guinicelli stands the "second Guido", Guido Cavalcanti, a poet of great talent who is perhaps most interesting to us for his use of the devices of "wit", before him associated exclusively with the humoristic tradition, in verse of elevated tone and feeling. In an exchange with Guido Orlandi, his uncustomary joining of "argutezza," religious imagery and passion drew from the latter the horrified response, "S'avessi detto, amico, di Maria...", in which we find a striking anticipation of Ben Jonson's comment on Donne's Anniversaries, that to say what he had of any woman but the Virgin was to blaspheme. Indeed,

the later English poet is foreshadowed in more than the reaction which Cavalcanti's poem evoked, as a glance at the piece in question will show.

Una figura della donna mia
S'adora, Guido, a san Michele in Orto,
Che di bella sembianze, onesta e pia,
De' peccatori è refugio a conforto.
E quale a lei divoto s'umilia,
Che piu languisce, più n'a di conforto;
Gl'infermi sana, i Demon caccia via,
E gli occhi orbati fa vedere scorto.
Sana in pubblico loco gran languori,
Con reverenza la gente s'inchina,
Due luminari l'adornan di fuori.
La voce va per lontana cammina,
Ma dicon ch' è l'idolatra i Fra Minori,
Per invidia che non e lor vicina.[20]

The Vita Nuova of Dante Alighieri, and its companion piece the Convivio, stand at the end of this tradition, marking its penultimate stage of development, and leading at last to the Divine Comedy, which is in one of its manifold aspects the final expression of the Florentine love myth, the result of a resolve "to say of woman what no man had said before." Let us note, however, that in the end Dante makes those poets of love whom he admires the most do penance in Purgatory or in Hell, simply for having devoted their talents to so trivial a subject. The attempted synthesis of the stil nuovo, it should be noted, destroys itself in the process of achieving its success and at the very moment of its triumph.

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[20]Azzolina, op. cit., p. 78.

Dante learned the techniques of love poetry not only from his Florentine and Sicilian predecessors but by turning back to Provence, to the original well spring of erotic poetry. He relearned from the followers of the trobar clus a taste for obscurity and adornment; he preferred the intricate, and often barely comprehensible, Arnaud Daniel to the more popular Giraut de Borneil, whose verse could be understood even by the stolti, the stupid herd. To him poetry was always the possession of the learned few and suffered only by catering to the mass; a reactionary in politics, the great Florentine was hardly more democratic in his aesthetic point of view.

But all this is, perhaps, by the way. The essential contribution of Dante to the development of erotic verse was his removal of love from the limitations of this world, and his complete depersonalization of woman, whom he turned into a symbol of divine truth. For Dante the lover must not merely devote years of unrequited adoration to his lady in hope of ultimately winning her affections; he must devote his whole life to that pursuit with no such hope, without even daring to speak to his beloved. In a sense, this achieved at last a solution to the ancient conflict between man's belief in woman's inferiority and his need to worship her, but it was an illusory solution for most men.

There are in the Dantesque synthesis Neo-Platonic elements; Dante, to be sure, never knew Plato directly, but in

Augustine whom he loved above all, and in the other Fathers and doctors of the Church, there were Plotinian elements ready to the poet's hand. Essentially, however, the new myth arose rather out of man's desire to protect himself from an encounter between reality and his ideals than from any external inspiration, literary or philosophical. For Dante it no longer mattered whether the beloved was in fact unworthy, nor even that she was in life the wife of some one else. The passion she aroused was undeniably good, for it led to the desire for God and taught the lover how to reach salvation. Love and theology had been merged, but at what a cost! To a few ascetics the Florentine synthesis may have been satisfactory, but to most men it seemed an evasion of the central problem. It was easy enough to turn the courtly ideals, stripped of all carnal connotations, to religious ends; they had after all been constructed on religious models, and whatever was left of woman could be transformed without difficulty into an allegorical representation of some spiritual impulse. For most of us this dual synthesis, complete as it is, and in the end, I suppose, a source of peace, is hardly possible--for it rests upon a denial of the flesh.

We are all willing enough to make symbols of our women after having them; it is a rare man who would make his mistress a myth before taking her to bed. Dante, himself, historical evidence seems to indicate, was never as successful in life as in literature in his self-imposed task of living

by the image of Beatrice alone.

With Petrarch comes the collapse of the always precarious Dantesque synthesis. There is so much superficial resemblance between the love of the former for Laura and of the latter for Beatrice, that we are likely to overlook the vast gap between them. The clue to the cleavage in their ideals is in the respective names of their loved ones; Beatrice is the source of beatitude; Laura is the laurel, the symbol of fame. To Petrarch fame was the spur and poetry the source of glory on earth. This new attitude he learned from the Classical world and in it he foreshadows the Renaissance.[21]

Petrarch abandons, too, the "scientific" matter so characteristic of Dante and the dolce stil nuovo, substituting for the scholastic imagery of the latter the gods and goddesses of antiquity, the mythology of Greece and Rome. He was a student of the older literature and of the ancient world, particularly of the Roman poets; and in his old age he even learned to read Greek. His abandonment of the search for figures in the life around him and in contemporary thinking marks a major break in the continuous medieval tradition we have been following; and his flight to the past for rhetorical material indicates the path to be followed by most of his successors.

Behind this shift in mythological and rhetorical material

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[21] See Gaspary, op. cit., pp. 396 ff., and the same author's Su le "Poesie Volgari" del Petrarca.

lies a shift in point of view. As the tradition of love had been refined, it had moved further and further away from the consideration of the object of love to an interest in the psychological fact of loving, from description and physical praise to an analysis of mental states. Petrarch reversed this procedure; in him the metaphysical discussions of "spirits" and potential forces are gone; the blonde hair, the lips and breasts have returned. And this change from internal to external is reflected, too, as we shall see below, in style.

But as modern as Petrarch was in his concept of literary fame and in the sources of his imagery, he was essentially of the Middle Ages in his sense of sin. He had abandoned the Florentine myth as over-intellectualized and too remote from living, but he could substitute for it no satisfactory rationalization. Once more in him the struggle between God and love is renewed; once more in him, unlike Dante for whom the only sin had been to leave loving, the love of man for woman is sin. He relives the old pattern of fear and repentance, devoting his last years to writing pious works in Latin and to regretting his youthful passions.

Basically his vulgar writings are anti-intellectual, the creatures of language rather than thought. In Dante the movement of ideas had been most important, forcing the movement of words to assume its image. Dante was not afraid to be brutal or even ugly when the occasion demanded, but in Petrarch elegance was all, ease, and smoothness, and exterior beauty.

Petrarch, we have noticed, began to read Greek in his old age, but it is doubtful that he ever read Plato in the original, early or late. There were Platonic, or more precisely neo-Platonic, ideas a-plenty in the general intellectual atmosphere of the time, and in his lyric poetry Petrarch made use of those which had passed into the common literary tradition in which he moved. This is little of this sort in the Canzone beyond the common places, but their author for better or worse was to become the hero of the Neo-Platonists.

In 1439 the Greek, George Gemisthus Pletho, in Italy for a council of eastern and western churches, lectured on Plato. He made little headway with the Roman clergy, but among his audience, and apparently deeply impressed, was Cosimo de' Medici, who, remembering what he had heard, had the son of his physician, the later famous Ficino, trained in the Greek language and educated as a Platonist. Around him in later years was organized a group of friends, interested amateurs and students, calling themselves the Platonic Academy; and as the fruit of their interest and efforts there emerged in 1482 a translation of Plato into Latin by one of their members, Pico della Mirandola.[22]

From this group interest spread rapidly throughout Italy, and from there to all of Europe, an interest, as had been the case with Pletho, combined with a respect for the early

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[22]Nesca A. Robb, Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance, and Paul Shorey, Platonism Ancient and Modern.

commentators and developers of Platonic thought, especially Plotinus and the cabalistic writings of the Jews. Almost from the first the work of Plato himself was seen through the hazy mist of the Enneads, romanticized into a mystic and magical creed. And beside the figure of Plato, as viewed through the visions and revisions of Plotinus, was set the figure of Petrarch, a native hero for the young Italians to set beside the ancient Greek.

Why Petrarch was chosen it is hard to say; for as we have seen he had little enough in common with Platonism as such. But his romantic character seemed to jibe with the vague but fervid idealism of the members of the Academy, and his name and verse were very early confused with the concepts of the neo-Platonists in so far as they were concerned with dignifying and explaining love.

It is not to our purpose here to follow the history of neo-Platonism beyond the point of its convergence with Petrarchanism, but it is perhaps worth noting that the Plotinian movement was always at least as much literary as philosophical, in the technical sense of the word. Its followers were largely interested in the aesthetic impact of its new ideas, and in the release its broad sweep afforded the poetic soul after its long confinement within the rigidities of Scholastic Aristotelianism. Perhaps, this is a clue as to why the followers of Ficino turned rather to the superficial Petrarch than the subtle but Thomistic Dante,

despite the fact that the dolce stil nuovo had anticipated their erotic doctrines with its concept of love as the mover of the universe, of the union of the souls of lovers, of ecstacy, and of mundane affections as the steps to the ultimate divine passion.

While the Petrarchans and the neo-Platonists were seeking refreshment and renewal for the traditional medieval codes among the remnants of antiquity and with idealism and romance, another tendency was growing, which, while paying lip service to the forms of courtly love, was sapping it away from within by cynicism and contempt.

The values of the courtly myth, we remember, served the needs of a small group at the center of the feudal world, a group which had been able to attain leisure for aesthetic and sentimental theorizing only when the society about it was already approaching its dissolution. L'amour courtois was no sooner evolved, than the group for which it was forged disappeared as a decisive social and artistic force. The feudal lords and ladies did not, however, fade from the scene over night, and in their long period of decline they made a lasting impression on their successors, the bourgeoisie, and especially on the off-spring of the very men who had sounded the death knell of Feudalism in beating back from the gates of Florence the last quixotic attempt to re-establish the Holy Roman Empire.

Boccaccio is typical. Born only a generation after Dante, he was the son of a successful merchant, a member of the new ruling class of Florence, that most bourgeois of the new Italian cities, in which so many impositions and disabilities had been imposed upon the nobility that certain crimes were punished by ennobling the culprit. The young man was able, by the wealth of his father, to get the education and to cultivate the social values which would enable him to condemn the very gold by which he had got them.

For men of this type the theories of _domnei_ served to supply a synthetic cultural background (for they denied their own) and an opportunity to quiet suspicions of their own inferiority, by proving to themselves and the rag-and-bobtail remnant of the aristocracy that they, too, were subtle and sensitive. The function of courtly love had changed, but its forms remained pretty largely the same, with perhaps an increasing emphasis upon the esoteric and an underlining of the snobbism already present. The complement of this _parvenu_ development, hidden at first, but in the long run crucial, was an undercurrent of cynicism, not blatant like that of the _fedeli d'amore_, but continually renewed by the clash between the artificialities of the newly acquired etiquette of love and the basic hard-headedness of the middle class.

In England the conflict of classes reached a climax more slowly, and long before the bourgeois Revolution a peculiar measure of compromise, later to reassert itself, had

been attained. In Chaucer, for instance, a contemporary of Boccaccio, we find an attitude much less shrill and emphatic--and quite without cynicism. When the English poet was in the process of recreating the Filostrato, he recast its love-philosophy along the lines of the courtly tradition of France, which he found much less self-conscious and much more truly medieval.[23]

We find in Chaucer, who, though bourgeois in origin, lives in a more backward and united society, no feeling of having to capture a tradition. He accepts one as he had accepted the manners of the court into which he had been introduced in early life. The men of Chaucer's time and circle had never had their noses rubbed in the slime of the world. In Italy the breakdown of a society and a long-standing set of values left men confused before the unadorned brutality of life; and it is this, in part, which leaves the trace of a sneer in so much of Boccaccio's poetry of love. Chaucer attained psychological truth of a rather profound sort within an unquestioned traditional framework of ethics. The backwardness of this world contributed no little to the balance of his vision. Not until the Tudor period were Englishmen given a glimpse of the stark Italian experience, and by that time it had been embroidered with the spectacular and the melodramatic.

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[23] C. S. Lewis, "What Chaucer really did to Il Filostrato", Essays and Studies, XVII (1932), 55-76.

The main stream of English lyrical poetry even in the Renaissance, however, remained remarkably undisturbed and serene. The lyric in England was created by an act of will, a deliberate selection by artists and scholars (quite unlike the organic continental development) who chose what they considered the useful and fertile aspects of European tradition. Such a selection is bound to yield poetry narrow and artificial in spirit and function.

Petrarch -- the one word covers it all. It is of tertiary importance that it was not the real Petrarch who was imported into England; the significant fact is that the main line of English Renaissance love poetry flows from his work as understood by the English imagination. The Renaissance in Britain came from without and it came only in literature; architecture, painting and sculpture, the great cathedral arts, most available to the folk, organic and popular, showed no significant developments in England. Indeed, even in literature that country was behind the times from the first. To Gower and Lydgate Petrarch had been a scholar; to Skelton at the end of the fifteenth century he was still a "famous clerk" -- and when at last his impact as an artist and lyrist was felt among the English, the tides of literary taste in his native land were beginning to leave him behind. Elizabethan England did little to close the gap; the mode of expression remained fixed around the devices of Petrarchanism; the Elizabethan author in "his mythology and general

mental habit was nearer to 1400 than 1700."[24] The decisive influence in the lyric remained Italian, immediately or at one remove. Chaucer had turned to France for inspiration and help, for the devices of dream allegory and the love codes of Capellanus. There was nothing artificial in his use of Froissart and Deschamps (except as any set of artistic conventions is artificial) for he shared with them a common culture.

But when Wyatt and Surrey turned to Italy they were drawing upon the artistic expression of a world vastly different from theirs. There was thus from the first a great gulf between the literature and life of the Renaissance in the field of the lyric. Art, where it touched the actual business of living at all, was considered an adornment of social relationships. There was in the desperate attempt of a country emerging from a century of civil strife, with its awareness of a lack of a stable culture, its feeling that behind it lay crudity and semi-barbarism, and with its fierce determination to achieve gentility by forcible feeding through literary conduits, not a little that brings to mind the Italian parvenu art of an earlier period.

But in England, feudal culture, never fully developed, had committed suicide before the bourgeoisie had attained

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[24]Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry, p. 90.

artistic maturity. Certain native popular streams survived from the Middle Ages to feed the drama, which in its palmiest days had the good fortune not to be considered "art"; but the lyric was to remain for a long time in the hands of those who despised and distrusted the "rim-ram-ruff" of the folk. It was not long, however, before this lyrical tradition, so foreign at first to the manners of the world into which it was born, assumed a function in the artificial society of the court, which was being feverishly constructed as yet another bulwark against the anarchy by which the Elizabethans were eternally haunted.

The theories of courtly love turned out to be fortunate in one quite accidental respect. The sovereign of England was a woman, and one who made marital intrigue an instrument of state. What better place for the flourishing of l'amour courtois than the court of such a woman, and one, it should be added, who was interested in the European tradition of erotic love from a literary point of view as well? In her orbit, and in the interlocking lesser orbits of her Ladies, courtly love became once more a reality, for it had been reborn as a social factor. In England, as once in Provence, the love codes had become an aspect of patriotism. The whole fate of the tradition became identified with the queen; it was to stand or fall with her. In such an atmosphere its tendency toward extreme formalization was, of course, encouraged. A knowledge of its patterns and an ability to mold

them into verse became the qualification of the courtier.

A new stage in the socialization of love had been attained. As it had been in turn a mainstay of the feudal state and a bulwark of its theology, it now became the support of an emergent nationalism. The peculiar combination of the Tudor tradition of personal rule and a coming to the throne of a woman insured the development of the Cult of the Queen.

Out of this trend two notable effects emerged. First, the identification of love and marriage, which had begun as early as Chrêtien de Troyes, was completed, and secondly, the fate of the romantic conception of love became dependent, to a large degree, upon the political success or failure of Elizabeth. The reasons for the first development are obvious. The question of the Queen's marriage was uppermost in the minds of men and though adultery persisted as a sub-current in the general tradition, it was no longer socially accepted. The myth of the Virgin Queen had set a premium on purity.

In addition, the bourgeoisie had begun to play a new role. No longer were they possessed with the feeling of insecurity that had made them fly in Italy to the culture of their former masters. In England the lines that were to reach final clarity in the coming Revolution were already apparent. Puritanism, so largely the religious expression of an economic fact, was beginning to make its influence felt. The middle class was in process of forging ideals

of its own, quite inimical to the medieval values, that would justify passion by institutionalizing it and make love acceptable by joining it to marriage.

> After the break with the Church of Rome, with its conservative attitude toward all sex relations, new opinions regarding woman, marriage and the home gained favor...No longer as in the medieval church, was virginity held to be the highest good, but a chastity of marriage was glorified by the Protestants...Thus he [the Puritan] began to concentrate his interest upon preserving the purity of the married state rather than the psychological purity of the individual....[25]

It is no accident that Edmund Spenser, the author who most consummately expressed that point of view, was bourgeois in origin and had been trained at one of the first schools established by the rising new class, but he is not alone. Almost all the major poets of the period from Shakespeare to Chapman are with him in fighting the same good fight.

They do not always move unerringly to the goal. Even in Spenser the new tendency wears the superficial trappings of the older way, for the poet moved on the rim of the court world, and he smuggles his emotional revolution into its circle, disguised and unsuspected in all its implications perhaps even to himself. But the real damage had been done. The cleavage between the love-myth of Spenser and those of

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[25]Louis B. Wright, Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England, p. 203.

the past is deeper and more critical than any could have surmised then. But from this point of vantage we can see that the distance from Britomart to Pamela is a good deal shorter and more direct than that from Britomart back to Cressida. The charmed medieval circle of sin and repentance has been broken through.

In this world and at this stage in the development of the love-myth, the Songs and Sonnets appeared. In what relation they stand to contemporary developments and traditional theory we are now prepared to discuss.

DONNE AND HIS CRITICS

One beginning to write about the love poetry of John Donne is overwhelmed at first by a feeling of despair in face of the huge and consistent edifice of misinterpretation our age has built about him. It is impossible to ignore this bulwark of legend, for distinguished scholars and authorities have lent a hand to its erection and it has become a part of our culture, of what we inevitably learn when we think we are learning about Donne. It is to this that we must turn our attention in order to clear the way for the establishment of the real relationship of the Songs and Sonnets to preceding erotic tradition.

Our modern interpretations are essentially romantic, a product of our desire to find "rebels" everywhere. The same tendency which led us not long ago to identify Milton with Satan has made us willing to see in the poetry of John Donne a revolt against what we like to call the "artificialities" of Petrarchanism. We have made the seventeenth century courtier, with all his essential dandyism and awareness of convention, a revolutionary hero, the great-grandfather

of the contemporary movement toward sexual freedom.

As early as Courthope the picture was sketched in. Donne is a "revolutionist in love" ruthlessly demolishing the "fine Platonic edifice" of his time in favor of a concept of love as "the principle of perpetual flux in Nature".[1] Courthope knew little of the medieval tradition. The one paragraph he devotes to filling in the background of his "fine Platonic edifice" is full of errors. In light of modern scholarship we can no longer believe in the existence of the Cours d'amour, nor is it possible any longer to think of l'amour courtois as, in any fundamental sense, a revision and extension of "the ancient canons of the art as expounded by Ovid". The historical data from which Courthope argued can no longer be admitted but the conclusions at which he arrived have somehow survived.

The reasons for this survival are many. Donne is the darling of our age; we have rediscovered him, relearned the pleasures of reading him and have insisted on recreating him in our own image. He has become the center for a re-examination of our literary values, so closely associated with our current aesthetic problems, that we have wanted to be deceived, and where superficial resemblances have seemed to indicate his likeness to us, we have been only too willing to look no further.

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[1]W. J. Courthope, History of English Poetry, Vol. III, p. 154.

Now there can be little doubt that John Donne did ignore some of the most popular elements in the amorous tradition out of which Spenser and Shakespeare and Daniel worked, but when we pass on to the consideration of why the author of the Songs and Sonnets turned away from just those elements and what he proposed to substitute for them, there is room enough for disagreement.

The prevailing tendency in recent years has been to follow Courthope in considering Donne a defender of naturalism, a proponent of passion as a self-justifying force. This theory, given the blessing of Professor Grierson and extended particularly by Hugh I'Anson Fausset, has triumphed all along the line. Among the scholars generally it has been accepted with some reservations; in the popular mind it has completely won the day.

Let us examine for a moment Grierson's exposition of this point of view. Donne, he tells us, created a "new philosophy of love...a less transcendental, less dualistic and ascetic conception of the nature of the love of man and woman." He is "sensual, realistic, scornful" and he "sets over against the abstract idealism, the sharp dualism of the Middle Ages, a justification of love as a natural passion..." From classical sources, largely Epicurean, the poet has learned a scorn for the worship of woman and an unabashed sensuality.[2]

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[2]Donne's Poetical Works, Vol. II, pp. xii-xlv, passim.

At the center of Grierson's contention we find his interpretation of The Extasie, without which his views cannot stand. But upon examination this ultimate "justification of love as a natural passion", which struck at the heart not only of Petrarchanism but of any attempted idealization of love on conventional medieval or Platonic lines -- turns out to be the development of a quite unrevolutionary concept with a long and respectable ancestry.

Professor Hughes[3] has discovered examples of the same defense of carnal love among the neo-Platonists and has reminded us that Varchi in a discourse before the Platonic Academy at Florence had stated

> anzi è impossibile...quando alcun uomo ama alcuna donna ancora di buono amore, che cotale amore sia perfetto, se non si congiungno ancora i corpi...

and indeed what we have already discovered about the evolution of courtly love should have indicated that such an idea was far from incompatible with the basic amorous tradition. In Provence, in Sicily, in the sensual verse of Petrarch this concept would not have been strange. Even among the poets of the dolce stil nuovo, that most other worldly version of the love codes, at least one voice was able to declare

> Et si quis forsan ex humana fragilitate appetitus in me inordinatus insurgat...ut major in me virtus sit appetere...quam refrenare....[4]

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[3]"The lineage of the 'Extasie'", Mod. Lang. Review, XXVII (1932), 1-5.

[4]Quoted in Vossler, op. cit., p. 52.

Had the Extasie been Donne's last word, as it by no means was, it could hardly have made him the champion of realism that some have imagined.

But let us disregard for a moment the question of the place of the Extasie in the total configuration of Donne's work, for there is a further contradiction in Grierson's case. Donne, we are to believe, lacks the "sharp dualism" of the medieval view, but Donne does at the same time consider that love for woman is justified and despise its object. Now, even if this is not the same dualism as that which cleft thought in the Middle ages, it is one equally deep and quite as inimical to the single view.

Donne is essentially a Renaissance figure, Grierson tells us, for his "scorn for the worship" of woman is not medieval; it is not found in Dante or in Petrarch. Even were it entirely absent in those two figures. (and there is some ground for the belief that precisely such a feeling does persist as an undercurrent in Petrarch), it is central to a host of others not less fundamentally medieval: Macabrun, Peire Cardenal, Chaucer, Bocaccio, even, at the last, Andreas Capellanus; one has but to mention their names to remember that just such a scorn is characteristic of the Middle Ages. It will never do to maintain that a concept so firmly rooted in the basis of Christian thought waited for the last decade of the sixteenth century to be born. It was, as we have seen, the inevitable concomitant and background of

courtly love.

It is impossible, too, in light of what we know of European love-philosophy, to accept the reality of what Grierson considers the typically Renaissance opposition in Donne's work between the medieval formal pattern and the classical view of love, the "strain of dialectic" forever in conflict with the "strain of vivid realism". To see in the Songs and Sonnets the light hearted brutality of pagan verse is not only to miss the fundamental impossibility of the survival of this single point of view in face of the Christian concept of sin, but to overlook, too, the evidence of tone and texture in Donne's verse. Such "realism" is what he pretended to in his bitter and uncertain pose; it is what above all he could not attain. As Grierson reads the Songs and Sonnets they are the product of "the reckless gaiety of youth masking as cynicism..."; to me they appear rather to arise from the deep and shamefaced idealism of youth constrained by social pressures and convention to mask as cynicism. But to this I shall return later.

The position of Grierson has been amplified and extended in various ways, becoming less cautious as it is made more explicit. Its essentially romantic character has appealed to some. Robert Sencourt in a rather incoherent study takes up this cue, speaking of the poet's "lurid yet not...ugly passion", and referring again to his mythical espousal of the "natural enjoyment of love", in which, Sencourt would have

us believe, we are to see not the influence of the pagan world, but a reflection of the "immemorial ordinances of the church"![5] What those "immemorial ordinances" really had to say about love and its "natural enjoyment" we have already seen.

Sencourt sees everywhere in Donne a forecast of modern thought, and in his poetry a verbal harbinger of Rodin's "le Baiser Suprème", with its idealization of sexual passion; but the Songs and Sonnets are to him chiefly a spring board for ecstatic flights of rhetoric, expressionistic recreations of the poems, like this upon the Extasie,

> While the electric messages pass through the fingers, while lip presses lip, while brightness of the eyes of one gaze, as of the lovers of whom we read, into the close sapphire sparkle of the others...etc.

in which Donne has not only been "kidnapped", but slain and dismembered besides.

Hugh I'Anson Fausset is probably the most popular, as he is the most extreme, representative of this tendency. In his life of Donne every modern heresy, every romantic distortion is underlined and emphasized. The text is full of the most elementary errors of fact (we are told, for instance, that Donne made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land); and, as in the case of Sencourt, the failure of perception is accompanied by a failure of style. In Fausset's turbid prose the legend of Donne, the blood brother of the twentieth century, the great

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[5] Outflying Philosophy, pp. 30-45.

emancipator of man's passions, "at times a near monster, full blooded, cynical and gross", reaches its climax.

"He cut the convention, bursting through the tender, trivial and sophisticated code of love, like a satyr trampling a bed of flowers" to free the spirit and for the sake of his "peculiar modernity", and because he was, after all, a "kind of masculine maniac...defying every scruple of taste and morality".[6] We are talking, we must try hard to remember, of John Donne.

Let us not imagine, however, that only those in whom imagination has usurped the place of reason, who are so busy feeling that they forget to read, have fallen among the kidnappers of Donne. Careful scholars like J. E. V. Crofts[7] have espoused their point of view; subtle students like Mario Praz have joined them in speaking of the presence in the Songs and Sonnets of "un realismo appassionato e cinico."[8]

Professor Palmer, the editor of Herbert's works, writes of "Spenser's lulling rhythms and bloodless heroes...being displaced by the jolting and passionate realism of Donne...."[9] and Leguois' concept of the poet as completely cynical and debauched, using the subtle argumentation of his poems dis-

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[6] John Donne: A Study in Discord pp. 20-61, passim.

[7] "John Donne", Essays and Studies, XXII (1937), 128-144.

[8] Secentismo e Marinismo in Inghilterra, p. 5.

[9] Quoted in Louis I. Bredvold, "The Religious Thought of Donne..." U. of Michigan Pub., Lang, and Lit, I (1925), 193-232.

ingenuously and for the purposes of seduction, is too well known to need further comment.[10] Even Mrs. Simpson pauses long enough in her study of Donne's prose works to tell us that "the old chivalrous ideal had become a mockery by this time, and had to be dethroned before a new one, truer to the facts of experience could be set up", and that it was Donne who undertook in his verse to force the abdication of the older concept to make way for the new.[11]

In every handbook and literary history this is the view of Donne that is espoused. Unhistorical perhaps, and unreal, it has become a factor in our thought, as interesting for its own sake as the eighteenth century concept of Shakespeare. But like the latter concept it carries with it difficulties arising from its own fundamental inadequacy.

The proponents of this kind of interpretation have occasionally been led by the logic of their position into statements obviously in contradiction with every belief of Donne and of his world, such as that of Reuben Potter in which he informs us that for Donne "the ecstasy of the lover...and the contemplation of the divine essence are so closely akin that no dividing line can be drawn between the mental processes...";[12] but far more serious is their difficulty in explaining just

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[10]Pierre Legouis, Donne the Craftsman.

[11]A Study of the Prose Work of John Donne, p. 8.

[12]"John Donne's Discovery of Himself", U. of California Pub. in Eng., IV (1934), 3-27.

where Donne's ideas came from, by what strange confluence of tradition and environment he learned to speak out of the world of Elizabeth in the voice of D. H. Lawrence. To examine the historical and cultural background too closely would be to destroy the theories of the "kidnappers", so they shrug their shoulders and ask us to believe of Donne's "naturalism" or "realism" or "defence of natural passion" that "he conceived it parthenogenetically"[13] -- out of the nowhere into the here!

The most serious and thoroughgoing attempt to explain the "naturalism" of the Songs and Sonnets on the basis of something more than spontaneous literary generation is found in a series of essays by Louis I. Bredvold.[14] Like Grierson or Fausset or Sencourt, Mr. Bredvold begins by telling us that Donne is the proponent of an "audacious and singularly modern philosophy", and that "his appeal is ever to nature for the justification of a frankly sensual conception of love", but instead of calling upon us to believe that the poet has sucked these ideas from his thumb, he attempts to show the relationship of many of Donne's "singularly modern" concepts to a sceptical and naturalistic tradition descending from medieval times to the Renaissance. The essence of this tradition, according to Bredvold, is a denial of the sanctity of both the

[13] Ibid.

[14] op. cit. and "The Naturalism of Donne in relation to some Renaissance Traditions", Journal of Eng. and Germ. Phil., XXII (1928), 471-502.

lex gentium and lex naturalis, the assertion that the laws of nations arise from an unstable and evershifting fixing of custom, and, finally, an attempt to substitute for natural law the law of Nature.

There are three points at which the arguments of Bredvold break down. First, Bredvold fails to show precisely how Donne became acquainted with the tradition which he posits. Unless some one author or group of authors can be shown, through whose intervention the sceptical view influenced the poet's thought deeply enough to shape his art, all evidence of its existence and persistence is beside the point. Bredvold suggests the possibility of Montaigne's having played such a role, but sets forth no real evidence in support of that contention. Even if it were possible to show an acquaintance of any decisive sort on Donne's part with the work of the latter, it would be sufficient to compare the Songs and Sonnets with the poetry of some one obviously influenced by the sceptical line of thought, let us say Théophile, who is mentioned by Mr. Bredvold, to see how far the English poet is from the French sceptic in tone and feeling.

Secondly, Bredvold seems to misunderstand certain aspects of so-called medieval "naturalism", especially the relation in which the latter stands to the theory of the Fall, and to the courtly codes with their idealization of love. Although many medieval thinkers referred enviously to the original freedom of man in a state of nature, they did not on that

account propose to return to that state of nature or indeed think it possible. The lex gentium was accepted as a second best, but, for all its uncertainty and restraint, inevitably and unalterably man's lot after the Fall. This, too, remains Donne's point of view, and where he does not express it, he is being playfully and obviously sophistical as in the Paradoxes.

Such a point of view was neither "sceptical" nor "cynical" in its original form among the Fathers, nor did it become so when developed by Jean de Meun, who is misunderstood by Mr. Bredvold, as he has often been misunderstood before, through taking dramatic speeches put in the mouths of his characters as the expression of his own opinions. Jean is not possessed of a "sceptical, cynical and somewhat gross temperment"; he is bitter perhaps and outspoken, but his bitterness arises from a deep-rooted idealism in regard to religion and love. It will help our understanding of this fact to recall that it was Jean de Meun, of all men, who took up the unfinished Roman de la Rose, and that neither he nor his contemporaries considered his point of view contradictory to that of Guillaume Lorris. They saw him rather as complementary to the latter, and so must we.

Third, and most important, Professor Bredvold in his effort to fit Donne into the tradition of Montaigne has disregarded completely those poems which do not fit his contention, and read others with what seems to me an utter disregard for tone and feeling.

Let us look at the two passages upon which Bredvold bases his proof of Donne's scepticism. The first comes at the conclusion of the fragmentary "Metempsychosis"; the second is the paradoxical "Confined Love".

The first is the casual re-echoing of a commonplace found also in Hamlet in much the same form.

> There's nothing simply good, nor ill alone,
> Of every quality comparison,
> The onely measure is, and judge, opinion.[15]

It comes, we recall, at the end of a poem, mocking and unserious in tone, in the midst of a digression, and is occasioned by an attempt to explain why "cursed Cains race" invented plowing and the other useful arts. It is not a central idea as its accidental concluding position would seem to indicate, but a quite incidental concept in the midst of witty sophistry. It is asserted in one breath and contradicted in another; in another poem composed about the same time we find Donne writing and this time quite unsceptically--

> Good wee must love, and must hate ill,
> For ill is ill, and good good still
> ...
> If there were good it would be seene,
> Good is as visible as greene,
> And to all eyes it selfe betrayes:
> If they were bad, they could not last,
> Bad doth it selfe, and others wast....[16]

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[15] Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. John Hayward, p. 272. Referred to hereafter as Hayward.

[16] "Communitie", ibid., p. 23.

or again, and still, let us note, in the poetry of his youth

> Or, your owne end to Justifie,
> For having purpos'd change, and falsehood; you
> Can have no way but falsehood to be true?
> Vaine lunatique, against all these scapes I could
> Dispute, and conquer....[17]

As for "Confined Love", with its defense of human promiscuity on the basis of that granted animals and birds, and on the grounds of analogies with the natural world, one must read it as a paradox, for it is, indeed, simply another version of A Defense of Womens Inconstancy, Paradoxe I in the Juvenilia. It is to be understood as a display of wit in defending a subject obviously false. The whole point of these exercises of ingenuity is the apparent and obvious falsity of the theses they defend, and this is a fact too little realized, though clear enough to one who knows the tradition of the genre. Donne lived in a world in which certain ethical principles were universally accepted. It was only against such a fixed background that the paradox had point, the enjoyment of each witty sally being proportionate to its degree of removal from what no one really questioned was the truth. To us, in a world where no values have gone unchallenged, the more blatantly sophistical a point, the more we are likely to take it seriously. In this there is a commentary upon our civilization as well as our literary judgment.

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[17]"Womans Constancy", Ibid., p. 5.

It must be pointed out, too, that "Confined Love", like many of Donne's poems, is dramatic, a fact underlined here by the poem's being placed in the mouth of a woman. I do not believe this has ever been noticed before, although Grierson has indicated the use of a similar device in one of the other Songs and Sonnets. When this fact is realized, the whole point of the poem is changed; it becomes a woman's commentary upon woman's lack of faith and her sophistical defense thereof, rather than the expression of the poet's own attitudes and values.

One or two attempts of less value and significance have been made to bolster the defense of Donne as a "naturalist" by supplying a background in accord with such a view. Professor Grierson's theory of Classical influences we have already mentioned, and there is perhaps one other worthy of remark. In a German dissertation, Joseph Kortemme[18] has attempted to portray Donne's poetry as a reflection on the literary plane of the general movement of the Baroque contemporaneously sweeping Europe; but such a concept, even if true, is too broad and vague in its dependence upon the high power abstractions which alone link literature and the plastic arts to be of real significance.

There have been occasional attacks against the prevailing point of view. Mr. Hughes in two notable articles has

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[18] Das Verhältnis John Donnes zur Scholastik und zum Barock.

assailed the stronghold of the naturalists at two points, demonstrating the lineage of the Extasie in an attempt to discredit the current view of that poem as a revolt against neo-Platonism,[19] and setting forth the evidence against the extreme position of Bredvold in an essay at restoring to our vision a Donne who "never entirely lost hope of finding falsehood's older sister, Truth!"[20] Professor Hughes never struck through to the root of the manifold misinterpretations because of the limited scope of his articles, but his efforts point the way to those who will see.

Very recently Mr. C. S. Lewis has raised his single but skillful protest against considering Donne as a liberator,[21] come to substitute at last "the real for the artificial". That which is essential in the Songs and Sonnets, he tells us, that which is most typical, is not the obvious direct and passionate statement, but the element of wit, the paradoxical and the humoristic. To be sure, it is Donne's "manly" tone, his eschewal of the obviously poetic, his "dandyism" and his biliousness that appeal to us, but the determining factor in his verse is none of these. It is his Catholic and more than medieval sense of sexual sin that turns him from the

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19"The Lineage of the 'Extasie'," The Mod. Lang. Rev., XVIII (1932), 1-5.

20"Kidnapping Donne", U. of California Pub. in Eng., IV (1934), 61-93.

21"Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century" in Seventeenth Century Studies Presented to Sir Herbert Grierson, pp. 64-84.

central tradition of his time, the linking of courtly love and marriage.

Mr. Lewis brings to Donne a good deal of understanding but little sympathy. One suspects that he is shocked and disturbed by him; or perhaps it is merely that he desires to strike through the seventeenth century poet at the moderns who are using him, and whom Mr. Lewis hates as the disruptors of the values to which he is most devoted. It is this lack of sympathy which turns him away, at the very edge of seizing the essential Donne, to railing at him for being "parasitic" in giving us the sorrows and perturbations that arise out of love, the peripheral disturbances, but never love itself.

In an answering piece Mrs. Bennet[22] points out that what Donne is talking about is precisely the central thing, the ethical experience of loving, while what Mr. Lewis presumably expects and misses is the physical description of the beloved, the hair, the lips and the eyes. But in Mrs. Bennet sympathy, though present, is not enough to prevent her from falling into the conventional misinterpretations, and telling us that Donne rejects the medieval view of sex as sinful, and that "the purity or otherwise of the sex act depends for him on the quality of the relation between the lovers".

Earlier Miss Ramsay had approached the love poetry of Donne from the point of view of the Middle Ages,[23] but her

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[22]"The Love Poetry of John Donne, A Reply to Mr. C. S. Lewis", ibid., pp. 85-104.

[23]Les Doctrines Médiévales chez Donne..., p. 63.

whole understanding of that period, influenced by the theories of her master, Picavet, led her to look for and to see Plotinism everywhere. To her the Songs and Sonnets represent yet one more product of a neo-Platonic love tradition, arising out of a confluence of the Song of Songs, the Enneads of Plotinus and Christian mysticism, and passing on through the Vita Nuova to Donne. To her the nature of Donne's poetry is simple, centering around four fundamental neo-Platonic concepts:

1. The merging of the identities of lovers.
2. The denial of the sensual and the external.
3. The availability of the ecstatic state to man.
4. An esoteric doctrine, incapable of being understood by the profane.

Those poems of Donne, which even she is forced to label "cyniques et grossiers", she mentions only in an unobtrusive footnote, assuring us that they are of little importance in the total picture.

But in selecting those poems which fitted her theory and ignoring the rest, Miss Ramsay has presented us with a picture, as misleading and one sided in her direction, as that of the naturalists in theirs. Neither theory has been able to account for the total effect of Donne's work, to see beneath its shifting and varied patterns a consistent meaning and mode of thought, and to tie all the elements, idealist as well as cynical, to a historically demonstrable tradition.

In a vain attempt to somehow achieve order in explaining the underlying ideas of the Songs and Sonnets, some commentators have been driven to read into them what they find a reasonable or desirable order of emotional development. The favorite device of such commentators has been to try to impose upon the poems the order of the poet's life. Such a method implies a naive concept of the relationship between the work of an artist and his experience, and overlooks the obviously dramatic character of much of Donne's verse, but it has long been popular none the less.

Gosse, in his early life of Donne, sets the style for the autobiographical school, attempting to show in the Songs and Sonnets a perceptible and continuous development from cynicism to idealism, which he would link with the poet's meeting with Anne More, his courtship and subsequent marriage. Apparently undisturbed by the presence, often in the same poem, of "idealist" and "cynical" elements, the attempt to classify the poems into neat categories has continued, in Grierson with circumspection, in Fausset with his customary contempt for fact, and in Mrs. Bennet with her stubborn conviction that, though it has proved impossible to assign individual poems to definite periods, they really can't be haphazard after all.

What evidence we have, aside from subjective impressions of critics and commentators, would seem to indicate that the Songs and Sonnets are all of a piece. Ben Jonson

told Drummond that Donne had written his best poems all before he was twenty-five, and Izaak Walton corroborates him, saying of the poems which Donne "facetiously composed and carelessly scattered" that the largest part of them had been written "before the twentieth year of his age", a fact which he later repeats in a laudatory poem, presumably in answer to some who had expressed incredulity at such precocity. These are the opinions of two men who knew Donne, the only contemporary opinion recorded on the date of the composition of his erotic verse, and I see no reason why we should not accept it as true.

Men have attempted to combat their evidence only because it seemed impossible to them that some of the poems of contempt and idealization could have been written indiscriminately and together. But once we have seized the basic unifying factor, there are no elements in Donne's youthful lyrics of love which will not fall into place.

THE AESTHETICS OF JOHN DONNE

Everyone who has ever written on the love poetry of John Donne has sooner or later said that it represents a revolt against Petrarchanism. The opposition of Petrarch and Donne has become one of the clichés of literary criticism. But when we examine the works of the poet himself to discover what he has said on this subject, we find precisely--nothing. There is not a single word of judgment, stated or implied, about Petrarch in Donne's verse early or late, in his letters or in his prose works. There is a reference to Laura in "The Harbinger to the Progresse" which precedes the "Second Anniversarie",[1] but it is quite causal and indicates nothing of the poet's attitude. One additional bit of evidence, however, that Donne knew his Italian predecessor is of more significance.

In one of the books that have survived from among those known to have been in Donne's library, there is inscribed in

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[1]Hayward, p. 214.

the poet's hand the motto Per Rachel ho servito & non per Lea,[2] a quotation from Petrarch's nineteenth canzone. The significance of this is clear, and for those who see Donne as a conscious rebel against Petrarchanism--rather disconcerting. Men are not usually given to inscribing their books with tags from poets they especially detest; and we know that Donne, at least, selected his mottoes as a rule from his favorite authors. Another tag, for instance, of which he was fond, Antes muerta que mudada, is taken from the Diana of Montemayor, who seems to have been the most beloved poet of Donne's youth.[3]

His admiration for the Portuguese courtly poet is also worthy of note. The fact has been noticed before but its full implications seem hardly to have been realized; or else those who have been content glibly to prate of Donne's enmity to the whole gilded and idealistic love tradition and his deliberate resolve to replace its artificialities with "honest passion", might at least have taken the pains to explain away the fact that the favorite poet of this "rebel's" youth, one of the only two vernacular poets about whom he comments in his letters, is the author of a conventional pastoral of love with Platonic overtones.

What first hand evidence we have would seem to indicate that Donne, at the age when he was writing the Songs and Sonnets,

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[2]See Geoffrey Keynes, A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne, p. 180.

[3]T. E. Terrill, "A Note on John Donne's Early Reading", Mod. Lang. Notes, XLIII (1928), 318-319.

was reading and remembering the Canzone of Petrarch, and immersing himself with delight in the conventions of the Diana. This is not to say that Donne was after all an imitator of Petrarch; his work was different from that of the latter but not in revolt against it. He chose to deal with a different aspect of a larger tradition than the Florentine, but did not for that reason feel opposed to him. As a matter of fact the very idea of revolt implies a much more serious view of the function of poetry than that which, as we shall shortly see, was held by Donne. Today when literature and morality have to a large extent been identified, it is possible to distinguish profitably between "truth" and "artificiality" in verse, but where all literature, by definition, was cut off from ethical truth such a distinction was inconceivable.

Where then did the tradition of Donne's enmity to the "trivial and sophisticated codes of love" arise? It is perhaps in part the result of what has been said about Donne's verse ever since his death, the parasitic progression of criticism from criticism. The earliest critics, moving within the framework of the same concept of poetry as Donne, saw him as a rebel in style, for style was the only factor with which, it seemed to them, criticism was concerned. Carew praised him for his "wit", and for his having banished the train of Greek deities from the rhetoric of verse, as a rebel in the world of metaphor, and in the course of time the

center of this commendation has been shifted from the formal aspects of the Songs and Sonnets to their matter, as our own concepts of art have changed. It is just one more instance of reading our values back into the past, that has led us to transform Donne from a revolutionist in the mechanics of verse, to a revolutionist in ethics and morality.

But there is another and even more important factor which has set the work of Donne apart from that of his contemporaries in our eyes; and that is the nature of his sources of inspiration and the traditions on which he drew. They are strange because they are foreign; they arise outside of England, and outside the conventionalized English view of continental literature.

Donne seems to have had nothing but contempt for the poetry of those of his fellow countryman whom we have come to consider the great and typical writers of the time; the center of artistic endeavour seemed to him the trivial pieces of his fellow courtiers, who were reading with him the new Italian and Spanish books, and imitating the continental trends in which he, too, was interested. In all his writings Donne does not once refer to the work of Spenser or Shakespeare, or even that of his personal friend, Ben Jonson; he seems completely unaware of the great creative surge of Elizabethan literature. But he does show a constant sensitivity to the shifting tides of Italian literature; he takes up the new conception of Satire, suggested by the writers of

that country, then the Paradox, and, in turn, whatever else the influence of that distant land led the circles in which he moved to decree fashionable.

Spanish literature, too, seems to have played a leading role in Donne's literary development. Looking over his bookshelves in his later years, the poet finds "that in my poore Library, where indeed I ame, I can turn mine Ey towards no shelfe, from the Mistresse of my youth, Poetry, to the wyfe of myne Age, Divinity, but that I meet more Autors of that nation, than of any other."[4] In his attitude toward the poetry of his own country there is a mixture of avant gardisme and snobbishness, of the contempt of the cognoscenti and of the courtier to which we shall return below.

Whatever Donne may have thought he was doing, we may be sure he did not consider himself the apostle of truth battering against a stubborn and perfidious convention. To be sure, he rails against "that loving wretch that sweares, 'Tis not the bodies marry, but the mindes",[5] but it is the mood of a moment. Another moment, another mood, and he will be telling us "Difference of sex no more wee knew, Than our Guardian Angells doe";[6] and if we take one or the other as the final expression of his point of view, we will be sorely confused

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[4]Letter to the Marquis of Buckingham in Hayward, p. 479.

[5]"Loves Alchymie", Hayward, p. 29.

[6]"The Relique", ibid., p. 47.

by the time we have turned the page.

Unless we realize, first of all, Donne's attitude toward his verse, his general view of the function of poetry and its relation to reality, we will get nowhere. Referring to some verse he was sending in a letter to his friend Sir Robert Carr, Donne wrote "and even then I did best when I had least truth for my subjects. In this present case there is so much truth as it defeats all Poetry."[7] This is a crucial statement and one which cannot be explained away by all the efforts of our contemporaries to save their apostle of truth. Its meaning is simple and clear; and it is not that "when he was not tied by an active and true emotion toward the subject of his poetry he was free to follow his deepest desire, to use that subject like a scalpel to cut deeper into his own mind."[8] It does mean quite simply that for Donne poetry and truth are mutually exclusive; that poetry is dependent upon the free play of wit; in a sense is that play, and that when conviction is present, it is likely to turn the poet from his true end, the pursuit of image and metaphor and the display of ingenuity, to the unpoetic business of making a point or, as we say, expressing himself.

This is, of course, a theory quite unlike our own, and one, the belief in which, quite cuts off a poet from modernity.

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[7] Ibid., p. 248.

[8] G. R. Potter, "John Donne's Discovery of Himself".

But it is Donne's opinion, bluntly stated, and we will do well not to ignore or underestimate its manifest significance. The traditions behind such an attitude toward poetry should be familiar to us; they are those of the Middle Ages, of the troubadours and trouvères. When the Moine de Montaudon in a tenso with God wishes to excuse himself from the writing of verse, he does so on the grounds that it is sinful to belie one's true beliefs, which to him is a necessary concomitant of composing poetry.

> Senher, ieu tem que falhis,
> s'ieu fas coblas ni cansons,
> qu'om pert vostr'amor e vos
> qui son escient mentis,
> per que·m part de la barguanha.[9]

And Dante, we recall, in speaking of the poet he loved best, the Provençal Arnaud Daniel, from whom he learned the Sestina, calls him il miglior faboro, the best smith of the mother tongue.

To one starting from such a concept of the relation of poetry to reality, the function of the poet cannot appear as anything but trivial and inconsequential, and such indeed was the view of Donne. The production of verse was to him a forgiveable but foolish occupation of youth, like drinking and light love-making, to be indulged in gaily and repented at leisure. Writing in 1612, Donne complains that he finds it hard to forgive himself for having "declined" to publish

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[9]Carl Appel, Provenzalische Chrestomathie, p. 132.

"anything in verse,"[10] referring of course to the Anniversaries, for the Songs and Sonnets he never in his life time permitted to circulate except in the manuscript books of his friends; and two years later he writes to Sir Henry Goodyer of Lady Herbert "that that knowledge which she hath of me, was in the beginning of a graver course than of a poet into which (that I may also keep my dignity) I would not seem to relapse."[11]

To the last he held to this point of view, seeking to destroy all of his youthful poems, and declaring with contempt upon being asked to publish his earlier work, that he had no desire to be "the rhapsodist of mine own rags". In the attitude of his later years, religious as well as purely aesthetic considerations play a part in making him turn against the products of his wit and skill as "idolatry", and earlier his views on publication are complicated by his snobbisme, the desire to be exclusive, which led the poet to choose those forms and indulge in those conceits which could be understood only by a narrow and aristocratic circle.

There is in Donne a good deal of the "dandy". In his declaration that he "would have no such readers as he could teach", he struck the note later taken up by his printer in his dedication to the "understanders",[12] a note that must be

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[10]Edmund Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne, p. 78.

[11]Ibid., p. 79.

[12]Quoted in C. S. Lewis, "Donne and Love Poetry...", p. 67.

understood as arising from more than the temporary social situation in which the poet found himself, a note essentially medieval in its desire to be difficult and recherché. There is a traditional point of view here that goes back to the poets of the trobar clus, with their contempt for general opinion and their resolve to be rather as rare as gold than as common as salt.

> aiso•m diguatz
> si tan prezatz
> so que vas totz es cominal?
> car adonx tug seran engal.
> ...
> Giraut, no vueill qu'en tal trepeill
> torn mos trobars que hom am tan
> l'avol co•l bo e•l pauc co•l gran.
> ia per los fatz
> non er lauzatz,
> quar no conoison, ni lur cal,
> so que plus quar es ni mais val.[13]

In Dante, with his contempt for the opinions on poetry of the "stolti", and his avowed preference for the obscure style, that tradition is carried forward. It is a view that inevitably follows the conception of a poem as a thing made and adorned, and together the two are the keystones of medieval aesthetics, the points at which the literary theories of the Middle Ages differ most sharply from those of the modern world.

We are misled by finding Donne in our anthologies sand-

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[13]Appel, op. cit., p. 126.

wiched between authors who wrote for a cultural world with which he had little in common. Donne is immune from the influences of his contemporary literary milieu because he was not of it; the atmosphere of ideas and conventions in which he really moved is lost to our perception with the scribbled jests and gallantries in verse, written by the young men at the Inns of court, the hangers-on of Essex, and the frequenters of the fashionable salons. In this world, in which both love and verse had become parlor games and evening entertainments, a poem was written to amuse and be forgotten.

Donne's early verse was produced not for public consumption, but rather to be read privately among those who were, or had been, in the social world out of which the poems arose, or those who stood close enough to that section of society to understand its attitudes and values. The poems, let us note, do not stand outside of that world and comment upon it; they move within its charmed circle and comment upon situations that have meaning only in that context. If they are fantastic rather than elegant, it is because the group for which they are written demanded at one moment wit rather than grace. They are not "literature", except in so far as the literary played a role in that narrow and artificial complex. They are, in short, not the reactions of a sensitive man to the life which his passions have urged upon him--they are a part of that life, resembling in this respect the verses of the Fedeli d'Amore, as the social group for which they were written

resembled those earlier associations of young men about town.

The form reflects the function. The medium, the mechanics are alike slight and frivolous in manifest intent (which, of course, does not preclude their effect being serious). I think we may understand them to have stood in Donne's mind in the same relation to his more serious work in prose, as do his early amours to his political, military, and ecclesiastical activities.

As we should expect of verse that is a part of a larger pattern of existence which is of greater relative importance (the verse of the amateur if you please), the focus of interest in Donne's verse shifted as his interests in the larger world were changed. The relationship which exists between his complimentary verse and his social relationships as a whole, and that between his devotional verse and his complete religious life illustrate precisely this point. In the former case they are essentially an aspect of etiquette (though he could never quite keep his metaphysics from breaking through), in the latter they represent a mode of prayer, or, more precisely perhaps, of religious meditation.

We may safely assume, then, that the Songs and Sonnets move always within the circle of Donne's social life, and can be understood as illustrating it, not as a commentary, but only as any part may, by analysis, be made to illustrate the whole. Their mood and method is determined very largely by the same factors as those which determined the cut of the

poet's clothes and his turns of phrase at the time. This, too, like the other elements of Donne's verse we have thus far examined, is quite in accord with the best medieval tradition. Verse, we should bear in mind, was originally a social grace, a sign of merit and rank. To Donne it was still just that. He could hardly have been concerned with the demands of "realism", for he felt his function to be that of interpreting and exploiting a set and difficult complex of conventions.

The meaning of poetry under such conditions could be neither individual nor social in the broader sense, but had to be shared with a compact cultural group and that group only. Realism, as we know it, is an aesthetic aspect of democracy. It could appear in the Elizabethan drama, with its extensive and largely plebeian audience, but it was excluded from lyric verse by the very artistic assumptions of that form.

It is hardly realized, I think, how long lyric poetry continued to be created according to the demands of a social and political system which had died. This aesthetic lag, it should be noticed, arose from the fact that the love-tradition (the subject of the lyric <u>par excellence</u>) was in the possession and control of those aristocratic circles which tended to preserve tradition long after it had ceased to be meaningful. Donne, to be sure, was no aristocrat, but he was ambitious, and aspiring to the select company of

the young men who followed Essex, and to the salons of various noble ladies, he found it as necessary to accept their aesthetics as he did their manners.

But despite the evidence of Donne's own explicit avowals of his attitude toward his art, and of the milieu which conditioned that art, it is impossible to miss the feeling of seriousness, of an almost tortured earnestness, that persists behind and above the conventional machinery of the Songs and Sonnets. It is this elusive but undeniable atmosphere of sincerity that has puzzled all critics and students of Donne's poetry, and that has led many of them, in utter disregard of the traditional framework of the poems, to see in them the defence of "truth to experience" and an attack on the courtly codes.

We have already seen that such a view, though a tempting and easy solution, jibes ill with the statements of the poet himself, and disregards the fundamental incompatibility of various of the poems if we take them as literal professions of belief. No, Donne is a mass of contradictions and confusion, incapable of being fitted to any psychological scheme or fancied pattern of development, if approached as a "realist".

It will not do, however, to attribute the poet's apparent ungaiety to the dramatic character of his verse, or to his embracing the "manly" tradition which stems from Wyatt, or to his "biliousness", or even to a fancied continuous

state of "excitement" which confines him to the emotionally and ethically disturbed periphery of love.[14] Against the depth and fire of what we do, after all, as sensitive readers, feel in the Songs and Sonnets, such explanations are manifestly superficial and beside the point.

The tenso and partimen of Old Provence had developed originally out of a parlor game played as early as the eleenth century, and from the partimen, with its set problem and its judges, various social pastimes had been evolved again. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, in almost every country of Europe the discussion of questions d'amour had become a favorite indoor sport. Mock serious debates were organized for the amusement of the ladies, about such problems as the relative superiority of man's love and woman's, the compatibility of love and marriage, the seat and origin of love, whether love could remain firm in the same state without either diminishing or increasing, etc.[15] Examples of this type of discussion are found everywhere in the older poetry, and in Donne we find two of the problems mentioned here worked into the fabric of his verse. They are presented in the Songs and Sonnets, not in their customary pro and con manner, but in the form of affirmations of one side of a problem. Their origin however remains obvious.

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[14] See C. S. Lewis, op. cit.

[15] See Thomas Crane, Italian Social Customs of the Sixteenth Century.

Just such disparitie
As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.[16]

Love is a growing, or full constant light;
And his first minute, after noone, is night.[17]

Other elements of the old traditions were preserved in still other jeux de société. There was one, for instance, called "Lovers' Hell", something like our modern children's game of Forfeits, in which the participants, when they failed to answer certain questions, had imposed upon them as punishments taking the Veil, preaching a sermon in honor of the God of Love, and other penalties of a similar sort, which reflected in conrete and degenerate from all the major elements of the Religion of Love, whose emergence and development we described in our historical survey of the evolution of the European erotic love-myth.

By the time of Donne these games had passed over into England and had become popular in the more Italianate salons, and among the young men who in their travels had become familiar with the Italian language and with the social customs of that country. The circles in which Donne moved were close to the center of this movement; Lucy, Countess of Bedford, for example, later a great friend and patroness of the

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[16]"Aire and Angells", Heyward, p. 15.

[17]"A Lecture upon the Shadow", ibid., p. 54.

poet, was for a long time the protector of Florio, the leading English populariser of the Tuscan tongue.

There are few allusions in the literature of Donne's time to these imported parlor games, but, it is interesting to note, one of the few is in Ben Jonson, who, as we have already mentioned, was for a while a rather close associate of the poet. One would hardly expect the trivia of courtly life to be recorded for posterity, and so one is rather surprised that these diversions have been noted at all than at the paucity of the references to them. In Donne's poetry, however, they have left their unmistakable imprint both in matter and form.

Toward the middle of the sixteenth century the fondness for debating moot points of love-theory, and the search for new ways to refresh the traditional forms that were growing stale, led to the appearance in Italy of the literature of Paradoxes and Doubts (the latter called by Donne Problems), a development of extreme interest to us because of its influence upon the early prose and verse of Donne. Contributions to the new genre were made by the gay academies, which had continued to flourish since their origin in the late thirteenth century, and by individuals emulating their organized wit.[18] An example of the former is the Dieci Paradossi degli Academici Intronati da Siena, which appeared in 1564, and which defended

[18]Crane, op. cit., pp. 150 ff.

with erudite texts and involved dialectic such palpable absurdities as the contentions that love does not exist in lovers, evil is necessary, and love longs only for those things which are virtuous.

The movement continued well into the seventeenth century, for in 1608 we find Giovan Battista Manso arguing in I Paradossi o vero dell'Amore that women should love least those who love them most and other propositions of similar import and seriousness. But the most important work of all in this genre is the Paradossi of Ortensio Lando which was published in Lyons in 1543, and which became so popular in England in the next fifty years, that in 1593 it was translated in part by Anthony Mundy. In 1600 Sir William Cornwallis, the younger, a friend of Donne, wrote four paradoxes of his own, in which the borrowings from Lando are frequent and extensive,[19] and about the same time Donne was probably composing the bulk of his efforts in this genre. Meanwhile, Lando, and this is an indication of some importance both of the nature of the man and the attitudes implicit in writing of this kind, had brought out a second volume in which all the propositions of the first, that poverty is preferable to riches, ugliness to beauty, faithlessness to virtue etc., were with solemnity and erudition taken up and rebutted one by one.

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[19] Iuvenilia, (with a Biliographical Note by R. E. Bennet).

It is out of this background of sophistry and wit, of the ancient codes of love become an evening's sport, that Donne's Songs and Sonnets emerged. If there were a literary sin in such a world it would be to be serious. To thrust into the carefree badinage of courtiers a profound expression of feeling or a heartfelt ethical judgment would be to display a lack of taste. The rules governing the production of verse in such a corner of society were indistinguishable from the demands of etiquette and the codes of gallantry. There was room for cleverness and subtlety, to be sure, but earnestness was not allowed. Donne submitted to the regulations of the salons he chose to frequent, and the small demands of the society of gay blades he sought out, but below the level of consciousness he seems to have revolted against their insincerity and inadequacy.

This is the real revolt in Donne and it is not directed against Petrarchanism, neo-Platonism or any of the idealist conventional forms which Donne did not use. It is directed rather against the very techniques and traditions which he himself felt impelled to employ because of the audience to which he addressed his work and the world of values in which he moved. It is directed against the pretense of cynicism and the sophistic defense of natural passion, which to our standards have seemed revolutionary "truth", but which in light of his were the falsehood upon which poetry is necessarily based.

It is just this attitude toward art which helps keep Donne's rebellion beneath the level of consciousness, but it is aided in this task by the impact of another aspect of Donne's thought, and this latter is, perhaps, of even greater importance. Donne, like the men of the Middle Ages, was convinced not only of the triviality of verse, but also of the insignificance, in any broad view, of man's love for women. Sex, he knew, when he stopped for a moment to be sober, was sinful, irreparably and unconditionally. Hence all love-codes, all attempts to rationalize and justify passion, were lies. What point was there, then, in turning against contemporary love conventions, however inadequate they might seem to his profane ideals, for another set of beliefs more congruous perhaps with those ideals and aesthetically more satisfying, but equally at odds with the ultimate morality of the church?

Could Donne have accepted with Spenser the new bourgeois theories of the purity of the married state, he might have escaped from the dilemma -- but, as we shall see, it was just such theories that were above all reprehensible to his every standard. His sympathies, in so far as they urged him away from the conventions which were thrust upon him, took him rather backward to earlier and more truly medieval forms of the courtly codes.

There are three levels of belief in conflict beneath the surface of Donne's early verse, the accepted and completely degenerate love-theory of the <u>salons</u> and of his

courtier friends, in which love like poetry was a game, a set of beliefs arising from his own emotional experience and early reading, and a Catholic, medieval consciousness of the essential sinfulness of all sexual experience.

There is a tension in the Songs and Sonnets, a hint of bitter conflict, which seems to me inexplicable in any other terms. It is almost as if the purely trivial subjects of Donne's actual poems carried with them the emotional overtones of poems of much greater meaning and sincerity, forever suppressed. Here, it seems to me, is the clue to the strange persistence of seriousness despite the manifest lightness of tone, to the cruel and ambiguous complexity of whose presence no reader of Donne can help be aware.

We have already discussed the love-theories of the salons; we must take up next the second level of beliefs, the evidence for their existence, their nature and their traditional sources, before passing on to the third and final phase of Donne's thought.

DONNE AND THE "DOLCE STIL NUOVO"

Occasionally in reading Donne we are struck by a line or a stanza in which we hear for a moment a new voice, a tone gentler in quality and more straightforward than the guarded and tortured idiom to which we are accustomed. It as if for the instant a pose has been cast aside and we are given a glimpse of something deeper, closer to the poet's ethical center; then, as if he had suddenly become aware of what was happening, the tone returns almost fiercely to its usual character. Particularly at the beginnings of poems, when the unconscious impulses are strongest and the censor least wakeful we are likely to catch this note.

There is more than subjective warrant for putting certain passages in such a category, for they have disturbed commentators down the years by their stylistic incongruity. The beginning of "Loves Deitie", for instance, has been noticed by Courthope and by Praz as being different from the typical Donne in metre and tone, yet neither has satisfactorily explained why thus briefly and at just such points Donne should have written in cadences more like Spenser or the gentler Shakespeare than his own.

It is my contention that here and there, despite himself, as it were, Donne gave utterance to the second level of belief to which we have referred, to the myth, congenial to his heart but unexpressed because of its conflict with the values of the circles in which he chose to move, and that these utterances are signalled by a change in style.

If we are correct in our conviction that the ungaiety of tone in the Songs and Sonnets is due to an unconfessed revolt at the sceptical and trivial ideas they superficially seem to express, we should expect that when Donne has momentarily abandoned those ideas his verse would become simpler and more peaceful in metre and texture. On the level of style Donne was able to make the confession he dared not utter on the level of direct statement.

Let us see, then, just what he has said in those passages where the tone seems to indicate that his guard has slipped for an instant. "Loves Dietie"[1] begins:

> I long to talke with some old lovers ghost,
> Who dyed before the god of Love was borne:
> I cannot thinke that hee, who then lov'd most,
> Sunke so low, as to love one which did scorne.
> But since this god produc'd a destinie,
> And that vice-nature, custome, lets it be;
> I must love her, that loves not mee.

It is a protest, lyric in tone and straightforward enough, at the state to which the world has come in its treatment of

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[1]Hayward, p. 40.

love, a protest conventional and time-honored by the days of Donne, for the earliest troubadours whose verses have survived were already bemoaning the sad plight of lovers in their time, and sighing for a remoter Golden Age. What, asks the poet in sorrow, has become of the world in which true love was always reciprocated, in which "amor...a nullo amato: amar perdona". He is sure it was not always demanded of the lover to worship eternally where he was eternally scorned.

> Sure, they which made him god, meant not so much,
> Nor, he in his young godhead practis'd it.
> ...
> His office was indulgently to fit
> Actives to passives. Correspondencie
> Only his subject was...

But we have heard before of just such a concept of love, the deity concerned only with correspondency, indulgently fitting actives to passive "com' adamas di ferro in la minera." We are sure with Donne that in at least one place love "in his young godhead" did not advocate loving her that "loves not mee". Indeed, the whole tenor of this passage brings to mind Guido Guinicelli and the theory of the gentle heart. It is to the world of his followers, to the exponents of the dolce stil nuovo, that Donne seems regretfully to look back. It is the hope of order implicit in the metaphysical system of the cor gentil which attracts him; for it is order above all which this so-called rebel against "every scruple of taste and morality" desires in a world where

... every moderne god will now extend
His vast prerogative, as far as Jove.
To rage, to lust, to write to, to commend,
All is the purlewe of the God of Love.

For concomitantly with the breakdown of other sections of society, the god of love has left his place in the regulated hierarchy of the divine and is challenging the authority of the supreme God Himself.

With the beginning of the last stanza there is a change in style, a break in the directness of logic which has thus far characterized the poem. This last stanza Courthope tells us[2] is "a stanza of pure paradox", the product, according to him, of Donne's perversity, and one which leaves the mind "without that sense of repose which art requires." But let us see what Donne has really said:

Rebell and Atheist too, why murmure I,
As though I felt the worst that love could doe?
Love might make me leave loving, or might trie
A deeper plague, to make her love mee too,
Which, since she loves before, I'am loth to see;
Falshood is worse than hate; and that must bee,
If shee whom I love, should love mee.

The chain of thought remains unbroken; Donne's poem, which was begun in the spirit of the stil nuovo, concludes on a double note which, stripped of its paradoxical adornment, might be found in the verse of Cavalcanti or the younger Dante. Falsehood is in the last analysis worse than scorn or contempt; and the worst of punishments is to be forced to leave loving.

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[2]Courthope, op. cit., p. 166.

Love is clearly conceived as an absolute good, the value of which is quite independent of anything but the quality of devotion of the lover; what the lady feels or does not feel in return is quite irrelevant. In the act of loving there is a grace beside which any physical reward is meaningless. As in Dante the only sin, and it is its own punishment, is to mistrust love, or to leave loving.

In these few lines Donne has posed and answered one of the critical questions behind the theories of courtly love; and he has answered it in the tradition of Guinicelli and the Vita Nuova. Yet in the concluding stanza the poet, becoming aware of where he has half unconsciously been tending, catches himself up; his "poor, riddling, intricated soul" reasserts itself and strives to bury beneath the involutions of paradoxical wit the tenor of its statement. But for all the double paradox, the concluding turn and counter turn, Dante's god of love, "the lord of fearful aspect", has been served; though indeed Donne ashamed of his unwilling tribute has tried to "brine it so with scorne or shame, that him it nourished not."

Once again in Aire and Angels[3] we find in the opening lines the stylistic signal we have learned to know, the quiet certainty, the simple directness--

> Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
> Before I knew thy face or name;
> So in a voice, so in a shapelesse flame,
> Angells affect us oft, and worship'd bee.

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[3] Hayward, p. 15.

Nor has the signal failed us. Once again we are in the presence of the sub-surface idealism of Donne; and once more the concepts of the "sweet new style" underlie the meaning of the poem. The source of the influence at work is indicated almost immediately by the implied comparison of the poet's lady and the angels. We remember that Guido Guinicelli's beloved "tenea d'Angel sembianza", and that at the very center of the metaphysics of the stil nuovisti was the concept of woman as a separated Intelligence, a ray of the eternal love that is God.

With the fifth line, however, comes the characteristic shift of mood, this time earlier in the poem than before. The tone changes and the imagery with it; no longer is the angel a symbol of Donne's mistress, but of something quite different as we shall see very shortly. No longer is the verse either simple or direct. But the train of thought has already been set forward on its way, and, as before, we will be able to observe its consistent development beneath the intellectual gymnastics and the camouflage of irony.

There seems to have been present in John Donne, as in those Florentine poets whom he is following here, two pairs of conflicting ideas about love. The first we have seen in "Loves Dietie": that love was of absolute value to the soul of the lover, and yet that his love demanded to be complete reciprocation, "correspondencie". The resolution of that conflict we have followed above.

The second, which is closely related, we find here: that love needs embodiment, and that there is no body which is not too gross for it. Even as the soul must be perfected in assuming flesh, so must love, the offspring of the soul, find some material thing to give it formal expression.

> But since my soule, whose child love is,
> Takes limmes of flesh, and else could nothing doe,
> More subtile than the parent is,
> Love must not be, but take a body too,
> And therefore...
> That it assume thy body, I allow,
> And fixe it selfe in thy lip, eye, and brow.

But even the finest hair of woman's head "for love to worke upon Is much too much". Man's love in its need for embodiment has sought out woman, but she, like her hair "extreme and scattering bright", is unworthy in her most delicate part to be the vessel for this ultimate expression of the male soul. What then is the answer to this dilemma?

> For, nor in nothing, nor in things
> Extreme, and scatt'ring bright, can love
> inhere...

Donne does not hesitate. Crude though woman may be in the flesh and impure, her love is purer than herself, and in this love of hers, still less refined than that of man (standing in the same relationship to the latter as air to the angelic essence which yet uses it as a garment), his love may inhere.

> Then as an Angell, face, and wings
> Of aire, not pure as it, yet pure doth weare,
> So thy love may be my loves spheare;
> Just such disparitie
> As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
> 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.

Behind this whole problem, of course, lies the medieval concept, still living and unchallenged for Donne, of woman's inferiority, and it is clear that his allegiance to that belief has nothing to do with his cynicism, real or pretended. The poem is one of genuinely tender feeling beneath the play of wit and I find it in no way marred by the ending.

> Just such disparitie
> As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
> 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.

This is the poetic statement of what to Donne was a fact. The Doctors of the Church had taught, and all men for ages had agreed, that woman was spiritually inferior to man, and her love therefore and quite obviously inferior to his. Where is the "corrosion and distortion" in this? Where the "quiet insult" that some critics[4] have pretended to discover in this commonplace. Even Tasso had declared in his Conclusioni d' Amore[5] that man from his nature loves more lastingly and deeply than woman. There is no more malice in attributing to woman a lower place than man, than there is in considering man inferior to God. Donne in this poem has consistently followed the poets of the "sweet new style" in resolving the conflict out of which it arose; the conception of love as an ennobling force has been preserved without surrendering the view of woman as a lesser man.

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[4]Crofts, op. cit., p. 130.

[5]Crane, op. cit., p. 143.

It is through these occasional lapses of the censor that we are able best to see and understand the ideal love-system to which Donne all through his early years paid a service no less devout for being unavowed. But there is other evidence of his familiarity with and fondness for the concepts of the Florentine school. Scattered here and there throughout his work, they make an impressive list when they are collected and catalogued.

There are some ideas present in the love-myth from its first manifestations in Provence, which are found, to be sure, in the synthesis of the Vita Nuova, but which might have come to Donne from anywhere in the world of the love codes, out of the commonplaces and generalities circulated popularly, out of his beloved Diana, or from any of a hundred other sources. But not, let us notice, from a concept of love as "natural passion" that would leave tradition for "reality".

It is only in conjunction with the more special and peculiar conceptions which we shall examine later on that they take on significance of a positive sort. Among these more anonymous concepts we find the view of love as a tyrant, the "lord of fearful aspect" as Dante had dubbed him,

> Ah, what a trifle is a heart,
> If once into loves hands it come![6]

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[6]"The Broken Heart", Hayward, p. 35.

He is the tryan Pike, our hearts the Frye...[7]

who is especially cruel to those who resist his first advances.

If thou give nothing, yet thou'art just,
Because I would not thy first motions trust...[8]

Associated with this aspect of the tradition there are persistent allusions to the feudal world in which, as we have seen, it first took shape.

...then subject and degree,...
Love I submit to thee....[9]

Of similar origin is the conventional Lady, whose scorn and cruelty are always bringing her lover to the point of death.

When I am dead, and Doctors know not why,
...they shall finde your Picture in my heart...[10]

When by the scorne, O murdresse, I am dead...[11]

Against whatever she may choose to do the lover is powerless to rebel, for the lady is above reproach, a thing of wonder and admiration.

She' is all States...
Nothing else is...[12]

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[7] Ibid., p. 36.

[8] "Loves Exchange", ibid., p. 25.

[9] "Loves Usury", ibid., p. 8.

[10] "The Dampe", ibid., p. 47.

[11] "The Apparition", ibid., p. 35.

[12] "The sunne rising", ibid., p. 6.

Especially among the Florentine poets was the praise of the lady carried to hyperbolic and fantastic heights, and in Donne we find two of the most characteristic laudatory conceits of this school, the comparison of the poet's mistress to an angel, and the identification of her, symbolically, with the informing world spirit.

> Yet I thought thee
> (For thou lovest truth) an Angell...[13]

> Or if, when thou, the worlds soule, goest,
> It stay, tis but thy carkasse then,
> The fairest woman, but thy ghost,
> But corrupt wormes, the worthyest men...[14]

The lover's only refuge is flight into loneliness, where he may give vent to tears and sighs, and suffer the chills and fever, the torment and sleepless nights, that are a part of the service d'amour, fixed and formalized by five hundred years of tradition.

> Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares,
> Hither I come to seek the spring....[15]

> Send me some token, that my hope may live,
> Or that my easelesse thoughts may sleep and
> rest...[16]

> Who saies my teares have overflow'd this ground?
> When did my colds a forward spring remove?
> When did the heats which my veines fill....[17]

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[13]"The Dreame", ibid., p. 26.

[14]"A Feaver", ibid., p. 14.

[15]"Twicknam Garden", ibid., p. 20.

[16]"Sonnet. The Token", ibid., p. 55.

[17]"The Canonization", ibid., p. 9.

Whatever his fortune, his reward or lack of it, the lover must remain faithful, and must abide by the rule of secrecy.

> And if this love..
> From prophane men you hide..
> Then have you done a braver thing
> Than all the Worthies did....[18]

It is not only a contempt for the profane who would not understand, it should be added, which demands silence on the part of the lover; it is the basic pattern of adultery beneath all these affairs, and the conventions arising from them.

Donne, it is true, was married, and presumably deeply in love with his wife, but we would get no hint of any feeling he might have had for her from the Songs and Sonnets. Walton has told us, and others imitating him, that this or that poem was written to Anne Donne, but even if this be true the poet has so disguised the real relationship existing between himself and the person to whom these pieces are directed that the fact is not aesthetically significant. The poet has adapted all his poems, whatever their origins, to the adulterous codes of love. To write poetry explicitly and openly about the married state was to Donne simply inconceivable; such private emotions are not the stuff upon which wit can work. Donne is as far from The Angel in the House as he is from Sons and Lovers.

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[18]"The Undertaking", ibid., p. 5.

In this respect, too, Donne is thoroughly medieval. Like Dante (who was happily married, too, be it said) and Cavalcanti and Guinicelli Donne never considered for a moment substituting the domestic and unspectacular affection he had for the woman he had married for the conventional poetic relationship which had been evolved long before out of a peculiar social set-up in old Provence. Even Donne's later poems of tender and Platonic feeling are addressed, let us note, not to his wife but to the ladies who were his patrons and his friends.

Those who try to suggest that the pair in the Extasie are "bride and groom" or "husband and wife" have missed one of the essential aspects of the tradition in which Donne is working.[19]

We find, too, in the Songs and Sonnets considerable use of the Religion of Love. There are a number of possible sources for this particular set of conventions which, as we have seen, was developed early and transmitted everywhere, and one that seems very likely to have been available to Donne is the parlor game "Lovers' Hell" and other similar jeux de société, in which various elements of the sanctification of love were preserved in degenerate and playful form.

But, in general, the way in which Donne makes use of ecclesiastical imagery is so much more like that of the

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[19]George Potter, "Donne's Extasie, Contra Legouis," Phil. Quarterly, XV (1936), 247-253.

school of the dolce stil nuovo, and of Guido Cavalcanti in particular, than any other that we have little hesitation in declaring that in this respect, as in so many others, the seventeenth century English poet is indebted to the thirteenth century Florentines.

There is, according to the tenets of the Religion of Love, a church of love, with services, ritual and a clergy.

> Whilst yet to prove,
> I thought there was some Deitie in love,
> So did I reverence, and gave
> Worship...[20]

> Wee for loves clergie only' are instruments...
> Here loves Divines...
> may finde all they seeke...[21]

Like the Catholic Church upon which it is modelled, it has its Saints and martyrs, of whom holy tales are told, called like those of their prototypes, legends. (cf. Chaucer's The Legend of Good Women)

> And by these hymnes, all shall approve
> Us Canoniz'd for Love...[22]

> And if unfit for tombes and hearse
> Our legend bee...[23]

> For since I am
> Loves martyr, it might breed idolatrie,
> If into others hands these Reliques came...[24]

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[20]"Farewell to love", Hayward, p. 52.

[21]"A Valediction: of the Booke", ibid., p. 21.

[22]"The Canonization", ibid., p. 9.

[23]Ibid.

[24]"The Funerall", ibid., p. 43.

The varying degrees of protest against, and lack of faith in, the deity of love receive the classifications of religious dissent; there is everything from schism and heresy to downright atheism.

> This face, by which he could command
> And change the Idolatrie of any Land...[25]
>
> There, the faith of any ground
> No schismatique will dare to wound...[26]
>
> Poore Heritiques in Love there bee...[27]
>
> Rebell and Atheist too, why murmure I...[28]

We are confronted next with a whole host of Plotinian concepts, and with them a problem. Is it from the Italian neo-Platonists, whom he seems certainly to have known, from Ficino and Mirandella and Varchi, that Donne derived these ideas, or did he rather derive them from Dante who had in turn learned them from Augustine and from the Doctors of the Church? It seems likely that both these sources brought their influence to bear on the Songs and Sonnets, but not equally, one of them giving general shape and direction to Donne's pattern of thought, the other contributing secondary detail. Which, then, was the primary source?

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[25]"Loves Exchange", ibid., p. 24.
[26]"A Valediction: of the booke", ibid., p. 21.
[27]"The Indifferent", ibid., p. 7.
[28]"Loves Deitie", ibid., p. 40.

The question is made difficult by the extensive and deep resemblances between the thought of the two schools, yet I do not think we shall have to abandon the problem as insoluble. The neo-Platonists, as we have pointed out in our historical section, were basically romantic and anti-scholastic; their movement began as a revolt against the rigidities of medieval Aristotelianism; Dante and the stil nuovisti were rather classical and Thomistic. Among the former we find the theories of love embedded in a metaphysics out of Plato by way of Plotinus and the pseudo-Dionysus; among the latter the same love theories are set in a philosophy out of Aristotle by way of Aquinas and containing only occasional Plotinian elements.

When we ask ourselves with which of these modes of thought Donne was more sympathetic, the answer is obvious. Every basic prejudice and intellectual habit drew him to the Aristotelian-scholastic complex. It is impossible to deny that there are direct neo-Platonic influences apparent here and there, for instance, the cabalistic references in the sexual number symbolism of the Primrose.

> Live Primrose then, and thrive
> With thy true number five;
> And woman, whom this flower doth represent,
> With this mysterious number be content...[29]

But, broadly speaking, where there appear in the Songs and Sonnets concepts common to the two traditions, we should not

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[29]Hayward, p. 45.

hesitate to attribute them directly to the poetry of the "sweet new style". Even the theories of ecstasy, which we are likely to think of in connection with the neo-Platonists since Professor Hughes demonstrated their presence in the poetry of the French Platonist Heroet, is also found in Florentine verse, particularly in Dante's Vita Nuova, where it is associated, as in Donne, with those mythological creatures i spiritelli, the spirits, whose discovery in the medieval physiologists and subsequent adoption by Guido Cavalcanti we have already noticed.

> As our blood labours to beget
> Spirits, as like soules as it can,
> Because such fingers need to knit
> That subtile knot, which makes us man....[30]

It will, perhaps, be sufficient to list only a few of the Plotinian concepts which are present in Donne's youthful verse, but we must be aware that they are everywhere in the Songs and Sonnets, and are of an importance much greater than a cursory examination of the poems would lead us to suspect, serving in large part to give Donne's verse its basic philosophical tone. Love, Plotinus had taught, is the prime mover of the universe. It influences not only humans but all created things.

> ...Yea plants, yea stones detest
> And love...[31]

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[30] "The Extasie", ibid., p. 37.

[31] "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day", ibid., p. 32.

Love inheres in the soul,

> But soules where nothing dwells but love....[32]

and is therefore immortal.

> Only our love hath no decay...[33]

It is the greatest good in life, beside which other human satisfactions are pale and meaningless.

> I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
> Did, till we lov'd?...[34]

Love is a mystical experience, an ecstasy in which the souls of lovers are transported outside of their bodies.

> Our soules...
> hung 'twixt her and mee...
> Wee like sepulchrall statues lay...[35]

The lovers are then merged into one, a unity of souls. This concept of unity through love is central to the whole tradition, being related to the mystic concept of unity with the godhead, and it is one to which Donne refers again and again throughout the Songs and Sonnets.

> Our two soules, therefore, which are one...[36]

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[32]"The Anniversarie", ibid., p. 16.

[33]Ibid.

[34]"The Good-morrow", ibid., p. 3.

[35]"The Extasie," ibid., p. 37.

[36]"A Valediction: forbidding mourning", ibid., p. 37.

Love, these mixt soules, doth mixe againe,
And makes both one...[37]

And we were mutuall Elements to us,
And made of one another...[38]

Out of this set of conventions, too, arises the contradiction that we have seen solved in Aire and Angels: being a creature of the soul love rises above sex and the body,

But he who loveliness within
Hath found, all outward loathes...[39]

Vertue' attir'd in woman see,
And dare love that...
And forget the Hee and Shee...[40]

But as no soul can exist without flesh to give it form, so love, too, must find its "type" in the material world. There is no sin in this. Amor mixtus, into which physical elements may enter, is permitted as well as amor purus, and both are distinguished from voluptas, the unbridled passion of the vulgar, called by Guido Cavlcanti "rabiem", and by Donne, echoing him, "rage".

For, though minde be the heaven, where love
doth sit,
Beauty a convenient type may be to figure it...[41]

To' our bodies turne wee then, that so
Weake men on love reveal'd may looke;
Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke...[42]

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[37]"The Extasie", ibid., p. 37.
[38]"The Dissolution", ibid., p. 48.
[39]"The Undertaking", ibid., p. 5.
[40]Ibid.
[41]"A Valediction: of the booke", ibid., p. 21.
[42]"The Extasie", ibid., p. 37.

From these more general postulates, the poets of the dolce stil nuovo had drawn more particular corallaries essential to their formulation of the myth, and these, too, are reflected by Donne. The theory of the cor gentil lies at the center of all the work of the Florentine school; the true lover must be "gentle"; he must possess probitas to be admitted into the mysteries and graces of love. The vulgar and the crude are so obsessed with the carnal, that their sensibilities cannot receive the impulse of a true and spiritual passion.

> Dull sublunary lovers love
> (Whose soule is sense)...[43]

That excellence which exists potentially in the gentle heart is, by the impact of love, made actual; it is not created by love or the lady, but rather shown by their mutual influence.

> Gentle love deeds, as blossomes on a bough,
> From loves awakened root do bud out now...[44]

There are two further ways in which the synthesis of the "sweet new style" influenced the love poetry of Donne, ways more general perhaps, than, those we have been discussing, but no less real or important for that. There had been from the earliest times in Provence, humoristic verse, poetry of

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[43]"A Valediction: forbidding mourning", ibid., p. 36.

[44]"Loves Growth", ibid., p. 23.

the paradox and the turn, the product of fancy and wit. But the genre had contained only the broadly farcical, verse obviously and unsubtly about nothing at all. The troubadours were capable of attaining in their cansos a tone of profound devotion, and in their sirventes invective or burlesque, but irony, in any real sense of the word, was quite outside of their range. There is, though, humor a-plenty, humor of a daring sort, skirting pretty close to the edge of sacrilege.

It was not until the thirteenth century in Italy that the devices of the humoristic tradition were turned to more serious and subtle ends, with the blending at the hands of various poets, the most distinguished of whom is Cavalcanti, of the line of mockery and the line of love, the sirventes and the canso. From these poets Donne might well have learned the method of interweaving subtle analysis and playful paradox that he made so characteristically his own.

The poets of the Florentine school were distinguished from their predecessors, and indeed from some who were to follow them in time, by their shift in emphasis from the object of love to the process of loving. Their verse is more concerned with the psychology of passion than with the physiology of the beloved. There is in them a relative unconcern with the appearance of the lady, an avoidance of the pat and boresome descriptions that Petrarch was to revive.

When we find in Donne a similar tendency, when we discover in his songs of love the familiar lips, eyes and golden

hair conspicuous by their absence, when we find, in short, in the whole of the Songs and Sonnets not one retailing of the lady's physical beauties, we will not be at a loss. We will recognize Donne's habitual approach as a development of the psychological method of the followers of Guinicelli, as a method arising, not from a personal failure of the visual sense, but from a traditional emphasis upon the inner mechanisms of the enamoured spirit.

With this evidence in hand we are justified in stating that the ideal system of love to which Donne was attracted was that of the dolce stil nuovo. His allegiance to that system he hardly dared confess even to himself, for its values were at odds with those of the circles in which he chose to move; but it is an allegiance which persists everywhere beneath the surface of his verse, occasionally breaking through to expression, and always supplying for the imagination a well of figures, images and conceits.

It is a love-philosophy, we must insist, hardly compatible with a "peculiarly modern" Donne; it is a philosophy that is medieval, reactionary, in a sense, even for its own time, and in espousing it Donne looked not forward to the present, but backward to a more congenial past.

The facts that we have presented thus far, weighty as they may be in their cumulative effect, are not sufficient to prove a direct influence of the "sweet new style" on the Songs and Sonnets, unless we can discover, in addition, con-

clusive proof of a connecting link between Donne and the Italian poets.

There is no doubt, to begin with, that Donne knew Italian; he uses tags of that language from time to time in his letters, and he is known to have visited Italy during his travels in 1594 and 1595. But more particularly we have evidence that Donne knew the work of Dante. The poetry of the great Tuscan poet was little known in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there were a few men who kept alive a spark of interest in his writings. Perhaps the most outstanding of these English scholars and amateurs was Donne's friend, Henry Wotton (Henrico Wottoni the poet once called him in mocking reference to his literary tastes), to whom in 1598 Lombardelli, a Sienese, dedicated a book in epistolatory form called I Fonti Toscani, in which Dante's poetry is discussed. And in a reading list which this same Wotton drew up for the use of some friend (it is not impossible that it was intended for Donne himself) he wrote, "Il Dante col commentario di Landino, in fol. Worthy the studying."[45]

There is no lack of evidence confirming these indications in the work of the poet himself. As Mario Praz has pointed out, there are certain debts to the author of the Divine Comedy apparent in Ignatius his Conclave, and in the

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[45]Evelyn M. Simpson, op. cit., pp. 296-7.

Fourth Satire there is an obvious reference to the Inferno.

> ...and a trance
> Like his, who dreamt he saw hell, did advance...[46]

Even more indisputable is the evidence of a letter, written presumably around 1660, and perhaps to Henry Wotton, in which Donne, in the course of one of the few literary discussions to be found in his letters, comments that although he reads comparatively little, being "no great voyager in other mens works", he had just been looking through the Divine Comedy.

> Even when I begun to write these I flung away
> Dant the Italian, a man pert enough to bee
> beloved and too much to bee beeleeved...[47]

After which he proceeds to discuss the theology of a passage which has disturbed him.

Far more important, however, to our purposes than evidence of Donne's knowledge of Dante's master work, would be some indication that the English poet was acquainted with the earlier works of the latter, such as the Vita Nuova or the Convivio, in which the influence of the dolce stil nuovo is clear and its concepts generally applied.

Such an indication is not lacking, for among those books known to have been in Donne's library is L'Amoroso Convivio in an edition published at Vinegia in 1531.[48] But the pos-

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[46]Hayward, p. 134.

[47]Ibid., 442.

[48]Geoffrey Keynes, op. cit., p. 175.

session of the Convivio indicates more than a knowledge of that volume alone, for the latter is in part an allegorical interpretation of the earlier Vita Nuova, and it is utterly inconceivable that Donne should not have consulted the original work in the course of reading a commentary upon it, even if he had not known it before.

These two works together contain in them not only Dante's complete statement on love, but a summation of the whole tradition of the "sweet new style". Alone they are a sufficient explanation of all the elements of the Florentine myth which we have discovered in the Songs and Sonnets; and if Donne knew in addition the De Vulgari Eloquentia, which seems likely enough on the basis of his other reading, he was acquainted with quotations from some twelve or thirteen typical Provencal love poets and several Italian predecessors and contemporaries of Dante, including Guido Guinicelli, as well as with the comments of the great Florentine upon his fellow artists.

There is little doubt that Donne knew at first hand the traditions of the dolce stil nuovo, and what elements we find in common between his verse and the poetry of the exponents of that tradition can hardly be attributed to coincidence or chance.

SCHOLASTICISM AND THE LAW

The poetry of the "sweet new style" is one of the channels through which the influence of scholasticism enters the Songs and Sonnets. The influence of the Florentine school upon Donne was, as we have seen, exerted in various ways, but there is hardly another as significant as this. Without scholastic elements the love poetry of Donne would have been something quite different from what it actually is.

The role of scholasticism in the shaping of that poetry is twofold. Its influence is apparent in the form of many of the Songs and Sonnets, especially in their dialectical structure, which follows with startling faithfulness the pattern of exposition of the schools. But, in addition and even more spectacularly, it has acted upon Donne's choice of imagery and upon the way in which that imagery is used. The use of such concepts in Donne as the three-fold nature of the soul and the relation between the angels and their spheres is well known enough to need no more than the bare mention.

Everyone is aware that Donne draws upon the "science"

of the schools for much of his rhetorical material, and that a good deal of the distinctive flavor of his verse arises from his utilization of that source. It is hardly less well known that he uses those materials in a fashion peculiarly eclectic, in a fashion which implies no necessary belief in the system of thought from which any particular figure is taken. Each metaphor is picked with an eye to its usefulness in illustration and emphasis, rather than its orthodoxy or doctrinal consistency.

The conventional explanation of Donne's behaviour in this respect is that proposed first, I believe, by Professor Courthope, when he pictured the decay of medieval thought, and the new poets seizing

> upon the rich materials of the old and ruined philosophy to decorate the structures which they built of their lawless fancy...[1]

This explanation has ever since been, to a greater or lesser degree, accepted by everyone from Professor Grierson to Miss Ramsay, and has become the stock in trade of every student of Donne. To Mr. Courthope Donne was part of a movement, visible to him throughout Europe, and the fellows of the English poet, in his maraudings among the ruins of ancient science, were such men as Gongora and Marini; but recent scholarship (and the work of Mr. Praz in particular) has convinced us that any comparison of Donne with the Spanish or

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[1] *op. cit.*, p. 148.

Italian eccentrics is pointless and misleading. There are resemblances, to be sure, but they do not go beneath the surface.

We have maintained the theory of medieval decay, but more and more we have narrowed it down until we are forced to admit with one recent writer that the general development noted by Mr. Courthope is "limited in time and space to John Donne",[2] or, to put it somewhat more bluntly, that that so-called development has been created post facto out of the very work it is supposed to explain. As a matter of fact, from what we know of Donne, it is hard to agree either that he was possessed by a "lawless fancy", or that for him the old philosophy was, in any real sense, "ruined".

The explanation of Donne's use of scholastic imagery must be sought, not in general historical considerations, but in his relations to literary tradition, a tradition the pursuit of which would take us back to thirteenth century Florence, to Sicily and beyond to the feudal courts of Provence.

We have described earlier the attempt to replace feudal imagery with figures drawn from contemporary science undertaken by the bourgeois poets at the court of Frederick II. Feeling that the terminology of feudal life was both unreal to men in their social situation and unbecoming to their

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[2]John F. Moore, "Scholasticism, Donne and the Metaphysical Conceit", La Revue Anglo-Américaine, XIII (1936), 289-296.

class, such men as Giacomo di Lentini had turned to newer sources, and first of all to the Bestiaries and Lapidaries. They were not, let us notice, in search of fanciful material, for these books to which they turned, to us fantastic, were to the medieval mind repositories of scientific fact. Giacomo begins by writing of the basilisk and the phoenix,

> Lo badalisco a lo specchio lucente
> Traggi a morire con isbaldimento:
> L'augel fenice s'arde veramente
> Per ritornare a novel nascimento...[3]

and weaves into his verse the butterfly and the flame, and the lore of precious stones. Even this earlier "scientific" matter is not unrepresented in Donne; he too writes of the virtues of gems, of the legendary "specular stone"; nor are the animals of the bestiaries forgotten, not even the fiery phoenix.

> And wee in us finde the 'Eagle and the Dove.
> The Phoenix ridle hath more wit
> By us...[4]

Astrology was another source to which the new poets turned in their search for fresh and meaningful imagery. Richart de Barbézieux, we remember, had taken great joy in singing "delh solelh e de las estalas", and the use which Guinicelli and Dante made of stellar lore is too well known to need further comment. Here, too, the Songs and Sonnets follow suit.

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[3]Cesareo, op. cit., p. 345.

[4]"The Canonization", Hayward, p. 9.

As all the vertuous powers which are
Fix'd in the starres, are said to flow
Into such characters, as graved bee
When these starres have supremacie...5

But the "scientific" poetic schools could not attain a systematic and rich fund of imagery that could in any real way rival that derived from the social complex of feudalism, until medieval philosophy and science had worked out its own synthesis. It was not until the great organizing genius of Aquinas had brought order to the thought of the Middle Ages, that the world of science could provide rhetorical material, which was at once subtle and mature. The poets of the dolce stil nuovo arrived on the scene contemporaneously with the height of the scholastic renaissance, and, drawing upon thomistic sources, at last produced the poetry which Giacomo had envisaged and abortively attempted, poetry rich and serious, and yet fundamentally bourgeois.

I am not suggesting that Donne took his scientific material from the school of Dante. Obviously, he knew the scholastic philosophers himself, much more thoroughly, indeed, than most of his contemporaries, because of his early Catholic training, and he must have drawn in the main upon his own knowledge of their dogma and metaphysics for his conceits. But from the stil nuovisti he did inherit the tradition, passed on to and culminating in them, of using scientific

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5"A Valediction: of my name, in the window", ibid., p. 18.

material in erotic verse.

The use of such material was regulated in Donne, as in Guinicelli, not by the demands of a unified metaphysics, but by the formal demands of art. Such a method has nothing to do with the flourishing or decadence of scholastic thought; it is used before and during the heyday of the schools as well as after. When we see Donne's work as typical of the decay of medieval philosophy we are being misled.

Beside the unified structure and the close knit doctrine of the Divine Comedy, the Songs and Sonnets are bound to appear thin, disorganized, not in the highest sense "metaphysical". But such a comparison is ridiculous. It is to the Vita Nuova, the verse of Cavalcanti and Guinicelli that we must compare the love poetry of John Donne, and, when we have made that comparison, we will begin to understand the traditional way in which Donne made use of the concepts of scholastic science.

There remains a word to be said about those images in Donne which are drawn from law and the parlance of the courts. It would perhaps seem sufficient to note that Donne was trained as a lawyer at the Inns of Court, and that he quite naturally drew upon those funds of knowledge which were therefore available to him. But there is a tradition behind the use of law-imagery in erotic verse, a tradition inextricably linked by history with the use of scientific imagery which we have just examined, particularly with the Sicilian

poets and the exponents of the "sweet new style".

The beginnings of the use of legal terminology in love poetry go back to the earliest cansos of the troubadours. At first the use of such terminology is closely connected, as we might well expect, with the feudalization of love. In Guillaume, the Count of Poitier, who is the earliest Provençal poet whose work survives, we find an example of this type.

> Qu'ans mi rent a lieys e•m liure,
> Qu'en s carta•m pot escriure...[6]

And in Peire Vidal whose works were translated by the master of Guinicelli the tradition is carried on this time into the actual courts of law.

> S'eu fos en cort on hom tengues dreitura,
> de ma domna, si tot s'es bon e bela,
> me clamera, qu'a tan gran tort mi mena
> que no m•aten plevi ni covinensa...[7]

To the Sicilian poets, who carried on the development of the poetry of courtly love, the legal references were among the few allusions in Provençal poetry which were congenial, for they were men of law themselves and it amused them to find the subtleties of the bar transferred to the discussion of love. Guido delle Colonne, we remember, was a judge and Giacomo di Lentino a notary; and it was through the law school at Bologna that the whole concept of vernacular love

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[6]Appel, op. cit., p. 52.

[7]Ibid., p. 65.

verse moved into northern Italy.

In the north the legal aspects thus far preserved were not forgotten; indeed, Guido Guinicelli, the fountainhead of the stil nuovo, had studied law at Bologna and was a judge. As was inevitable in a line passed on by lawers and jurists, the use of legal imagery was extended and fixed, and, since these were the same men who had performed an analagous service for scientific figures, joined to the latter in a single tradition. With this tradition we have seen Donne was acquainted, and from it he doubtless drew encouragement to tap his own knowledge of the law and of its jargon for some of the characteristic imagery of the Songs and Sonnets. There are many examples from which one might choose; one will have to suffice.

> Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow?
> Or say that now
> We are not just those persons, which we were?
> Or, that oathes made in reverentiall feare
> Of Love, and his wrath, any may forsweare?
> Or, as true deathes, true maryages untie,
> So lovers contracts, images of those,
> Binde but till sleep, deaths image, them unloose?[8]

At the beginning of this section it was suggested that the argumentative and expository structure of Donne's verse, as well as its characteristic imagery, owes much to the influence of scholasticism. There are other factors at work in giving to many of the Songs and Sonnets the air of a logical

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[8]"Womans Constancy", Hayward, p. 4.

demonstration or a brief. The habit of arguing publicly and in sport the questions d'amour has undoubtedly played a part; the tradition of the paradox has contributed its share; and the legalistic mind with its love for quibbling and debate has left its mark.

But exceptionally evident throughout is the influence of the sic et non method made especially famous by Thomas Aqinas in his Summa Theologica, which is signalled in the poems by the typical triadic structure of argument. In this form of disputation a positive point of view is first advanced, the thesis, and against this is set another contention equally plausible and apparently in contradiction to the first, the antithesis; but both are at last resolved by a third statement, in light of which the first two are seen as complementary aspects of a final truth, the synthesis.

Donne employs this method often in the Songs and Sonnets and most typical of his poems in this respect is The Flea.[9] The poet begins with an invocation to his mistress to spare the flea which has bitten both, for in that insect they are joined, as in life they never were, and its dispatch therefore would be a triple crime.

> Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
> Where wee almost, yea more than maryed are.
> This flea is you and I, and this
> Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is...
> Though use make you apt to kill mee,
> Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,
> And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three...

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[9]"The Flea", ibid., p. 29.

This is the thesis. But the lady having, "cruell and sodaine", killed the flea, triumphantly turns to the poet to declare that despite his solemn warning, the flea dead they are none the worse for the deed; and this is the antithesis.

> Yet thou triump'st, and saiest that thou
> Find'st not thy selfe, nor mee the weaker now...

The lover's argument appears to have collapsed before the undeniable truth of his mistress's matter of fact statement. It does not seem that beside the antithesis the thesis can any longer stand; but a sudden twist, and Donne has snatched his synthesis out of the teeth of defeat, by the process of affirmation and denial, arrived at last at the point for which he had been aiming from the first.

> 'Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee;
> Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to mee,
> Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life
> from thee.

Scholasticism and theological dispute, as we have suggested, are not the only forces making for the argumentative character of Donne's verse. Such poems as "Confined love"[10] and "The Extasie"[11] in their special pleading seem to be indebted to the tradition of the love-debate.

In the early tensos, and in the more formalized joc partit, the troubadours had disputed among themselves over various aspects of the love-codes, and in Sicily such mock debates

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[10] Hayward, p. 26.

[11] Ibid., p. 37.

had been adopted and expanded, appealing, for obvious reasons, to the lawyers of Frederick's court. Both in literature and as a social diverson these _debats d'amour_ had enjoyed a long and unbroken development throughout Europe, and the tradition doubtless came to Donne by way of his reading (there is a _question d'amour_ debated in the fourth book of Montemayor's _Diana_), and the games of the _salon_.

Some of the _Songs and Sonnets_ appear to have been occasioned by playful discussions in verse between Donne and his friends for their mutual amusement, and not a few of his poems can only be fully understood if they are taken as the defense of one side of a question against an opponent whose verses in support of the other have been lost.

There is still another factor which contributes to the close-knit logical nature of Donne's love lyrics. In such a poem as _A Lecture upon the Shadow_,[12] we feel as we read that we are in the presence of something different than the ordinary poem of love, something more, perhaps, than poetry of any kind ordinarily gives us. It is as if we were simultaneously reading a poem and the explanation of that poem. And precisely that in my opinion is what Donne gives us![13]

Toward the end of the great period of Provençal poetry, it became habitual to insert in the manuscripts of verse before any poem that might offer difficulties to a prospective

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[12]Hayward, p. 54.

[13]Suggested by Praz, _op. cit._, p. 103.

reader (and that there were plenty of those we may be sure) what was called a razo, an explanation of the piece to which it was attached based on the text and whatever the commentator knew or chose to imagine about its background and the circumstances under which it was written. Such practises were, in all likelihood, suggested by the scholarly practise of writing passages of exegesis and explanation upon sections of the Bible, Patristic writings, such classical works as Vergil's Aeneid, which was allegorically interpreted, etc.

Dante, familiar with this practise from his readings in Provençal, carried the process a step further. In putting together the Vita Nuova, the Italian poet attached to the poems which he had written earlier or was then composing his own razos. Donne, I cannot help feeling, went still further compressing the poem and the razo into a new unity, in which the ordinary logic of verse is supplemented by the logic of exposition. Let us look for a moment at the first stanza of A Lecture upon the Shadow.

> Stand still, and I will read to thee
> A Lecture, love, in Loves philosophy.
> These three houres that we have spent,
> Walking here, Two shadowes went
> Along with us, which we our selves produc'd;
> But, now the Sunne is just above our head,
> We doe those shadowes tread;
> And to brave clearnesse all things are reduc'd
> So whilst our infant loves did grow,
> Disguises did, and shadowes, flow,
> From us, and our cares; but, now 'tis not so.

There is here not only the symbolic equivalent of an idea that we are accustomed to look for in poetry, but a running

commentary and explication of that symbol, and, lest even this prove not clear enough, Donne hastens to add a two-line tag in which the informing concept of the whole stanza, reduced to a denominator of prose sense, is stated once more.

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

It is a process which must have gone on beneath the level of the poet's consciousness, and it is one which, depending to a large degree on personal and subjective reactions, cannot be demonstrated with the certainty of fact; but it is, I think, thoroughly credible in light of Donne's other uses of Dante's early poetry of love.

DONNE AND CATHOLICISM

We have stated earlier in this study that there are three conflicting levels of belief in the Songs and Sonnets; the trivial love codes of the salon, the idealist synthesis of the "sweet new style", and underneath the two a profound conviction of the sinfulness of sex under any circumstances. We have tried to demonstrate how the last prevented the overt assertion of Donne's idealism and helped keep it captive and ashamed beneath the empty wit of the first; and we have further indicated that it was this same more than medieval concept of sin which kept the poet from moving with the central love-traditions of his time and country. It now remains to be shown where this view of passion arose, what forms it took, and precisely how it turned Donne from the love-marriage synthesis back to the Middle Ages and the traditions of courtly love.

The crucial fact for Donne's ethical background is his Catholicism. He was born a Catholic, and brought up in that faith. He was taught by Catholic tutors, and it is even possible that in his youth he studied at Jesuit schools abroad; it is certain that, though he attended the two great

English universities, he took a degree at neither because his religion made it impossible for him to take the necessary oaths.

Through his mother, the daughter of John Heywood, a writer of interludes, and a descendant of Sir Thomas More, he was related to many eminent Catholics. One of his uncles, Jaspar Heywood, was imprisoned for taking part in a Jesuit mission to England, and indeed all about him during his most impressionable years those he loved were subject for their faith to persecution and suffering. He himself has noted in the preface to the Pseudo-Martyr how strong were the bonds which tied him to the faith of his childhood.

> I had a longer work to do than many other men: for I was first to blot out certaine impressions of the Romane religion and to wrestle both against the examples and against the reasons, by which some hold was taken, and some anticipations early layde upon my conscience, both by persons who by nature had a power and superiority over my will, and others who by their learning and good life seemed to me justly to claime an interest for the guiding and rectifying of mine understanding in these matters.[1]

His mother, who outlived him, remained with him until his death, the living symbol of the religion of his boyhood, a religion he might publicly and, in all good faith, abjure, but whose impress upon his ultimate values he could never quite erase.

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[1]Quoted in Walton, Lives, note p. 53.

Indeed, some have suspected that political reasons were the strongest element in Donne's conversion to the Church of England, at least at first; but, be that as it may, he was certainly grounded from childhood on by his Catholic teachers in the writings of the fathers and the works of the great scholastic philosophers, and, despite changes in his allegiance and theology, he never lost his interest in or taste for the medieval doctors.

It is from them that he acquires the knowledge of the subtleties of scholastic thought which is woven into the texture of his verse, but, even more important, it is from them, too, that he learned the harsh medieval dogma of the evil nature of all passion. Not even in marriage was the sex act a good; love in our sense of the word was not recognized; the man who approached his own wife with undue desire was an adulterer.

This Donne never forgot. "In our generation by our parents", he told his congregation, "we are conceived in sin, and they have sinned in the act."[2] Even the love and pity he could not beat down in his heart when his wife had died was to him a fault, a self-indulgence to be fought against and repented. If there were any ultimate good in the passion he had felt for Anne More, and which had led to their foolhardy marriage and almost to the ruin of both, it was only

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[2]Quoted in Miss Ramsay, op. cit., from Alford, Sermons, Vol. IV, 318-9.

that from this lesser love he could pass on to the adoration of God.

We find in Donne's sermons, despite an evident resolve to hew to the line of the Church he had accepted, occasional shifts in emphasis that make the import of a passage ever so slightly unorthodox from the point of view of official Anglicanism. Almost all those shifts, it is worth noting, are concerned with the question of sex or the status of woman. They are few to be sure, but it is not their infrequency which is to be wondered at; it is rather the fact that there are any at all. For Donne is continually on guard in his sermons against any lapses from orthodoxy, as Professor Grierson has pointed out in his preface to a recent study of Donne's theology.

> My second impression is...that Donne was in all his explicit statements on dogmas and practice an orthodox Anglican, almost too completely... Donne writes somewhat as an advocate who, having accepted his brief, is prepared to defend every article of the creed he has adopted.[3]

The English Church at the beginning of the seventeenth century was engaged in a battle against the traditional medieval view of love; it had set itself as one of its tasks the defense of matrimony, with the concomitant and complementary depreciation of virginity and elevation of the position of woman. To these ends Donne strives always to guide his

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[3]In Itrat Husain, The Dogmatic and Mystical Theology of John Donne, p. x (pref.).

statements when he is led to touch upon these crucial subjects. But he is not always equally successful; sometimes the older Catholic view is uppermost for the moment, and it is in just such a moment that Donne tells us

> Marriage was given for a remedy; but not before any apperance of a danger. And given for Physick, but not before any apperance of a disease...[4]

And again speaking of a woman in a sermon delivered at a marriage he says:

> She is but Adjutorium, but a Helpe: and nobody values his staffe as he does his legges...[5]

And once more speaking on the Nativity he turns aside to the discussion of virginity.

> It is a singular testimony, how acceptable to God that state of virginity is...let them embrace that state that can...[6]

It is this passage which stirred Coleridge, who is always ready enough to cry, "Papam redolet!", to declare heatedly in his notes upon the sermons--

> One of the sad relics of Patristic supermoralization, aggravated by Papal ambition...[7]

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[4] LXXX Sermons, p. 217.

[5] Quoted in Simpson, op. cit., p. 62n. from L Sermons, 2.14.

[6] LXXX Sermons, p. 17.

[7] S. T. Coleridge, "Notes on Donne", Literary Remains, Vol. III, p. 103.

For Donne, even in his later years, the basic lessons of the medieval church remained ineradicable. "The sphere of our loves is sublunary, upon things naturally inferior to ourselves." From such a view of sex flows quite inevitably a view of woman as a temptress, and the pursuit of her as illusory, a "vain Bubles shadow". Wine, comedies, and women Donne denounced as "Job's miserable comforters" to the soul.[8] For him woman remained something to be cherished at best, but never to be treated as the moral and intellectual equal of man.

From these fundamental concepts, too, emerges the worship of chastity for its own sake, that sad relic of "Patristic supermoralization", which produced in Donne the impulse to write those occasional lines in praise of his own abstinence that strike us as somehow too insistent and too smug to be true.

> I would have that age by this paper taught
> What miracles wee harmlesse lovers wrought.
>
> First we lov'd well and faithfully,
> Yet knew not what wee lov'd, nor why,
> Difference of sex no more wee knew,
> Than our Guardian Angells doe...[9]

If such a triple view of woman, marriage and virginity persisted in Donne in later years, despite his conversion and the lessons of a dogma he was sworn to uphold, how much

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[8]Quoted in Simpson, op. cit., p. 62.

[9]"The Relique", Hayward, p. 46.

stronger must that view have been during the years in which he was writing the Songs and Sonnets. He was then hardly removed from his years of Catholic training, and had not yet reached the point where he was to begin his struggle against its hold upon his thought and his beliefs.

We must be careful not to confuse these medieval views on sex, as some have done, with what they are pleased to call Donne's "cynicism". There is no connection whatsoever between the sophistic praise of faithlessness and the mock praise of naturalism, which Donne learned from the degenerate love-codes of the young men about town, and the profound conviction present in his more idealistic poems and his theological writings as well as his witty and paradoxical verse, that woman is inferior to man,

> at their best
> Sweetnesse and wit, they'are but Mummy,
> possesst.[10]

and that love is in the final analysis a cheat, "a winter-seeming summers night". This is not the cheap mask of sophistication that the essentially idealist poet felt forced to wear in deference to the standards of the circles in which he moved; this is the basic pre-condition of both the idealism and the mask. When we have realized this, we will not be surprised at the appearance of these contemptuous views of

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[10]"Loves Alchemy", ibid., p. 28.

woman in poems otherwise tender and devoted; we will understand how, in a piece of gentle and platonic feeling, the poet in his search for a striking image can draw, quite unabashed, upon his concept of woman's natural inconstancy--

> For graves have learned that woman-head,
> To be to more than one a bed...[11]

nor will we be led like Professor Crofts into the uncritical point of view that finds in the conclusion of Aire and Angels, as we have already noted, "corrosion and distortion", which destroys the effect of the opening stanzas.

And when we have understood that the source of Donne's views of sex and women lies in the very bed rock of his ethics, in the emphasis of an early education whose influence he could never completely overcome, we will not be inclined to give credence to any theory that sees these attitudes as arising in youth and being later "fined" by his love for his wife, or softened by his association with the courtly ladies. His convictions arise from dogma, from a metaphysics sealed by faith, and such a system is immune to the impact of experience.

It is worth noting that Metempsychosis, of all Donne's poems probably the most violent and bitter against women, was written in the very year of his marriage, and that as late as 1610, when he began the composition of An Anatomie of the

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[11]"The Relique", ibid., p. 46.

World, his ethical point of view remained still unyielding in these respects.

It will pay us to look for a moment at the Anniversaries, of which the Anatomie of the World is the corner stone, for in the midst of these poems dedicated to the hyperbolic praise of a young lady recently dead, in the midst of a eulogy so profuse that Ben Jonson protested "that they were prophane and full of blasphemies", and told Donne that "if it had been written of the Virgin Marie it had been something", we find the poet digressing occasionally to tell us his views of marriage and of women in general, whom he calls by their ancient title, "the weaker Sex", and in whom we are told inheres "the poysonous tincture, and the Staine of Eve". Here is what Donne, "fined" by more than ten years of marriage, has to say of womankind.

> How witty's ruine! how importunate
> Upon mankinde! It laboured to frustrate
> Even Gods purpose; and made woman sent
> For man's reliefe, cause of his languishment.
> They were to good ends, and they are so still,
> But accessory, and principal in ill;
> For that first marriage was our funerall:
> One woman at one blow, then kill'd us all,
> And singly, one by one, they kill us now.[12]

It is still, after his life with Anne More, the same story as "Loves Alchemy", like "mummy" woman yields incidental and secondary benefits in the realm of physic; but the elixir

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[12]"The First Anniversarie", Hayward, p. 199.

of life, the meeting of mind with mind, is simply not there. Even of the marital state itself Donne speaks still with the voice of the Fathers; it is no sin perhaps but there is sin in it.

> For marriage, though it doe not staine,
> doth dye.[13]

Whatever the complexity of Donne's writings, whatever shifts in opinion and belief underlie his development, in respect to the central problems of sexual passion he was always consistent. In his very contradictions, in the uneasy juxtaposition of distrust of woman and her praise, there is a truth to experience more fundamental than the logical patterns of development from cynicism to idealism which critic after critic from Gosse to Mrs. Bennet has tried to impose upon the Songs and Sonnets.

There are two things we must not forget. First, that Donne's concepts of woman as faithless and morally inferior to man and of sex as irremediably evil were not the products of cynicism and sophistication, but of the strong medieval and scholastic elements in the poet's early religious training. And second, that these ethical concepts are not incompatible with the most exalted and exaggerated idealism, but indeed tend rather to foster and support it. The whole history of the evolution of the codes of love is, as we have

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[13]"A Funerall Elegie", ibid., p. 212.

seen, evidence of just such a relationship.

If one believes that nothing can justify sex, then one is perfectly free to build up around its functioning whatever standards his experience suggests or his fancy dictates. We have observed how the men of the Middle Ages took advantage of that freedom to build up a mock religion about the god of love. By Donne's time men like Spenser, who no longer believed in the absolute evil of passion, were beginning to tie love to the church through the concepts of romance and the chastity of marriage. But our poet, leaning toward Catholicism as Spenser leaned toward Puritanism, felt the old utter indictment as profoundly as Dante or Giraut de Borneil ever had, and so felt himself free to yield to the demands of social conformity, to his desire to please his courtier friends and the ladies of the salons, by abandoning the profound and serious myth of the stil nuovo for the vain and witty conventions of the courts. The point is easy to miss, and those who have missed it feel that Donne must somehow be a "modern", since only the newer gospel of Freud seems to permit the freedom they find in the Songs and Sonnets.

There is, however, one vital difference; for the seventeenth century poet would never feel that his flight from one set of conventions to another took him to "reality". No, he realized that he could only change one fiction for another, because there was no reality. Love was a made up thing, an attempt forever futile to reconcile man's behaviour

in his relations with woman to his moral standards. Love was a creation of human fancy; and that fact was as present to Donne as it is absent from us.

What set of conventions he did at last adopt we have seen, and we have attempted to discover where he found them. It remains now to say a word more about his separation from the easier and more progressive solution of his contemporaries, and to consider in conclusion the nature and aesthetic meaning of poetry arising from such sources and conditioned by such views.

CONCLUSION

There were three facts that kept Donne from embracing the love-marriage synthesis, which, as we have seen, represents the central development of the love-myth in his age. The first of these was social, the second religious, and the third political.

Donne had little in common with the bourgeoisie, who were the motivating force behind the new love-tradition. Its characteristic religion, Puritanism, was always especially distasteful to him, its incipient political theory foreign to all his rigid hierarchal concepts, and its desire to be hard-headed and prosaic, to make ethics "practical", was in conflict with his every principle. When he thought of the middle-class at all, he thought of how to escape from it to the aristocratic world of his heart's desire.

Donne's religious training made it impossible for him to sympathize with the Protestant tendency to concentrate "upon preserving the purity of the married state rather than the psychological purity of the individual." We have already noted his basic views on virginity and marriage, and all

that was most permanent in these cut him off from the new trend. But it was perhaps above all the connection of the contemporary movement with the Cult of the Queen which prevented Donne's embracing it. His Catholicism had kept him from the royal court, and to his youthful zeal the Queen had become the very symbol of the corruption of the English spirit.

In his Metempsychosis, we remember, Donne had intended to make the final resting place of the treacherous soul, which had first inhabited the fatal apple of the Garden of Eden, after a progression through bitch and she-wolf, the body of Elizabeth!

> For the great soule which here amongst us now
> Doth dwell, and moves that hand, and tongue, and brow
> Which, as the Moone the sea, moves us; to heare
> Whose story, with long patience you will long;
> (For 'tis the crowne, and last straine of my song).[1]

The poem was never completed, but the man who had viewed the Queen as the last fleshly vessel of all lust and heresy would find it difficult indeed to bend the knee at the shrine of Cynthia.

In addition, the nineties had seen a reaction to the first burst of enthusiasm which had greeted the new sovereign. The question of the succession, the continuing foreign wars, trouble in Ireland, the plague and the growing unrest of pea-

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[1]Hayward, p. 257.

sant labour all conspired to bring about a feeling of disillusion and resentment. The Puritans were loud and violent, the court circle troubled and confused; the former sprang into action against the pleasures of an over-sensuous world while the latter lost the old secret of expansive and careless revel and perceived through their thin joys the shoddy beneath.[2] It was still possible for some to preserve their belief in the myth, now become a shrill and unbecomingly flirtatious old woman, but for others the bleaker medieval traditions began to re-assert themselves, and still others took refuge in a deliberate pose of scepticism and cynical wit.

In Donne both the latter tendencies were apparent. He remembered with special significance the teachings of Jerome on the Fall; and he was willing to adapt himself to the fashionable despair of that regressive time, to pretend that his illusions, as yet untried, were battered like those of his older companions. Both tendencies took him to the past, and in the microcosm of his thought he relived the development of the medieval myths of love: the initial uncomplimentary view of woman, the concept of love as absolutely good, the paradox of an evil creature somehow leading man to this good.

From this conflict Donne moved toward the synthesis that we have just examined. It emerges in his verse, distorted,

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[2]Theodore Spencer, "Donne and his Age", in A Garland for John Donne, p. 85.

disconnected and half-concealed, but it is there beneath the irony and the formal pose. There is obviously no explicit statement of his beliefs anywhere, and without knowledge of the traditional backgrounds against which he worked his mode of thought is bound to remain extremely, almost impossibly, elusive. But there is little excuse for missing the indications of the tone and texture of the verse, indications that warn the reader of the presence of an injured sensibility beneath a cynicism which is half pose and half defense of the underlying sensitivity. It is difficult to be patient with those who take Donne's praise of faithlessness and his "naturalism" at their face value; to their lack of perception the Songs and Sonnets must remain forever contradictory and confused.

But though it is incomprehensible that people should not perceive that something in the poet is offended, it is comprehensible enough that some perplexity should exist as to exactly what in him is offended. There are in Donne's poems two protests which are often confused: one against the irreconcilable conflict between ethical truth as revealed by the church and all conventions of love; and this is primary; the other, derived from the first, against the Spenserian synthesis which would sanctify love through marriage, and it is this about which the critics have always talked and which has obscured from them the meaning of the first. But the fundamental and serious significance of Donne's work can

never be grasped without a full understanding of the primary protest.

In the last analysis, Donne's plight is that of one asking for order in a disordered world. More precisely, it is that of a man seeking an order defined in terms of a feudal, Catholic, international community in a world that is in transition toward a new concept of order, bourgeois, Protestant, and nationalist.

It was a peculiar era. The metaphysics of the Middle Ages had not yet in the last decade of the sixteenth century been challenged by another full dress system of ideas, but it was beginning to be baffled by a world which refused to correspond to its formulae, and which was not as yet ready to explain itself in its own terms. The medieval views of love were as much challenged in this respect as any of the more pretentious aspects of thought, and Donne was a living embodiment of the conflict.

The strange way in which the problem was posed caused men to turn their eyes inward. The impact of two societies, or of two philosophies can be objectified and discussed from without, but the conflict of a society and a metaphysics can only be seized subjectively in the consciousness of an individual. But this turning inward urges still another step forward the advance toward individualism, thus tending to destroy the medieval concept of external order by objective law. In such a setting the self-dramatization and attitudin-

izing which are so frequent in Donne find encouragement.

But another aspect of this conflict yields an even more important element in the poetry of Donne. The formal equivalent of a desire for order, plus an appreciation of disorder is that discordia concors, the metaphysical image.

It is sometimes remarked in nostalgic tones that the metaphysical poets possessed the ability of living in divided worlds. Those who pity our time for having lost that amphibian secret forget that the faculty arose only because these poets possessed in the first place a divided world, and that the awareness of that fact was by no means pleasant to some of the artists of the time, Donne, for instance, who, unaware of the virtue the twentieth century would make of his necessity, was busily engaged in an attempt to re-achieve the single world of the Middle Ages.

I am particularly concerned with this point as an indication of a common desire in the period to return to medieval stability. We may be sure that Donne looked back to Dante with just such yearning as is felt by Mr. T. S. Eliot when he contemplates Donne.

Allegory was a characteristic of the medieval mind as the metaphysical conceit was of that of the seventeenth century, and when we have understood both we will have been made aware of the debt of the latter to the former, and of their crucial difference. It has been said that allegory is "the perception of the seamless coat of the universe",

springing from the belief that there is ultimately one world of which any part symbolizes all others and the whole. God, the original artist, makes men's lives meaningful in more senses than one; each is his organic exemplum, serving to point a moral or illustrate some larger truth. The task of the human artist is too see life as it is and his portrayal of it must inevitably partake of all the levels of meaning present in the created world. All this is in Dante's Convivio, and there Donne must have read it and remembered.

With the death of the feudal world and the emergence of the bourgeoisie with its ideological handmaid, Protestantism, the unified Catholic order disappeared forever. The attempt in England to revive its ideals within national limits was from the first doomed to failure. Though the real protestant revolt had been anticipated by the political rebellion of Henry VIII against Rome, its influence made itself felt very early. The artificial and reactionary via media of the English church was matched in art by an attempt to recapture artificially the aesthetic vision of the era of Dante.

But two worlds already existed and could not be wished away. Heaven and earth had been irremediably severed with the separation of their visible symbols, Church and State. A temporary welding of the two could only be achieved by an act of the will and reason, the metaphysical conceit; and the very nature of this attempt is an admission of the initial separation. There is a fundamental kind of "violence"

in the yoking of the two. Dr. Johnson saw the fact clearly, though he did not seem to realize either its aesthetic justification or its potential impact upon the world of art.

The "metaphysical" poets were not successful in their attempt, but at least they reached toward a medieval goal. Spenser, despite his "allegory" which is quite different from that of the Middle Ages, was content to take the Petrarchan view of the metaphor as decoration; Donne persisted in the Dantesque belief that it was a mode of perceiving and rendering the multiform nature of truth in the created world.

Later generations who had lost sight of the medieval vision failed to realize what Donne had been trying to do. The goal forgotten, they saw only the mechanics, which they imitated and in imitating damned. Poetry thereafter was to set itself other goals.

Here, it seems to me, is the point of a fundamental cleavage, more important than the famous "disassociation of sensibility", which after all had to follow once it had been admitted that there were two disassociated worlds which only art could join. Were one given to scolding literary history, he might pick a quarrel with Donne as the grandfather of that dichotomization of poetry of which Milton has been called the father, and for which he has suffered too long alone.

Donne found his desire for order baffled in yet another and even more fundamental way in the face of the sexual impulse. Men have tried occasionally to banish that drive

or to outlaw it; but the way of asceticism has never proved workable for more than a few for any length of time. In the main the efforts of ethics and art (and it has been, let us remember, a male ethics and a male art) have been directed toward the erection of a system of values, congruous with man's larger aims and including some justification of sex.

Each time such a system has been created it has foundered, for the very idea of systematization is in contradiction with the irrationality of desire. It has further proved necessary to the existence of such systems to elevate woman to a position commanding respect and even worship. But men have always found it impossible to ignore the fact of woman's spiritual and intellectual inferiority, as a thousand myths, including that of the Fall, testify. Moreover, there has been introduced into the Western world a peculiar Hebraic development of the basic concept of the irrationality of passion, the concept of sexual "sin".

The most obvious ordering force available to the hand that would regulate the chaos of love is the idea of faithfulness. Even where there have been other regulatory methods, institutional, legal, religious, or pseudo-religious, this idea has been present. The fundamental assumption behind its use seems to be that any feeling which produces a stable relationship in society is, by virtue of that fact, justified. But faithfulness, alas, has forever disappointed us. Systems, which, on the other hand, accept lack of faith, ignore the

central desire for order and offer an evasion rather than a solution.

In addition, men, in their desire to emphasize their separation from the beasts, have been continually puzzled and disturbed by the fact that they share with them the enjoyment of the sex act. "Riddling and intricated", they have come to envy those very beasts who are immune from their problems and the sadness which follows satisfaction.

> Ah cannot wee,
> As well as Cocks and Lyons jocund be,
> After such pleasures?[3]

With all these facts assembled against it, each new love-system has given only temporary ethical peace, leaving men at the last more hopelessly troubled than ever. It is this essential truth that emerges from the love poetry of John Donne out of the pattern of his triple conflict of belief; and it is thus that, for all his baggage of medieval dogma and allusion, he speaks to us of our common plight: the desire for order forever in conflict with passion, the feeling beneath our more momentary impatience with this or that contemporary code, that there are <u>no</u> codes which will avail us, <u>no</u> standards which will give us peace.

His verse is the flesh and blood of the awareness, skeletal for most of us, that woman is ethically different

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[3]"Farewell to Love", Hayward, p. 54.

from man, forever betrayed by her need for the very emotional stimulus which is her only path to an integrated life. He speaks of our need for that weak and uncertain creature, our strange desire to find her worthy of adoration. He tells us of the paradox of her completing us by a feeling that is greater than herself.

This is what John Donne gives us, and I cannot help feeling that it is more fundamental than the cheeks, lips and eyes of the sonneteers. It has been said that he does not paint the flesh and blood of his women. Of course not! The flesh is always and inevitably inadequate. Lust, Donne knew, is as much abstracted from the particular body as more complete love. The brief collision of the bodies we can take for granted; the intricate systems by which we rationalize and adorn our feelings shift with the tides of social change; the world between, where we are eternally aware of the ineluctable gap between our flesh and our fictions of love, has been and will remain the common possession of mankind. It is that world which John Donne has sung.

TRANSLATIONS

p. 11.

It appears then that one should not take advantage of marriage chiefly to find delight or to sate oneself with lustful pleasures...The man who is too ardent a lover is guilty of adultery with his wife... There is nothing which stinks more to Heaven than to love one's wife like an adulterer...

p. 12.

woman is of man and man is not of woman, nor is man made for woman, but woman for man. Therefore woman should be subject to man, for man is the head of woman...

p. 16.

Of all which is said and done, that which pleases the desire of her heart seems to her good and reasonable, whether it be good and reasonable or not. And because woman knows nothing by right or reason, except that her heart be moved tenderly...

p. 23.

Even as the elephant, which, when it falls, cannot arise, until the others of the herd, with their cries, call it up...

p. 24.

The woods put forth their leaves at the sweetness of the new season; and the birds sing, each in its own tongue, following the pattern of the new song. At such a time it is well that each take that of which he has most desire.

From that place, which is to me more fine and fair than any other, I see no messenger or seal; wherefor my heart neither laughs nor sleeps, nor do I dare betake myself thither, to know in certainty if she fares as I would have her.

....

I still remember one morning when we made peace after war, and she gave me so great a gift, her love and her finger-ring. I pray God may let me live long enough to get my hands once more beneath her cloak.

I care nothing for the chatter of those who have parted me from my Bon-Vezi; for I know the nature of words, how they spread from one short speech which is let fall; let such as these go about boasting of love; we shall have the loaf and the knife to cut it.

p. 25.

Once I partook of doughtiness and of love's joys; but now I flee them both, and shall take refuge in Him, at whose hands all sinners find peace.

...

I have abandoned love and joy, and the gray and the silver, and the martin's fur.

p. 27.

In addition Giacomo excluded from his sonnets such images...as were able to accord only with the chivalric and feudal spirit. Considering that a certain kind of language which might suit...barons and vassals, might not suit...the poets of the Sicilian court, men of study like himself, he sought meditative and rhetorical material...in the science of the schools: in philosophy, in physick, in the Bestiaries, in the Lapidaries, in the collections of moral precepts...

p. 28.

> took much delight in making similitudes in his poems of beasts and birds, and of the sun and stars in order to speak of new matter upon which no one before had composed or made poetry...

p. 31.

> If I were fire, I would burn the world; if I were the wind I would fill it with tempests; if I were water, I would flood it over; if I were God I would cast it down into the depths ...If I were Cecco, as I am and always was, I would take for myself the gay young girls, and leave for another the ugly and old.

p. 32.

> Its novelty was to treat love and woman in a new way, a way suggested by the contemporary scientific and philosophical movement...And the new poets, moving away from the concept, dominant in the earlier poetic schools, of woman as the mirror of beauty and worth... and wishing to fit their art into the universal order already established by philosophy, saw in woman an angel and in love a ray of the power of God...

pp. 34-35.

> Love always seeks the gentle heart as does the bird the wood's green shade. Nor did nature make love before the gentle heart, nor the gentle heart before love...
>
> The flame of love inheres in the gentle heart like virtue in the precious stone. For no power descends from a star until the sun has made the gem a gentle thing. When the sun by its force has drawn forth all therein which is vile, the star then gives it worth. Thus the heart which is made spotless, pure and gentle by nature, is enamoured by woman in the guise of a star.

Love abides in the gentle heart for the same reason that the flame delights to burn at the top of the torch, clear and subtle, and will not burn elsewhere because it is so proud!...Love takes up its abode in the gentle heart in its corresponding place as the magnet in the iron of the mine.

The sun beats down all day upon the mud; vile it remains, nor does the sun grow colder. The proud man says, "I am gentle by my blood." He is the mud and the sun is gentle worth...

To the Intelligence of each heaven God the creator shines more bright than the sun to our eyes. Such creatures perceive their Maker behind the veil. Each heaven turning bears obedience to Him, and pursues the prime, blessed end of God. So should woman yield the truth which shines out of her eyes, arising from the gentle inclination of her soul, nor should she ever turn her obedience from that truth.

Lady, God will say to me: "How did you presume?" (when my spirit stands before Him). "You have passed the heavens and come at last to Me, and yet have given yourself in vain love in My similitude. For praise belongs alone to Me and to the Queen of this worthy realm, before whom all fraud dies." I shall be able to tell Him then, "She bore the semblance of an Angel, as if she were one of your kingdom. How do I merit blame if then I fell in love with her?"

p. 36.

In the place of San Michele in Orto, Guido, an image of my lady is worshipped, which because of its beautiful aspect, humble and pious, is the refuge and comfort of sinners. And whosoever humbles himself devotedly before her, the more he languishes, the more solace he has for it. She heals the sick, casts out evil spirits, and makes the blind see clearly. She cures great ills in a public place; with reverence men kneel before her. Two shining lights grace her from without. Word of her goes along distant roads; but the Minor Friars say it is Idolatry, out of envy because she is not near them.

p. 53.

Thus it is impossible...when a man loves a woman even with a good love, that such love should be perfect, unless the bodies are also joined...

And if perchance out of human frailty an inordinate desire is raised in me...it is a greater virtue in me to yield to it than to refrain...

p. 73.

Lord, I fear lest I should sin, if I make couplets or songs; for one loses Your love and You who belies his own true beliefs, and therefore I will have nothing to do with Your bargain.

p. 75.

Tell me then, if you prize so much that which is common to all; for in such case all will be equal...Giraut, I do not wish my poetry to make such a success that men admire in it the good as well as the bad, and the greater as well as the lesser. I will not be praised by fools, for they do not know, nor do they care, what is more precious and what worth more...

p. 113.

The basilisk in the shining mirror speedily finds his own death. The phoenix truly burns itself to return in a new birth.

p. 115.

For I have turned myself over and delivered myself into her hands, and she may inscribe me in her book [as her man]...

p. 116.

If I were in court where one upholds the right, I would complain against my lady, though she is good and beautiful, for she has committed a tort in not abiding by our contract and agreement...

APPENDIX

POPULAR MEDIEVAL ELEMENTS IN THE "SONGS AND SONNETS"

It is seldom realized how large a part is played in the Songs and Sonnets by elements drawn from popular medieval traditions. In this study we have been concerned exclusively with tracing the indebtedness of Donne's love poetry to a set of conventions largely aristocratic in inspiration and transmission, but at least a word must be said of the poet's debt to the folk, a debt somewhat less striking than that owed the courtly codes, but of considerable importance none the less.

The question of just how John Donne came to tap the traditions of the people must remain unanswered; that he did so is, however, beyond question. His use of popular elements is reflected in two aspects of his work, in his choice of imagery and in some of his poetic forms.

It has been noted that Donne, in the main, abstained from using in his verse the mythology of Greece and Rome, and that when he did turn to such sources for his allusions he tended

to pervert them beyond recognition.[1] In the Songs and Sonnets the classical dieties who are mentioned, it should be noticed, are Venus, Cupid and Jove,[2] all of them figures who had passed into the stock of popular knowledge during the earliest Middle Ages. There are in Donne none of the abstruse references to remote gods and goddesses so dear to the heart of the typical Renaissance poet, no nymphs, no fauns, no satyrs, no rosy-fingered dawn.

Some of the metaphorical devices employed by Donne to replace the type of allusion he eschewed we have already seen, but in addition to "scientific" mythology Donne used for his purposes the traditions of the folk, fairy tales, popular allegory, the Emblems, and animal lore.

When Donne would pose an unanswerable question, he does not ask us what song the Sirens sang (indeed, in his verse the Sirens have abdicated in favor of their medieval sisters, the Mermaids) or what name Achilles bore among the maidens, but

> Tell me, where all past yeares are,
> Or who cleft the Divels foot...[3]

When he would send us forth on impossible quests, he does not talk of Augean stables, but, drawing on legends of the

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[1]Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry, p. 225.

[2]See "The Indifferent", Hayward, p. 7; "Loves Exchange", ibid., p. 25; "Loves Deitie", ibid., p. 40.

[3]"Song", ibid., p. 4.

folk, tells us:

> Goe, and catche a falling starre,
> Get with child a mandrake roote...[4]

In the Songs and Sonnets every popular source of any importance is tapped; the märchen and old wives' tales supply an occasional figure.

> Or snorted we in the seaven sleepers den?[5]

The romances of antiquity, the so-called "matter of Rome the great" contributed here and there.

> I have done one braver thing
> Than all the Worthies did...[6]

From the Emblem books comes another handful of figures.

> Call her one, mee another flye,
> We'are Tapers too, and at our own cost die,
> And we in us finde the 'Eagle and the Dove...[7]

Perhaps even the famous image of the compasses is derived from just such a source.

> If they be two, they are two so
> As stiffe twin compasses are two,
> Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
> To move, but doth, if th'other doe...[8]

And from fairy tale sources, too, but worked into the obvious patterns of popular allegory in the Middle Ages, witches and giants and enchantresses enter Donne's verse

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[4] Ibid.

[5] "The Good-Morrow", p. 3.

[6] "The Undertaking", p. 5.

[7] "The Canonization", p. 9.

[8] "A Valediction: forbidding mourning", p. 37.

to take their places, unabashed, beside the triple soul, the "spirits" and the Intelligences of the spheres.

> First kill th'enourmous Gyant, your Disdaine,
> And let th'enchantresse Honor, next be slaine,
> ...
> For I could muster up as well as you
> My Gyants and my Witches too,
> Which are vast Constancy, and Secretnesse...[9]

As impressive a testament as is Donne's choice of imagery to his acquaintance with and interest in popular medieval traditions, even more significant is his choice of poetic forms. Love poetry in its beginnings among the folk, as we have pointed out, before its adaptation to the needs of courtly society, was sung by women, or at least dramatically composed to represent the point of view of women. The basic types of song were few: the song of leave-taking, the plaint of the woman unhappily married, the story of the maiden who either desires to get married or to stay single against the will of her mother. Although there was an occasional court lady who practised the art of trobar, in the courtly tradition the earlier forms were very soon replaced by songs of faith and sorrow from the lips of the suppliant male lover.

But in Donne we find three poems out of the total of less than three score in the Songs and Sonnets which are unmistakeably chansons de femme. It is a puzzling phenomenon, for such forms were preserved in none of the literary conventions which Donne knew. To be sure, the people in England, as well

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[9]"The Dampe", p. 48.

as on the continent, continued to compose just such songs, but how Donne encountered the popular tradition is hard to say.

Grierson pointed out some time ago that the speaker in "Breake of Day" is a woman, but the fact, to me equally clear, that the same is true in "Confined Love" and "Selfe Love" has never to my knowledge been mentioned before.

In "Breake of Day"[10] two of the old popular forms are joined, the dawnsong of parting, the alba, (of which "The Sunne Rising"[11] is another example, although there is some evidence in the latter of classical influence)

> 'Tis true, 'tis day; what though it be?
> O wilt thou therefore rise from me?

and the commiato, the traditional song of leave-taking in which the lover, called away on some other duty, (in the earliest days his overlord's call to war) takes a reluctant departure amid the tears of his mistress.

> Must business thee from hence remove?

"Confined Love"[12] has consistently been read as the expression of male opinion on the stupidity of society's bans against promiscuity, and on the basis of such an interpretation has been taken on occasion as a critical avowal of Donne's beliefs; but a careful reading will show that the

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[10] Hayward, p. 16.
[11] Ibid., p. 6.
[12] Ibid., p. 26.

poem represents dramatically the complaint of a woman.

> Some man unworthy to be possessor
> Of old or new love...
> Thought his paine and shame would be lesser,
> If on womankind he might his anger wreake,
> And thence a law did grow,
> One might but one man know...
> ...
> Beasts so no joyntures lose
> Though they new lovers choose,
> But we are made worse than those...
>
> (My emphasis throughout)

The poem is a development on a more abstract level of the song of the mal mariée, in which a woman desirous of taking a lover rails against her husband and the laws which forbid her satisfying her lust.

"Selfe Love"[13] is the third chanson de femme which Donne wrote. In it a woman, after surveying in her mind's eye all possible types of men, discovers that virtue or vice in them alike will work to her disadvantage if she takes one as a lover; whereupon she resolves to love only herself.

> Is there no kinde of men
> Whom I may freely prove?
> I will vent that humour then
> In mine own selfe love.

There are various elements in this piece from sources just as various, but in the main it seems to represent a peculiar development of the song of the maiden, who (against the arguments of mother or suitor) resolves to remain without a lover.

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[13]Ibid., p. 55.

There is of course a considerable degree of sophistication in Donne's handling of the traditional folk themes, but it is undeniable that he turned occasionally to such sources in search of new dramatic forms or fresh rhetorical material. Donne's eyes were always turned toward the Middle Ages--and he found inspiration there, not only in the conventions of the courtly circles and the verse of those who emulated them, but also in the unbroken tradition of song among the common people who had first dared sing of love.

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JOHN DONNE'S SONGS AND SONNETS

A Reinterpretation in the Light of their Traditional Backgrounds

LESLIE FIEDLER

Under the Supervision of Professor William Ellery Leonard

Most of the critics of John Donne's love poetry maintain that the Songs and Sonnets represent a "peculiarly modern" attitude toward verse and love, a revolt against the Petrarchan artificialities of Donne's age, and a foreshadowing of our contemporary "naturalism." I have tried to show that Donne never consciously turned against the devices of Petrarch, and that his poetry in so far as it effectively differs from that of Petrarch's imitators, differs in being more medieval rather than more modern, more reactionary rather than more revolutionary.

From a technical point of view the Songs and Sonnets, in their dialectical method and form, in their psychological emphasis, as well as in the imagery drawn from the "science" of the schools and the jargon of the courts of law, stands at the end of a continuous and clearly defined tradition that begins in Provence and can be traced through the bourgeois Sicilian school of the early thirteenth century to the great poets of Florence, and particularly Dante, through whose work its influence reached Donne.

Aesthetically, Donne viewed poetry as essentially inimical to truth, as the artistic elaboration of falsehood; ethically, he started from a concept of love as irremediably sinful. Both

these views are medieval--and both cut the poet off decisively from a "naturalist" point of view.

In John Donne's erotic verse there were three levels of belief. The first was drawn from the love-codes of the courtiers who were the poet's friends, the end products of a tradition in which love had become a parlor game. This view he accepted because it was fashionable.

The second was derived from a set of idealistic and metaphysical conventions which, originating among the troubadours, had reached the peak of its development at the hands of the poets of the dolce stil nuovo. This tradition, which Donne learned through his reading of Dante's Vita Nuova and to which he was attracted by all his sympathies, he suppressed in favor of the shallow artificialities of the circles in which he moved. His unavowed allegiance occasionally asserted itself despite his unwillingness to recognize it.

The third level of belief arose from his early Catholic training and reflected the dogma of the Church Fathers on the sinfulness of all sex relations, in marriage or out. It is this belief which kept Donne from following the central love-tradition of his time, the sanctification of love through marriage, and turned him back to a world which had already passed.

It is the perpetual and insoluble conflict of these unreconcilable beliefs which causes the complexity, and, in large measure, the almost bitter earnestness of Donne's verse. It is a typically medieval conflict, and to understand it, as well as much else in the Songs and Sonnets, we must understand the Middle Ages.

Approved W. E. Simard E. B. Greene

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This summary is approved as to form and content.

I recommend its publication by the University of Wisconsin.

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