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Karley Adney

Butler University, kadney@butler.edu

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Defending Donne: 'The Flea' and 'Elegy XIX' as Compliments to Womankind

by

Karley Adney

The Wife of Bath is one of Geoffrey Chaucer's most famous characters; she was a woman strong enough to govern her own life. One may assume that this woman, penned by a man, could be labeled now as a feminist. It is possible, though, that Chaucer created this boisterous, opinionated woman not simply to assert that women are capable of being independent, but merely to show that women who attempt to do so are all as rude and coarse as she. So, her statements about life, love, and marriage may not be her own sentiments, but merely an echo of Chaucer's personal beliefs concerning women.

John Donne, like Chaucer, also implicitly shares with readers his beliefs concerning women in the poetry he composed. Although female voices are severely lacking in his body of work, readers still learn a great deal about what he thinks of women due to their implied presence and reaction to the male narrators of Donne's poetry. However, "discomfort has arisen primarily from [Donne's] treatment of women" (Benet 14), mostly due to the absence of the female voice in his poetry; that is to say, critics have not hesitated to "convict Donne of misogyny" (Benet 14) because of the lack of female speakers and the emphasis seemingly placed upon using women as props to fulfill the male narrator's sexual desires.

These attacks of misogyny are not always merited, however. Even in poems in which the female voice is absent—especially in some of the seduction poems, in particular "The Flea" and "Elegy XIX"—it is obvious that Donne thought women honorable and intelligent. He must believe them honorable since the narrator is forced to use a grand amount of convincing to get the addressed woman to even consider granting his requests; he must consider them intelligent primarily because they play along with and rebuke the male narrator, thus implying they are smart enough to understand the complex wit of the arguments made by the narrator.

It would be useful to establish that women constituted part of Donne's readership before furthering this argument, since the way in which Donne represents women in his poetry would matter particularly to them. Convincing proof that women did indeed read Donne's work is skillfully noted in Janel Mueller's "Women Among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Donne for," in which Mueller carefully traces some of Donne's interactions and beliefs about women concerning his writings. Mueller's research provides that Donne not only had female readers, but female readers with power, including Magdalen Herbert, the Countess of Bedford, as well as the Countess of Salisbury (142). What is even more important is that Mueller recounts the way in which Donne responded to women. Mueller notes that Donne is perhaps the only metaphysical poet whose depiction of women became more positive over time (148) In his love poetry, Donne seems to be mostly concerned with the way in which the male is permitted to act due to the female's responses, and seeks mainly to fulfill his own desires—primarily sexual. These desires can easily be noted in poems such as "The Flea," "Elegy XIX," "The Indifferent,"

and perhaps even "The Ecstasy."

However, later in Donne's career when he writes many verse letters, Mueller argues that Donne is seeking more than sexual satisfaction from the women; in fact, Mueller asserts that "[i]n the verse letters, we gain a deepened sense of what the male self seeks in a female other: not just to be acknowledged but also to be wholly ratified by her" (150). Not only did the women created in and addressed by his writings now carry a presence more powerful than the mute musings of his poems, but they become figures from whom he even took suggestions about his work. As Mueller wisely refers to an excerpt from a letter from the Life of George Herbert, "Donne writes to the cultivated Magdalen Herbert, entrusted 'the inclosed Holy Hymns and Sonnets...to your judgment, and to your protection too, if you think them worthy of it,' since she has bestowed, he says, 'all the good opinion he enjoys'" (142). This instance is not the only case of Donne entrusting his work to or considering advice from female readers, however. Mueller also notes how "when Donne's complexly motivated Anniversary poems on Elizabeth Drury broke into print, the Countess of Bedford and the countess of Salisbury were much displeased. They let Donne know this. He quickly bowed to the censure of his two patronesses" (142). It can be assumed, then, that Donne knew some of his readers would indeed be female, and that these readers, much like the male counterpart of his audience, would be confronted with and asked to comprehend his metaphysics.

One of the most famous of Donne's metaphysical conceits that these women, among other readers, would be need to understand appears in the poem "The Flea," in which a flea functions as the premise of the argument that the narrator makes while trying to convince the addressed female to go to bed with him; this is also one of Donne's more famous seduction poems. Although this poem may seem misogynistic since it is a dramatic monologue in which the lady is given no voice and the narrator seems concerned with nothing more than sexual satisfaction, a closer reading of this poem also yields readers with the possibility that through the monologue, Donne is actually flattering women.

The first way in which this poem portrays itself as flattering to women rather than misogynistic is when the addressed woman is depicted as guarding her honor, instead of submitting to the narrator's pleas. The poem begins as follows: "Mark but this flea, and mark in this, / How little that which thou deny'st me is" (lines 1-2). It is the second line here that immediately establishes the woman's refusal to grant the man's wishes to fulfill his sexual desires. Donne's narrator emphasizes this positive attribute by saying, a few lines later, "Thou know'st that this cannot be said / A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead" (5-6). Obviously this signifies that the woman with whom the narrator is conversing is one who will not indulge in any activity that may result in sin, shame, or more importantly, anything that could risk her virginity. This female character is definitely flattering to women. It is the narrator, now, who appears wild and a rogue, yet the woman guards her constancy and appears careful to readers. This radical difference between the male and female in the poem is also stressed in the line "Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met" (14). These lines surely indicate that the parents of the woman addressed, and the woman herself, are not always welcoming to the presence of the male narrator; in fact, he implies here that the only way the two are able to meet is by their very blood mixing within the innocent flea that has bitten them both. The poem is also complimentary toward women because, in the end, it is

the lady who is victorious: "Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st thou / Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now" (23-24). These lines illustrate then, that the woman never did submit to the narrator's wishes, and in refusing to do so, she remains pure and virtuous, and a woman to whom other female can easily aspire.

Truthfully, this is a poem about seduction, but it is from this attempt to seduce that the woman rises up glorious and undefiled. In "The Flea," it is obvious that "[t]he poet clearly views honor as an obstacle to seduction, as unfortunately framing and thwarting male desire" (Raynie 40). It is this "thwarting" by the female that is highly praising toward women. The woman in "The Flea" is nothing like the woman in Donne's "Break of Day," who must resort to questioning her lover's feelings for her since he finds his job more appetizing than her bed and body atop it; the woman in "Break of Day" is left unhappy, after giving away herself only to have her lover leave soon after the sun has risen. In "The Flea" the woman need not feel any remorse, for she did not give into anything except her desire to kill a pesky flea. The narrator would like to persuade the woman to go to bed with him, but his efforts were futile, for "[e]ven though the goal of the poem is seduction, the poem seems to concern itself more with the problem of undermining honor as a counter in the seduction exchange" (Raynie 43). It is this struggle with honor that depicts Donne's implicit praise for the female sex.

The second reason that this seduction poem is actually flattering rather than misogynistic is because the addressed female understands the incredibly witty argument made by the narrator. Not only that, but she handles the wit of the argument so well she is able to further the argument herself by playing along with him. In "The Rhetoric and Poetry of John Donne," Thomas Sloan argues that "Donne frequently does not hesitate to name, often by simile, the points of contact between a thought and its allegory, and in doing so, heightens the analogizing process" (41-42). Sloan's claim here supports the argument that this poem is indeed flattering to women, namely because the woman in the poem understands the witty claims of the male.

It is obvious that each of the three stanzas of "The Flea" are a series of responses to what the woman, who is completely aware of what is going on, has said to the narrator. Readers might assume that there was an initial confrontation between the man and woman, for the poem then begins with the narrator's plea for the woman to listen to and pay attention to him, and the flea. The stanza closes with "And pamper'd [the flea] swells with one blood made of two, / And this, alas, is more than we would do" (8-9). These lines may lead readers to picture the male sighing, trying to rationalize a sexual encounter because their bodies have already met and mixed within the flea, yet the woman is merely scoffing at him.

It is obvious that the woman has reacted in this manner because in the following lines the man pleads, "Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare" (10), thus signifying that the woman has made an initial move to kill the flea. It is at this time that the flea begins to function as more than a nuisance, but an allegory as well. Suddenly, it is in the flea "Where we almost, nay more than married are. / This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is" (11-13). The flea has progressed from the mundane to the sacred: from an parasite to a holy temple of marriage where their union might be

properly blessed. The woman, however, is not swayed. Within a few lines, the woman has become “Cruel and sudden,” (19), and without warning, she has decided to kill the flea and “purple[s] [her] nail, in blood of innocence” (20). She understands the allegory, and disapproves of it. In turn, she squashes the flea and in doing so demolishes their marriage bed and temple, along with any hope the narrator had about getting her into bed with him. It is allegory like that in the “The Flea” that “requires not only a total and comprehensive vision in the poet but also a society that understands a system of symbols and accepts the values implied in them” (Dundas 233). This poem, then, truly applauds women since the woman in the poem understands and even destroys the allegory presented by the narrator.

In “The Role of the Lady in Donne’s Songs and Sonets,” Ilona Bell also claims that Donne achieves “an empathetic, imaginative, and varied response to the lady’s point of view” (113). Bell also offers the explanation that “the lady’s acknowledged actions are only the most extravagant reminders of the continuing and even more importantly implied reactions which give her and the speaker’s relationship with her a distinct and crucial role in poem after poem” (115-116). These arguments wholly support the assertion that Donne is more than a misogynist void of any compassion or sympathy for women’s needs and feelings. However, Bell goes on to say that “[a]fter all, Donne was capable of writing ‘Break of Day’ from the woman’s perspective” (115). But Donne’s empathy for women is much better demonstrated in the flattery of the seduction poems than in his “Break of Day,” since this aubade is clearly one of Donne’s weaker poems. The meter and rhyme of “Break of Day” are very simple, especially compared to other poetic masterpieces like “The Canonization,” “The Relic,” or “The Good Morrow” (among others), all of which include varying meter and rhyme schemes. “Break of Day” also lacks any elaborate wordplay or metaphysical conceits, both of which are undoubtedly Donne’s forte. This poem illustrates that Donne is unable to adopt the persona of a woman effectively. However, writing as a male interacting with a woman, as in “The Flea,” Donne captures, and better still, flatters the woman.

Donne’s “Elegy XIX: On his Mistress Going to Bed” is very flattering to the woman being addressed. As with “The Flea,” he praises, but now explicit in this poem, lavished on the woman indirectly praise women in general. If the woman in “Elegy XIX” needs a lot of convincing to even consider yielding her constancy rather than diving into bed, then Donne is saying that women like the one in the poem do, in fact, exist.

Although the poem seems nothing more than a forty-eight line plea by the male narrator to get his lover to undress and come to bed with him, it also highlights the woman’s power. “Elegy XIX” is in large part a cataloguing of the clothing the addressed woman wears, ranging from her gown, to her busk, and even her jewels. The preoccupation with clothing and fashion in this poem is by no means strange or unnatural; in fact, “fashion was the order of the day” at this time (Feinstein 63). Sandy Feinstein, in her “Donne’s ‘Elegy 19’: The Busk between a Pair of Bodies” argues that fashion was very important during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (61). Feinstein cleverly reflects on the way in which Elizabeth, as a woman of power in a time when men were expected to rule the world, used clothing as a prop to assert her own power, “to reinforce [her] presence and even [her] authority” (62). It is the clothing of the woman in “Elegy XIX” that also highlights a woman’s power because the man is forced to skillfully negotiate with her to remove them, and until she does, he will “in labour lie” (2).

This poem may also easily remind readers of Herrick's "Delight in Disorder," in which the narrator also focuses on a woman's clothes. Herrick's narrator, however, admits that rapture is kindled for him by noting the woman's inexact dressing, how she allows her "tempestuous petticoat" (10) to be glimpsed, or lace and ribbons to "flow confusedly" (8); he even finds great satisfaction in "[a] careless shoe string" (11), arguing that these imperfections are far more seductive than all her garments being properly tied, laced, and positioned. But the woman's power in "Delight in Disorder" appears to have reached a plateau; the narrator needs only to see the clothes slightly out of place and he is "delighted," most likely because her scattered clothing reminds him of all that he has seen, tasted, and enjoyed and how she no longer refuses him and guards the appearance of her clothing as closely as her virtue. He probably smiles when he sees her petticoat because he is familiar with it, and also what lies beneath. This implies the woman has already given in to his wishes to be with her, for he does not need to bed the woman to be sated, as Donne's narrator does. It is in "Elegy XIX" that the woman's power is celebrated through the mention of clothing, for the narrator wants to finally become acquainted with what is covered. This argument alone demonstrates to readers that the woman in Donne's poem is virtuous, whereas the woman in Herrick's poem is questionable. Here again, although implicitly, Donne is complimenting women.

Diana Benet, in her "Sexual Transgressions in Donne's Elegies," mentions that "most of Donne's Elegies do not concentrate either positively or negatively on a particular woman, relationship, or amorous emotion" (19). This statement does not apply to "Elegy XIX." Here readers are presented with a man who is completely focused on one woman who is praising all that is natural—what he considers beautiful—about women. This alone stands as a great compliment to the female sex. Readers are struck with a fine example of Donne's ability to telescope images within the first five lines, in which the narrator suggests, "Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glittering, / but a fair fairer world encompassing" (5-6), pulling all the heavens together and compacting them into the space of the woman's girdle. This simile is also the first compliment of the poem, in which the narrator compares what is under the girdle (the woman's body) to a "fair" and beautiful world. But this is only the first of many compliments that ensue while the man continues his attempt to get the woman to consent to his wishes. This plea relates to one of the narrator's next requests, that the woman remove "her spangled breastplate" (7) so that he would not be distracted by it, thus emphasizing his wishes to focus on her in her natural state. It is obvious that the narrator has a strong desire to see the woman naked, but it is unfair to assume that it is simply so that they may partake in sexual acts. It is unfair of readers to automatically consider that the narrator's intentions are altogether unwholesome; perhaps he longs to see her naked because it is a way in which to be intimate with his lover and to appreciate her body. This assumption is not unrealistic since the narrator's feelings of admiration and love for the woman and his relationship with her appear very genuine, more than just simple ploys to get her into bed.

The narrator then says "off with that happy busk" (11). The mention of "busk," here, has raised a great deal of controversy. One must have an understanding of what a "busk" is to clearly discuss the ramifications of the woman wearing it, and what it means for Donne's narrator to ask her to remove it. According to Feinstein, "[t]he busk, along with the bodice, was one of the primary means to create the

stiff, erect, masculine visual effect that was achieved by flattening the chest and stomach and elongating the waist” (64). These busks were “straight, erect, and hard” made from materials like whalebone and wood (68), and caused great discomfort for the women who wore them. Even though they helped women to create a more masculine presence, as Feinstein notes, these busks were actually quite dangerous: “Although they might appear as protective armor, guarding virginity as a chastity belt once did, they not only attract men but, worse, they interfere with procreation by deforming the body” (66). Namely, they deformed women’s bodies by “flattening the stomachs that were meant to bear children” (Feinstein 66). And although these busks worked to constrict a woman’s body, Feinstein suggests that by wearing a busk, the woman is actually demonstrating she has “control over her body, if not sexuality” (67-68). This is definitely a more positive way to view the function of the busk. By referring to it, Donne’s narrator may be suggesting that he knows the woman has control over her own body and by acknowledging that, so demonstrates that he knows whether the woman will undress and grant his wishes is her decision, and hers alone.

Removing the busk would definitely bring the woman one step closer to “full nakedness,” but again, readers should consider that this elegy is more than a play between two people which results in nothing more than an extended and erotic striptease. The man’s request that the woman remove her busk carries with it another important implication: the narrator wants the woman to be comfortable, not only with herself but with him. By asking her to remove her busk, the narrator is implicitly telling the woman that it is acceptable for her to let her defenses down when she is with him. Without the busk, the woman becomes less masculine, and more natural. She need not guard herself so heavily against his efforts, because once again, he seems to emphasize that the decision to do anything is hers alone. For instance, the narrator says, “License my roving hands” (25), which demonstrates that before doing anything, he asks the woman’s permission. Firstly, this shows great respect for the woman’s feelings, which a misogynistic poet obviously would not take the time to do. This statement is also implicitly flattering to women because readers know, from this line in particular, that the woman has not yet allowed the man to touch her; all one can surely infer from the poem at this point, is that the man and woman are in the same room.

The man asks for permission to explore the woman’s body, which he then refers to as:

O my America! My new-found land
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,
My mine of precious stones: My Empery,
How blest am I in this discovering thee! (27-30).

It has been argued that “[at] the beginning of this passage the woman is the monarch, providing a license; but the moment she gives this license she loses her sovereignty...The man becomes not only explorer but conqueror, and she becomes his land and kingdom” (Guibbory 822). But even if the woman has submitted to the request to remove her busk, this does not mean she has lost all power. She is still wearing other garments, and thus holds the power because the man is still forced to ask her to remove more of her clothing. It is true that the removal of the busk signifies that the woman is more

comfortable with herself and may allow the man to explore soon, but there is no indication that she has done so yet. The narrator does refer to her as “my America” (italics added), but this does not mean that the woman has been claimed as his property. This statement could very well be nothing more than a metaphor that is, in fact, very complimentary. This poem was composed in a time of constant discovery and exploration—both of which were greatly cherished and celebrated. One of the great discoveries, of course, would have been finding and exploring foreign lands. So, when the narrator compares the addressed woman in the poem to America, a beautiful land full of mystery, hope, and unknown treasure, he pays her a compliment of great magnitude. These lines do not have to refer to a man who has claimed his ownership over some land and unearthed its riches; instead, these lines could very well reflect the love and passion the man feels for the woman. The amount of asking he must do to get her to undress may suggest that this is the first time she has undressed for him. This instance may be the man’s first time of making love to the woman, if she will allow it, and so to him she becomes a place full of glorious things, for which he is definitely “blest” to be discovering.

One should also note the strategic use of legal jargon in this section of the poem. The narrator’s request begins with “[I]license” (25) and ends with “to enter into these bonds, is to be free” (31). It is the careful selection of diction here that also demonstrates to readers that the relationship between the addressed female and the male narrator is one of equality rather than possessor and possessed; they are entering into a contract together as equals, to become partners. The woman is not signing away the rights to her body as soon as she provides the man with “license to rove,” but agreeing to what is to come because she desires to have it as much as the man. This agreement surely reflects that Donne thinks highly of women, rather than viewing them as simple objects to be owned. His narrator respects the woman, which must surely imply Donne respects women also.

It is the last section of the poem that is perhaps the most flattering toward women. It is here that the narrator compares the woman (and certain other women like her) to “mystic books” (41), followed by the statement “which only we / (Whom their imputed grace will dignify) / Must see reval’d” (41-43). There can be no higher compliment than comparing a woman to a “mystic book,” to the word of God. The word of God is what Donne, as a Christian, would have and did live his life in accordance with. This word was law; hence, comparing the woman in the poem to God’s word means that the narrator (and likewise Donne) respects, if not idolizes, the addressed woman. The line “(Whom their imputed grace will dignify)” (42) may cause questions for readers, since “imputed grace” does indeed refer to predetermined fate. Those who would label Donne as a misogynist may read this line as Donne and his narrator’s self-assuredness that they will, in fact, become intimate with and know the woman addressed. Donne, and his narrator, however, definitely deserve more credit than that. It has already been established that the man and woman of this poem share a relationship in which love exists. These lines, then, could very well be read referring to the love the man has for the woman, a love that resembles the mystic and erotic love man might have for God. This concept of Eros love is frequent in Donne’s poetry, wherein he infuses it with religious love and terminology: consider the poems “Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward” and “Holy Sonnet XIV.” In “Good Friday,” Donne makes use of this erotic love for God by asking for punishment because of his actions so that he may finally be deserving of God and Heaven; the same is done in “Holy Sonnet XIV” in which Donne demonstrates this erotic love

immediately by asking God to “[b]atter his heart” (1) in order to reshape and reform him so that he be made fit to love God as he should. Therefore, it is not at all unrealistic to assume that Donne’s love for God could be evident in “Elegy XIX,” specifically at the very point in question. And if this love extends to the woman of the poem, one could not justly call Donne’s narrator, or even Donne himself, a misogynist.

The last two lines of the poem leave readers with the feeling that the narrator cares deeply for the addressed woman in the poem, implying that Donne could feel the same way about a woman. The narrator closes with, “To teach thee, I am naked first; why then / What needst thou have more covering than a man” (47-48). Although these lines hint at how the narrator is eager for the woman to remove her clothing and come to bed with him, one need not necessarily read these lines as selfish. The line “To teach thee, I am naked first” (47) stands as an offering to the female; the male is willing to teach the woman, which implies she should not feel self-conscious or uncomfortable when she is with him. He also says that he will be “naked first” (48), which emphasizes the fact that he will take the first brave step into unfamiliar territory, and if she so desires and is at ease, she may follow him. A misogynist (or poet) who does not care about the feelings of the woman he longs to be with would not make offerings such as these, but Donne and his narrator do.

The females addressed in both “The Flea” and “Elegy XIX” may not have been given words of their own, but even so, they are a mighty presence. The women steer the action of the poems—they both have power—and this power was assigned them by the poet. There are women in literature who appear to have power, but then one must consider perspective, as the Wife of Bath did, and wonder how the lion would have looked if he had painted himself. That is, what were the genuine intentions of he who created her character? Whether Chaucer meant to be rallying for women’s rights still remains a question, but as for the ladies in “The Flea” and “Elegy XIX,” readers know that Donne painted his ladies with respect and compassion, and no misogynist would have bothered to do so. Although their words are absent, their implied existence should remind readers of a sleek yet subtle lioness, flicking her tail and purring proudly, lounging regally just around the corner of Donne’s words.

(1) The narrator’s sexual desire for the addressed is especially obvious in “The Flea” as well as “Elegy XIX: On his Mistress Going to Bed.”

(2) This desire may be less obvious in “The Indifferent,” but still lingers as a theme when one considers the recklessness with which the narrator catalogues the women whom he could love; this is an obvious signifier of lust rather than love, since the narrator will find contentment in the arms of almost any woman, rather than one specific woman.

(3) Although perhaps much harder to detect, one might note that sexual desire is also present in Donne’s “The Ecstasy,” which could very likely be recounting “the first sexual encounter between [a] man and [a] woman” (Bell 126).

(4) Mueller credits "R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life*, (Oxford, 1970), pp. 181-82, citing Izaak Walton's excerpt of a letter exchange in his *Life of Mr. George Herbert (1675)*" (142).

(5) The narrator clearly refers to what he and the woman share as love (18). Donne's narrator in "The Flea" makes no such reference, and therefore one could assume Donne's narrators do not use love as a tool to convince the addressed woman to grant the man's wishes. Love really does exist between the people in the poem. This is one reason one can consider the narrator of "Elegy XIX" as a man who regards his relationship with the woman as something special and sacred. This can also be inferred by the narrator's comment about "the hallow'd temple, this soft bed" (18). It seems reasonable, then, to assume that the narrator truly treasures the woman in the poem and his relationship with her.

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