

Layers and Varieties of Love in Donne's Metaphysical Poetry

The Rising Sun

1. *The primary image in "The Sun Rising" is the sun itself. How is the sun described and how does that description help characterize the love that's celebrated?*

"The Sun Rising" is an aubade or morning song, traditionally a form in which lovers lament the coming of dawn because it brings with it the need to rise from bed and part. So Donne's speaker initially shows little respect, addressing the sun personified as a "Busy old fool" (line 1) who peeps through "windows and...curtains" (line 3) to disturb their pleasure. He accuses the sun of being "unruly" (line 1), but it is in fact the ruled nature of the sun—the way in which it keeps the "seasons," like the "hours, days, [and] months" (lines 4 & 10)—that so upsets the speaker. Love and lovers, he claims, are far above such mundane concerns, so the sun should go and harass those to whom his motions are relevant—"schoolboys" and apprentices, "court huntsmen" and farm labourers (lines 6-8).

Yet by the third stanza of the poem the speaker seems to invite the sun "to spend all his time in their chamber" (Herz 2006, 108). The change grows of the conceit that makes the woman "all states" and the speaker "all princes" (line 21): since the lovers are the whole of the world and the sun's duty is to "warm the world," it need shine only on them to shine "everywhere" (lines 28 & 29). Their "bed" becomes the sun's "center," the "walls" of their bed chamber, the "sphere" in which the sun revolves (line 30). In thirty lines the sun has shifted from offending their love to illuminating it alone, and clearly serves to elevate and celebrate the love described by the speaker.

The sun is also a common image, especially as a metaphor for the beloved lady, in Petrarchan love poetry—the very kind of poetry that Donne's speakers so often reject and overturn. So the opening criticism of the sun in this poem is more predictable than its joyful domestication in the last stanza, and the change from one to the other might well alert the reader to potential implications. A possibility that arises in this context is that Donne, known as well for his cynical poems about love and women as for his more idealistic ones (see, for instance, "Song" and "The Indifferent" in your *Norton Anthology*, pp.670-671 & 673, as well as "Love's Alchemy"), may be exploring a shift in his speaker's, if not his own, attitude toward the emotion of love.

"A great visiter of Ladies" as well as "a great writer of [those] conceited Verses" (Post 2006, 6) that were at times less than kind to women, young Jack Donne fell in love with Ann More, and sacrificed much that he had expected of the world to

continue their love—"the punning phrase *John Donne-- Anne Donne—Undone* began immediately to circulate" (Post 2006, 10). Could "The Sun Rising," then, be a poem about the dawning of a deeper and more lasting form of love—one closer to the Petrarchan ideal than young Jack would have cared to admit? Because Donne's poems are virtually impossible to date, and any sense of a progression of thought and emotion in his writing as a whole tends to be artificial, we will likely never know for sure, but such a reading layers more deeply and illuminates more brightly the conceit of the sun and its rise in this poem.

Study Tip: "The Good Morrow" (*Norton Anthology*, pp.669-670) also celebrates a love described by the speaker as new and more profound than anything experienced before: "If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee" (lines 6-7). The poem compares well to "The Sun Rising" for that, as for its insistence upon the lovers being a world in themselves (discussed under the next question). The treatment of both the sun and time in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (*Norton Anthology*, pp.751-752) makes another fine comparison to "The Sun Rising."

A World of Difference

2. *The lovers in "The Sun Rising" are equated with the whole world, and the world, along with other geographical images, is used in "Elegy 19" as well. There is, however, a vast difference between the ways in which this conceit is used in the two poems. How would you describe the difference?*

In "The Sun Rising," love is beyond anything remotely mundane; its pleasures demand that the world be shut out. Yet the lovers are the world: the speaker "all princes" and "kings" (lines 21 & 19); his beloved "all states" and their riches of "spice and mine" (lines 21 & 17). Together they are the "world" warmed by the sun: both the "center" and "everywhere" (lines 28-30).

The one instance of the word "world" in "Elegy 19" describes the woman's body—her "girdle" may glisten like "heaven's" stars, but beneath or rather within it lies "a far fairer world" (lines 5&6). The concept is reinforced by the claim that removing the woman's "gown" reveals a "beauteous state" (line 13), a development that suits perfectly the tone of the elegy. Here the speaker's goal is, as in "The Flea," seduction and sexual gratification. The object of his conquest is likened to newly discovered lands: "O my America! My new-found-land, / My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned" (lines 27-28). The perspective is similar to that in "The Sun Rising" in that the woman is the earth with its "precious stones" (line 29) and other riches, waiting to be conquered and exploited by the man, but in the elegy she remains a

separate land. In “The Sun Rising,” on the other hand, the lovers united make the new world—a microcosm of love—and the emotion described seems to move beyond the physical.

Study Tip: Strictly speaking an elegy is a mournful or plaintive poem, especially one written to lament the dead, but the Roman poet Ovid, whose writing was a strong influence on Donne, wrote his erotic poems “in the elegiac couplet, hexameters followed by a ‘limping’ or foot-short pentameter” (Patterson 2006, 118). Thus Ovid’s *Amores* are known as elegies, as are Donne’s similar poems, but Donne deliberately surpasses Ovid “in the force, extent and daring of his erotic poetry”; as a result, his “Elegy 19” “was censored in the early editions of his poetry and not printed until after the Restoration” (Hadfield 2006, 52-53).

To Love and Be Loved

3. *Ravishment is the hope of the speakers in both “Elegy 19” and Holy Sonnet 14, and the poems share other ideas too, but the person addressed, the object of ravishment, the speaker’s ultimate goal, the form of each poem, as well as the style and language differ markedly. Can you list the particulars of these differences?*

The two poems share not only the ideal of ravishment, but the metaphor of military conquest and the concept of enthrallment as freedom. It is characteristic of Donne to explore physical and spiritual love with language and ideas that overlap in meaningful, sometimes startling ways. Yet the differences, too, are striking:

- In “Elegy 19,” the desired woman is addressed by the speaker (“Come, Madam, come”: line 1). In Holy Sonnet 14, it is God who is addressed, in particular the Trinity (“three-personed God”: line 1).
- The object of ravishment in the elegy is the woman, whereas in the sonnet it is the speaker (presumably Donne) himself.
- The ultimate goal of the speaker in “Elegy 19” seems to be sexual gratification, while that of the speaker in Sonnet 14 appears to be redemption and eternal salvation.
- One poem is an elegy and one a sonnet, and it’s interesting that Donne chooses the longer, more discursive form to express physical desire, with his speaker luxuriating “in the act of the woman stripping” (Hadfield 2006, 52), and crushes his meditation on spiritual love into the more compact and demanding form of the sonnet. Such enormity of thought and emotion

pressed into so tight a package nicely echoes at the structural level the paradox of an imprisonment that liberates (lines 12-13).

- Luxuriating is precisely what the speaker of the elegy seems to be doing—luxuriantly drawing the eroticism of verbal and visual stimuli out in much the same way as Donne draws out his elaborate metaphors. In contrast, the speaker of the sonnet gets straight to the point: “Batter my heart...” (line 1), he begins, and his language and meter throughout remain harsh and quick, with a multitude of single-syllable verbs, many of them explicitly violent, and a frequently pounding rhythm. The language of military conquest is far more dominant here than in the elegy, where it is only one of several conceits, and expresses the intensity of the speaker's spiritual struggles in a highly memorable way. If “Elegy 19” might be considered textual foreplay, then Sonnet 14 is definitely “something else thereby” (“The Relic,” line 18).

The legacy of Donne's vivid expression of spiritual conflict in poems like Sonnet 14 is felt in other poems of the seventeenth century, like George Herbert's “The Collar” (in your *Norton Anthology*, pp.735-736), but instead of God's silence as in Donne's religious monologues, Herbert often includes God's voice calling him back to the straight and narrow. Published posthumously in the same year as Donne's poems first hit the press (1633), Herbert's devotional poetry achieved instant popularity: “within seven years the book was into its sixth edition” (Wilcox 1993, 183).

Study Tip: You may want to consider Donne's treatment of spiritual and secular love beside Titian's visual portrayal of “Sacred and Profane Love” found in your *Norton Anthology* (p.C18). The painting features two Venuses, one celestial and the other terrestrial, bearing virtually identical faces and forms, and it is the celestial Venus representing “universal and eternal beauty and love” who is nude.

Hands and Seals

4. The word “seal” is used in both “The Relic” and “Elegy 19,” but is glossed very differently by the *Norton Anthology* in each case. Do you think both meanings are relevant to both poems? How does the concept of the seal contribute to the description of love in each poem?

When in “The Relic” the speaker claims that the hands of both him and his beloved “ne'er touched the seals” (line 29), the *Norton Anthology* provides the marginal gloss “sexual organs.” The point is an essential one in this poem, where the lovers are equated with religious “relics” (line 16) and saints, and the purity of their

relationship is central: “Difference of sex no more we knew / Than our guardian angels do” (lines 25-26). Such chastity might contribute more surely to the possibility of “their souls” meeting at the grave on judgement day and making “a little stay” (lines 10 & 11).

In “Elegy 19,” the word appears in the singular form: “There where my hand is set, my seal shall be” (line 32). The *Norton Anthology* glosses the line (p.686n4) as making use of the kind of legal terminology with which Donne would have been familiar: the lawyer’s setting his hand can be aligned with signing a document, which would then receive a wax seal. But the meaning from “The Relic” is necessary to both the literal sense and the joke here, with the lover placing his hand where he hopes to place his sexual organ—upon her “seal.” (The application of the word seal to both the engraved metal object that presses the hot wax and the wax so pressed complicates the analogy.) The use of “seal” here is indicative of the sexual love explored in the elegy, and defines rather precisely the bonds the speaker wishes to enter to achieve freedom.

Returning to “The Relic,” it is worth noticing that a mention of “law” appears in the line immediately following those “seals” and modifies them: “Which nature, injured by late law, sets free” (lines 29-30). The line may cast doubt on the purity of the relationship, since nature would allow sexual organs freedom were it not injured by “late law” (line 30), and read another way, the poem could be describing a sexual relationship outside of matrimony—one that never entered the legal bonds of marriage. The ideal of chastity is among the “miracles” (lines 22 & 31) performed by the lovers after all, and both miracles and relics are Catholic concepts, and thus highly suspect in the Protestant environment of seventeenth-century England. Suspicion about what exactly constitutes purity may be required here to get to the heart of the relationship described. Certainly the notion that the woman will be a Mary Magdalen, a name associated with the sexually sinful woman converted to Christ in the New Testament Gospels, hints at this being the case.

Study Tip: Much scholarly ink has been spilt in speculation over the identity of the women described or addressed in Donne's love poetry. In the case of poems like "The Relic" that express a love beyond the physical, readers are more inclined to interpret the woman as Donne's wife, Ann More, than they are in a poem like "Elegy 19," though there, too, the woman has often been read as More. As with so many other details in Donne's poetry, the word seal might provide a hint given that Thomas Egerton, Donne's employer and More's uncle, was "ord Keeper of the Great Seal" of England (*Norton Anthology*, 2013, 667). For an example of a poem that puns with the names Donne and More in suggestive ways, see "A Hymn to God the Father" in the *Norton Anthology* (pp.695-696).

Love's Elite

5. In both "Elegy 19" and "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" a belief in a privileged insight or understanding known only to an elite is introduced. Can you identify the relevant passage(s) in each poem and explain what is being suggested?

In "Elegy 19," the relevant passage is lines 34-43. The speaker argues that like souls that need to be "unbodied" to "taste" spiritual "joys," so bodies must be "unclothed" to experience the full potential of the pleasure available to them. Clothing, like other adornments, only distract the "eye" of fools and tempt them to desire the "coverings" instead of the women themselves. Women's clothing is like the "gay" covers of books designed to attract "laymen," while the women beneath the clothing are the "mystic books" themselves, and only those granted "grace" and able to read them properly comprehend this. The *Norton Anthology* (in note 6, p.686) explains how this works within Protestant (particularly Calvinist) doctrine—only the elect can appreciate naked women—but Donne's language is also decidedly Catholic, and in a Catholic context those with such privileged access to and understanding of books are the clergy whose duty it was to communicate the Word of God to lay folk, who were not encouraged to read the Bible and other theological writings in the way they were by the Protestant church. The conceit therefore equates both the learned clergy of the Catholic faith and the fortunate elect of the Protestant with the men privileged to read and enjoy the true mystery of women. Worship of the Virgin Mary might justify such a concept in theological writing, but in the context of "Elegy 19," Donne's irreverence rears its head again: the conceit of women as books serves the immediate purpose of the speaker, who argues that since he is among this elite or should be ("Then since that I may know..."), the woman he desires ought to reveal all her corporeal secrets to him.

In “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” stanzas two through six are particularly relevant, though the privileged love they describe is explored throughout the poem. In stanza two the speaker urges his beloved not to weep or sigh as they part, lest their love be revealed to the unworthy: “’Twere profanation of our joys / To tell the laity our love” (lines 7-8). Both “laity” and “joys” recall the language of “Elegy 19,” but the love here is not focused simply upon a sexual appreciation of the female body. Unlike “Dull sublunary lovers’ love” (line 13), which changes with all earthly things, the love shared by the parting lovers is “refined” (line 17) beyond the senses, connecting them in “mind,” whether “eyes, lips, and hands” (line 20) are involved or not (though that they are at times seems clear in the implications of the compass conceit that fills the last three stanzas). Such a love allows their “two souls..., which are one,” to grow when their bodies are parted, expanding in a simile borrowed from metallurgy “Like gold to airy thinness beat” (lines 21 & 24). Again, it is an intellectual elite that is implied—the word “mind” makes that clear—but the bond between the lovers is also a spiritual connection of “souls” that strengthens both individuals as well as their relationship.

Donne was not the first to celebrate this religion of love. The ideal of more than one person uniting to become one soul is mentioned in the bible among the apostles, and was celebrated among monastic writers in the Middle Ages, but such love is chaste, its source God, even when the love described seems to exceed the appropriate bounds. Lancelot’s love for King Arthur’s queen Guenevere in the romances of the Middle Ages provides an example of erotic love with strikingly sacred overtones—Lancelot’s love for Guenevere is no less than devotion—but in that case the love is also adulterous, as destructive as it is ennobling. In Donne’s “Valediction,” on the other hand, neither God nor illegitimacy overshadows the lovers—in fact, his biographer Walton believed that the poem was “addressed to Donne’s wife on the occasion of his trip to the Continent in 1611” (*Norton Anthology*, 2013, 679n1). Erotic love within marriage is thus elevated to “new” and “provocative heights” (Guibbory 2006b, 143).

Of Compasses and Alchemy

6. A striking geometrical conceit is developed by the speaker in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and an alchemical one in "Love's Alchemy." How does each serve to characterize human love and the speaker's attitude toward it?

Although the allusions to alchemy in "The Canonization" suggest a transcendent human love, in "Love's Alchemy" the dominant conceit paints a far more negative picture. The speaker, who boasts considerable experience with women, claims that he will never find the "hidden mystery" (line 5) of love no matter how urgently he seeks it. Like an alchemist who celebrates the minor discoveries his "pregnant pot" produces while the true "elixir" eludes him (lines 7 & 8), lovers may dream of a long and ideal relationship, but get nothing more than a "winter-seeming summer's night" (line 12). Anyone who believes that "'Tis not the bodies marry, but the minds" is a disillusioned, if "loving wretch" (lines 18-19). Not only do women lack the "angelic" (line 20) minds imagined by such a hopeful optimist, but they lack minds altogether: "Hope not for mind in women" since "at their best / Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed" (lines 23-24).

As the *Norton Anthology* points out (p.677n5), these final lines are punctuated differently in the various versions of the poem, and such changes can alter the meaning: is the implication, for instance, that women seem much sweeter before they are "possessed" by men, or that their "Sweetness and wit" are only symptoms of some sinister possession that renders them zombie-like. So the closing lines complicate the meaning of the poem and its conceit, but most readers agree that "no matter how you punctuate" that final couplet, it remains "nasty, rude and crude" (Herz 2006, 104), suggesting that even for sexual gratification alone woman's value is questionable. The only saving grace granted here is that loving women may provide temporary pleasure, in the way of the alchemist's lesser "medicinal" (line 10) discoveries, since as Sir Thomas Browne laments, mummies were exhumed, purchased, and used in the seventeenth century as "balsams" to cure "wounds" (*Hydriotaphia*, Ch.5).

In the more positive "Sun Rising," alchemy remains a suspect science, but as a contrast to the love described: "compared" to that love, "all wealth" is as insubstantial as "alchemy" (lines 23-24). In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," the lovers are bound together through their minds as well as their souls—a perfect example when compared to "Love's Alchemy" of just how much the opinions expressed in Donne's poetry can differ. The geometrical conceit in the "Valediction" emphasizes the nature of this bond, since the "twin compasses" (line 26) to which the lovers' souls are likened are connected at the top or head of the instrument. Their souls are "two" (line 25) like the two legs of that instrument, hers fixed in the

“center” (line 29), his roaming in a circle around her as he travels. Their connection means that when the outer leg or soul roams “far,” the center one “leans and hearkens after it,” then “grows erect” again as the outer one “comes home” (lines 30-32). The “firmness” (line 35) of the center soul guarantees the perfection of the outer soul’s circle (the extent of their united soul’s “expansion”: line 23), ensuring the return of the speaker to his lover. Both language and image demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of the relationship: erotic and physical as well as intellectual and spiritual.

As the most famous of Donne’s metaphysical conceits, the compass simile has been read in a wide variety of ways. Samuel Johnson, for instance, cited it in the eighteenth century as an example of how metaphysical poetry yoked the “most heterogeneous ideas...together” by “violence” (Haskin 2006, 236). Modern readers are more inclined to appreciate the unique qualities of Donne’s metaphors with their ability to suggest so many different meanings on so many levels simultaneously. Yet interpretations can still vary widely. In a discussion of “The Politics of Gender,” for example, a late twentieth-century scholar argues that much like seventeenth-century conceptions of marriage which “subsumed” a woman’s identity in that of her husband, Donne’s conceit expresses “not mutuality but a power differential” that favours the man because the woman, as the “‘fixed foot’ of the compasses,” moves only “when the roaming foot rotates” (Hobby 1993, 32 & 33). One could as easily argue, however, that one of the most striking aspects of Donne’s simile is that it assigns that stable, masculine-seeming center foot to the soul of the woman, and the wandering foot that forms the circle to the soul of the man. Certainly if there is a power differential here, its exact balance is not as obvious as the strength and constancy granted to the woman, who like the male speaker maintains a separate identity with qualities all her own.

Study Tip: Most of us have been familiar with drafting compasses from childhood, when we encountered them in the geometry kits used in school. If for some reason, however, you're not exactly sure what a compass is or how it works, or if you'd simply like to learn more about this instrument, a quick Google search online with the words "Drafting Compass" or "Compass Drafting" will reveal a wealth of information and images. Used in drafting and mathematics, the compass was also associated with builders like the masons, and in medieval art was sometimes depicted as the tool God used to create the earth, a tradition upheld by Milton when he has the earth created via "golden Compasses" in Book 7 of *Paradise Lost* (*Paradise Lost* 1674, 7.225). Still today the compass is a symbol of creativity, precision, and discernment. Of particular interest in reading "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is the compass's use in cartography and navigation, since this means that the widening circle of the united lovers' souls can be imagined as metaphorically expanding out over (a map of) the lands and seas the speaker will soon visit, and, if the compass's precision is applied more practically while navigating the journey, he will return safely as well.