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Analysis of "Gender Matters: The Women in Donne's Poems." In Achsah Guibbory, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006): 201-216.

The poetry of John Donne is divisive to say the least. In large part, this is because his writing is so varied; it consists of both deeply spiritual works addressed to God as well as poems filled with innuendos so vulgar that they become borderline pornographic. Through his works, he appears to express so many inconsistent, and often contradictory, worldviews that trying to reconcile them has become a great scholarly challenge. For example, English professor Ilona Bell, in her essay "Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems," chooses to focus solely on his conflicting attitudes towards women. She points out that "Donne has been termed many things; a misogynist...a metaphysician...an egoist and careerist," yet she argues that he is actually "a poet/lover...who was supremely attentive to the woman's point of view" (Bell 201). This assertion runs contrary to the more common literary consensus which generally characterizes Donne's portrayal of women as more in keeping with the patriarchal practices of his time. Yet Bell emphatically disagrees with the scholars who see the women in his poetry as "a shadow figure, the object or reflection of male desire,...a sex object to be circulated for the titillation and amusement of Donne's male coterie" (Bell 201). She insists that to read Donne's body of work in this way is to commit the same act of misogyny that Donne is so often accused of. Furthermore, she posits that "a remarkable number of Donne's love poems are, first and foremost, poems for and about women" (Bell 214). Bell certainly raises several valid points that

aim to redefine and re-contextualize some of the academic debate surrounding such a well-known poet. That being said, she ignores, or at the very least disregards, the more unsavory aspects of his depiction of the opposite sex for the sake of maintaining her argument that Donne should be acknowledged as relatively progressive given the time period he wrote in. Bell's theory that Donne's poetry respects the viewpoint, presence and inner life of women may contradict strongly with the more obvious academic consensus, but it is still mostly compelling, even if it fails to fully capture the complexity of the baffling man that she aims to demystify.

Bell's thesis hinges on her claim that the intended audience for much of Donne's poetry has been mischaracterized, thus leading to a misinterpretation of his deeper meanings and intentions. She acknowledges the disparities that are so common throughout his work, noting that he "both echoes and challenges the stereotypes of his day" (Bell 201). However, she reasons that this is really just a reflection of the cultural traditions within which the poems were written. Donne, like many of his contemporaries, was a statesman and a cleric first and a poet only as a hobby. As such, most of what he is now remembered for was probably written for friends, family and lovers; in other words, it was all designed to be distinctly intimate and personal. Bell further alleges that more often than not his intended audience was specifically female and that the majority of Donne's poems "seek to entertain, converse with, and yes, even seduce, a mistress" (Bell 203). And, per Bell, when one views his work from this perspective then a common theme emerges: the insistence that one not generalize about women. Her analysis of "Satyre III" assesses that the poem deems it to be "stupid and wrong to generalize about women on the basis of particular women" (Bell 205). After all, it is tempting to seek out metaphors and symbolism in the written word and even more tempting to interpret a poem about a single, specific woman as commentary on the entire gender. So, the first major part of Bell's argument is that such a

narrow reading fails to grasp Donne's intentions; he did not aim to generalize about an entire gender because he had no need to. After all, the friends and lovers he was writing for probably did not care to hear his broad philosophical generalizations in poetic form. The second major part of her argument revolves primarily around the poem "Sappho to Philaenis," which is told from the perspective of a lesbian woman reflecting on her lover. Par for the course, many interpret it as an "exploitative male fantasy of female sexuality" (Bell 208). Yet Bell thinks that Donne's portrayal of homoerotic love is more nuanced; she maintains that he actually takes the time to embody Sappho's opinion of her sexuality and her relationship with Philaenis. This, in turn, apparently allows for a message of female empowerment; "Sappho is gloriously erotic, boldly outspoken, and brilliantly persuasive", while Philaenis is "'mighty' and 'amazing' because she is neither defined nor controlled by men" (Bell 210). Bell then contends that her interpretation of Donne's poetry can be understood as indicative of a more integral theme that lingers over all his work. Anne More was Donne's wife with whom he had eloped, and subtle allusions to their relationship abound throughout his poetry. Bell suggests that Donne refuses to generalize about women and attempts to write from their perspective because much of his poetry was probably written specifically for More, for whom he clearly felt immense passion. According to Bell, "Sappho and Philaenis" ultimately "strive[s] to keep alive the 'mutual feeling' which made John Donne's and Anne More's love sweeter than anything he had ever before experienced" (Bell 211). Thus, Bell insists that Donne's poems are extremely private and passionate works, and do not comprise the sexism and discrepancies of which they are so often accused. She concludes that this overall quality ultimately makes Donne ahead of his time, even if he never intended to be.

Bell's essay clearly aims to eschew traditional discourse on Donne in an attempt to create its own highly intriguing interpretation of his approach to gender issues. Ironically, her argument is most convincing when it works within the parameters of pre-established scholarly debates. Most noticeably, her explanation for Donne's self-contradictory nature, which has bewildered so many readers, is both brilliant and plausible because it becomes even stronger when applied to some of his most famous poems. Consider, for example, "Elegy 2: To his Mistress Going to Bed." Bell asserts that Donne "questions the social norms that divide women into angels and whores", and this is uniquely apparent in this particular work (Bell 207). Donne compares his mistress to an angel when he says, "In such white robes heaven's angels used to be," but he also demands, "Off with that girdle...Unpin that spangled breastplate...Unlace yourself" (Donne 12-13). By characterizing the woman as an angel *and* a whore, Donne defies both stereotypes and the generalizations they provide, allowing his comments to feel more personal. But defying conventional categories was not the only way that Donne negated the impulse to generalize about women. Bell notes another common tactic seen in many of his poems is his persistence on the belief that his relationship with his lover will be special. "Donne himself stands above it all, implying that...*his* love, when he chooses to express it, will be a very different sort of love" (Bell 204). "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" embodies this sentiment when it examines the grief felt by two lovers who must be separated for a time. Donne begs, "So let us melt, and make no noise,/ No tear-floods, nor sigh tempests move" because he wants the love he shares with this woman to be more profound than the love of other people who succumb to base and insufficient tears (Donne 120). In "The Sun Rising," the concept of "special" love plays out in tandem to another theme that Donne was found of: man as a microcosm. In "Holy Sonnet 15" he writes, "I am a little world", and this idea that the human body is a metaphor for the world is laced

throughout his body of work (Donne 179). “The Sun Rising” takes this a step further when he describes the bed that he and his lover share as the center of his world: “This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere” (Donne 93). The microcosm concept in general, and its use in “The Sun Rising” in particular, emphasizes that the focus of the writing is on unique and specific individuals; it places the interpersonal relationship of the lovers above all else and inherently denies generalization because no one else seems to matter to them. The poems discussed thus far may only be a brief sampling of Donne’s oeuvre, but all of them fit neatly into Bell’s explanation for why the poet refused to generalize about the women in his writing, thus providing convincing evidence that her theory may well be correct.

However, Bell’s argument falters in her other conclusion that Donne is some sort of proto-feminist writer and the complete opposite of the typical academic characterization. As she puts it, “[H]is poems also dramatize the ways in which Donne and his mistress - above all and most importantly, Anne More - challenged, even if they were powerless to overturn, the patriarchal polity and society into which they were born and died” (Bell 214). As mentioned earlier, Bell lambast the critics, not Donne, for relegating the role of women in his poetry to mere shadows. This is dangerous ground to tread because to disagree with Bell might be misconstrued as sexism, but that is simply not what is intended here. Instead, it is important to realize that as appealing as reinterpreting Donne from a positive feminist standpoint may be, it is an argument that can only work by relying on selective evidence. Which is not to say that Bell entirely ignores Donne’s prevalent sexism; “Misogyny and male domination are fundamental to Donne’s poetic and cultural inheritance. Not surprisingly, therefore, Donne’s poems acknowledge the sexual stereotypes and gender hierarchy that subordinated early modern women to men” (Bell 214). But she always dismisses this tendency as merely an expression of the limitations of Donne’s time

and the cultural norms that surrounded him. Sadly, her conclusion is fundamentally incompatible with the relentless joy Donne appears takes in objectifying women's bodies. In "Elegy 2: To his Mistress Going to Bed," when Donne writes, "O my America, my new found land,/ My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,/ My mine of precious stones, my empery,/ How blessed am I in discovering thee" it is hard to imagine this as the work of a man who, according to Bell, aimed to champion the independent mind and spirit of women (Donne 13). Likewise, in "The Flea" when Donne creates the following metaphor: "This flea is you and I, and this/ Our marriage bed, and marriage temple," it is all too easy to forget about the woman he is trying to woo (Donne 89). She becomes lost in his overwrought metaphor. This is only made worse by the line "pampered swells," an all too obvious innuendo for his erection, an image which reinforces the importance placed on his lust and joy, not hers (Donne 89). Which is not to say that the second part of Bell's argument has not merit. Certainly, there are moments in Donne's poetry where he appears to do his ample best to capture the woman's perspective. Most of the examples that Bell cites are genuinely fitting for the argument she is trying to make, but they present an incomplete picture. John Donne's writing simply cannot be reduced to labels like misogynist or feminist-hindered-by-the-trappings-of-his-society because his poetry is more multifaceted than any of those descriptions could indicate.

John Donne is a mystery and he will probably never fully be solved. His idiosyncrasies and refusal to conform to a coherent worldview make his writing fascinating, beguiling and endlessly frustrating. These qualities also explain why it is that he has endured for so long. The four essays made available for this assignment all attempt to make sense of the inconsistencies that appear to plague his work, each in their own way. They all seek to find a resolution that might finally seem persuasive and satisfactory. To some extent, Bell succeeds on this front. Her

new perspective on the role of audience in Donne's writing and the importance of negating generalization serve as a necessary reminder that Donne's work was composed of personal statements rather than grand and sweeping assessments of deep concepts. Yet the second half of Bell's argument almost seems to contradict the first; she sweeps aside a great deal of contradictory evidence with little explanation, attempting to re-envision Donne as a progressive man whose treatment of gender anticipates "the modern conception of gender which argues - biology being one thing and gender another - that sex differences are not natural or universal but culturally constructed" (Bell 214). The problem with this part of Bell's analysis is not that she is entirely wrong but that she is, ironically, generalizing. Even though the first few pages of her essay warn the reader not to generalize when reading Donne, Bell breaks her own rule by depicting the gender politics of Donne's works in a rather skewed manner. Yet, as she herself points out earlier in the essay, to generalize with Donne is to miss the point entirely.

Works Cited

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