

What's Done is Donne: Analyzing John Donne's Misogyny in Elegy 19

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Abstract

With a complex body of work, an uncertain biography, and many varied manuscripts comprising the canon, John Donne's poetry (1573-1631) is difficult to analyze. Donne himself adds to the complication by being ambiguous in his word play and about his attitudes towards women, especially in his Elegies. Donne often wittily ridicules the women in his elegies, but he also creates petulant speakers in these poems whose desires are unfulfilled. For example, Elegy 19: "To his Mistress Going to Bed" presents a man who humorously commands his lady to undress, but his wishes are never explicitly fulfilled. This ambiguity has led to a disagreement among Donne scholars on whether Donne truly expresses such disparagement of women or whether his words satirize some other aspect of the erotic situations he presents in these poems, such as masculine desire or contemporary politics. This study hopes to gain a better understanding of the disagreeing claims about Donne's representation of women, with specific focus on Elegy 19. This project will consider the different biases and reasons for why certain critics choose to analyze Donne in the way they do, whether with reference to a certain historical context or a character trait they identify in Donne himself. Some scholars examine Donne's work based on facts that are difficult to prove, such as his feelings about politics and love, which creates these disparities in readings of the poems, while ignoring other aspects, such as manuscript variations, that might undermine their readings of his texts. It will hopefully be demonstrated that Donne's elegies should be considered in their variety of versions with less hypothetical influence from ideas about Donne's character or his times.

Keywords: John Donne, Elegies, gender

1. Body of Paper

Donne's amatory elegies draw on the classical Roman poetry of Ovid and Propertius. Like Ovid's, Donne's love elegies are satires in which self-conscious speakers "expect their audiences to see the logical fallacies of their self-justifying arguments, as they themselves do."¹ Donne develops intricate personas that blur the lines between solemnity and irony, making it difficult to determine the true thoughts and intentions of the speakers, much less Donne. In addition to these complex elegiac personas, seventeenth century manuscript tradition complicates matters. Like most poets of his time, Donne, and other editors, circulated different variations of his poems through handwritten manuscript copies. These developed personas and manuscript edits, both intentional and not, remove Donne's hand from his own works, which makes interpreting Donne's works difficult because readers cannot easily connect his biography to his texts. Therefore, there exists a number of vastly different readings of Donne's poems, especially his rather misogynistic Elegy 19: "To his Mistress Going to Bed," which attempt to determine Donne's true intentions behind the questionable poem.

Donne's biggest controversy, at least for modern readers, is most likely his insulting treatment of women in his poems. In the elegies, Donne's apparently deliberate misogyny at times earns censure from modern readers, who disapprove of his apparent disregard for women and their bodies. Still, his true intentions are less than clear, for Donne's speaker also acts in ways contrary to a sexist brute. In "Going to Bed," a seemingly simplistic retelling of a

man urging his mistress to strip for him, the speaker tells his mistress to “[l]icence [his] roving hands.”² The word “license” connotes the exploration licenses that Queen Elizabeth I gave to explorers, which suggests that the speaker considers his mistress in similar terms to land to be explored and exploited. Yet, simultaneously, the speaker is asking for permission to touch the lady rather than just grabbing her, a fact that demonstrates the woman’s power over her own body. The ambiguity in the speaker’s words make it difficult to pinpoint what Donne truly feels towards women. Scholars cannot agree on whether he conveys prejudice or almost progressive feminism. Nor can these scholars ascertain Donne’s intentions for choosing to display such disdain.

“Going to Bed” continues to be the one of Donne’s most contested elegies. The poem may revolve around the speaker’s command to his mistress to strip, but the hyperbolic language creates a light and playful tone. The speaker begins by telling his mistress, “Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy, / Until I labour, I in labour lie.”³ The call demands the lady’s immediate response, but also puns on the word “labour,” which connote both hard work and a woman’s birthing labor. The connection between waiting for a lover in bed and birth diminishes the woman’s pain to something as frivolous as a rendezvous, which is rude and imprudent to say. However, the indiscretion also indicates a man whose impatience leads him to hyperbolically complain that waiting on his lady equates the extreme pains of birth, making his words seem silly rather than harsh. This discrepancy makes it difficult to discern whether the speaker is bullying his mistress into undressing for him or, knowing that she has full control over her own clothes, he strives to tempt her out of them and humor her at the same time. By being vague about who or what he insults, Donne allows for the possibility – even the probability – that the object of humor, the one being satirized, is not the mistress but the speaker. Within this satire, Donne’s conceits of conquest and gold also hold social, economic, and political implications that some critics latch onto as the true meaning of the elegies. Scholars even contest the underlying symbolism of the clothes the speaker lists. Analyzing this elegy’s critical reception in light of manuscript variations may offer a better understanding of Donne’s complexity. Furthermore, it may highlight new routes for scholars to take in future research.

Few critics can agree on why Donne chooses to be so distasteful in his elegies. His *Songs and Sonnets*, secular love poems that generally portray women less disparagingly, attest that he has the ability to write in a less offensive manner. Donne’s elegies communicate romantic and erotic scenarios between lovers. Such poems might depict the women with more power, especially considering how often Donne’s speakers are left unsatisfied or foiled by their mistresses, but as attested by “Going to Bed,” Donne’s speakers say undeniably inappropriate things to and about their mistresses, and these slurs are much more obvious than any feminine power. Donne’s decision to belittle his mistresses while also obstructing the interactions between speaker and lady creates a tone that is more satirical than romantic, which undermines the “love” nature of these love elegies.

To somewhat mitigate the inconsistency, some scholars believe that Donne lessens his misogyny by discreetly giving power to the women. Because of the patriarchal society he lives in, these critics argue that Donne must cater to the “misogyny” and “male domination” of his “cultural inheritance,” which entails that he too must be misogynistic and create dominant male speakers.⁴ Therefore, Donne can only express feminine power implicitly through veiled word choice and careful metaphors, something subtle enough that only those looking would find these hidden meanings. In analyzing the clothes in Elegy 19, Feinstein closely examines the busk, a long thin piece placed in the corset to “create the stiff, erect, masculine visual effect that was achieved by flattening the chest and stomach and elongating the waist.”⁵ According to Feinstein, this “envied busk” serves as “a counterpoint to the narrator’s imperious commanding voice.”⁶ Furthermore, while the busk is “omnipotent” in its ability to stay hard, the speaker cannot remain so; the busk therefore highlights the speaker’s own “physical insufficiency.”⁷ The “physical insufficiency” explains the speaker’s arrogant bravado, an act he displays to hide his insecurity. Though the speaker feels apprehensive, he still wants to maintain control over his interactions with his mistress. He wishes to prove that he holds the phallus, the symbol of power, despite how the lady’s busk indicates otherwise. The speaker is begging his mistress for affection but does not wish for her to realize the fact. Through this analysis, Feinstein demonstrates how true power lies with the mistress in the form of the busk rather than the commanding speaker of Elegy 19, despite how desperately the speaker tries to suppress her with his arrogant commands.

While Feinstein only focuses her attentions on the busk, other scholars look at other aspect of Elegy 19 to support their claims that Donne attempts to treat women equally. Ilona Bell similarly proposes that Donne empowers rather than disparages the woman, but unlike Feinstein, she does not concentrate on a single metaphor like the busk, but Donne’s work overall. Despite the apparent misogyny, Bell manages to find something other than Donne’s mere disgust for women:

Donne argues that it is...the sexual part that makes women, women. From one point of view, this is critical and demeaning to women, reducing them to sex objects, or commodities to be traded among men. From

another point of view, it is a matter of fact – or biology. From yet another point of view, it is liberating to women challenging the double standard.⁸

Bell does not completely disregard Donne's misogyny. She decides to see beyond it to possible attitudes of feminine empowerment and gender equality, a perspective that relies heavily on the loving relationship she perceives existed between Donne and Ann More, a young noblewoman. More was the niece of Egerton, Donne's employer, and Bell considers Donne's poetry to contain the secret love notes from Donne to More before they eloped. Bell does note the puns on both "Donne" and "More" littering Donne's poems, which could very likely indicate Donne's attempts to court More. Still, Bell allows Donne's character, or this romantic, star-crossed lover she considers Donne to have been, to color how she interprets his elegies. Though Bell also notes Donne use of "masculine persuasive force" to "assert power over his mistress" in "Going to Bed," she ultimately does not follow this thread of thought, quickly shifting to other passages she contends depict the "least oppressive form of female sexual pleasure."⁹ For Bell at least, the elegy's speaker expresses Donne's own emotions, specifically his love for the lovely Ann More. Bell willingly allows her altruistic image of Donne color her interpretation of Donne's elegies.

While there are scholars who find hidden examples disproving Donne's label of misogynist, there are critics just as intent to point out the meaning of Donne's blatant misogyny. Some of these critics interpret Donne's offensive language as evidence of his own distasteful nature. Achsah Guibbory claims that Donne's choice to be misogynistic reflects not so much his poetic persona, but proof of Donne's own prejudice. The speaker's disdain for women reflects Donne's own disdain for women. Guibbory admits that Donne's poetry is "shockingly witty," but wit comes from the its owner's own principles, so "at some level he possesses an ability to identify (even if briefly)" with his speakers.¹⁰ Similar to Bell, Guibbory appears to judge Donne's poems based on her judgment of his personality and her understanding of seventeenth century England. However, unlike Bell, Guibbory relates Donne's love dramatizations to contemporary politics rather than his personal life. Furthermore, her construction of Donne's values is only an introduction that segues into her main argument: the connection between Donne's elegies and politics. Because love "involves power transactions between men and women," so love poems can similarly suggest political struggles, namely the silent struggles between Queen Elizabeth I and the men who prefer the patriarchal status quo.¹¹ Donne feels the common anxiety of late sixteenth century men who wish to remain in power over women. This connection between politics and love opens up new possibilities for analyzing Donne's elegies. Nevertheless, the disparity in Bell's and Guibbory's readings of Donne's elegies further suggest that their perspectives affects their reading of Donne's elegy, which reflects less on what Donne conveys in "Going to Bed" and more on what they want him to say. When scholars ground their work in what they want a poem to say, whether or not they realize they are doing so, they might offer readings that obscure the poem's true meaning.

Diana Benet and R. V. Young also consider Donne's elegies politically, albeit with different results. Young disagrees with Guibbory's claim that Donne's misogyny represents his mindset. Citing Donne's entire body of work as evidence, Young argues that Donne is "a man of intelligence and sensitivity, who would certainly be aware of the blatantly shocking and offensive features in his poetry."¹² Young's interpretation of Donne's elegies revolves too around Donne's political beliefs, but not because of Donne's masculine anxiety for the stable rule of a female monarch. Instead, Donne's elegies, specifically Elegy 19, secretly convey anti-imperialist sentiments. Revealed, the "protestations of pious intentions" of greedy explorers would "invite persecution."¹³ To Young, the speaker attempting to control his mistress represents these avaricious men attempting to control new lands. Therefore, though Young does not explicitly mention this, the speaker's failure to gain explicit satisfaction would indicate Donne's own wishes for the explorers' own failures. Similar to Bell, Young appears willing to interpret Donne's misogyny as a veil for more altruistic opinions, although he directs it towards imperialism rather than women in general. Benet agrees that Donne's elegies are less love poems than political commentary. However, she claims that Donne "sets out to explore the natures of women and *of men*," with emphasis on the "sexual transgressors: aggressive or uncontrollable women, a would-be cross-dresser, an effeminate man, men overcome by women, powerless husbands, and an anarchic lover."¹⁴ She construes Donne's misogyny not so much a display of Donne's derision for women so much as a small part of his criticism for anyone who cross the invisible lines laid out by society. Again, similar to Bell and Feinstein, Benet argues that Donne's misogyny does not reflect his true disgust for women. Rather, his misogyny serves as a small part of his overall criticism of all people, regardless of gender.

As conveyed by these disparate readings, neither Donne's elegies nor the man himself are easy to interpret. Yet, there exists certain similarities between some of these readings. Bell, Guibbory, and Young may not agree with each other, but each chose to define Donne's elegies based on their constructed versions of the poet. They do not interpret who Donne is through his poems, but rather use their own interpretations of Donne to decide what he is writing about, whether it his personal relationship with Ann More or his more political feelings about Queen Elizabeth I and English

exploration. So, despite the focus on the same lines in Elegy 19, this character focus alters how they interpret Donne's words. For example, Guibbory and Young both cite "Going to Bed's" lines:

O my America, my new found land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,
My mine of precious stones, my empery¹⁵

Guibbory notes how "America," "kingdom," and "mine" all represent places of masculine power, and when the mistress provides "license" for the speaker's "roving hands," the power shifts from the mistress, or the monarch, to the speaker, the man.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Young sees this metaphor as an inversion of imperialist writing, which often depict exploring new lands as exploring a young virgin woman.¹⁷ Through her interpretation of Donne's elegies as hidden love notes to Ann More during their secret courtship, Bell also instills the elegy's speaker with her perception of Donne's true feelings for his wife. As demonstrated by Guibbory and Young, varying poetic perceptions often hinge on the same quotes, an indication that it is not so much the poem itself but the contextual background each scholar leans on that guides their interpretation of the poem. These topics diverge from each other with few similarities: Bell chooses to base her argument on Donne's relationship with Ann More, Guibbory on his unpleasant opinion of women, and Young on Donne's rebellion against English imperialism. Again, these scholars highlight through their arguments that they have chosen their interpretive emphases based on their personal views about Donne, which appears to be possible due to the fact that their claims revolve around specific parts of the poem. For example, several scholars discuss the line "O my America, my new found land," but few consider the line "As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be."¹⁸

While Benet and Feinstein also make differing arguments from Young, Guibbory, and Bell, they rely less on their interpretations of Donne himself. In her efforts to establish how Donne's love elegies are not in fact love poems but social commentary, Benet still contextualizes Donne's elegies within contemporary politics and society. However, she eschews considering these aspects within the character of Donne she establishes. Instead, Benet judge Donne's elegies to be satirical works, social commentary, based on the fact that, unlike love poems, Donne's elegies "do not concentrate either positively or negatively on a particular woman, relationship, or amorous situation," a choice that contrasts from those of the Roman elegists.¹⁹ Her judgment lies not in vague psychological analyses of Donne, but the concrete contrast between Donne's elegies and those of Roman elegists, a peculiarity that she explains as social commentary. Benet concludes that Donne criticizes "sexual transgressors" by citing instances in the elegies in which Donne expresses contempt or mockery towards either the male speaker or the mistress and noting the reason for his disdain.²⁰ Feinstein also avoids Donne's personality when grasping onto the image of the busk. Instead, she relies on historical context of the busk and the text of Elegy 19 itself to illuminate the clothing article's importance. For example, by noticing the lack of a phallus in the poem, Feinstein concludes that the comparison between the busk and phallic imagery means that woman "appropriated the male prerogative."²¹ Because neither Feinstein nor Benet rely much on Donne for the speaker's thoughts, they present arguments that one can be more easily evaluated. Furthermore, while Feinstein's argument that the busk represents the mistress' phallus may be a bit extreme, Benet's argument appears less biased because it is not based on aspects that are less difficult to prove, such as Donne's political leanings or his relationship with Ann More.

If scholars are searching for ways of interpreting Donne through their constructions of his identity, they could consider instead the manuscript variants of Elegy 19, which all these scholars ultimately fail to note. As a sixteenth century poet, Donne circulated his poems primarily as "coterie works, intended for an audience of close friends, clients, and family members" due to the perception that poetry has little literary value, which meant few poets printed their poems.²² Manuscripts of Donne's poetry go to his close friends, where they are copied and further circulated, creating a chaotic and complex body of work that remains problematic to unravel. Because of this form of circulation, the choices of editors and compilers become quite important. As Marotti notes, "[a]uthorship and original contexts both disappear in a 'new' text written, in effect, by the compiler."²³ Nevertheless, the complexity of this manuscript culture does not mean that it should be ignored. Considering textual changes within the manuscripts give a sense of the social context based on what compilers censor or alter in Donne's text, but it also offers alternative meanings to a poem without adding personal opinions such as those of Guibbory, Young, and Bell. In the Westmoreland (NY3) version of Elegy 19, which is considered the most authorial due to its fairly neat hand the fact that it was written by Donne's close friend Rowland Woodward, line 11 uses the description "hairy diadem" and line 45 states, "Here is no penance, much less innocence."²⁴ The 1964 *Harmony of the Muses* version, which is the first published copy of Elegy 19, emended line 11 to "happier diadem" and line 45 to "There is no Penance due to Innocence."²⁵ These alterations suggest an editor's attempt to censor the poem, for the speaker vulgarly describes his mistress as "hairy" and shamelessly states that neither "penance" or "innocence" is required. These changes and their underlying implications

can also be used to make hypotheses about the reasons behind Donne's choices and what he hopes to accomplish by writing such offensive words that they are censored. Even without "creating" the Donne they want through vague historical circumstances, scholars have much to explore within Donne's poems.

Poets commonly express their emotions through poetry. Nonetheless, when studying writing as complexly varied as Donne's elegies, it is no longer just about a poet expressing his emotions. Donne's elegies express a variety of personas and beliefs, so even if he were to identify with his poetry, it is difficult to determine what characterizes Donne within his poems. As Bell states, Donne can be seen a "witty misogynist, a great devotee of women, or a lover willing to risk everything for the woman he adores" based on "how one chooses to interpret and evaluate the lines one selects" of his poetry.²⁶ Ultimately, Donne's Elegy 19 and his elegies in general should be taken as separate dramatizations of their specific identities, because they do not attempt to create a continuous story but tell their own diverse stories. These varying stories imply that Donne strives to convey distinct messages in each of his elegies. Therefore, while readers should consider historical context and Donne's biography so that no one construes Donne's words in an egregiously wrong manner, attempting too much to connect Donne's elegies with the man himself would be minimize the effect of Donne's creative world-making. Donne creates such dissimilar personalities, and the changes in manuscripts could highlight how these personalities are understood and received by contemporary readers. Manuscript variants reflect how Donne's peers understood and constructed his poetry, much in the same way that character assessments have guided scholarly reading of the elegies. Therefore, focusing on the wording in different versions of the same poem could offer endless possibilities for interpretation as well as endless possible interpretations already made. Comparing how seventeenth century England understood Donne to how modern scholars understand Donne could construct a more complete picture of Donne's poetry and the man himself. Ultimately, this kind of study could provide more information about Donne than if scholars were to continue creating their own versions of John Donne.

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