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Gender and Sexual Roles in John Donne’s Love Poetry

In John Donne’s love poetry, the male speaker talks about his relationship with a woman, establishing the sexual and gender roles of the two lovers. This very structure seems to imply traditional gender roles: the man speaks to or about the woman, who remains silent. Through this confining structure, Donne both affirms and flips traditional expectations of men and women. In “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” “Valediction: of Weeping,” and “Elegy 19: To His Mistress in Bed,” Donne constructs the relationships between the male speaker and the female lover in ways ranging from traditional to transgressive through elaborate conceits, gendered words, and pronouns. However, even the transgressive constructions end up reinforcing gender norms to some extent.

Donne’s poem “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” transgresses gender norms even through the possibility of traditional roles. In the seventh line of “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” Donne enters into a conceit about compasses. He first establishes “thy soul”—his lover—as the “fixed foot” of the compass (l. 27). In the next stanza, he describes how “in the center sit[s]” the “fixed foot” while “the other”—Donne— “roams” (l. 29-30). It initially seems that the speaker and his lover exist in very traditional spheres: she is at home while he roams. However, “fixed” also carries a phallic connotation: unconventionally, the woman, not the man, is hard and upright. A line before, the phallic word “stiff” describes both the compass leg of the woman and the leg of the man: a more traditional description would reserve “stiff” for only the man, and use a word more suggestive of penetration for the woman (l. 26). The next lines continue to make ambiguous the sexual roles of the man and the woman. In the eighth stanza, the line, “It leans and harkens after it” contains ambiguous “it” pronouns (l. 31). If the first “it” is female, then the woman is the one to “lean” and “harken” after the wandering male, who would be the second “it” (l. 31). This is in line with traditional gender roles, in which the man is free and the woman is subordinate and reactive. If the first “it” is female, the second must be male (l. 31). The “and” in line 32 connects two clauses, both of which the first “it” is the subject. In the second clause, the female “it” grows erect (l. 32). The word “erect” has obvious phallic connotations: Donne describes the woman in terms usually reserved for the male penis (l. 32). This is an obvious transgression of traditional gender norms. The last part of this clause is “as that comes home” (l. 32). The word “as” suggests a simultaneous action: the woman grows erect as the man comes home (l. 32). The woman’s arousal happens simultaneously with the man’s coming home: there does not exist a strict cause-and-effect structure, in which the woman is aroused as a response to the man’s actions.

There is another, more traditional interpretation of the “it” pronouns, in which the man is the first “it” and the woman is the second “it” (l. 31). In this second case, the man is the one that leans and harkens after the woman: despite the potentially transgressive suggestions of a woman in the control, the phrase still leans traditional—the woman is traditionally the object of desire. In another traditional iteration of the man-woman relationship, the man grows “erect” as he “comes home”; the man’s actions toward the woman (she is the one to whom he is coming home) result in his arousal (l. 32). The mention of “center” at the beginning of this stanza—which is unambiguously in reference to the woman—suggests a circle, and thus, a vagina. This, with “erect,” makes it clear that the sexual roles of the man and the woman are very traditional. It is impossible to ascertain which interpretation of the “it” pronouns is correct, and this ambiguity—concerning both the pronouns and the transgressive and traditional interpretations of the man and the woman’s sexual roles—is transgressive in itself (l. 31). The traditional, assumed sexual roles are not the default.

The next stanza of “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” involves a more explicitly transgressive act of sexual role reversal. The speaker, who is male, refers to “thy firmness”—that is, the firmness of the female. Once again, this is a phallic description that is traditionally used to describe men. That firmness is the subject of the sentence, and its object is “my circle” (the man’s circle). Once again, the word “circle” in this context suggests female anatomy. The positioning of the firm woman and the circle of the man creates an anatomical reversal of the penis and the vagina, and the power dynamics that go along with that physical positioning. The phrase “makes me end where I begun” is also suggestive of a circle; in this phrase also, the woman is the one who “makes”—she is the subject and the man is the object. Despite the overall transgressive nature of this conceit, it is unclear whether the complete meaning and implications of this poem are transgressive. It is, after all, the man that is the speaker—the woman literally has no voice in this poem, and this is the traditional arrangement. Even by using the pronoun “we” and attempting to describe the lovers’ shared experiences, the man overwrites the voice of the women, completely counting it out.

In “Valediction: Of Weeping,” Donne seems to transgress gender and sexual roles, but ultimately ends up reinforcing traditional norms. In the first stanza, Donne compares his “tears” to coins (l. 2). His lover’s face is reflected in the coins, and it is her image that “coins” the tears (l. 2-3). Her image is the thing that makes the coins valuable (“And by this mintage they are something worth); without her image, the male speaker’s tears would be worthless (l. 4). This relationship in itself is not transgressive, per se, but the woman’s power here is greater—especially in relation to the power (or lack thereof) of the male lover—than what would be assumed to be traditional. But is her image only worth something because his love needs an object? Her image, stamped onto the coin, becomes part of as object even as it makes the coin worth something. It is the male act of production of the tears that even lets there be something to reflect the image of the female: even though the female makes the coin worth something, the male produces the coins in the first place. In addition, when the female sees herself reflected in the tear, she sees a smaller version of herself, not a more powerful one. When she becomes incorporated into the tear—and into the man himself—she becomes smaller. She may make his tear more valuable, but in the process she becomes subordinated to his desires. Later on in the stanza, the speaker refers to his tears as “pregnant of thee,” which seems to be an interesting feminization of the male speaker (l. 6). The female image impregnates the male tears. However, the impregnation is an unconscious one: the female does not know that her image is reflected in the tears of the man, and she has no control over the impregnation. The man’s tear reflects her image and becomes pregnant with it, putting the female’s image in a fetus-like condition. The female’s image is both fetus and impregnator, and she did not choose either position. Though the female seems to hold power, that power only serves in the end to facilitate the power of the man. Donne’s seemingly transgressive constructions of male and female gender roles seem more traditional than transgressive upon close examination.

In “Elegy 19: To His Mistress in Bed,” Donne’s gender and sexual configurations seem initially transgressive, but quickly revert into a strictly traditional male-female binary. The title of Donne’s poem “Elegy 19: To His Mistress in Bed” gives a hint as to the configuration of gender roles in the poem’s body. Using the possessive pronoun “his,” the speaker owns the female. Later on, the poem briefly seems like it will transgress—to a very small degree—these traditional gender roles: the male speaker asks the female to “licence” his hands and to “let them go” (l. 25). These requests imply that the female has the power to allow or deny; she has power over the actions of the man. However, once granted this power, the man is in a position of ultimate authority, while the woman is the passive recipient of his desires. The describes the woman’s body as “my new-found-land,” putting himself in the place of both the discoverer and the owner: the woman’s body is an object of which he can take immediate possession (l. 27). He goes on to describe her body as “my kingdom, safelist when with one man mann’d” (l. 28). Again, the male speaker uses the possessive pronoun “my” to state his dominance over the female body (l. 28). She is “safeliest” when “one man man[s]” her body: he is the one man, and the act of protecting her is also described as “mans”—there is no place for the female even in the very act of protecting her (l. 28). The speaker later describes how he is “blest” in “discovering thee,” attributing his access to her body not to her, but to a vague god or spiritual power (l. 30). What may seem at first to be a transgressive reconstruction of gender roles in which the woman has sole power over her body becomes a traditional gender binary in which the man has the real, ultimate autonomy over female bodies.

In “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” Donne mixes transgressive and traditional content to create truly transgressive gender and sexual roles despite a confining structure. “Valediction: of Weeping” and “Elegy 19: To His Mistress in Bed” seem initially transgressive, but quickly lapse into traditional patriarchy—any transgression is superficial and fleeting. Through all of this, though, Donne’s unique and complex comparisons are transgressive in themselves, forcing the reader to dig and search in order to ascertain the true implications of conceits, gendered words, and pronouns.