



**DONNE'S "THE PRIMROSE":**  
*MANNA AND NUMEROLOGICAL DALLIANCE*

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If, as Miss Gardner has affirmed, "To have imagined and given supreme expression to the bliss of fulfilment, and to the discovery of the safety that there is in love given and returned, is Donne's greatest glory as a love-poet,"<sup>1</sup> scattered throughout the *Songs and Sonnets* are nevertheless a handful of lyrics remarkable for the variety and range of their cynicism. From the callow, brittle skepticism of "Goe, and catche a falling starre" at the beginning of the 1633 arrangement to the world-weary, reasoned nihilism of "Farewell to Love" near the end, one encounters occasional poems that severely question the nature of the experience shared by man and woman, usually on grounds of female inconstancy. Perhaps the most wistful of these is "The Primrose," a lyric rightly denoted by R. A. Durr as "seldom noticed by students," though almost ideally useful as a "point of reference for the reading of Donne's secular verse."<sup>2</sup> Primarily a study of the poem's theme, Durr's discussion, together with that of Edward D. Cleveland,<sup>3</sup> makes the most satisfactory commentary on the poem to date. But, helpful as these explications are, they are not exhaustive. I hope to shed new light on "The Primrose" here by attending to certain of its technical features. Specifically, critics have not adequately explained the particular significance of the manna image of lines 1-4, and they have left unresolved the cynical enigma of lines 18-20: ". . . Since there must reside/Falshood in woman, I could more abide/ She were by art, then Nature falsify'd." A consideration of these two cruxes and the relationship between them will lead us to a fuller understanding of

<sup>1</sup>Helen Gardner, *John Donne: "The Elegies" and "The Songs and Sonnets"* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. xxx. Below I shall cite Donne's poetry in this edition.

<sup>2</sup>"Donne's 'The Primrose,'" in A.L. Clements, *John Donne's Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton, Inc., 1966), p. 212. The article originally appeared in *JEGP*, LIX (April, 1960), 218-22.

<sup>3</sup>"Donne's 'The Primrose,'" *Explicator*, VII, Number 1 (October, 1949), Item 4.

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“The Primrose” and show that this poem typifies Donne’s poetic technique as well as a significant strain in his philosophy of human love.

Even without the 1635 expansion of the title—“being at Mountgomery Castle, upon the hill, on which it is situate” (v. Gardner, p. 219)—the poem immediately evokes a strong sense of place and, hence, of drama:

*Upon this Primrose Hill,  
Where, if Heav'n would distill  
A shoure of raine, each severall drop might goe  
To his owne primrose, and grow Manna so;  
And where their forme, and their infinitie  
Make a terrestrial Galaxie,  
As the small starres doe in the skie:  
I walke to finde a true Love; and I see  
That 'tis not a mere woman, that is shee,  
But must, or more, or lesse then woman bee. (1-10)*

This stanza is the grain of sand in which one may see the universe of the poem. It is at once the seed from which the whole poem stems and a microcosm of its entire thought and action. Here the speaker posits his considered opinion of woman’s nature, that a “mere woman” cannot be a “true Love”; and he foreshadows his response to that disillusioning fact with the manna image of lines 1-4. Gardner states that the image of the manna to be created by the distillation of raindrops upon the primroses “seems . . . purely visual” (p. 219) and cites Exodus xvi.14 to show that manna was “a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.” Somewhat more helpfully, Theodore Redpath glosses lines 2-4 to mean, “. . . where there are so many primroses that if Heaven should let fall a shower of rain upon it, each single drop would be able to find its home in a primrose, and so turn into vital food,” an interpretation he attributes to “discussion with Professor Grierson.”<sup>4</sup> Like Gardner, however, Redpath does not expound the implication of this imagined transformation for the total statement of the poem.

<sup>4</sup>The “Songs and Sonets” of John Donne (London: Methuen and Co., 1956), p. 107.

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No one can doubt, I think, that the esthetic qualities of the manna God provided for the wandering Israelites were purely secondary. What remained after the dew "was gone up" (Ex. xvi.14) was something to eat, something to be used for sustenance. Though Donne here envisions making manna by the distillation of a shower of rain, not the exhalation of dew, his image otherwise parallels the Biblical source quite closely. And I suggest that, since women are equated with primroses in the poem, the image of dew drops transformed into provender anticipates and forms a paradigm of Donne's subsequent sophisticated transmutation of men into sexual victuals for ravenous woman in the last stanza of the poem.<sup>5</sup> In the second stanza the speaker considers what kind of women might be equated with "true Love" primroses—flowers with either four or six petals, the normal blossom having five. The woman represented by a four-petaled rose, he asserts, would be "scarce any thing," a mere lump of warm clay ("*Mummy*, possess," in the words of "*Loves Alchymie*"), and the lady symbolized by the six-petaled rose would be an immaterial abstraction who would "get above/ All thought of sexe" and demand to be studied, not loved. The speaker quickly protests, "Both these were monsters" and reiterates the premise of stanza one: "... there must reside/ Falshood in woman . ." (18-19). Following this damning judgment, he concludes, "... I could more abide,/ She were by art, then Nature falsify'd" (19-20).

Cleveland and Durr pass over these last lines, and Gardner, I submit, misinterprets them, reading the passage to mean, "I would rather she were falsified by painting her face than made no true woman by nature" (p. 220). But I do not believe Donne is here thinking of cosmetics. He means rather that since true loves, both flowers and women, are falsifications, perverse mutations of nature, and since the normal woman, represented by the five-petaled rose, is inevitably false, promiscuous, in nature, he prefers the ordinary to the unusual kind of falseness and proposes to justify his preference *by his own poetic art*. In short, the poet is equivocating on the word "falsify'd": in the phrase "falsify'd by nature" it means "made freakish"; in "falsify'd by art" it means "justified in promiscuity." He here

<sup>5</sup>The manna image forms what Wilfred L. Guerin *et. al.* (*A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* [New York: Harper and Row, 1966], p. 152) label an exponent, one of "those people, objects, words that represent or symbolize the patterns [in a work]." One might note here that Donne elsewhere mentions sex in terms of feeding—in the poem "Community," for example.

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announces his intention to do for women what the imagined shower of rain would do for the primroses at his feet. And he does it in the following stanza: he disperses a shower of wit upon women that provides them with ample food for their lust. Accordingly, in recording a direct response to the concluding clause of stanza two, stanza three provides a rationalization for the unfettered promiscuity of women.

Both Durr and Cleveland explain the numerology of the last stanza clearly, but neither sees that this sophistry is the very "art" to which Donne has referred in line 20. And this failure prevents these critics from fully integrating stanza three into the poem. After reiterating his equation of women with primroses, the speaker concludes:

*Ten is the farthest number: if halfe ten  
Belonge unto each woman, then  
Each woman may take halfe us men;  
Or if this will not serve their turne, Since all  
Numbers are odde, or even, and they fall  
First into this, five, women may take us all. (25-30)*

Here are alternative programs of sexual indulgence. First, since ten is the "farthest number" and since woman's number, five, is half ten, a woman may "take" half the male population as sexual partners. On the other hand, since "all/ Numbers are odde, or even" and since woman's number is the first to comprise one from each category, five may be said to contain all numbers and, correspondingly, woman to be licensed to take "all" men. In thus paraphrasing Donne's words, I agree substantially with both Cleveland and Durr. If we are to grasp the poem as a unified and complete form, however, we must see these numerological gymnastics as the "art" Donne has promised, not merely as an arcane philosophy of numbers he jumped to without warning.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>After surveying various interpretations of this numerology, Gardner argues that it means "either . . . that they [women] can absorb man, body and soul, or more idealistically, that they can in the mathematics of love be regarded as equal though different" (p. 221). I believe, however, that her reading confers on Donne a philosophical profundity he never intended. Especially in light of the rhetorical relationship of stanza three to the earlier parts of the poem, it seems desirable to find a reading consistent with Donne's basic cynical premise and misleading to seek externally defined values for the numerical quantities he here employs.

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Interestingly, this reading leads us to see that this poem is partly about art and the relationship of art to truth. Though scholars, including Cleveland and Gardner (v. p. 220), have unearthed the Pythagorean and Christian sources of Donne's inspiration, "The Primrose" is not primarily about Pythagoras' numerology and does not derive its validity from it. To misunderstand this point is to wander astray. Cleveland, for example, concludes that the poem has "established, on the level of philosophical number correspondence, the validity of ethical naturalism as the basis of moral antinomianism." But surely he is mistaken. One would suppose that any healthy young man who could prove the validity of "ethical naturalism" would rejoice and exult in his achievement. Yet "The Primrose" exudes a tone of daunted cynicism, positing at the very outset the speaker's sad estimate of female nature. And even though this assessment eventually leads to the flash of wit at the end, that *tour de force* does not dispel the depression entirely. The reason for the continued disappointment is clearly that the persona in this poem never forsakes the ideal of female constancy. Far from establishing an objective moral truth, Donne here, in a parody of the heavenly power that could create manna, fabricates an artistic rationale to render harsh reality more palatable. But this scheme is an invention of the *poietes*, a "maker," and its "truth" a self-generated and local panacea.

As I indicated above, I think "The Primrose" is typical of its author's practice, and I should like to conclude by pointing out two characteristics it shares with certain other Donne poems.

First, as I have already implied, many of Donne's conceits are self-explanatory or, one might say, auto-exegetical. Their language is rather reflexive than referential. Doubtless, a knowledge of Pythagorean number theory helps us with some details of "The Primrose": Pythagoras explains why "Ten is the farthest number" and why five, not three, is the first number composed of an odd and an even. But we can understand Donne without Pythagoras; that Donne here designates ten the "farthest number" is enough.<sup>7</sup> Similarly (and more simply), one does not have to be an

<sup>7</sup> John F. Huntley ("The Ecology and Anatomy of Criticism: Milton's Sonnet 19 and the Bee Simile in 'Paradise Lost,' I, 768-76," *JAAC*, XXIV [1965-66], 383-91) speaks perceptively to the critical precept involved here, arguing that the structural principles of a poem determine the meaning that any allusion may express: "The process of discovering them [the principles of structure], i.e., the hermeneutic process, involves . . . [the reader's] asking questions about relationships in such a way that the sequence itself can yield yes or no answers. It does not depend on the reader's memory of echoes and allusions, but on his ability to formulate propositions about the sequence which the sequence itself will affirm or deny" (385).

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entomologist to follow the conceit in "The Flea." And even though Donne's use of the word "compass" in the plural may prove initially confusing, in the twentieth century, even inexperienced readers can eventually unpuzzle the last section of "A Valediction: forbidding mourning"—because the conceit explains itself. This characteristic of Donne's figures even makes intelligible such learned poems as "Aire and Angels," which usually send critics to tomes of arcane lore.<sup>8</sup> I of course do not mean to disparage the work of scholars who explore sources and enlighten us about a poet's intellectual milieu, but only to say that Donne, perhaps more aware of the possible strain on his reader's learning or ingenuity than Jonson saw,<sup>9</sup> characteristically extends the conceit to shape an organic poem that reveals its own internal structure and meaning, a feature that helps to account for his appeal to the New Critics and their followers.<sup>10</sup>

Next, "The Primrose," like other of Donne's lyrics, *appears to be* self-generating; it seems to record a train of spontaneous thought. I stress "appears to be" because the poem, obviously, is a made thing; it has been carefully crafted. Nevertheless, one feature of this work is that it seems to develop, in the manner of a vine putting out successive runners, from one image or thought to the next in a linear and apparently unpremeditated fashion. The lover, already disillusioned with women, sets himself on the primrose hill and parenthetically notes that the flowers at his feet might be turned to manna. The great number of the blossoms reminds him of the Milky Way and of the plenitude of normal, false women. The falseness of the common woman then leads to a consideration of the uncommon woman, a theme he develops by the flower symbolism in stanza two. Having decided by the end of stanza two that all women are false in some terms or other, he hits on the idea of falsifying ordinary women by his own art, a notion that seems

<sup>8</sup>Cf., for example, Gardner's notes on pp. 205-06, where the reader is directed to Ficino, Ronsard, Aquinas, Leone Ebreo, and a sixteenth-century homily "Of the State of Matrimony," among others.

<sup>9</sup>Jonson's comment to Drummond of Hawthornden "That Donne himself, for not being understood, would perish" is widely known. See Alexander M. Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke, *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), p. 128.

<sup>10</sup>See, e.g., the treatments of Donne in John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (New York: John Scribner's Sons, 1938); Allen Tate, *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York: Swallow Press, 1948); and Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1939). Such critics have rightly insisted on the necessity of paying close attention to Donne's text.

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to arise from the implications of the earlier reference to manna. He carries out his design in stanza three.

The kind of fluid, moment-by-moment generation I have traced here is integral to the dramatic quality that distinguishes much of Donne's verse. The particular vitality and resilience that Donne derives from this tendency may be clearly seen if we contrast, for example, "The Flea" with Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," a work bent to a similar seductive end. Though both poems are dramatic in the sense that they situate a character in the presence of a listener, Donne's verses clearly evolve in much more direct response to the implied actions of the lady than do Marvell's. One senses that Marvell formulated the hypothetical syllogism that structures his poem before beginning to elaborate each premise with supporting imagery. By contrast, Donne seems to begin with only a strong sense of the *dramatis personae* and the precipitating fact—that the flea has sucked both lovers—and lets the poem unfold according to some organic principle implicit in the dramatic situation. Such a spontaneous, self-directive logic seems to inform a good many of Donne's poems, both secular and religious, and among the former is "The Primrose."

To conclude, I am not claiming that Donne is a seventeenth-century avatar of Shelley's soaring skylark. If his poems seem to unfold spontaneously, the agency of their development is a wit steeped in logic and rhetoric, and the mode of Donne's response is habitually discursive rather than intuitive or imaginative. Nevertheless, his poems share a quality critics have discerned in the writings of the baroque prosers,<sup>11</sup> the sense that the reader is witnessing, on the spot, the heat and excitement generated by an agile, questing mind in the very pursuit of truth.

<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., Morris Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose," in *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm: Essays by Morris W. Croll*, ed. J. Max Patrick et. al. (Princeton:Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 207-33.