

The origin of love: donne's theogony



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"Love's Deity" is an anti-lyric poem; rather than lament love's inconstancy or celebrate love's union, Donne questions the nature of love itself. Donne presents the poem as a theogony, an account of the origin of the god of love. For Donne, Love is a pagan god, operating in a beautifully imagined pre-lapsarian world in which all love is correspondent. However, the god of love, a tyrant, comes to abuse his powers, leading to unrequited and unequal love as the fall of man. But there is no retrograde action; men cannot return to the mythic garden of correspondent love. Disparity, Donne writes, is love's destiny, and so in the course of four stanzas, the poem expands from a theogony, an account of the creation of a god, to a theodicy, an attempt to justify the ways of god to men (5). The opening lines of "Love's Deity" are startling. "I long to talk with some old lover's ghost, / Who died before the god of love was born," the speaker intimates (1-2). We are thrown into a strange and paradoxical world: Can love exist before the god of love exists; did lovers and beloveds predate the god of love? Donne argues that this is the case. Not only does love exist before the birth of the god, but it exists in an unconstrained and elevated state: "I cannot think that he, who then loved most, / Sunk so low, as to love one which did scorn" (3-4). If this is so, if love predates the god, how did the god of love come into being? Donne suggests, perhaps, something akin to the transmigration of souls: the old lover's ghost, with pure and lofty love, dies, and the god of love is born (1-2). Love's deity, the subject of Donne's poem, is likewise the theme of Plato's Symposium, an account of a banquet given by the young poet Agathon in which the guests debate the origin of love. The

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mythic quality of Donne's poem, and the obscuration that attends the birth of the god, recall the debate in Plato. Phaedrus argues, from Hesiod's Theogony, for Love's age: "We honor him as one of the most ancient gods, and the proof of his great age is this: the parents of love have no place in poetry or legend" (p. 9). While the parenthood of Donne's god is equally uncertain, Donne follows more closely to the speech of Agathon: "he is the youngest of the gods," states Agathon, "and most delicate; in addition he has a fluid, supple shape; he is balanced and fluid in his nature" (32-33). His work is the work of moderation. This is, too, the work of Donne's deity in the second stanza. The "young godhead" is conceived as a bureaucrat, taking the true loves that he observes "an even flame two hearts did touch" and confirming them (9-10). Donne writes, "His office was indulgently to fit / Actives to passives. Correspondency / Only his subject was" (11-14). The god fits "actives" lovers "to passives" their beloveds. His work, "correspondency," is a matter of weight and balance. Donne's god of love "practises" in a world in which love already exists by necessity; it is built into human nature as the desire for the integrity of wholeness. Here, Donne recalls the myth proposed by Aristophanes in the Symposium: Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature. Each of us, then, is a "matching half" of a human whole. (27) Love, Aristophanes says, "is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete" (29). Donne's deity operates with this material: halves

of wholes, fitting them together. His work is simple, good, and beautiful in its tranquility; thus, it is also "indulgent" (11). The god of love is a lucky god. In this pre-lapsarian world of correspondent love, there is no need for lyric poetry. Unrequited love is absent from the vocabulary of men and gods; the law is, "I love her, that loves me" (14). What brings about the fall? As narrated in the third stanza, the god of love comes to abuse his powers. Like a tyrant, he claims more than is rightfully his. The god of love grows; he becomes "modern" and covetous. Donne writes, "every modern god will now extend / His vast prerogative, as far as Jove" (15-16). Perhaps he is weary of the simplicity and serenity of his work; perhaps he is mischievous, youthful still. At any rate, the god of love creates unequal love, lovers who "love one which did scorn" (4). This is the "destiny" of the god as foretold by the speaker in the first stanza. The "vice-nature, custom," validates this destiny, and the new law becomes, "I must love her, that loves not me" (5-7). Donne suggests that the fall of the god of love "the fall to tyranny and dark frivolity" leads to a parallel fall in man; "To rage, to lust, to write to, to commend, / All is the purlieu of the god of love" (17-18). Rage, lust, poetry, praise: Donne aligns the new play of the deity to the traditional tropes of the unrequited courtly lover. We should look again at the speech of Agathon in the Symposium. Agathon's speech follows that of Aristophanes, in which Aristophanes describes love as the desire for wholeness, and Love, the god, not as a creator but as a matchmaker: "he draws us towards what belongs to us" (30). Agathon rejects Aristophanes' account of love; his Eros is a creator-god, the source of all arts and crafts, archery, medicine, and prophecy, music,

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metallurgy, and weaving (36). Agathon muses, "the god is so skilled a poet that he can make others into poets: once Love touches him, anyone becomes a poet" (35). And in a comic gesture, Agathon, as he speaks eloquently and generously of Love and its province, says, "I am suddenly struck by a need to say something in poetic meter" (36). The fall of the god to tyranny results in the fall of man to poetry. The god of love, playful and poetic in his invention of unrequited love, moves man to poetry, "to rage, to lust, to write to, to commend" (17). This is the source of lyric love poetry, of the sonnet sequence tracing the changing shapes and faces of a lover and his beloved, of creation as the lack of fulfillment. Lyric poetry, then, is a property of a fallen world. The speaker is conscious that he is unable to free himself from its hold anymore than he is able to free himself from the hold of a woman who does not return his love, resulting in the pathos of the last lines of the third stanza: "Oh were we wakened by this tyranny / To ungod this child again, it could not be / should love her, who loves not me. (19-21) But it is impossible to ungod this child, to take back his claims and creations. To do this would be to renounce love, something the lover is unwilling to give up: "Why murmur I, / As though I felt the worst that love could do? Love might make me leave loving" (22-24). The god of love, taking his powers further, could take love away from men. This, the absence of love and its offspring, poetry, is terrifying to Donne, and would seem to be the ultimate fear, but Donne declares that there is one even worse. The god of love might try "a deeper plague, to make her love me too, / Which, since she loves before, I am loth to see" (25-26). Love could force "correspondency" where it is unlegislated and unnatural, taking a half belonging to one man and affixing it

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to another. Haphazard and untrue love is worse than no love at all; 'Falsehood is worse than hate' (27). Donne's fourth stanza begins peculiarly, 'Rebel and atheist too, why murmur I?' (22). The 'young godhead' Love grows into a rebel, a modern god claiming more than his just ends. In a strange turn of events, Love also becomes an atheist. By crafting rage and lust, properties only falsely belonging to Love, the god shows that the perfection and completeness of Love as correspondency is not enough for him. He aspires to a different sort of godhead. But is the speaker, like the god of love, both a rebel and an atheist? This is the paradox of the fourth stanza: the speaker is neither rebellious nor atheistic. He is unwilling to 'ungod this child' and unwilling to contaminate Love further. The speaker remains true to a god who no longer exists in his original form, a god whose 'office was indulgent to fit / Actives to passives' (11-12). The four stanzas of 'Love's Deity' end alternately, as an unrequited lover pulling petals off a daisy: 'She loves me, she loves me not. Donne writes, 'I must love her, that loves not me; Love, till I love her, that loves me; I should love her, who loves not me; and finally, 'If she whom I love, should love me' (7, 14, 21, 28). Donne ends the poem on the final petal of correspondent love, but it is headed by an if. This is like Aristophanes calling the guests of the banquet to praise love for its potential: 'If we are to give due praise to the god who can give us this blessing, then, we must praise Love. Love does the best that can be done for the time being: he draws us towards what belongs to us. But for the future, Love promises the greatest hope of all: If we treat the gods with due reverence, he will restore to us our original nature, and by healing us, he will

make us blessed and happy. (30) Donne does not argue that man can return to a pre-fallen state. However, he does argue that correspondent love is attainable "not, as Aristophanes suggests, by the restoration of man's original and joined nature, but as the closest approximation to this idea through romantic love. This union of lovers, forging a world of a room and each other, is the material for Donne's lyric poetry. This is why he remains true to love's deity in a fallen world; in the theogony of the god of love Donne also finds a theodicy. The god of love, rebel and atheist, is justified because of the possibility: If she whom I love, should love me.