Engl 125
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Meredith Louise Williams

Heart and Soul

by Meredith Louise Williams

As simple and confounding as the form and meaning of a flower, John Donne's poem "The Ecstasy" portrays a moment of heightened intimacy between two lovers and examines the true nature of love. At first Donne emphasizes the lovers' spiritual connection with religious language that presents love as a pure, shared experience between two souls, a metaphysical mystery akin to divine ecstasy. This view of love resembles the idea put forth in "Air and Angels" that love exists first in the spirit and then takes physical form. There is a shift, however, in "The Ecstasy" when Donne credits the lovers' bodies for first bringing their true selves together (53-54). This first "yet ne'ertheless" instance modifies the poet's experience of love as stated in "Air and Angels" because it points to the necessity of some physical encounter in love's conception. Common sense supports this position, as even love at first sight requires the two parties to see one another, yet Donne emphasizes the spiritual convergence achieved as a result of this physical interaction. In a surprising second "yet ne'ertheless" shift, Donne goes on to indicate that the lovers' subsequent return to their bodies is a small but necessary change, and this final statement complicates the view of love's manifestation depicted earlier. Donne began "The Ecstasy" with the idea that a physical encounter precedes a mystical connection but that the latter is most significant; in stating that this refined spiritual love must be further expressed in meaningful corporeal union, he draws a distinction between two types of physical love and

inspires further questioning. What is the clearly definable change from physical love to physical love as a manifestation of spiritual love, the point Donne describes when souls and not just bodies intertwine? Is this idea of "true love" a label that lovers give a mutually pleasurable activity, a semantic shift for the sake of romanticism to make lovemaking meaningful? The poem could be, after all, a clever poet's device for seducing his sweetheart. In essence, what is the final line of the poem's "small change" from spiritual to physical love (76), and how is love's physical representation different from love itself?

The key moment in "The Ecstasy" is the lovers' out-of-body experience, and while Donne clarifies that this is not the idea of spiritual love devoid of body set forth in "Air and Angels," he stresses the importance of this dimension beyond physical contact. First Donne describes the two lovers holding hands, their "eye-beams twisted" as they regard one another in a quiet moment of companionship (7). Instead of progressing to more intimate physical contact or even speaking to one another, the two lovers "like sepulchral statues lay" while their "souls negotiate there" between them (18-19). The next stanzas continue to elucidate and expand upon this supernatural ecstasy of a meeting of minds. While the lovers remain silent, an outside observer who understands the "soul's language" will be able to "part far purer than he came" (22, 28). Donne further depicts this conversation without words between the lovers as an invisible mixing of souls, an idea that echoes the "shapeless flame" and "lovely glorious nothing" from "Air and Angels" (3, 6). The two poems contrast, however, in that "Air and Angels" describes a formless love proceeding to take "limbs of flesh" and fixing itself in the lady's "lip, eye, and brow" (14), while in "The Ecstasy," the lovers have met previously and are gazing into one another's eyes before this supernatural union can occur. Thus, in "The Ecstasy" Donne acknowledges the role of physical presence in the realization of love, stating that their

bodies “Did us, to us, at first convey” (54). Nevertheless, the focus of the poem remains the formation of “this new soul” from two disparate entities, for this ecstasy of spiritual union is what “Defects of loneliness controls” (45, 44). Here the objective of Donne’s love is for “soul into the soul [to] flow” (59), despite the admission that their souls “to body first repair” (60). At this moment in “The Ecstasy,” it is clear that the lovers’ bodies are a means to achieve the end of true spiritual love. Yet Donne does not constrain his definition of the role of the human body to a mere transportation device or package for the soul. Instead he goes on to express the need for further physical interaction as the expression of spiritual love, as he remarks, “So must pure lovers’ souls descend / T’ affections, and to faculties, / Which sense may reach and apprehend” (65-67). This last shift is the most problematic because it reverses the previously stated idea that love can exist, indeed, that love exists in its highest form, as a purely spiritual interaction. Had Donne left the lovers holding hands and joining souls, “The Ecstasy” would uphold the supremacy of bodiless love as “Air and Angels” did, with the additional consideration that people must meet physically before they fall in love. However, in arguing for intercourse as the natural expression of spiritual ecstasy, Donne causes the reader to question the difference between this supposedly more profound physical demonstration of love and pre-ecstatic physical love. Remembering that the poet himself has something to gain from his argument makes the distinction dubious. The poet’s vested interest gives the reader reason to suspect the driving forces behind his argument for the inevitability and desirability of the regression from divine union to sex.

When Donne claims that the ecstasy of lovers’ spiritual relationship must be expressed through physical means, he calls into question his motivation and casts a shadow of doubt on the lofty ideals he expresses. The joys of mental and emotional union set aside, the poem is

essentially an attempt to convince the poet's beloved of the beauty and innocent inevitability of sexual intercourse. After saying to his lover "To our bodies turn we then" (69), Donne cleverly evades suspicion of a vested interest in the sex itself by adding the phrase "so / Weak men on love revealed may look" (70). With this dodge, the poet makes clear that he does not just want to make love to her, for that is what weak men who cannot experience the full spectrum of love as he can do. He distances himself from these lusty mortals, at the same time giving a persuasive line of reasoning for the natural progression from spiritual to physical ecstasy. The lines "Love's mysteries in souls do grow, / But yet the body is his book" present an interesting picture of the relationship between love and its manifestation (71-72). Love grows in their souls, but it must take shape in the form of a book and be put into words for others to understand. In other words, love's realization requires a physical manifestation, for only lovers such as Donne who have reached a level beyond physicality understand that lovemaking is a "small change" from spiritual union (76). The poet's manifest skill in developing complex conceits and irresistible arguments could be just as easily employed to mask less honorable intentions. Then again, what is it that makes a man's desire to have sex with a woman honorable if they "truly" love but dishonorable if they do so solely for physical lust? Do words or entire poems describing their shared spiritual ecstasy justify their typical human desires and actions as unique, even heavenly-ordained love? The dichotomy between "love revealed" and the love whose "mysteries in souls do grow" becomes disturbingly thin if the one relating those mysteries is seeking his own physical satisfaction (70-71). Love as an ideal spiritual experience is then reduced to a societal construct whose purpose is to make physical desire socially acceptable. If physical and spiritual love are no different, then the spiritual nature of love may as well be a collective fantasy. Love's higher

aspirations become human formulations to rationalize and dignify their carnal passions and to defend their pursuit of physical satisfaction.

As this cynical view hardly captures the essence of Donne's poem, a better course would be to take the author at his word and to concentrate on what Donne himself discloses about the relationship between spiritual and physical love. It is important to note that Donne separates these two forms of love by a "small change" (76). If he had not done so, if he had left the union of souls and bodies indistinguishable, the aforementioned concerns would apply. When the boundary between supernatural connection and sexual intercourse blurs and disappears, the former risks becoming a pretext for the latter. If love and lovemaking are the same, then the ideal of love may well be a romantic ruse for clever poets to trap unsuspecting, gullible persons of the opposite sex. Donne does not eliminate this distinction, but says that a lover like himself and his beloved would observe a "Small change, when we'are to bodies gone" (76). The fact that there *is* a change preserves the exceptional nature of the connection between the lovers' souls and maintains this connection's unsurpassed value in spite of its dependence on physical expression. Indeed, while arguing for physical intimacy, Donne describes the necessary shift from soul to body as a descent instead of a horizontal shift or mere translation. Even earlier in the poem, Donne states simply that this ecstasy "was not sex" and that the lovers "saw not what did move" (31, 32). These lines suggest that the ecstasy of spirit that the two lovers experience reveals mysteries of love too profound for human sense to grasp. They cannot "see" it, but the presence of love without physical expression is discernible to those who have experienced it. The physical manifestation, whether a gentle caress or passionate lovemaking or sex, is a lesser but more tangible version of love made accessible to limited beings. While words may be used to express concepts of love beyond the typical human experience, that does not mean that these ideas are

nonexistent or superficial masks for baser desires. Donne recognizes human limitation but grants readers a glimpse of love's quintessence. "The Ecstasy" is therefore like a violet Donne offers to his beloved and to his fellow human beings. A cynic might see nothing more in such a gift than a manipulative scheme to win physical gratification, or worse, a seductive suggestion in the giving of a plant's sexual organ; however, someone who had experienced and believed in true love could see beyond the flower's form to a symbol of eternal love, faithfulness, and truth that does not wither.

Works Cited

Donne, John. "Air and Angels," "The Ecstasy." *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*. Ed. A.J. Smith. London: Penguin, 1996. pp. 41, 53-56.