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Introduction

This book examines some of the ways in which western poets and artists have explored the connexions between sexual desire and the hope of ascent to heaven. Most of our examples are drawn from the period between the late renaissance, when the delicate indirections of the poetry of love had reached their full flowering, and the late rococo, which cultivated a mixture of coy titillation and frank sensuality. Desire is difficult to talk about. Although countless works of literature have chosen sexual desire as their theme, attention is usually focused on its secondary signs and symptoms. While the appearance and behaviour of the lovesick poet – his cries of lament, facial pallor, and haggard eyes – are conventionally represented, it is as rare to find a description of desire itself as it is to find an evocation of nausea, or of joy. Such experiences elude direct verbalisation. When the erotic arts attempt to express desire rather than the consequences of desire, they have recourse to a seemingly endless series of transformations, and the same is true when they attempt to represent the experience of the divine. Indeed, it is because both experiences can be at once so intense and so inexpressible that they are frequently coupled.

By no means all the erotic artists of our period combine the celebration of sexuality with ascensional imagery. Indeed, most of the joyous pornographers and their illustrators, from Aretino and Raimondi to Nogaret and Rowlandson, are resolutely earthy and horizontal, their avoidance of ascensional imagery often implying that they repudiate the worth of anything other than immediate physical pleasure. The most interesting artists nevertheless grapple, in a diversity of ways, with the tensions generated by the junction of the two. Despite the volatility and energy of the materials, an exhaustive commentary on so large a theme over a period of two and a half centuries would be ponderous if not impossible. We have chosen therefore a variety of representative examples, ranging from major works of art to manuals for confessors, from ecclesiastical ceiling paintings to witty, pornographic poems. To provide a controlling framework, both temporal and geographical, we concentrate on three divergent but artistically related areas: English poetry, French and Italian easel painting, and the decoration of baroque and rococo churches in southern Germany and Austria.

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The richly decorated churches, in which the art of the rococo reached its apogee, show the connexion between sexuality and ascension in its most fully and subtly developed form.

We have usually selected our examples from poets and painters in the main stream of European art. To these we have added lesser figures when they seemed, often because of their simpler character, to make our points for us more clearly. Thus, along with works by Michelangelo, Correggio, Parmigianino, Piazzetta, and Caravaggio, we appeal to paintings and drawings by Martin Knoller, Damiano Mazza, and Richard Tompson; in conjunction with the familiar poetry of Spenser, Marino, Milton, Rochester, Aphra Behn, and Wieland, we mention works by Francesco Ellio, John Hall, and John Gore.

Although whenever necessary we explore formative changes in artistic context, it has not been our intention to write a consecutive cultural history. We focus, rather, on the immediate emotional impact of the works discussed and on the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from the rich variety of treatment given to a persistent, fundamental theme. The persistence of the theme has not led us to approach it as the expression of a universal truth, but rather as an enduring, intriguing concern of the human creative intelligence. Chapter 1 is a sampler in which a few poems and one painting are briefly examined in order to isolate focal points for discussion. In the later chapters we deal with poetry and the visual arts in about equal proportions. Conscious of the formal and aesthetic differences between the genres, we explore in chapter 5 some of the ways in which those differences affect the erotic and spiritual imagination.

Attitudes to the place of eroticism in the arts between the renaissance and the French Revolution have undergone notable changes during the course of the twentieth century. The commentaries of David Foxon, Roy Porter, Peter Wagner, and others have led to a better understanding of the central place of comic, satirical, and anticlerical works which in the quite recent past were often dismissed as peripheral and regrettable. Hints of sexual meaning and of profane elements in poems and paintings of a generally decorous or even pious nature are now more readily accepted as normal than was the case in standard readings of half a century ago. In our attempts to clarify the significance of those hints, we dissociate our judgements entirely from the degree to which the works examined explore bodily or sexual matters.

The eroticism of the works we discuss in most cases expresses male sexual arousal – usually, though not always, in a heterosexual context. Almost all the influential erotic artists of the period were men who created images of sexual and spiritual bliss from an unambiguously male point of view. With varying degrees of success some of them occasionally tried to enter the female imagination, though when they did so they tended, with the major exception of

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Milton, to adopt a selfprotective, ironic stance. This book is thus mainly concerned with ways in which male artists and their male viewers and readers have responded to the theme. We briefly discuss a poem by one woman, Aphra Behn, who attempts to write from a male point of view. Although she wisely begins from a neutral standpoint, she rapidly adopts the man-centred erotic conventions of her day and ends her poem with a titillating evocation of male prurience.

In discussing ascent we distinguish between movement initiated by the subject himself and passive flight aloft brought about by external agencies or powers: our focus is more often on the ascending subject than on sources of energy motivating him from outside. Another recurrent theme is the distinction between flight as free horizontal movement into regions that do not extend beyond the human and upward flight with implications of spiritual value. Contrasts of vertical and horizontal are frequently embedded in the ordinary language and imagery of sexuality. When a man and or a woman is imagined as aroused but not yet sexually united with a partner, terms carrying strong ascensional connotations are usual: the man is erect, the woman's heart may 'flame up and burn with love' (Sappho, fragment 89). Both may look forward to a time when they will achieve a state of heavenly bliss. The archetypal hope of the epithalamium is expressed in Sappho's famous lines: 'Up with the rafters high,... Raise them high, ye joiners' (fragment 148). The lover may speak of his mistress as his goddess; she, as in the late female heads of Greuze, may roll her eyes ostentatiously upwards. When the two are sexually joined, it is common for the upward-tending language and imagery to give way to something predominantly horizontal: *coire* means to go or come together; *congressus* is a mutual walking or proceeding; a *coniunx* is yoked to a partner. Whatever their coital postures, loving couples are said, in many languages, to lie or sleep together. Before the event, the aspiration is upwards; the subsequent satisfaction of desire is found in activity parallel with the surface of the earth. In chapter 3 we examine two epithalamia in which horizontal movement and the desire for ascent are strongly polarised.

The difference between the language of aspiration and the language of fulfilment has proved troublesome to many. The difficulty of reconciling vertical and horizontal modes and phases of eroticism, central to the tension of the Petrarchan condition, lies at the heart of the debates of love throughout the later Middle Ages and the renaissance. In its simplest and most idealistic form, the conflict is presented as the hope of replacing painfully frustrated physical desire with spiritual fulfilment. Theological writers frequently allude either directly or indirectly to Saint Augustine's distress at fallen man's inability to control the erection of the penis. In his several discussions of the problem Augustine not only lamented the loss of control that makes man prone to sin,

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but suggested that the erection of the penis – ultimately brought about by the devil's bidding – is a simulacrum and daily reminder of Satan's hubristic attempt to rise above his station. That the fulfilment of physical desire and the consequent awareness of sin should be expressed in horizontal imagery is fully to be expected. Creative artists have nevertheless found the antithesis of earthbound sexuality and the hope of heavenly bliss subtler and less easy to define. Erotic desire for the mistress may itself be understood as a kind of spirituality, while the hope of spiritual salvation is at times seen to be an almost undisguised transformation of eroticism. Polarised images of sexual activity as a lively movement of both spirit and body and as a heavy biological exercise are starkly presented in an anonymous Restoration poem 'Against Marriage', which may have been written by a woman. Despising male lust, the author contrasts the tedious routine of sexuality in marriage with the free lovemaking of the young libertine, who

> must have a sprightly youthfull Wench,
> In equal Flouds of Love his flame to quench:
> One that will hold him with her Clasping Arm,
> And in that Circle, all his Spirits Charm:
> That with New Motion, and unpractic'd Art,
> Can raise his Soul, and re-ensnare his Heart.
> Hence Spring the Noble, Fortunate, and Great,
> Always begot in Passion, and in Heat:
> But the dull Off-spring of the Marriage bed,
> What is it but a Humane shape in Lead?
> A sottish Lump, engendred of all Ills,
> Begot (like Cats) against the Parents wills.[1]

In a reprint of about 1690, the comparison 'like Cats' is replaced by the more pungent 'like D[ung]'. Although the equality of wench and bachelor is asserted in mutual 'Flouds of Love', the woman is then clearly in control. After the capture of the bride the situation changes. Throughout the generally conventional attack on the married state, the author laments the subjection of a wife by 'that inconsiderable animal called a husband'. When exploring intimate relationships, artists are necessarily concerned with who is dominant, who is imagined to be psychologically and morally on top. While the physical posture of lovers – a primary indicator of these concerns – is the explicit subject of chapter 2, it is an implicit theme throughout the book.

We trace the development of erotic imagery from the full expression of the tensions in the high renaissance until the late eighteenth century, when the secular spirit of the French Enlightenment called into serious question the relevance and adequacy of vertical imagery as a means of representing human experience generally and erotic desire in particular. Although throughout the

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period our erotic artists usually created images of women engaged in serving the needs of men, they often saw in women – whether imagined as submissive or dominant – the most attractive route to heaven. Sometimes, indeed, the example of Mary the Mediatrix suggested that women offered the only true route. As the focus on genital sexuality intensified during the development of rococo art under the patronage of Louis XV, the assimilation of the desirable mistress to the Virgin, familiar since the Middle Ages, grew increasingly overt. In chapter 7 we explore some of the ways in which artists in the latter half of the eighteenth century sought to reconcile the resulting ambiguities through an amalgamation of spiritual and secular imagery. We examine some notable successes, together with some less happy examples. In our concluding chapter we attempt to clarify our theme by making a tentative excursion beyond our announced chronological limits to give a brief account of the very different imagery of erotic flight in Keats's *Endymion*.

Readers familiar with recent explorations of the history of sexuality will notice that we have preferred to respect the cultural assumptions of our painters and writers rather than to construct for them and wish upon them attitudes and a vocabulary alien to their thinking. Unpersuaded by psychoanalytic approaches to creativity, whose formulae and deterministic view of human capacities seem to us to carry the danger of easy and reductive answers, we try to attend to surfaces. We have assumed that our artists knew what they were up to and – for good or ill – meant what they said in the pictorial or written language of their day. We endeavour to understand that language on its own terms. While we are sometimes adversely critical, we have tried to comment from a standpoint consistent with that of the relevant period. It would seem pointless, in particular, to complain that most of our artists take women's inferiority for granted.

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1 ❋ Sexuality and ascension – finding the way

A popular thirteenth-century fabliau tells of a naive virgin who insisted that she would never marry and who also said publicly, to many astonished listeners, that she had an overwhelming desire to fly through the air like Daedalus.[1] Accordingly she made wings from feathers and wax and attached them to her body and tried to fly, but always in vain. A clerk who had heard her advised that without a tail she could never achieve her aim. The girl believed him and asked for his help, which he readily agreed to give. Having taken her to a bedroom he kissed her more than thirty times. When she asked what he was doing, he replied that he was forming a beak for her. 'Does one make a beak like that?' she asked. 'Yes', he answered, 'but turn over, for I want to make the tail'. After she had adopted an appropriate position on her hands and knees, the clerk entered her 'up to the balls'. When he explained that he was now making the tail, she asked him to push hard to attach it well, for fear that it might otherwise fall off. He did so, and afterwards, as they were resting, promised to finish the job within a year, to which the girl responded that she would not leave him until it was done. The delighted clerk continued his work to such effect that she grew pregnant, which led her to ask in distress how she could possibly fly in such a heavy condition. The clerk responded that she should not complain to him about her state, which was natural, in contrast with her desire to fly, which had been against nature. They then married.

In this version of Gullibility a Prey to Desire, sexuality and ascension are established as polar opposites. The girl's longing to fly is presented as an alternative to the desire for a husband and children. She had hoped to replace a heavy and necessary capitulation to the human condition by an impossible virginal ascension. The fabliau ends with a statement that for the girl the adventure ended well, suggesting that she had acquired wisdom, had learned her lesson. Soaring flight is no substitute for the solidity of ordinary life dependent on sexual activity and a man's leadership.

The essential narrative elements of the fabliau are to be found in many other tales of disguise and seduction. Among the best known is the second story of the *Decameron*, day 4, at the heart of which lies a titillating juxtaposition of secular eroticism and heavenly delight.[2] Boccaccio's development of

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an extended metaphor and his inclusion of a succession of witty double meanings transform the simple polarities of the fabliau into an ironic and ambiguous commentary on the relationship of sexuality to spiritual aspiration. A corrupt friar, Brother Alberto, tricks Lisetta, a simple-minded married woman, into believing that the archangel Gabriel wishes to lie with her. He persuades Lisetta to agree to Gabriel's coming to her in Alberto's body, saying that this would be a great boon to him: while Gabriel is borrowing the body, Alberto's soul will wait in paradise. Lisetta's ready consent allows Alberto to 'fly that night many times without wings', a phrase which in Italian has an amusingly springy rhythm: 'molte volte la notte volò senza ali' (I.487). The next day Alberto assures her that during her encounter with the archangel his soul was transported to a most delicious region, among many 'flowers and roses', but that he knows nothing of what his body was doing. Metaphorically ecstatic during the sexual encounter, Alberto claims to have experienced a true ecstasy. On a later visit to Lisetta, the angel tells her that although lovemaking is a normal celestial activity she is more attractive than any of the females in heaven (I.489). Explicit comparisons with the meeting of Gabriel and Mary (I.484, 485) leave no doubt that the story parodies the annunciation. As in the story of Tristan and Isolde, the messenger in this version adulterously replaces his master.

Both the fabliau and Boccaccio's story are comic, celebrating physical satisfaction and the superior cleverness of the male, gently mocking naive, proud aspirations. The active men in both are clearheaded and in control. Other narratives and visual images, turning the horizontal dimension on its end to disguise fleshly desire as spiritual longing, bear heavier implications. While contemplation of the Virgin Mary's bodily assumption into heaven in a golden mandorla may inspire thoughts of salvation, the hero of tales of courtly love, prone to celebrate the earthly rather than the divine Venus, risks being for ever deprived of his strength. Few works of western art so openly represent the apotheosis of the destructive profane Venus as does a late mediaeval north Italian tray, now in the Louvre (fig. I). Such trays, commonly used by nurses attending women in childbirth, were given as wedding presents and served as gift-offerings for young mothers. Six armed heroes, labelled with their names – Achilles, Tristan, Lancelot, Samson, Paris, Troilus – kneel in a luxuriant garden while the naked figure of Venus hovers above them. Surrounded by a glory in the shape of a mandorla, she is accompanied by two winged cupids, one carrying a bow and a handful of arrows, the other a single arrow. Crowned and imperious, she has a pair of folded, angelic wings attached to her shoulders.

The power of flight is normally an attribute of her son rather than of Venus herself. Although she is sometimes given wings, they usually appear

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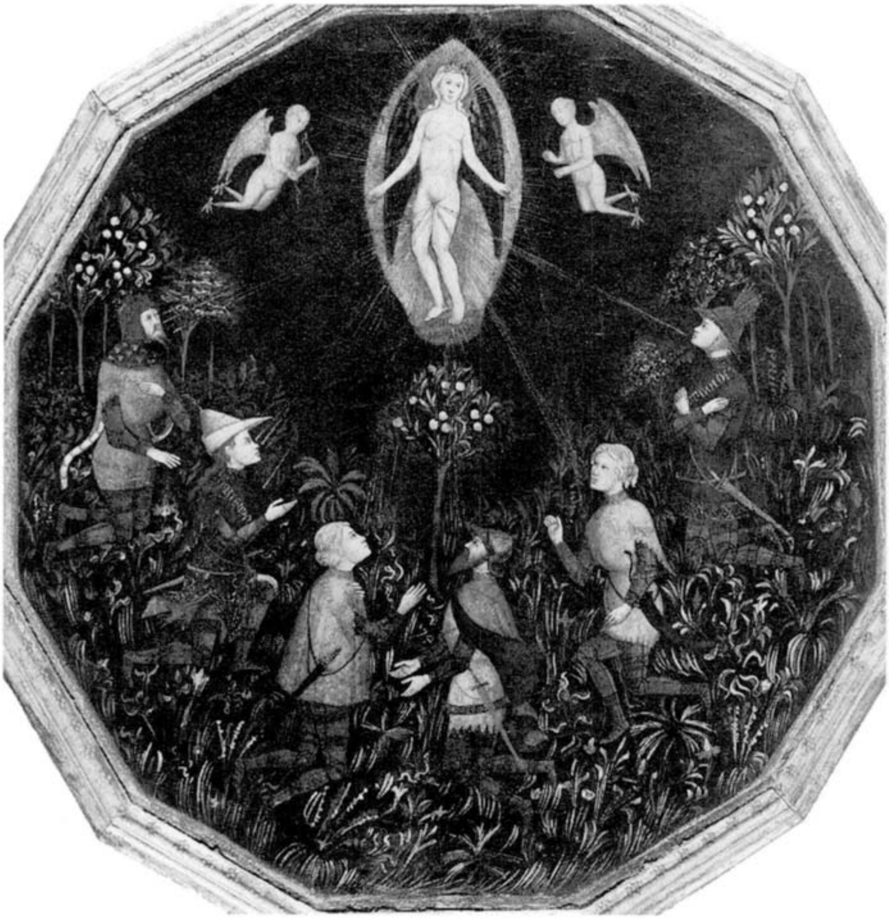

1 Tray, from north Italy (c. 1405). The anonymous painting is attributed to the Master of the Capture of Tarentum.

only when she is doing something out of the ordinary, such as pretending to be her chaste enemy, Diana.[3] Vainly trying to wish away his sexual desire nearly three centuries later, Sir Philip Sidney imagined neutralising the power of Venus by teaching her 'with *Dian's* wings to flie'.[4] If she were to learn that lesson, Venus' occasional and cynical choice of disguise would become fixed as enduring captivity in the form of her antithesis. The uncommon wings in fig. 1 – decidedly not those of Diana – create a strong sense of threat. In the more familiar iconography, differences in the portrayal of Venus and of Cupid allow a lover to lay blame on the mischievous young male for painful, sudden attacks of love. Although Venus may encourage the destructive work, she is not herself directly implicated in the wounding; the separation of roles leaves it possible to imagine her hands as clean. Negative effects of love can be attributed to Cupid, so freeing the lover to celebrate the gifts of the

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goddess herself. By giving Cupid's wings to Venus, the painter disconcertingly combines angelic charity with a display of sexual power. Her whole body glows with light, while golden lines representing especially powerful rays are drawn from her airborne pubis to the upturned faces of the men below.[5] The rays are similar to those with which the planetary Venus sometimes shines in mediaeval tracts on astronomy. More significant, however, is their iconographic identity with rays which, in annunciation pictures, commonly proceed from the Holy Ghost to the belly of Mary. The reversal of direction – from a profane female figure rather than towards a divinely chosen one, from the source of pleasure rather than towards the locus of procreation – teasingly plays with a reversal of values further developed by iconographic analogies to the other extreme of Mary's life, her bodily assumption. The mandorla enveloping Venus is identical with that in which Mary sometimes rises to heaven. In this context, suggesting a further inversion of values, the rays form a profane equivalent of the tongues of flame descending to the disciples at Pentecost. The theme of reversal is again extended by Venus' downward-pointing arms, expressing union with earthly things rather than the passive acceptance of divine power implied in some similarly arranged assumption pictures (see, for example, fig. 36).[6]

Because of its exceptionally open representation of sexual desire, the tray has often caught the attention of commentators.[7] Van Marle thought of it as 'crudely indecent' and as representing the cause of all man's miseries and failures, while Loomis saw in it a harbinger of the renaissance interest in pagan culture.[8] Cantelupe, keen to find the painting spiritually positive, believes that it dignifies passion by showing the victory of love over the martial urge represented by the six armed heroes.[9] Although he notices the sinister clawed feet of the cupids, he makes no attempt to reconcile these attributes with his positive sense of the implied message to a young bride or mother. Despite the ambiguity of its morality, the painting is very literary, inviting the viewer to remember the stories of the heroes, verbalise the content, and draw appropriate conclusions. Whatever the intended effect on the young woman who was to receive it, there seems to be little reason to interpret the scene as other than an expression of the dominant power of sexual love. Barely distinguished, the two claw-footed cupids do not represent, as pairs of cupids often do in mediaeval, renaissance, and baroque art, the sacred and profane powers of eros. Hovering like attendant demons, they parody Mary's guardian angels, duplicating and reinforcing the incarnation of profane love. All the heroes are men who have been brought to grief by its power, the fallen nature of which is suggested by the fruitful apple trees in the garden. The profane flying Venus, falsely deified, falsely crowned by her courtly lovers, usurps the role of Mary. The gap between lovers, a region often inviting free and joyous

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movement, is crossed and partially negated by the intense, stiff, golden beams. Looking longingly upwards, the men are rigid, paralysed, crushed into submission, and kept close to the surface of the earth. Despite the image of flight above, the static scene suggests no life-enhancing possibility of ascension.

Unease generated by the opposition of ascent and sexuality is strongly felt in Spenser's sonnet sequence, the *Amoretti*, in which he explores the painful development of his relationship with Elizabeth Boyle, his wife-to-be. The tension is especially strong in a group of sonnets – 72, 73, and 76 – which celebrate, though uneasily, the partial fulfilment of love. In sonnet 72 Spenser makes brilliant use of the Petrarchan form to explore the pursuit of divine bliss through the pathway of the profane body. The speaker is nevertheless unable to disguise from himself his awareness that capitulation to the appeal of the flesh goes counter to the scale of values implicit in the neoplatonic succession of body, spirit, mind. The clogging of spirit by flesh is a conventional image of neoplatonic love poetry, as is its opposite, the topos of the all-satisfying mistress who makes spiritual aspiration redundant. Less conventional is Spenser's reduplicated account of his failure to ascend the spiritual ladder. The opening quatrains are arranged as a symmetrical pair of pulsating up-and-down movements: twice his words rise, twice they sink back. In each case two lines rise, ending respectively on 'sky' and 'light', only to be followed by two more that fall to 'mortality' and the nostalgia of a forgotten journey to heaven. At the end of the octave, as he grows painfully conscious of loss, he reaches a nadir which ironically coincides with the word 'flight':

> Oft when my spirit doth spred her bolder winges,
>   In mind to mount up to the purest sky:
>   it down is weighd with thoght of earthly things
>   and clogd with burden of mortality,
> Where when that soverayne beauty it doth spy,
>   resembling heavens glory in her light:
>   drawne with sweet pleasures bayt, it back doth fly,
>   and unto heaven forgets her former flight.[10]

In sonnet 3, the last of the introductory poems of the sequence, he had rejoiced that his beloved's 'soverayne beauty' had raised him from baseness by kindling 'heavenly fyre' in his spirit.[11] At the turn after the octave in sonnet 72 the lover grows aware that her sovereign beauty, like that of the crowned Venus on the tray, offers the possibility of access to a heaven more attractive than anything he had thus far imagined. Eschewing the journey to celestial regions, he therefore remains below, celebrating his delight in human sexuality. That all is nevertheless not quite well is implied by the less than ecstatic