

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## *Introduction*

This is a book about ways of loving, under changing cultural, political, and economic circumstances, as expressed in poetry from Sir Philip Sidney to John Milton. I have chosen to begin it in the last decades of the sixteenth century and to end it a hundred years later, because this is an especially critical period of cultural transition – of transition in society generally and more particularly in prevailing attitudes toward love. When I began working on this book, I meant to limit it to secular love poetry in relation to cultural change. But poems, like facts, have a way of forcing their own terms on the reader. The result is a book that is somewhat less neat and orderly than I first intended, but hopefully truer to its subject. It ranges “downward” to consider such matters as the lovers’ sexuality and material circumstances and “upward” to touch on their highest aspirations and ideals.

It proved simply too limiting not to consider the relations between secular and sacred love. Writers at the time thought there were important connections, as well as differences; indeed, it is hard to see how these two loves could fail to intersect in some way. Broadly defined, religious love is love to which people give – or believe they ought to give – the highest priority. Notionally, the highest allegiance of most men and women in the period was to the Christian God; actually (as in other times) their allegiances might vary considerably from the professed ideal. Whether or not a particular poet loved God first, or something else, nonetheless his subordinate loves, for persons and for things (or for himself) were bound to be colored by his ultimate allegiance.

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)

As I worked with the poetry, it gradually became apparent that a system of biblical metaphors, which writers used to describe relations between men and women, between created beings and God, and between God and his Church, is especially revealing, helping us not only to understand literary works and their interrelationships but also some of the attached cultural and psychological attitudes. An ancient tradition, which includes the Song of Songs, the Pauline Epistles, and the Book of Revelation, as well as many succeeding commentaries, springs from the originating verse in Genesis: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).<sup>1</sup> An intricate system of imagery exfoliates from this earliest verse on love and marriage: a system that comments on it, interacts with it, and sometimes extends it into new areas of reference. In the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and in later theological, devotional, and literary traditions – as well as in the marriage service – this verse commenting on the marriage of Adam and Eve develops into a rich system of metaphors connected with human love, divine love, and Christian community, which I term the biblical marriage trope. This trope in turn proves, in Milton’s case especially, to have revealing connections with the broad trend toward the secularization of western culture, which gained decisive momentum during the seventeenth century.

I have chosen to discuss the poets on which I draw sequentially, beginning with Sir Philip Sidney. So the book begins on a largely secular note. I take Sidney to be an important representative of older ways of thinking about love. In particular, he represents the central traditions of courtly and Petrarchan love, which converge and combine in the love poetry of the Elizabethan period. But he is also among the first poets to discover – much to his discomfort, if not his virtual self-destruction – that the older ways of loving were no longer satisfactory to a man in his historical situation. As Thomas Kuhn has shown with respect to scientific revolutions, discrepancies, dissatisfactions, and a general feeling that something is vaguely amiss, generally precede the working-out of a new set of explanations.<sup>2</sup> Much the same is true of other cultural systems

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

and of inward psychological attitudes, which may gradually become incompatible with changing circumstances, until ones that work better are developed to replace them. With regard to love, Sidney was not only a last brilliant exemplar of the older, aristocratic Petrarchan tradition, but an important precursor of a century-long process of change and reinvention.

A pivotal figure in the reinvention of love is John Donne. Chapter 2 is devoted to his secular love poems, especially the *Songs and Sonets*. Donne began with attitudes molded by the Petrarchan tradition, with which he struggled for a good part of his life. Under great social and psychological pressures (partly attributable to his difficult personal situation in relation to society) he invented a new kind of private love: idealized, Romantic, mutual, and transcendent in feeling. This new love, however, was so far ahead of its time culturally that it is questionable whether even Donne himself could have understood all its potential implications. In his last years, his thoughts turned in other directions. It took two centuries for events (including the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Romanticism) to catch up with Donne – and more than three centuries before his love poems could be appreciated as they have been by readers in the modern period.

Donne also wrote some of the strongest devotional poems in the language. In chapter 3, I take up some of the difficulties he had in transforming his early loves for “profane mistresses” and for his wife into the sacred love of God. Some of the same personal characteristics and attitudes that made Donne so innovative as a lover of women – among them his active, insistent masculinity – proved impediments to his loving God, but also were sources for much of the conflicted, paradoxical, baroque power of his best divine poems.

In chapters 4 and 5, I consider the sacred love poems of George Herbert and Richard Crashaw. These two poets offer instructive contrasts with Donne. Herbert is unable, or unwilling, to carry the biblical marriage trope to its logical conclusion, with respect to either the Church or his own soul. Instead, at the point where courtship gives place to consummation and marriage he substitutes another human

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)

relationship, that of parent and child. The result is an influential unsexing of sacred verse. In contrast with both Donne and Herbert, Crashaw revels in assuming the role of the Bride, which the marriage trope necessarily imposes on poets who employ it. Donne's masculinity and Herbert's sense of patriarchal superiority contrast with Crashaw's willing "femininity." Crashaw happily uses women as intermediaries and resigns himself to their traditionally passive and self-sacrificial role. In all three writers, the love of God is expressed in terms of various human relationships, and is emotionally colored by them.

In chapter 6 I return to earth to examine the secular love poetry of Thomas Carew. Like Donne, Carew was subjected to heavy psychological pressures by his difficult family situation and by society. But, because he had the advantage of writing a generation later than Donne, he was better able to incorporate changing historical circumstances and social interactions into his vision of love, and to find a more practical solution. Where Donne invented a new kind of love that idealizes the privacy of the loving couple and rejects the material and social worlds, Carew invented a love that makes a place for itself in the daily transactions of society by imitating the new economic mobility just coming to the fore in England's agricultural marketplace. As Donne validates what would eventually become the Romantic ideal of the loving couple, who perforce retreat from the world and set up magical walls against it, Carew validates the more pragmatic, market-driven notion of the individual lover who serves his (or her) own freedom and happiness by replacing courtly loyalty with libertine mobility. Although libertinism was not new, Carew gave it a new kind of ethical justification, which he borrowed from the progressive thinking of such New-Scientific "improvers" in the field of agriculture as Samuel Hartlib.

As Donne provides the center of gravity for the earlier part of this study, Milton is the center of gravity of its last part. Chapter 7 considers the question of Milton's versions of the love of God and of the Church, especially as revealed by his handling of the marriage trope. For Milton, sacred love is so zealous and

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

vehement that it may often appear in the form of hatred or rejection. Many readers have been disturbed by the violent “bigotry” of his writings. More recently, others have approved his revolutionary fervor. Milton was temperamentally unable to accept the tropes of the Church as a loving Bride and as a universal Mother. Instead, he provides his readers with a new model of sacred love, in which the Church and other cultural institutions have no part. His is a love always in danger of individuation and isolation. In Milton’s prose and in *Paradise Lost*, divine love borrows from tradition but at the same time cuts itself loose from traditional and communal norms. In this regard, Milton is not only a late exponent of Christian love, bringing it down into the modern world and acclimating it to its new circumstances, but an early precursor of Modernist and – more notably – Postmodernist ideological zeal and political commitment.

In chapter 8, I discuss the paradox that Milton was famous throughout the eighteenth century and long afterward as the patron of loving, companionate marriage, but that he was equally widely known as the Great Divorcer. There is an intimate connection in his writings between love and divorce – as there is between divine love and divine hatred. Uniquely for his time, Milton proposed a doctrine of divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. His views of marital compatibility and incompatibility, which are carried over implicitly into *Paradise Lost*, prove difficult, perhaps impossible, to reconcile with his fundamentally Christian ideas concerning grace and freedom. Adam and Eve are an exemplary pair who represent a new ideal of love and marriage – an ideal remarkably similar to Donne’s in some ways but far more influential – that is based on a kind of occult natural supernaturalism rather than on Christian or on rational principles. It aspires to its own version of eternal transcendence. In *Paradise Lost*, as in the *Songs and Sonets*, companionate love and marriage take on the heavy burden of assuaging loneliness, curing alienation, and sheltering the loving couple against the assaults of a hostile world. Society, the extended family, the patronage network, even God and the

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Church, no longer have effective power to deal with the burgeoning psychosocial pressures of cultural change upon love.

Since my topic is large, I should begin by remarking on a few things this book is *not* about. Inevitably I touch on desire, sexuality, gender roles, dominance and submission, feminism, patriarchy, and other matters related to love of great topical interest. I do so only insofar as my argument takes me in these various directions. Love remains my central concern, not the varieties of “sexual politics.” I should also say that my concern is almost entirely limited to the love of male poets for women and for God or the world. I have bounded my discussion in this way because the subject is broad enough, if not already too broad. I am confident that many other scholars, more capable than I in these areas, will continue to study women poets and various other questions related to feminism and to gender theory, with which I am only indirectly or intermittently concerned. I have often profited from reading such work – as I hope will be evident in the following chapters – but I am not primarily concerned to address these ongoing discourses directly.<sup>3</sup>

Because my focus is on a selection of love poets who were all men, and also because I sometimes speak in terms of seventeenth-century perceptions, I have often written “he” where it might have seemed more politic to have written the now generally preferred form, “he or she.” I have done so deliberately – though not without considerable thought, frequent hesitation, and concern not to be misinterpreted – as a way of speaking more honestly and responsively to what this book is about than the mere pretense of “correct” usage. The question of whether men and women love or desire in just the same way is vexed and complicated. I have not attempted to enter into it. Certainly there are culturally induced differences between men and women – differences which in turn differ in various times and places – if not underlying biological differences. The peculiar psychological quirks and habits of male love poets, as expressed in their work, are often clearly different from those of female love poets. It would have been dishonest and confusing had I always written “she or he,” in contexts

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

where what I really mean is only or chiefly “he.”<sup>4</sup> I hope, nonetheless, that women readers can profit from what I have to say about poet lovers who, from their point of view, represent the “other.”

In the same way, I know there are “class” limitations in choosing to write about the particular poets I have chosen. They are by no means all courtiers, all equally well-born or privileged, all Protestants, or all similar in personality; but (I realize) they all are members of a privileged few who attended Oxford or Cambridge and formed the loosely knit group of lettered men who (if only because of their university degrees) called themselves nobles or gentry. We might wish that the seventeenth century were more like ours, but we cannot change it now. I have confined my study to these particular writers for several reasons. One is that I find major poets more satisfying to work with than minor ones, and these were among the major poets of their time. Another is that “major” poets are likely to be more than usually sensitive to cultural change. They are exceptionally good as poets, in part, not only because they are “universal” in some mystical sense, but because universality – which I take to be the ability to speak strongly to readers of other centuries and cultures – is likely to arise (paradoxically) from unusual responsiveness to particular personal and historical circumstances. Other significant markers of cultural change may, of course, be found in ballads and broadsides, as well as in the popular theater, but I leave those fields to others.

It is with particular regret that I have omitted consideration of Spenser, Shakespeare and Jonson, but no one can undertake to do everything in a book of decent proportions. C. S. Lewis has suggested that Spenser and Shakespeare played a critical role in turning love away from courtly origins toward a new ideal of mutual love and courtship leading to marriage.<sup>5</sup> Spenser was perhaps the sanest and most thorough poetic investigator into all the varieties of love.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare, especially in his festive comedies, contributed equally to the new ideal of marriage, even though altogether his views about love were far more complicated and ambiguous than Spenser’s. Love leading

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)

happily to marriage amounts to only a corner of what Shakespeare has to say on the subject, but, being Shakespeare, it is a very capacious corner.<sup>7</sup> I have chosen not to write in detail about Shakespeare or Spenser at this time for several reasons. First, because critics have already written so much that is to the point, and I hope readers will join me in preferring to avoid a long labor of summary. Second, because close rereading of either poet would require a book in itself, or at least several large chapters in this one. And third, because Spenser, despite his amazing complexity, predominantly represents what I would call the “official” position – that is, society’s and Christianity’s position – on love and marriage, a position with which most of us are already familiar. The curve of development that I undertake to describe would have been further complicated by including them, but I do not think that it would have been fundamentally altered.

I should add that this is not *primarily* a sociological or a historical study of love. I have used my knowledge of sociology and history, often tacitly, but I have not attempted to provide a study that is highly detailed in either area. Such work has been done by others, notably by Michel Foucault in such general works as *The Archeology of Language* (1972) and *The Order of Things* (1970), as well as in his unfinished study of human sexuality. Nearer to the present subject, Lawrence Stone, in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977), has written a ground-breaking if controversial work, which has since been much built upon, disputed, and revised by others.<sup>8</sup> Of course I refer constantly to history, biography, and practice as well as to poetry. For that reason, a study of this kind would be impossible without reliance on the archival work of traditional historians and biographers and the provocations of recent cultural historians. My own hope, however, is to contribute to the ongoing multi-disciplinary conversation something new chiefly about what the poems themselves reveal concerning changing attitudes toward love. As Lauro Martines has argued, poems are also pieces of history, fragments of the past, although they are ordinarily “oblique and coded.”<sup>9</sup> Much of this book is therefore a work of what some have called



Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

“decoding,” in the light of cultural, historical, and political circumstances. I would prefer, however, to call it a work of interpretation.

As the last but most important of these preliminary caveats, I propose to offer no detailed theory to account for the precise mechanisms at work in what I consider to be the most interesting point of investigation for literary-cultural studies of a historical kind: examination of the interface between broad social, political, and economic practices and individual psychologies as reflected in literary texts. That culture, poetry, and the perceptions of individuals effect one another is obvious; but to my mind no one has yet given a full and satisfactory account of the mechanisms involved. Where many great thinkers have partly failed, it would be presumptuous of me to proffer a complete solution. But I hope this book may point toward further work that might be done to investigate how poetry can help us understand more clearly what goes on at the critical juncture of personal psychological processes with larger cultural forces. Out of the collision between the social and the psychological our future develops. In turn, such investigations throw new light on the poetry – not the least of a literary critic’s concerns.

Marxists and New Historicists of various persuasions have proposed a number of theories, in recent years generally more sophisticated and workable than the old Marxist model (sometimes now called vulgar), which argued that all culture is merely a superstructure built on determining material economic events. Nevertheless an unexamined “materialism” usually continues to shape our newer models, with the resulting frequent conviction that culture shapes people but people cannot shape culture. Postmodernists of many kinds continue to fall into less obviously materialist yet similarly problematic assumptions: for example, that we are entirely the prisoners of our systems of discourse, or that it is only possible for a reader to read what he already knows how to read.<sup>10</sup> Such theses, like Zeno’s paradox, are readily “proven” yet fly in the face of practical experience.

Many theories of this kind, fashionably “materialist” in their

Cambridge University Press

0521450306 - The Reinvention of Love: Poetry, Politics and Culture from Sidney to Milton

Anthony Low

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

*Reinvention of love*

assumptions, continue to have the weakness that they allow insufficiently for the possibility that people can change “the world” just as “the world” changes people. In Samuel Hazo’s elegant formulation:

the world we dream  
is what the world becomes,  
and what the world’s become  
is there for anyone’s re-dreaming.<sup>11</sup>

If Milton had not existed, the world might have turned out to be just the same as it is – but then again, it might not have. To take the thought experiment further, if none of the poets in this study had existed – or if no poets at all had existed – things would surely have turned out differently. But the hypotheses become increasingly absurd. These writers were essential parts of the cultural fabric of their times. At the least, Donne and Milton and their fellows can help us to understand *how* things have turned out. Without consenting to the particulars of his final thesis, I would heartily agree with Owen Barfield’s contention, well supported by modern science as well as by philosophical arguments, that those who see change in human history as “a formless process determined by the chance impact of events” are themselves victims of “the idolatry of the age of literalness” – that is, of the illusion that the phenomena we perceive are identical with the underlying physical reality, that they are purely objective, purely material, unchangeable “things.”<sup>12</sup>

In place of one-way models of cause-and-effect, which assume that events determine consciousness and never the other way around, I shall rather propose what seems to me immediately evident, from common observation, that the interchange between material and psychological processes operates in both directions. We change our circumstances; our circumstances change us. Our changing perceptions or ways of seeing things, and in turn our changing language or discourse, determine how we behave, indeed they determine what it is easily possible for us to see and do. How we behave, what we see and do, in turn gradually change our perceptions, our language, our systems of