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An Excerpt

“There is No True Sexual Relationship”: Courtly Love in Thomas Carew’s Lyrics

I . Thomas Carew and His Lyrics

Speaking of 17th century English poetry, Thomas Carew is never classified as a great literary-figure, and most of his works are buried under layers and layers of history. However, today we can still hear this minor poet's name because he “live[s] on imperishably in a few perfect lyrics” (242). One feature of Carew’s lyrics is that the scope of his subject matter is quite limited: “[t]he majority of Carew’s poems deal with love; Celia is either directly addressed or she is the implied reader” (242). In his poems, Carew often depicts a male speaker showing great affections for a lady (often named Celia), and complimenting the latter’s beauty with great efforts. Carew demonstrates his craftsmanship and wins him critics’ praise due to the artistic portrayal of the Lady’s beauty.

The representation of the janus-faced lady and the repetition of the theme of love have long been neglected by critics and are crying out for in-depth psychoanalytic interpretations. I believe that if we read Carew’s lyrics from a psychoanalytic perspective, we can have a better grasp at his strange poetic exercise, realizing that the courtly love expressed in his work is nothing but just a fantasy.

II. “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Goddess”

I propose to study Carew’s work by drawing upon Lacan's and Žižek's discussions on courtly love, sexual fantasy, and obsession. What is courtly love? In our common parlance it

is a concept and a practice that “developed in the twelfth century among the troubadours of southern France, but soon spread into the neighboring countries and in one way or another colored the literature of most of Western Europe for centuries” (Parry 3-4).

However, it is this understanding of courtly love as a historical construct that has a great impact on the western culture that Lacan aims to overthrow. He says we should see as it “as an altogether refined way of making up for the absence of sexual relation by pretending that it is we who put an obstacle to it” (*Feminine Sexuality* 141). “Sexual relation” is of course an incorrect translation of the original French “rapport sexual.” Lacan does not deny the existence of physical coitus (who would?); what he denies is the existence of a true sexual rapport, the harmonious union of thoughts and spirits between two individuals engaged in sexual act. Sexual rapports are impossible because “men and women desire different objects and desire them in different ways” (Easthope 92); put simply, “[w]hat we do in any relationship is either try to turn the other into what we think we desire or turn ourselves into that which we think the other desires, but this can never exactly map onto the other’s desire” (Homer 106.)

To conceal the horrible fact that true sexual rapport does not exist, we—“men,” to be more precise—have to pretend that “it is we who put an obstacle to it;” it is we who make it impossible. One way of accomplishing this is by “transform[ing] her [woman] into a spiritual essence, an absolute category” (Easthope 92), “*The Woman*, where the definite article stands for the universal” (Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality* 144). Such spiritualization of woman notably takes place in courtly love, in which the Lady “loses concrete features” (Žižek 89) and is “elevated to a spiritual, ethereal Ideal” (90). The courtly poet is like a doctor who, by using his imagination as the knife, performs plastic surgery on the lady, beautifies her whole figure, with the primary aim of turning her into a goddess. Since she is a goddess, the knight can never have her as his soul mate. The lady is *inaccessible*. By creating this inaccessible lady, the poet can “preserve the belief that, beyond her refusal of carnal pleasure, there [is] the

promise of a sexual rapport” (Leupin 103). The idealization of women, thus, is “fundamentally narcissistic in character (Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 151)—for men do it for their own benefits.

In Carew’s lyrics, he presents a Lady that has undergone this kind of operation

III. “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing”

But it would be ridiculous if we maintain that the Lady in courtly love is always a divine, kind goddess. In “Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,” Žižek tells us that the Lady can also a very a horrible woman: The Lady is “by no means a warm, compassionate, understanding fellow-creature,” rather, she is “cold, distanced” (89). Žižek further explains that the Lady is “as far as possible from any kind of purified spirituality: she functions as an inhuman partner in the sense of radical Otherness which is wholly incommensurable with our needs and desires; as such, she is simultaneously a kind of automaton, a machine which utters meaningless demands at random”(90). The poor servant who is demanded by the cruel Lady, surprisingly, is the knight, the lover. He is subjected to those “senseless, outrageous, impossible, arbitrary ordeals” (90) imposed by his master, the Lady. In Foucauldian terms, the power relationship between the knight and the Lady is asymmetrical.

Interestingly, like the ideal lady, the robot-like Lady is also manufactured through the technique of *sublimation*. According to Lacan, “[b]y means of a form of sublimation, poetic creation consists in positing an object I can only describe as terrifying, an inhuman partner” (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 150). As Žižek comments on Lacan’s conceptualization of sublimation, the aim of sublimation is not to “‘raise the price’ of an object by rendering access to it more difficult” (96)—we do not idealize the Lady in order to make her more desirable. “What Lacan means by sublimation, on the contrary, is shifting the libido from the void of the ‘*unserviceable*’ Thing to some concrete, material object of need that assumes a sublime quality the moment it occupies the place of the Thing” (96; original emphasis).

Originally, the lady, like every human being, is just a “common, everyday object” (95); however, by means of sublimation, she is elevated to the position of the Thing, a “forever-lost object” which “compels the subject to keep searching and circling round it without daring or being able to attain it (Chen 107). Because the Lady occupies the place of the thing, the lover regards her as a lost object that can never be found nor be (re)possessed. In another word, like the divine Lady, the cruel Lady is also a “sublime object” characterized by its inaccessibility.

Both the divine Lady and the cruel Lady are created for the same reason. According to Easthope, the superiority of the Lady over the knight “provides an obstacle” which “enables men to disavow the impossibility of the sexual relation” (92-93). Since the Lady master is so powerful, violent, and *sadist*, the servant-knight dares not to approach her, not to mention sabotaging her on bed. Men created this fictional asymmetrical power relationship so as to put another hindrance to the fulfillment of sexual union, as if without such hindrance, the lady would become accessible and true sex union will be possible. By creating this obstacle, men again can turn away from the fact that a true sexual relation is intrinsically impossible.

Carew creates this kind of *femme fatale* in his poems

IV. Or Woman as Whore

However, besides the *femme fatale* and the divine Lady, a third kind of woman also appears in Carew’s poetry, but only in one poem, “A Rapture,” the most erotic poem of the seventeenth century....

In this long poem, the male speaker seems to finally seize the janus-faced mistress who has never yielded to him before. Like a gallant, he asks Celia to go to “Elysium” (a synonym for paradise) with him.... Carew’s Elysium is the brothel par excellence. Women become whores here....

The biggest mystery now is that the idealized Lady is totally turned into a whore. To

solve this puzzling riddle, we shall turn to Lacan's conceptualization of the obsessive. As Bruce Fink explains, an obsessive person is usually a man (119) characterized by his confidence that he is "a whole subject...not as someone who is often unsure of what he is saying or what he wants—in other words, not as someone subject to lack" (122). An obsessive person believes that *he* is self-sufficient, so independent, so that he "refuses to see himself as dependent on the Other, attempting to maintain a fantasmatic relationship with a cause of desire that is dependent on no one—hence his predilection for masturbation" (122). The obsessive denies that fact it is the Other who triggers and satisfies his desire. Even if when an obsessive makes love with a real person, he always images that his partner is just a tool that he uses to enjoy the pleasure of sex, not to face the fact that the partner causes him to desire, and that the partner has his or her own desire. Consequently, the obsessive tends to "[create] two classes of women: the Madonna and the whore, the mother who can be loved and adored versus the seductive woman who embodies *object a*, who cannot be transformed into a maternal love object" (123). Both kinds of woman are not human beings; Madonna arouses only our love, not our desire; the whore only arouses our desire, not our love. The latter is not a subject who contained the *object a*; instead, she is *object a*. She is the cause of desire; she has no desire; thus, making love with her is not a problem.

The splitting of woman into Madonna and whore of course reminds us of the splitting of woman into the ideal Lady and the femme fatale in courtly love. Needless to say, the divine Lady and Madonna are the same figure, for they can only be loved and adored but cannot be desired nor sexually enjoyed. Thus, actually, the obsessive male in his mind creates three kinds of women: the ideal, the cruel, and the promiscuous. Then, the next crucial question is why the obsessive needs to create the prostitute as one of the elements that form the lady-femme fatale-whore trinity. I would like to argue that the whore is the *third* which not just intrudes in and interferes with but actually sustains the relationship between the virgin and the man. In her analysis of several European male directors' movies, Fabio Vighi points

that the “reference to whore *qua* third is what allows the male hero to sustain his relationship to the virginal wife” (47). To create an illusion that the couple’s (sexual) relationship is healthy, that there must be a complete communion between them, man introduces the whore as the agency that prevents him from achieving that imaginary perfect relationship with his wife: “If the whore does not exist and control me, I can give all my love to my wife and have a full sex with her.” In other words, the whore is another stumbling stone we put before us to trip ourselves, to prevent us from accomplishing a true sexual relationship, to stop us from acknowledging that a true sexual rapport is nothing but just a myth....

Nevertheless, what is so intriguing is that even though Celia is turned into an object, totally neutralized and annulled, the obsessive speaker is still afraid of having a full sex with her. If we target our analysis “not so much to the content of utterance—*what* is said—than to its form—*how* it is said—”(Dean 14), we will find that the “form” of “A Rapture” makes a full sex between the lady and her licentious lover impossible. This impossibility shall not surprise us as long as we bear two things in mind. First, the obsessive is the kind of person who “deliberately ignores the unconscious...that discourse that we do not and cannot control...[and] make us say the opposite of what we consciously meant, and do the opposite of what we consciously intended to do” (Fink 122). In other words, the obsessive is a “conscious thinker;” he holds onto Descartes’s formulation: “I am thinking, therefore I am” (Fink 259). Orgasm frightens the obsessive because it “usually leads, at least momentarily, to a cessation of thoughts, to a brief end to thinking” (124). Second, although on the surface fantasy is where sexual desires are freely expressed and satisfied, in fact it “is a favored spot for the most primitive *defensive reactions*” (Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand 27; emphasis added). In “A Rapture,” a sexual fantasy, Carew prevents the obsessive speaker from losing himself in orgasm by creating some defense mechanisms....

V. The Origin of Carew’s Courtly Love [omitted]

VI. Conclusion

My paper not only unearths a marginalized 17th century poet, Thomas Carew, but also an intriguing theme in his work: courtly love. This theme is deeply inscribed in his oeuvre because he was a courtier, and the court of King Charles and his wife promoted the ideology of spiritual love. Carew's poetry reflects and supports that ideology. However, I have avoided to overhistorize the theme so as not to overlook its psychological richness. I have found that Lacan's conceptualization of courtly love makes the psychological drama in Carew's poems understandable. The Lady is sublimated and becomes a cruel sadist and a divine goddess at the same time. Although the lover seems like the lady's poor servant, actually it is he who stages the unbalanced relation between them. By idealizing the lady, elevating her to the level of the thing, *the poet can veil the fact there is no true sexual relationship, disavowing courtly love's structural impossibility.*

Besides the janus-faced lady, in "A Rapture," I have found another type of woman: the whore. I have proved that actually the whore-virgin-femme fatale trinity results from the lover's obsessive psychic structure: unable to deal with real women, the obsessive has no choice but to classify women into three kinds of non-humans. Thanks to the whore *qua* third, the obsessive's illusionary perfect relationship with the divine mistress can be maintained, not ruptured. However, we also need to pity the whore, for she is treated as a sex toy by the obsessive lover; he is just using her—as an object—to masturbate. But the person who deserves more pity is the obsessive who, although he is just dealing an object with a human figure, still cannot fully enjoy and lose himself in sex because of his insistence and "dependence" on and indulgence in consciousness. Sex is what forces the obsessive to face the unconscious.

Now, integrating all previous points, I can reach the final concluding point—a point that Lacan did not make clear—is that *courtly love is exclusively the obsessive—not a*

hysteric—man’s fundamental fantasy. A fantasy that structures his relationship with women. If so, then, courtly love is not just a practice originated in ancient France; it is an ideology that works across time and space and still can be traced in today’s relationship between the obsessive men and women. Critic Walter claims that Carew’s “lyrics had their accepted and recognized place in the relationship between men and women” (212). However, this remark belittles Carew’s lyrics. In fact, Carew’s lyrics demonstrate what that relation is all about; the relationship between the lover and Celia is the relationship between every obsessive man and his partner. Courtly love is a trans-historical obsessive fantasy that coordinates his relationship with women, or to borrow Žižek’s words, even today, “the logic of courtly love still defines the parameters within which the two sexes relate to each other” (89). Then, the biggest task for the obsessive is to take up his courage and traverse this ultimate fantasy....

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