CUPID

in Early Modern Literature and Culture

JANE KINGSLEY-SMITH

CAMBRIDGE

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Introduction

In John Donne's lyric poem 'Loves Deitie' the speaker expresses nostalgia for a time before Cupid:

> I long to talke with some old lovers ghost,
> Who dyed before the god of Love was borne;
> I cannot thinke that hee, who then loved most,
> Sunke so low, as to love one which did scorne.[1]

Unrequited passion is attributed to an essentially sadistic deity. Yet it is the cultural reinvention of Cupid specific to early modern England that is ultimately to blame. Love's natural 'Correspondencie' (line 12) has been replaced by passion for one who scorns through the influence of Petrarchism, whilst his 'Tyrannie' has been enhanced by an expansion in divine power, perhaps attributable to Calvinism (line 19). The present book argues that Cupid did indeed extend his range of identities (and thence his facility for performing 'cultural work') in early modern England – 'To rage, to lust, to write to, to commend, / All is the purlewe of the God of Love' (lines 17–18) – but that what unites his disparate roles and makes Cupid a controversial, often seductive, figure for poets, dramatists and polemicists alike is his adversarial relationship to English Protestantism. Through this minor love-deity, matters of grave importance to the establishment of the 'true' faith were articulated and debated.

Cupid's sudden cultural ubiquity in England coincided with the aftermath of the Reformation. In *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), Stephen Gosson describes how the Devil, 'feeling such a terrible push, given to his breast by the chaunge of religion' has 'sente over many wanton Italian bookes, which being translated into english, have poysoned the olde maners of our Country with foreine delights ... bre[eding] a desire of fancies & toyes'.[2] As a protagonist in Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* and *Trionfi*, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Italian Senecan tragedy, Cupid might well be accounted one of these 'fancies & toyes' (he was often condemned as 'toyful') and his hostility towards the principles underlying the Reformation can be perceived in two main areas. First, while he was hardly unknown in the medieval period, Cupid became *visually* familiar to an unprecedented extent in sixteenth-century England, his image disseminated via the tapestries and painted cloths, paintings, prints and emblems that circulated throughout Renaissance Europe. Whilst, as Leonard Barkan has shown, the 'power of the image' was fundamental to the transmission and interpretation of paganism in the Renaissance,[3] unlike the other classical deities Cupid's visual appeal was also the means of his power. Not only did his arrows pierce through the eye, he wielded his own beauty as a weapon at a time when English visual culture represented nakedness only in contexts of devotional vulnerability or shame. Moreover, the popular medieval theme of the Court of Love (in which the lover prays before an image of Cupid) now represented the kind of idolatry against which Protestantism defined itself and which it was literally in the process of pulling down. Thus, Cupid threatened to reverse the major achievement of the Reformation: the transition from 'a culture of orality and image' to one based on print; from an intensely visual religion to one devoted to the primacy of 'the invisible, abstract and didactic word'.[4]

At a more basic level, the kinds of desire that Cupid embodied were fundamentally opposed to the 'erotic politics' of English Protestantism. The value that the latter placed on marriage may have redeemed sex as a form of pleasure and mutual amity, but it also placed a far greater emphasis on chastity, without which 'Mariage is but a continuall fornication, sealed with an oath'.[5] Not only was the wife to remain pure for her husband, she was also 'the only delectable object he must desire and behold' – thus marriage partners should be chosen with the utmost care.[6] By contrast, Cupid represents love's blindness, in the sense of its disregard for social hierarchy, and its transience, given that he can remove affection as easily as he imposes it. Though he plays a role in epithalamic poetry and masques, Cupid shows no necessary affinity with marriage and may just as easily inspire the kind of lust that leads to rebellion, murder and suicide.[7] Moreover, the multiplicity that defines Cupidean desire – which may be heteroerotic, but is also homoerotic, pederastic, maternal and incestuous – defies the process (identified as just beginning in this period) by which 'true love was … to domesticate desire and outlaw seduction … to line up sexual preferences as either acceptable or perverse'.[8]

The paradox that defines Cupid's position in early modern culture is that he was deployed to 'police' desire, as Foucault uses that term, suggesting 'not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses'.[9] For example, the figure of a castrating Cupid functioned to condemn sodomitical, male–male relationships but also to warn against the emasculating effects of excessive heterosexual love. As a mythological deity uniquely interested in imposing such passion he is also caught up in what Rebecca Bach calls 'the heterosexual imaginary'. Though some of its defining features were already in place, for example, the emphasis on marriage as the ideal situation for mutually satisfying sex, 'many of that imaginary's apparatuses had yet to be developed' and Cupid could play an important part in this work.[10] More generally, although he operates prior to Foucault's teleology (which begins in the later seventeenth century) we can see in Cupid the beginnings of the 'translation of sex into discourse'.[11]

Nevertheless, the failure to assert 'true love' and to 'domesticate desire' in the early modern period was also contingent upon Cupid (whose name in Latin meant 'desire'). In John Florio's 1598 Italian-English dictionary, '*Cupido*' is defined as 'the god of love or lust'. Thirteen years later, in the expanded edition, he is 'the god of lust or love'.[12] The moral uncertainty surrounding erotic desire appears more explicitly in *Cupido*'s linguistic derivatives. The term 'concupiscence', for example, was used from 1340 onwards to mean covetousness, 'libidinous desire, sexual appetite, lust'.[13] 'Cupidity' seems to have been an early modern coinage, again signifying 'ardent desire, inordinate longing or lust'.[14] But if Florio was more inclined to see Cupid as 'lust' in 1611, he needed to keep 'love' in play, and in this respect Cupid's mythological ambiguity (his capacity for imposing both romantic and carnal passion) reflects a larger linguistic problem. As Catherine Belsey has demonstrated, 'love' and 'lust' remained mostly interchangeable until well into the seventeenth century.[15] In *L'Academie française* (*The French Academie*, 1577), Pierre de La Primaudaye suggests that desire for the good (what he calls 'Love') may also be called '*Cupiditie, Lusting*, or *Coveting*' but 'because this affection is so out of square in this our corrupt nature, these names are commonly taken more in the evill then in the good part'.[16]

If Cupid's name reinforced the difficulty of distinguishing between love and lust so too did his physical attributes and the multiple forms in which he appeared. By the latter, I do not mean the *erotes, amorini* and *putti* that feature in classical mythology, and thence in both Italian Renaissance painting and English poetry, but the multiple incarnations of a desire-producing deity. Since Plato's division of Cupid into two, Cicero had expanded that number to three, Ficino four and Boccaccio at least six.[17] Visual attributes were used to distinguish between them. For example, the Neoplatonic Eros was generally considered to be sighted: in a painting by Lucas Cranach he removes the blindfold associated with his profane incarnation whilst standing on the complete works of Plato.[18] The Cosmogonic Cupid was often imagined astride a globe and holding a fish and a flower rather than threatening Creation with his darts. Nevertheless, an elaborate mythographic tradition, extending from the fifth to the late sixteenth centuries, had reinterpreted Cupid's most iconic features to the point of meaninglessness, with the effect that one version might easily blur into the other. For example, blindness usually suggested sin and shame but it might also signify 'the awesomeness of divine decrees which utterly confound humanity, leaving it infant-like and in the dark …'[19] Cupid's wreath of roses suggests either his Lucretian domination over nature or his lechery, since the rose 'blushes at the outrage to modesty and pricks with the sting of sin'.[20] Wings signify his divinity as a pagan god or his identification with the Christian angel, but they are also symptomatic of flightiness, moral errancy and infidelity.[21]

In Cupid's confrontation with an opposite, this hermeneutic difficulty was supposedly resolved. But when Cupid shared a stage with Diana, goddess of chastity, the fact that they were both armed with arrows and required to preside over weddings and the marriage-bed could create an awkward similarity between the two. Hence, the Triumph of Chastity might inadvertently run up against the epithalamium, as it does in Robert White's masque *Cupid's Banishment* (1617). Similarly, when Eros confronts his brother Anteros, he sees not only his opposite but also his mirror image, for Anteros signified either virtuous or reciprocal love – both identities that Cupid had been known to embody. In Andrea Alciato's emblem '*Anteros, id est amor virtutis*' (1531), the speaker addresses the boy in the *pictura*: 'Tell me, where are your arching bows, where your arrows, Cupid … where your wings?' only to be told that this is Anteros not Cupid. Whilst the emblem demonstrates the importance of Cupid's attributes, it does so by implying that without them one naked boy looks very like another.[22]

One of the main contentions of this book is that although Cupid attained a new distinctiveness in early modern England he was also elusive in a way that frustrated many of the polemical functions that he was required to perform. Focusing on the years 1557, when *Tottel's Miscellany* was first published, to 1635, when William Davenant staged *The Temple of Love*, the book argues that not only does this period represent a highpoint in the cultural visibility of Cupid in England, it was also defined by a series of political renegotiations with the ideals of English Protestantism: in the 1560s–80s, Elizabeth came under pressure to implement more extensive

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Protestant reforms; in the 1620s–30s, Catholic influence at the Stuart courts was met by an increasingly hostile 'Puritan' response. It is no coincidence that Cupid should have achieved his greatest cultural status at a time when he was required as an adversary, embodying the 'Catholic' sins of lust and idolatry in order to exorcize the dangers perceived to threaten the establishment of the Reformed faith. Nevertheless, Cupid's innate ambivalence also encouraged his appropriation by those who wished to express their opposition to Protestantism's more extreme doctrines. Poets suspicious of iconoclasm, hostile to Calvinist predestination or at war with the idea of sexual repression used the newly sadistic and tyrannical Cupid to manifest the tragic consequences of 'Puritanism', or they exposed him as a travesty illustrative of Protestant 'misreading' (there is something of this in 'Loves Deitie').[23] More generally, Cupid's confounding of the distinction between desires undermined the Protestant attempt to separate licit from illicit love and even extended to the limits that defined early modern patriarchy. In the case of both male and female gender identities, Cupid reinforced the norm and punished transgressions but he was also manipulated by women to assert their capacity for self-government and literary authorship, and by men to play out scenarios of subjection and disempowerment. Thus, even as Cupid was required as an agent of repression he embodied forbidden fantasies, and it is this that makes him such an irresistible figure in early modern literature and art.

THE IMAGE OF CUPID: CLASSICAL, MEDIEVAL, RENAISSANCE

In order to discuss Cupid's reinvention in early modern England, we need to familiarize ourselves with the genealogical, iconographic and hermeneutic traditions accrued in the previous centuries, beginning with Ancient Greece. Traces of Eros-worship have been discovered on the north slope of the Acropolis in Athens and at Thespiae in Boeotia.[24] Pausanias' *Description of Greece* (*c.* 143 AD) also records the existence of shrines at Parion and Leuctra.[25] Nevertheless, Eros-worship remained a relatively small, local cult, a fact that is sometimes testified to in classical literature. For example, in Plato's *Symposium* (*c.* 385 BC), Aristophanes observes: 'It seems to me that people have completely failed to appreciate how powerful Love is; otherwise, they'd have built vast temples and altars in his honour, and would have instituted enormous sacrifices'.[26] It was arguably Ancient literature rather than religion that was initially responsible for Love's fame.

Hesiod's *Theogony* (eighth century BC) was the first extant text to define Eros as a deity. Born out of Chaos, alongside Earth and Tartarus, he was a cosmogonic force,[27] worshipped at Thespiae in the form of a simple, phallic column. Indeed, it has been argued that his relatively lowly status as the object of a fertility cult might explain Aristophanes' perception that Eros was hardly worshipped at all.[28] Yet Hesiod also proffered a more Olympian conception of Eros, observing that he was not only the oldest but also 'the most handsome among the immortal gods', one who 'overcomes the reason and purpose in the breast of all gods and all men' (6). Subsequently, the temple at Thespiae would become home to statues of Eros as a beautiful, winged boy, including a marble by Praxiteles thought to surpass that of Aphrodite,[29] whilst in literary terms the *Theogony* would inspire the images of Eros fashioned by Euripides, Plato and Anacreon.

Fifth-century Greek tragedy takes Eros as one of its principal agents of destruction. In Sophocles' *Antigone* (442 BC), the Chorus blames the heroine's approaching death on that deity, for 'The grip of his madness / Spares not god or man, / Marring the righteous man, / Driving his soul into mazes of sin / And strife, dividing a house'.[30] In Euripides' *Medea* (431 BC), the protagonist's murder of her children is partly attributed to Desire.[31] However, it was *Hippolytos* (428 BC) that would prove most influential to early modern drama, providing the template for a specifically Cupidean tragedy. Not only is this the first literary text to provide the deity of love with arrows, Aphrodite is 'as cruel and vindictive as she is ever shown by anyone in antiquity',[32] inspiring love not simply as an affliction but as a death sentence. Moreover, although Aphrodite is the only love deity to appear on the stage, the Chorus anticipates a larger role for Eros, attributing to him a particular motive for revenge in the widespread neglect of his worship:

> man's premier tyrant,
> Eros the god, is never worshipped
> By any such honorable slaughter [as enjoyed by Apollo],
> Though he demands honour, since his keys
> Open to ultimate delight
> The dark, sensual chamber of Aphrodite –
> Little wonder he is violent among us,
> Imagining bitter adventures
> For those of our hearts he commandeers. (Lines 835–43)

This tragic conception of Eros would serve as a dramatic foil to the work of Plato, 'antiquity's most indefatigable theorist of desire',[33] whose *Symposium* addresses not only Eros' lack of religious worship but also the absence of poetic encomia in its seven speeches on Love. Traces of Hesiod are found in Phaedrus' assertion that Eros is a 'primordial god', and Eryximachus' acknowledgement of Love's cosmic influence (186a). Hesiod's theory that he was present at Aphrodite's birth and became her attendant (9) is also expanded upon in Phaedrus' distinction between a Celestial and a Common Eros, as defined by a Celestial and Common Aphrodite. But perhaps the *Symposium*'s major contribution to the iconography of Eros is its denial that he is beautiful or even divine.

Socrates' definition of love as the 'desire for something which is inaccessible and absent' (200e) offers a radical challenge to Agathon's idealization of Eros. For a start, it requires a new genealogy, with Diotima explaining that Eros is the offspring of Penia (Poverty) and Poros (Plenty/Contrivance), conceived at a feast to celebrate Aphrodite's birthday. His maternal inheritance means that Eros is neither beautiful nor good but 'a vagrant, with tough dry skin, and no shoes on his feet. He never has a bed to sleep on', but he overcomes these disadvantages through his father's ability to contrive 'captivating stratagems', as well as his 'desire for knowledge' and 'pursuit of education' (203b–d). Perhaps most importantly, Eros can no longer be a god, since they are, by definition, already wise, beautiful and happy. Rather, he occupies the in-between state of the *daemon*, who mediates between men and gods, and of the philosopher who is wise enough to perceive his ignorance. Thus, Eros' chief function is to guide man towards the perception of beauty that is also true wisdom.[34] The lover will move from loving the specific physical beauty of an individual, to admiring physical beauty *per se*, to focusing on mental beauty and 'what makes people's activities and institutions attractive', until he arrives at an appreciation of 'absolute beauty, divine and constant' (209e–212c).

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of this theory on the literary and artistic tradition of Cupid. Nevertheless, from the Hellenistic period onwards (323–146 BC),[35] a more light-hearted, erotic and playful notion of Eros also became popular, not unrelated to the symposiastic setting of Plato's seminal work and its valorization of boyish beauty. Alexandrian poets tended to reject the epic mythology of their predecessors in favour of familiar, everyday subjects, and they were particularly preoccupied with erotic love.[36] Hence, in the poetry of Anacreon, Eros functions as a flattering mirror for the youths to whom the lyrics are addressed. Yet he is also given a childish character of his own whose qualities of mischief and amorality inspire new narratives. For example, Theocritus' nineteenth *Ode* tells the story of an infantile Love being stung by a bee and complaining to Aphrodite, only to be told that his own 'stings' cause far more suffering. In Moschus' first *Idyll*, Love appears as a runaway, with his mother delivering a lengthy description of her son and offering a lascivious reward for news of him. Meanwhile, Meleager warns Eros not to abuse Psyche lest she use her new wings to fly away.[37]

Roman literature inherited all of these Greek forms of Eros, now renamed 'Amor' or 'Cupid', and in the work of Virgil and Seneca he retains much of his ancient threat. For example, in Virgil's eighth Eclogue, he is blamed for Medea's crimes: 'He taught a mother, once, to stain her hands with her own children's blood. A cruel mother – yes; but was she worse than that remorseless Boy?'[38] Seneca's Latin versions of Euripidean tragedy, in particular *Phaedra*, specifically expand Cupid's power to the exclusion of Venus. Finally, in Virgil's tenth Eclogue, Gallus coins a phrase that would inspire numerous Renaissance emblems, paintings and poems: '*Omnia vincit amor*' ('Love conquers all').[39] Nevertheless, Cupid was not an important Roman deity (certainly not in comparison with his Greek antecedent) and it is the Ovidian Amor that would represent the most sustained Roman influence on medieval and Renaissance Cupid.

In the *Metamorphoses*, we find new narratives describing Cupid's persecution of Apollo and Venus, as well as an account of the two kinds of arrows by which he imposes and withdraws desire (Book I, lines 466–74). But equally influential was the attitude adopted by the narrator of Ovid's erotic treatises who urges the reader to take Love less seriously. In the *Remedia Amoris* (*The Remedies for Love*), Cupid interprets the title as an act of aggression but is reassured that the poet intends only to preserve lovers driven to thoughts of suicide. At odds with the arguments of Virgil and Seneca, he insists that '[Cupid's] darts are free from deadly blood'.[40] The perception of Cupid as antithetical to Mars opens the *Amores*, in which the poet is not only subjected to Love but deflected thereby from his ambition to write epic poetry. He responds by translating the military triumph into an amorous context:

> [Cupid,] Bind thy locks with the myrtle, yoke thy mother's doves; thy stepsire himself shall give thee fitting car, and in the car he gives shalt thou stand, while the people cry thy triumph … In thy train shall be captive youths and captive maids; such a pomp will be for thee a stately triumph. Myself, a recent spoil, shall be there with wound all freshly dealt, and bear my new bonds with unresisting heart.[41]

This image would gain severity in Petrarch's *Trionfo dell'Amore* but here it remains pleasingly absurd, not least because elsewhere Ovid draws upon the Anacreontic tradition of a childish Cupid. The *Ars Amatoria* (*The Art* *of Love*) begins with the narrator's assertion that he is now so proficient at seduction that Venus has chosen him as Cupid's schoolmaster: 'Wild indeed is he, and apt often to fight against me; but he is a boy, tender his age and easily controlled'.[42]

In the medieval period, Cupid's status fell still further. Theresa Tinkle identifies a greater range – 'both male and female, blind and sighted, child and adult, playful and sinister, angelic and demonic' (1) – but finds this symptomatic of Cupid's marginality. In particular, his lack of any significant historical forebear, planetary associations or interesting etymology alienated medieval mythographers, causing Cupid to remain a 'curiously fugitive [figure] … sporadically emerging and then flitting away as swiftly as if he were fleeing the scene of some soon-to-be-discovered mischief' (59). But perhaps the most obvious innovation represented by the medieval Cupid is how distanced he has become from his classical past. This is partly a result of the moralizing impulse, for example, blindness was not a feature of the Greek or Roman deity but became a crucial iconographical attribute of Cupid in the thirteenth century as a symbol of love's sinfulness.[43] Similarly, although there was a tendency to interpret all of the pagan deities as descended from demons, Cupid's function as the inciter of lust made him particularly synonymous with the Devil.[44] However, Cupid's de-classicisation was also an effect of his assimilation into medieval culture, as a symbol of Christian love and as the deity of *amour courtois*.

The ease with which twelfth-century mystics interpellated Cupidean imagery into their religious lyrics may seem surprising until we recall the biblical texts that potentially blurred the distinction between pagan and Christian Amor: the gospel of St John twice asserts that 'God is Love' (1 John 4:8, 16) and the Bride in the *Song of Songs* declares herself to be 'wounded with love'.[45] Under this influence, medieval lyricists invoked the power of Cupid: 'Lat now love his bow bende / And love arowes to my hert send',[46] and imagined Christ as similarly subject:

> Þi mylde boones love haþ to-drawe,
> Þe naylis þi feet han al to-gnawe;
> Þe lord of love love haþ now slawe –
> Whane love is strong it haþ no lawe.[47]

Not only the pagan iconography but the classical narratives that defined Cupid were also revisited. For example, *De laude charitatis* by the twelfth-century French theologian, Hugo of St Victor, rewrites the triumph from the *Amores* with *caritas* in the Cupid role: 'you have drawn Him [Christ] to you bound in your chains; you have drawn Him to you wounded by your arrows. A man ought to be ashamed to resist you when he sees that you have triumphed even over God.'[48]

In secular love poetry, the troubadours and poets of the *dolce stil nuovo* exploited this parallelism to elevate their passion into a kind of religion. Either Love was rendered in the most vague and disembodied terms, demonstrating 'a principle so spiritual and sublime that it transcends by definition the realm of sensual experience', or he was imagined as angelic.[49] In the *Roman de la Rose* (1230, 1277), Guillaume de Lorris observes of Amor: 'He seemed to be an angel come straight from heaven',[50] whilst in Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (1292–4), Love echoes the first commandment, 'Ego dominus tuus', and later appears clothed entirely in white, recalling the angel of the sepulchre in Mark 16:5.[51] But it was Love's translation into the feudal lord that had the most sustained and deleterious effect upon his classicism. In the *Roman de la Rose*, he retains his Ovidian status as a beautiful and commanding youth and some of his mythological attributes, including the wreath of roses, torch and the bow and arrows, but he is now dressed in medieval finery, exerting a lordly authority in claiming the lover as his vassal, issuing commands and bestowing a kiss of fealty (lines 2023–42). He is also spatially conceived of in new ways: seated on a throne in his own castle or in a garden, and attended by a train of personifications such as Sweet Looks, Beauty, Wealth and Generosity (lines 905–1278).

It seems to have been Chaucer who began the process of restoring the classical Cupid to English poetry. The temple of Venus scenes in both *The House of Fame* and *The Knight's Tale* reveal a departure from courtly love conventions:

> in portreyture
> I sawgh anoon-ryght hir figure
> Naked fletynge in a see,
> And also on hir hed, pardee,
> Hir rose garlond whit and red,
> And hir comb to kembe hyr hed,
> Hir dowves, and daun Cupido
> Hir blynde sone, and Vulcano,
> That in his face was ful broun.
> (*The House of Fame*, Book 1, lines 131–9)

Cupid may still be blind, but the fact that he is naked and understood in relation to Venus and Vulcan associates him with the Roman tradition, thereby liberating him from a contemporary, medieval setting to embrace 'the ambiguities and universality of desire'.[52] Furthermore, although the Cupid of *Troilus and Criseyde* remains a composite figure of feudal lord,

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