Thomas Carew and the Erotic Law of Nature

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Open my dark Eyes that I
May thy wonderous lawes descry.
Thomas Carew (1594-c.1639)
translation of Psalm 119

As much space has been devoted to the analysis of Thomas Carew's obscurity as to his accomplishments as a poet. Most of the scholarly studies on his works are concerned with supporting or refuting F. R. Leavis' contention in Revaluation that Carew is indeed a poet worthy of critical admiration.¹ While his verse is lauded by his dedicated supporters for its tough, urbane wit, supposedly a reflecton of a sophisticated court society, his poems remain sparsely anthologized and, compared to the other so-called Sons of Ben, little studied.²

Perhaps this state of affairs exists because until recently many modern readers still shared some of the reservations about Carew and his verse voiced by Sir Edward Derring in 1640 when he denounced Carew's Poems, along with works by Ovid and the satirical Parliament of Women as "lascivious, idle, and unprofitable" texts.³ In this century, Carew's love poems were for many years dismissed as "too indelicate" to quote; his finest piece of erotica, "A Rapture," is presented by his editor and commentators as the work of an immature poet, an adolescent fantasy.⁴ Such approaches, however, trivialize an element in Carew's verse greatly admired by many of his contemporaries, his skill in portraying the erotic, and overlook the possibility that through his

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celebration of human sexuality, Carew is commenting on human society. Having succumbed to the seduction of his sensual portrayal of the erotic, readers easily can lose sight of Carew’s abilities as a satirist. While his obvious abilities as a poet of the amorous dance have been commented on and complimented, no attention has been paid to Carew’s own self-proclaimed ties to the spirits of two master critics of society’s conventions governing sexuality, Aretino and Rabelais.

If Carew is permitted to rejoin the company he himself cites as his literary models—Aretino, not Ovid—the tensions present in Carew’s writings are not so much between the attraction of the erotic and Christian moral standards, as G. A. E. Parfitt suggests, but between artificial social conventions and what Carew perceives as a divine order expressed in natural law. Regardless of whether Carew was indeed in his “nonnage” during the composition of “A Rapture,” as has been dismissively suggested, the rhetoric of the erotic which he employs in it produces the paradoxes which also underlie the issues raised in his other writings. His exploration of the nature of sexuality in a social context establishes a satiric vision of man and focuses on the dilemma of what is the true “law” by which man should govern his actions.

From his own day until now, Carew has enjoyed a mild reputation as a libertine. Isaak Walton wrote of Carew that he was “a great libertine in his life and Talk,” and there is no evidence to suggest that this is a libel on his character. But, libertinism, of course, can refer to more than simple sexual misconduct. The term was widely used in the seventeenth century to denote a “free-thinker” in the sense of one who did not accept conventional laws of any sort. In this context, contemporary critiques of Carew and the content of his love poetry which charge him with libertinism may carry more significance than plain prudery. Was it simply the overt sexuality which was so shocking, or are there other disturbing ideas implied in its presentation?