

monument which Lord Herbert had wished to have erected either in his rural seat of Montgomery or in the nearby village of Chirbury. According to Lord Herbert's will (dated 1 August 1648), a monument had been begun by a Mr Stone of Long Acre¹² (although it was never installed and may never have been completed).¹³ Either way, the letter implies that a monument or tombstone was absent almost a decade after Herbert's death.

In Aubrey's account of the gravestone, the inscription is attributed to 'lord Stanhope'. This might have been Philip Stanhope, first Earl of Chesterfield (1583/4?–1656), who is known to have been acquainted with Lord Herbert, although this does not sit well with the first of the two interpretations of Edward Herbert's letter, since Lord Stanhope was already dead when the letter was written. It may be that Aubrey was referring to Lord Stanhope's grandson, Philip, second Earl of Chesterfield (1633–1714), or that the inscription was composed by the first Lord Stanhope and used after his death. There could also have been some confusion arising from the fact that the first Lord Stanhope was, like Lord Herbert, buried on the south side of the chancel of St Giles in the Fields.¹⁴ These considerations weaken the authority of the inscription and with it the later dating of Herbert's death.

A final piece of evidence comes from the *Herbertorum prosapia* (1680), an ambitious work of family history by Sir Thomas Herbert of Tintern (1606–82).¹⁵ Its author

expenses were to be paid for out of the money which he had left to Edward, his grandson. Since Edward was an executor, he might, under these circumstances, have had the means and the motive to minimize his father's posthumous expenses.

¹² Presumably the sculptor and mason Nicholas Stone (1586?–1647), or one of his sons, whose premises were on Long Acre, near Covent Garden.

¹³ TNA, PROB 11/205/405. The account of Lord Herbert given by the biographer Thomas Fuller describes an ornate monument of 'his own Invention' which had been intended for Montgomery church. The description, which Fuller says had been 'Courteously communicated unto me Mr. Stone the Stone-cutter at his House in Long Acre', accords with that contained in Lord Herbert's will in two respects—the monument being erected within a fourteen-foot square and having a pillar or column at its centre—and does not contradict it. See Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (London, 1662), sig. 5G3v.

¹⁴ Parton, *Some Account of the Hospital and Parish of St. Giles in the Fields*, Middlesex, 221.

states that Lord Herbert 'departed this life the 5. day of August in the yeare 1648. and was buried in St Giles church in the Feildes where there is an inscription in the wall in the chancell in his memoriall'.¹⁶ This account provides an apparently independent corroboration for the dating of Lord Herbert's death to 5 August, although it is unclear (a) whether he had seen the inscription, (b) whether he had seen the inscription but was unconvinced by the date which it provided, or (c) whether he had seen the inscription and believed that it stated that Lord Herbert had died on 5 August (which would then call Aubrey's and Wood's accounts into question).

The agreement between the parish registers and the state papers is in itself strong evidence for the earlier dating of Lord Herbert's death and this is supported by the seemingly independent testimony of Sir Thomas Herbert of Tintern. By contrast, the later dating is based on a now missing monument or gravestone, which may have been installed some while after the event which it commemorated and which bore an inscription by an author whose identity (and hence reliability) cannot be confirmed. Based on this evidence, the earlier dating is to be preferred.

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¹⁵ See Norman H. Mackenzie, 'Sir Thomas Herbert of Tintern: A Parliamentary "Royalist"', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xxix (1956), 32–86.

¹⁶ Cardiff Central Library, Phillipps MS 5.7, 128. Curiously, whereas Sir Thomas Herbert places the inscription 'in the wall', Aubrey describes a 'grave-stone' and Wood writes that the inscription was on 'a flat marble stone' which had been 'laid' over Lord Herbert's grave. See Bodleian Library, MS Aubrey 8, 95r and Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, II, sig. E4v.

ANGELS ON PINHEADS AND NEEDLES' POINTS

THAT scholastic philosophers engaged in speculations about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin has long been exposed as a myth invented in the seventeenth century. William Chillingworth is usually

identified as the originator of this canard on account of his claim, in *The Religion of Protestants* (1638), that medieval Catholic theologians routinely occupied themselves with such trivial issues as ‘Whether a Million of Angels may not sit upon a needles point?’¹ However, there is a hitherto unnoticed seventeenth-century reference to angels and points of needles that is significant not only because it is earlier than Chillingworth’s, but also because it adds a new dimension to this old chestnut, offering a key insight into why the specific image of the point of a needle became part of this popular way of caricaturing scholastic disputations.

Previous detective work on this question, much of it helpfully summarized by George MacDonald Ross and Edith Sylla, has failed to uncover a single medieval source that spoke about angels dancing on the head of a pin (or the point of a needle).² The closest discussion of this issue by a prominent scholastic comes in one of Aquinas’s articles on angels which enquires ‘Whether several angels can be in the same place at the same time?’³ The force of the question is to do with whether pure intelligences, which lack materiality, can be co-located in space. Subsequently, an anonymous fourteenth-century mystical work introduces not a pin, but a needle, and makes reference to the incorporeality of souls rather than angels: ‘a thousand souls in heaven sitting on the point of a needle’ (*tūzent sēlen sitzent in dem himel ūf einer nādelspitze*).⁴ The relative obscurity of this work, combined with the fact that it falls within the genre of mystical writing rather than scholastic disputation, make it an unlikely source for early modern English critics of scholasticism.

My suggestion is that the reason an English writer first introduced the ‘needle’s point’ into a critique of medieval angelology is that it makes for a clever pun on ‘needless point’.

¹ William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants* (London, 1638), Sig. §§§§3r.

² George MacDonald Ross, ‘Angels’ *Philosophy*, ix (1985), 495–511. Edith Sylla, ‘Swester Katrei and Gregory of Rimini’, in Teun Koetsier and Luc Bergmans (eds), *Mathematics and the Divine: A Historical Study* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005), 249–71.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a. 52, 3.

⁴ Franz Pfeiffer (ed.), *Deutsche Mystiker* (Aalen: Scientia, 1962), II, 474.

The pointlessness of medieval philosophy, along with its deviation from biblical doctrine, is what lies behind what I believe to be the first reference to angels and the points of needles, which appears in an expository work by the English divine, William Sclater (1575–1626). Commenting in 1619 on medieval papists’ predilection for ‘doting about curious questions’, he adduces the specific example of their enquiries about angels:

... they fell to Disputations about the time of their Creation; whether it were before, or with the visible World; whether on the first day, or when they were created. Touching their Orders, what, and how many they were, their number, whether more fell or stood: whether they did occupie a place; and so, whether many might be in one place at one time; and how many might sit on a Needles point; and six hundred such like needlesse points.⁵

The examples cited by Sclater are all genuine topics of scholastic disputation except the last, which seems to have been introduced solely for its rhetorical value as a clever pun. Chillingworth, who shared Sclater’s contempt for the obscurity and vanity of scholastic philosophy, did not labour the pun in his subsequent 1638 reference. But he probably did not need to. Given that ‘needles’ appears in the Saxon genitive form (that is, without the now familiar possessive apostrophe) and that ‘needles’ was an acceptable seventeenth-century spelling of ‘needless’, astute readers would have been alert to the paragram. There were also subsequent authors who made the pun obvious. In a sermon on Christian charity, preached on 18 March 1649, Edward Willan observed: ‘When the question was asked, how many Angels might stand upon a needles point at once? The Answer was, that it was but a needlesse point to stand upon. Let not us stand upon such needlesse points of curiosity, to the breach of Christian Charity.’⁶ This suggests that in the first half of the seventeenth century, the punning potential of the ‘needle’s point’ was well established.

⁵ William Sclater, *An exposition with notes vpon the first Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London, 1619), 385.

⁶ Edward Willan, *Six Sermons* (London, 1651), 17.

The image of *sitting* (or standing) on a needle's point has its own uncomfortable mental associations. But the modern form of the myth has angels *dancing*, and this is also an innovation of the seventeenth century. The conceit of angels *dancing* on a needle's point is usually attributed to Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, who in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) refers to those who hold that 'Thousands of these *Incorporeal Substances*, or *Spirits*, might *Dance together at once upon a Needles Point*.'⁷ Again, though, Cudworth was not the first to have made the angels dance. Almost twenty years before, in 1659, another of the Cambridge Platonists, Henry More, had condemned 'the ridiculous fancies of the Schools' who deny extension to spirits, 'and then dispute how many of them booted and spur'd may dance on a needles point at once.'⁸ Yet another associate of the Platonists, Joseph Glanvill, also used this allusion: 'He that said, a *thousand* [angels] might dance on the *point of a Needle*, spake but grossly; and we may as well suppose them to have *wings*, as a proper *Ubi*.'⁹

It is worth noting that the Cambridge Platonists' motivations in relation to this issue differ from those of Sclater, Chillingworth, and Willan. The latter were focused primarily on the pointlessness of scholastic disputation in general, and the specific example of angels standing on needle's points was but one example of this. The Platonists, however, were directly engaged with the issues raised by the question. For them, it was not so much that this question about angels was pointless, but that the scholastic formulation was premised upon a mistaken view about the nature of spiritual beings. Unlike Aquinas (and Descartes, for that matter), they held that spiritual substance could be extended in space. Henry More thus insisted that substances must be present where they act, and that spirits must accord with locations in space. He also believed that space was an example of a non-material and infinite extended substance and, more radically, that God was an infinite being who was extended in space. These

were not trivial or pointless issues, and form part of the background of Isaac Newton's later controversies with Leibniz over the nature of space and the omnipresence of God. The Cambridge Platonists, in short, were disinclined to stress the play on words of the 'needleless point' since they were committed to the view that the location of spiritual beings was, in fact, a philosophical issue of fundamental importance.

The direction in which the Platonists moved the discussion tended to mask the play on words of the original formulation, and subsequently the needle's point became 'the point of a needle'. Thus, when in the early nineteenth century Isaac D'Israeli made his well known reference to the saying in *Curiosities of Literature* he expressed it this way: 'The reader desirous of being *merry* with Aquinas's angels may find them in Martinus Scriblerus, in Ch. VII who inquires... How many angels can dance on the point of a very fine needle, without jostling one another?'¹⁰ The eighteenth century also saw the beginning of a substitution of 'pin' for 'needle'.¹¹ This more common form of the claim, which has medieval theologians debating how many angels many dance on the *head of a pin*, has also served to diminish the force of the original pun, and further obscures one likely reason that this common mischaracterization of scholastic philosophy took the particular form that it did.

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⁷ Ralph Cudworth, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), 776, cf. 778.

⁸ Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (London, 1659), 341.

⁹ Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (London, 1661), 100.

¹⁰ Isaac D'Israeli, *Curiosities of Literature*, 10th edn (London: Edward Moxon, 1838), 23. While Aquinas's questions on angels can be found in Martinus Scriblerus, there is no reference to dancing on the point of a needle.

¹¹ The earliest substitution of pin for needle that I have found comes in Bartholomew Williams, *Congratulatio Roffensis* (Dublin, 1701), 18.