

JOHN DONNE, ELIZABETHAN POET

Our appreciation of John Donne's poetry has been spoiled by teachers who tell us that he was one of 'the metaphysicals'. This goes back to something John Dryden wrote about Donne: 'He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love.'

In other words, don't bother their pretty little heads with ideas, just tell them how lovely they are. It was not Donne who offended first, but Shakespeare, when he wrote his Sonnet 130, 'My mistress eyes are nothing like the sun'.

*Coral is far more red than her lips red,
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun,
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.*

His conclusion is a direct riposte to the criticism made by Dryden fifty or so years later.

*I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet by heaven I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.*

Shakespeare and Donne were close contemporaries. Donne was born in 1572, only eight years later than Shakespeare. Living in London, he must, as a young man, have seen many of Shakespeare's plays. He was an Elizabethan. His 'Songs and Sonnets', which are the poems we know best, were all written while Elizabeth I was still on the throne.

The only thing that divides these two Elizabethan poets is that one wrote for a public audience, the other for his friends. Shakespeare's poetry and plays (in individual volumes) were published during his lifetime because he had a reputation and a living to make. Donne's poems were not published. His reputation and his living later in life as a priest might have suffered if they had been.

The dialogue in Shakespeare's plays is full of the kind of argument and word-play which we find in Donne's poetry. The argument between Romeo and Juliet in Act II, scene i for example.

*Good night, good night! as sweet repose and rest
Come to thy heart as that within my breast!
O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?
What satisfaction canst thou have to-night?
The exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine.
I gave thee mine before thou didst request it:
And yet I would it were to give again.
Wouldst thou withdraw it? for what purpose, love?
But to be frank, and give it thee again.
And yet I wish but for the thing I have:
My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.*

Compare the arguments and the language Juliet uses with Donne's in *Lovers' Infiniteness*.

*Yet I would not have all yet,
He that hath all can have no more;*

*And since my love doth every day admit
New growth, thou shouldst have new rewards in store;
Thou canst not every day give me thy heart,
If thou canst give it, then thou never gavest it;
Love's riddles are, that though thy heart depart,
It stays at home, and thou with losing savest it;
But we will have a way more liberal,
Than changing hearts, to join them; so we shall
Be one, and one another's all.*

Reading Donne's *Break of Day*, it is impossible not to be reminded of the dialogue between Romeo and Juliet in Act III, scene v, when the sun wakes them.

*'Tis true, 'tis day; what though it be?
O wilt thou therefore rise from me?
Why should we rise because 'tis light?
Did we lie down because 'twas night?
Love which in spite of darkness brought us hither
Should in despite of light keep us together.*

It is easy enough to imagine Juliet speaking those lines which, as is very common in Donne's poetry, are addressed directly, not to the reader, but to somebody else.

*For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love...
Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,
Tomorrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
I wonder by my troth what thou and I
Did till we lov'd?
Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus
Through windows and through curtains call on us?*

Donne's poetic dialogues are more often arguments with himself, internal dialogues or, as they are called in plays, soliloquies. He is his own accuser and advocate, asking and answering questions, as Hamlet does when he puts the most famous question of them all, 'To be or not to be?' Donne, considering physical and spiritual love in *The Extasie*, begins with a question.

*But O alas, so long, so far
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They are ours, though they are not we, we are
The intelligences, they the spheres.
We owe them thanks, because they thus
Did us to us at first convey,
Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay.*

His soliloquy (or 'dialogue of one') goes from thesis and antithesis to synthesis.

*And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change when we are to bodies gone.*

More than *Hamlet* perhaps it brings to mind Viola in *Twelfth Night*.

What will become of this? As I am man,

*My state is desperate for my master's love;
As I am woman - now alas the day! -
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!
O time, thou must untangle this, not I;
It is too hard a knot for me t' untie!*

When Dryden called Donne metaphysical, he put a lid on him that remained closed for more than two centuries and that, even now, makes us forget that he was an Elizabethan and that the poetry of all Elizabethans had more of the 'nice speculations of philosophy' in it than of 'the softnesses of love'.

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