A STUDY OF THE *SONGS AND SONNETS* OF JOHN DONNE AS THEY SHOW HIS REACTION TO THE ELIZABETHAN TRADITION

by

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Submitted as an Honors Paper
in the
Department of English

Woman's College of the University of North Carolina
Greensboro, North Carolina

May 3, 1955

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A STUDY OF SONGS AND SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE AS THEY SHOW HIS REACTION TO THE ELIZABETHAN TRADITION

This study proposes to treat John Donne as a heretic of approach and idiom. It will show that his reaction against the Elizabethan traditions was sharp and complete. His approach to the theme of love in his Songs and Sonnets, circulated among his private friends, was radically different from the set, traditional treatment of love in the poetry of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This latter type of poetry had lost all traces of originality and freshness; idiom, mood, and often form corresponded to a constant pattern which had become insipid. Set phrases, invocations, and approach had been used too frequently. The Elizabethans preferred the sonnet as a form of expression; and many of the poets composed a series of sonnets in which the theme was most often that of undying, unrequited love.

Donne was not the only sixteenth century poet to break with this Elizabethan tradition. Shakespeare, in his "Dark Lady" sonnets, had ignored a portion of it; but he had retained the form of the English sonnet. This form was very popular with the Elizabethan devotees. In other poems he developed the picture of the fair, virtuous woman in much the same manner as had his contemporaries. His "Who is Sylvia?" is an excellent example of conformity in song. Rhythmically and otherwise it fulfills the bounds set by tradition. "Tell Me, Where Is Fancy Bred?" is another example of the tradition--- this fancy is found in the eye and is fed by gazing upon the beauty of the woman. This beauty is sufficient to keep alive the love. Ben Jonson illustrates this same Elizabethan idea in "To Celia." The reverent

attitude toward the woman, the idiom, the reference to Jove, king of the Greek divinities, are not new. The mention of the Greek gods and goddesses in connection with the sacredness of love becomes a device with the Elizabethan writers, and they use it frequently. It is against all of this, then, that Donne revolts: the set idiom, the idealized approach, and the often melancholy mood.

In showing just how Donne was a reactionary against this tradition, it is first necessary to examine it carefully. Poems by Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, John Lyly, and Christopher Marlowe will be considered in order to ascertain its limits more fully. From Spenser's collection of <u>Amoretti</u> sonnets, "Ye Tradeful Merchants" and "One Day I Wrote Her Name" will be used. His "Epithalamion" will be considered, more for its value in determining idiom than for its mood. Philip Sidney's "Oh Joy Too High" and "My True Love Has My Heart," both from his <u>Astrophel and Stella</u> collection, will follow these, as well as John Lyly's "Cupid and My Campaspe" and Christopher Marlow's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love."

The theme of the first sonnet from Spenser, as can be judged from the title chosen for the whole collection, is love. The poet, addressing his sonnet to the English merchants of the period, wonders why they travel so far abroad in search of their treasure. One may find all treasure in his love.

> If saphyres, loe! her eyes are saphyres plain;
> If rubies, her lips be rubies sound;
> If pearls, her teeth be pearls, both pure and round;
> If yvorie, her forehead yvorie ween;
> If gold, her locks are finest gold on ground;
> If silver, her fair hands of silver sheen....

She is the fair, blue-eyed beauty so prevalent in the poetry of the period. Spenser gives here what is probably the most complete description of her to be found. His final couplet completes the portrait and at the same time clearly

illustrates another of the devices of the tradition.

> But that which fairest is, but few behold,
> Her mind, adorned with virtues manifold.

The description is short and pointed; the lady is fair, beautiful, and virtuous.

"One Day I Wrote Her Name" adds still another theme to the traditional treatment of the subject of love. In this poem, the author tells of twice writing the name of his mistress in the sand, only to have the tide erase his efforts. The lady chides him. Such effort is vain, for just as the waves wipe her name from the sand, so she will die and be forgotten.

> Not so (quod I) let baser things devize
> To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame,
> My verse your vertues rare will etermize,
> And in the heavens write your glorious name,
> Where, whenas death shall all the world subdew,
> Our love shall live, and later life renew.

In his poetry then, Spenser will immortalize her virtues. The love he bears for her is eternal, and he can love only her. This is the traditional love which must remain constant and undying. It is pure and good; only baser things will die.

The structure of both sonnets is regularly English. The musical, running rhythms aid in conveying the theme of constancy in the poems as well as in showing the tenor of the emotion aroused by the love. The theme of constant love, the portrait of the fair, virtuous beloved, and the idea of poetry as a vehicle to immortalize her are compressed within the limits of the fourteen-line stanza.

Spenser's "Epithalamion" was written to celebrate his own coming marriage. The tone differs from the usual melancholy mood of the traditional

poems in that it is wholly joyful. The poem is used in this study only because it so clearly illustrates the extravagant, senuous imagery of the Elizabethan poets. The imagery of this poem abounds in classical allusions and in set phrases and invocations. The "doleful dreariment," "sorrowful complaints," "heads with girlands crowned," "mine owne love prayses," "discolored mead," "rosy morne," "deawy leaves," and "cruel love" give an idea of the ornate phraseology which Spenser uses. Numbers of things are "sweet" to him; "sweet snatches of delight," "sweet pleasures," "sweet creatures." There is also a pastoral motif in the poem. The images drawn from nature are numerous and ornate. They build within the reader an atmosphere which can be easily recognized as one which corresponds to the emotional state that the author desires to call forth.

The use of classical mythology in this poem illustrates once again a device of Elizabethan poetry. Spenser first invokes the aid of the muses in composing his song. He will, he states, sing to his bride as Orpheus sang to Eurydice. Hymen, the god of marriage, is invoked many times. The poet speaks of the twin powers of the sky-Phoebus and Phoebe, the sun and the moon. Hesperus, god of the West Wind; Venus, goddess of love; and Cynthia, goddess of the moon, are also used. The love affairs of Jove are mentioned as they reflect upon the coming consummation of Spenser's marriage.

Lines one hundred sixty-seven through one hundred eighty-five are almost identical to some lines in Spenser's fifteenth sonnet.

> Tell me, ye merchants daughters, did ye see
> So fayre a creature in your town before,
> So sweet, so lovely and so mild as she,
> Adorned with beautyes grace and vertues store,
> Her goddly eyes like saphyres shining bright,
> Her forehead yvory white,

Her cheeks like apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips like cherries charming men to bite... .

The descriptions are almost identical. The "saphrye eyes" and the "yvory forehead" are found in both. The lady of the sonnet had ruby lips; Spenser's bride has cherry lips. He has previously spoken in the "Epithalamion" of the lady's "...long, loose, yellow locks... ." In both poems he has used the merchant image as a means of introduction. The sonnet would seem to be a condensation of the epithalamion, for the marriage song continues by celebrating the worth and virtue of the bride. An examination of Spenser's use of this tradition illustrates how closely he followed the set form..The woman, fair and chaste, is worshipped for her beauty and virtue. Spenser also used the idea of perpetuating her memory in verse.

Song...
Be unto her a goodly ornament,
And for a short time endless moniment.

His use of identical word combinations and images in these two poems is not coincidence. Their use exemplifies Spenser's acceptance of the set requirements of the Elizabethan tradition.

Philip Sidney's "My True Love Has My Heart" builds the theme of constant love to an even greater climax. In it, the lady tells of the exchange of hearts between her and her lover. "There never was," she states, "a better bargain driven." Her heart in his heart guides his thoughts and senses; he loves it because it was once his own. His heart, wounded by her beauty, in turn wounded hers; and this mutual wound was healed only by the exchange of hearts. These organs, which control the lives of both, as well as their love, in exchange become symbolic of the extent to which that love will endure. As long as they live, each will depend upon the other for life and for love.

From the collection Astrophel and Stella, the poem to be analyzed is "Oh Joy Too High." In it, Sidney speaks of himself as an unworthy recipient of the gift of the lady's love. It is a "...joy too high for his low style to show." His words, the form of his expression, everything is unworthy of showing her worth. The love he has been given is a "...bliss fit for a nobler state than me!" "Oceans of delight" flow over him; the "winter of his misery" is fled, and spring has come. All of this is true

> For Stella hath, with words where faith doth shine,
> Of her high heart giv'n me the monarchy.

She is his; and he, who inhabits this world of bliss, states that

> . . . a virtuous course I take,
> No kings be crowned but they some covenants make.

In Sidney, as in Spenser, one finds the exalted tone in the worship of the woman loved. Sidney also used the sonnet, with its set pattern, as his vehicle of expresssion. The imagery, one finds upon close examination, is set. Each builds what Donne calls "...in sonnets pretty rooms."[1] The diversity of imagery becomes less and less fresh with this perusal of Elizabethan poetry. The numerous "virtues manifold," the "winter of my misery," the "saphyre eyes," are common to all the poets who dwell upon the theme of love.

John Lyly's "Cupid and My Campaspe" is written on the basic assumption that the author's mistress is superior to even the god of love. Cupid loses every symbol of his position to her. She also wins the color of his lips and cheeks, as well as his eyes. The poet ends with a lamenting note:

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[1]John Donne, "The Canonization," The Poems of John Donne, p. 14.

> Oh, Love, has she done this to thee?
> What shall, alas, become of me?

The imagery of this poem follows the same pattern which has already been examined. Campaspe, playing cards with Cupid for kisses, wins "the coral of his lips," "the rose growing on's cheek," "the crystal of his brow," and "the dimple in his chin." In such a manner Lyly describes his own love. Cupid has lost to her, and Cupid was more powerful than he. He cannot expect to win Campaspe if the god of love has lost to her. The traditional pattern has been followed once again; and the familiar imagery, the use of classical mythology, and the melancholy mood are all present.

In "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Christopher Marlowe also illustrates the extravagant imagery common to the Elizabethan writers. The author, who is trying to persuade his mistress to come away from him, builds an emotional appeal which is almost irresistible. He depends heavily upon pastoral motifs; he is dwelling on the idealized side of love which Sir Walter Raleigh dispels in his famous answer to this poem. Marlowe pleads

> Come live with me and by my love,
> And we will all the pleasures prove....

We will listen while "...melodious birds sing madrigals." She will sleep on "...beds of roses," wear shoes with "...buckles of the finest gold." Everything will be for her pleasure. It is implied that nothing is worthy of her, and yet the poet says

> If these delights thy mind may move,
> Then live with me and be my love.

Other than the extravagant, sensuous, imagery and the idealized approach to love, there is little of the traditional Elizabethan spirit in this poem. The classical motif is implied in the use of pastoral images, but it is not overtly presented. There is no definite melancholy mood in the poem, but

even the most traditional writers often dispensed with it. The imagery and the attitude toward love are most important, and both of these follow the traditional rules in this poem.

A close examination of these seven poems shows plainly the limitations of the Elizabethan traditions. The woman is fair beyond comparison, virtuous, adored with reverence, and forever constant to the one she loves. The man, in turn, is unworthy of the gift of her love, happy if he has received it, and forever constant. The possession of the woman's love is not always the ultimate expectation of the man, however; and the realization of this often results in a melancholy mood which is also a part of the tradition. Extravagant comparisons and sensuous imagery are factors which were consistently employed by the Elizabethan writers. The rhythm of their poetry is regular; most often these writers choose the sonnet as a form of expression. When they diverge from this form, the subject matter is still the same. The songs of the Elizabethans are beautifully regular lyrics that hold within themselves the very tone of music.

Such was the tradition against which Donne was revolting when he wrote his Songs and Sonnets. In order to show this and at the risk of categorizing too much, this paper proposes to subdivide the poems into three groups; those which deal with the purely physical aspects of love, those which fall into neither this group nor into a Platonic expression, and those which can be termed Platonic. The poems to be considered in entirety are "The Canonization," "The Apparition," "The Sun Rising," "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star," "The Indifferent," "The Undertaking," and "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning."

The first group, which deals with the more physical side of love, includes "The Canonization," "The Indifferent," and "The Sun Rising."

Even among these three the theme of love is treated differently. Mood varies not only among them but also within the poems themselves.

The theme of love in "The Canonization" is primary; it is not, as is so often true of Donne, intermingled with the theme of inconstancy. The poet sets the tone of the poem with the opening line:

"For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love... ." Chide my palsy, my gout, my five grey hairs, he tells his friend. Tell me of my ruined fortune; gain a fortune in your own right; improve your mind by concentrating on the arts; hold a position at court in order to admire the nobility; admire the king; do whatever you will; only let me love her whom I choose.

From this chiding tone, Donne moves to a more questioning, contemplative mood. He wonders who has been injured by his love. His sighs have caused no ships to sink; his tears have made no floods occur. His coldness has never postponed the coming of spring, and the warm desire which flows through his veins has added not one name to the list of those who die from the exorbitant fever of the plague. Soldiers still fight; government practices continue. In short, the world continues to move in its ordained sphere even though he and his mistress do love.

He and his love, he continues in the third stanza, have become, by the act of love, everlasting. "Call us what you will... ," tapers which die, burning their flames to nothingness; infinitesimal flies; the eagle, symbolic of force, swiftness and battle; and the dove, symbolic of peace and gentleness. He also used the Phoenix image, with its suggestion of reincarnation. The two are directly identified with it. "We two, being it, are one." The flame being burned out, he is saying, another bird, another love, arises in its place. The means by which they rise from death is almost mystic.

We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

The idea of mystery is perpetuated in the next stanza, where Donne states that future lovers,

. . . all shall approve
Us Canonized for love.

It is mystery, then, in the sense that the canonization of saints is a mystery. This religious connotation is not unusual in Donne; he often uses religious imagery in his love poetry and secular imagery in his religious poetry.

In the third stanza and in the preceding one, Donne plays upon the very die. In Elizabethan times the word was used to denote actual death, but it also meant "to obtain.... a sexual orgasm."[2] This undoubtedly arose from the prevalent belief that any loss of "humors" shortened the length of one's life, since they were non-perpetuating. Sexual intercourse, then, was a form of death in life; and the very act of love was a limitation of life. With this idea in mind, phrases in these two stanzas become more meaningful; ". . . at our own cost die," and "We can die by it, if not live by love."

The concept of death is continued in the idea of canonization. Saints are dead before they are canonized; the lovers have, in theory, died because of their love. The thought is further developed in the statement that if their love is not fit for history it will be fit for verse.

We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms
As well as well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns all shall approve
Us Canonized for love.

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[2]J. B. Leishman, The Monarch of Wit, p. 22.

These sonnets, these "sacred hymns," these "pretty rooms" will serve to perpetuate their memory of love as a well-wrought urn or magnificent tomb will serve to perpetuate the memory of less fortunate mortals. It is the glory of the momentary act, however, rather than the beauty or constancy of the lovers, which will be remembered. Future lovers, regarding them as saints, will invoke them:

> You whom reverend love
> Made one another's hermitage;
> You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
> Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
> Into the glasses of your eyes
>
> . . .
>
> Countries, Towns, Courts; beg from above
> A patterne for your love.

Notice that love to Donne is "reverend" love. He never belittles physical love. On the contrary, he pays constant homage to a completely physical relationship.

Intermingled with the theme of death in life, one finds continuous religious connotations. In addition to the idea that the lovers will become saints to future lovers in a religion of love, the verses written to them will be regarded as hymns in praise of this new religion. Even the reference to an invocation has a religious suggestion connected with it. Love in this situation becomes a hermitage. This can be considered a withdrawal from society for religious reasons. By stating that

> You to whom love was peace, that now is rage,
> Who did the whole world's soul contract... ,

Donne presents the omnipresent aspect of the two lovers. By their saintly situation, they have become all-seeing. The consummation of this theme is found in the last two lines:

> Beg from above
> A patterne for your love.

The mood changes constantly throughout the poem, and the changes are clear and directly in conflict. In the first two stanzas, the tone is chiding and at times almost harsh. From the idea of "For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love..." and "Alas, alas, who's injured by my love..." he moves to the reverent contemplation of that love; and the last two stanzas abound in religious imagery. It is a religious tone with which Donne ends the poem, but it is a religion of physical love rather than of soul. The lovers will be worshiped for daring to love rather than for their virtue or constancy.

John Donne's approach to the theme of love in "The Canonization" is the first break with tradition in this poem of which one is aware. The mistress is mentioned only as she becomes the woman loved. It is the act of love, and not the woman, which is worshiped. Although there is no direct mention of inconstancy, one receives the impression that physical desire for one woman can die just as the Phoenix died, only to be resurrected in another woman.

The definite use of erotic imagery is another factor in his revolt. Love is used throughout the poem in such a way as to mean only one thing: purely physical love. The play which Donne makes upon the double meaning of the verb die is plainly evident. It is quite understandable that Donne's readers both understood and enjoyed such suggestive double allusions.

The form of the poem should also be considered. Found in a collection of songs and sonnets, it cannot completely fit the requirements of either. Donne consistently breaks into his basic rhythm with rare or unusual variations. While it is true that a great deal of very good poetry exemplifies a variation from the basic meter, Donne's poetry follows the

principle of variation to the extreme. Just as he makes his images entirely different from those of the Elizabethans, so his meter is also different. Through his use of this diversified pattern, the poet maintains a steady conversational tone. This tone differs entirely from that of the traditional paeans of praise.

The imagery is also radical--radical not in the sense of using newly-coined words but in the daring combination of words and phrases which the traditionalists considered unfit for verse. Donne used familiar images in new ways and introduced into his poetry things which build an intellectual comparison rather than an emotional reaction. Donne succeeds in producing the emotional reaction he desires, but he does so by appealing to the intellect rather than to the senses.

"The Apparition" is entirely different in mood from "The Canonization." The lady to whom this poem is addressed has quite evidently refused her lover's advances, and he becomes very angry and vindictive. When he is dead, he tells her, his ghost will come to torment her. She may think herself free from his advances, but this will never be.. Finding her in arms less worthy than his own, he will taunt her for her sin and for her indiscretion. She is only a "fain'd vestall," a term which carries with it all the connotations which accompany the unfaithfulness of a religious devotee. She is not, he is stating, truly virtuous; her virtue is only a mock religion. By pretending constancy to moral principles she is trying to deceive him. When his ghost appears to mock her,

> ...he, whose thou art then
> Wilt, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think
> Thou calls't for more
> And in false sleep will from thee shrink.

She will not dare to call her lover, who, exhausted from making love to

her, will shrink away in pretended sleep, thinking that she demands more love.

> And then, poore aspen wretch, neglected thou,
> Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat silt lie
> A veryer ghost then I. . . .

Here Donne achieves a particular harshness. "...poore aspen wretch..." rolls harshly, building his fury into almost onamatopoetic expression. Neglected by a lover who, following the consummation of his desire, is immediately unfaithful, she will lie frozen with fear.

In the last four lines, Donne's tone changes abruptly. It becomes mocking and self-satisfied.

> What I will say, I will not tell thee now
> Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent
> I'd rather thou shoulds't painfully repent
> Than by my threatenings still rest innocent.

His desire has become hate; he no longer cares for her. He will not, however, tell her with what words he will taunt her, for then she would not dread his coming. Instead, he draws a morbid satisfaction from the fact that she must "painfully repent" for having refused his advances.

Donne manages to sustain an accusing tone throughout. One finds its presence even in the last four lines. The repetition of certain sounds also adds to the harsh effect. The angry hiss of "...by your scorn, O murderess... ," the constant repetition of the "th" sound in "...thou thinkest thee free... ," and the continued use of "s" and "th" words such as <u>shrink</u>, <u>think</u>, <u>thee</u>, <u>thou</u>, <u>solicitation</u>, and <u>murderess</u> build the evident anger of the lover to a peak.

As the anger turns to hatred, the sounds change. In preparation for the more scornful tone of the last lines, the consonants lengthen. The long, flat sounds in "Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat..." add a timeless

illusion to his fury. They are combined with the hissing vowels, and the combination carries with it a deeper sense of scorn than has previously been attained. This gives the impression that the early fury has not completely abated; even though the hatred is becoming deeper than mere fury, the transformation is not yet fully complete.

"The Apparition," like "The Canonization," fits no set pattern of rhythmic expression. The accented beats, in keeping with the harsher tone, are far more prevalent. Donne uses a combination of iambic and trochaic feet which enables him to juxtapose accent for effect, but even under these conditions there are numerous feet which are spondaic. Line length and stanza form are also different. In the first eight lines, the length varies from tetrameter to pentameter. These lines are followed by a line of iambic dimeter, three lines of iambic pentameter, a line of iambic trimeter, and four lines of iambic pentameter. Once again the form of the poem is at variance with the title of the collection, for in form it is neither a song nor a sonnet. This seventeen-line poem is one of the shortest in the whole collection.

The tone of this poem is in keeping with the development of the theme of rejected love. Donne goes against tradition when he approaches the theme of "The Apparition" in this manner. Traditionally, the lover accepts rejection as a sign of his unworthiness. Donne becomes angry when he is rejected; he is, he says, worthy of her love.

> Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
> And thee, fain'd vestall, in worse arms shall see... .

It is this idea, coupled with the rejection, which merits the harsh, conversational tone throughout. The variable rhythms are essential in carrying out this impression. The many accented syllables aid in conveying the impression of a sincere and deep anger.

The third poem of this extremely erotic group is "The Sun Rising." It contains less overt erotic imagery than either "The Canonization" or "The Apparition;" but it is, nevertheless, too extreme to be classed with the group which has already been defined.

The poem begins with a questioning invocation to the sun.

> Busy old fool, unruly sun,
> Why dost thou thus
> Through windowes and through curtaines call on us?

This address is as unorthodox as Donne's approach to the theme of love. By thus chiding the sun, he has broken another of the mores of Elizabethan poetry; the mighty sun is chided for rising and disturbing the lovers. "Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?" the poet asks. The sun, a "Sawcy pedantique wretch... ," should chide slow apprentices, remind the nobles that the king is going hunting, hurry slow schoolboys; but he should leave the lovers alone. Through the use of this list of trivial occupations, Donne creates an impression of the unimportance of the sun's rising. He makes the lovers the most important people in the world over which the unwelcome sun has risen. The lovers, unlike the rest of the world, do not depend on the sun.

> "Love all alike no season knowes, nor clime,
> Nor hours, days, weeks, which are the rags of time."

The act of love of which Donne speaks is timeless; desire knows no spring or winter, no hours or days.

The second stanza begins with an abrupt change of tone but not of intent. The second invocation to the sun is much more in keeping with tradition. The poet speaks of the sun's beams"...so reverend and strong... ." He continues, however, by developing the idea that although the sun is all powerful, the lovers are stronger than he. The lover could eclipse the sun

by closing his eyes. The only reason that he does not do so is that he would lose sight of his mistress. The light of her eyes is enough to hide the light of the sun; there is a possibility that it may even blind the sun. If her glance has not blinded him, Donne dares the sun to look over the rich areas of the world and see if they are in their accustomed places.

> Looke, and tomorrow late tell mee
> Whether the 'India's of spice and Myne
> Be where thou leftest them, or lie here with mee.
> Aske for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
> And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay.

The poet considers his love an India, a veritable treasure store. She is the treasure of all the world; all of it has lain in this one bed in England.. Donne does, however, give the impression of inconstant love when he tells the sun that he should ask whether or not these riches are in the same spot as they were before. The sun will hear that, "All here in one bed lay." Hence the past, not the present, thus giving the impression that this love is only a momentary act. At present, however,

> She is all states, and all princes I,
> Nothing else is.

Princes only play at being the powers which he and his love are. Compared to their emotions, wealth and power are but mockery. Even the life-giving sun is only half as happy as they are. There is the implication that although they die through love, this is better than to give life. The duty of the sun is to warm the world, and they are the world. Therefore the sun has only to shine upon them.

> "Shine here and thou art everywhere;
> This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere,"

The act of love is presented here as the whole world. It is the only thing that matters; compared to it, everything else is only pretense. The sun

image carries out the development of this theme; for its strength, when set against the emotion of the two, makes love become, intellectually, a force stronger than the sun itself.

This poem diverges from form just as did "The Canonization" and "The Apparition." The unusual thing about Donne's rhythm in this poem is the absence of the spondee. Rather he resorts to another unusual foot, the pyrrhic. This combination of two short beats characterizes the more subdued tone of the poem. In "The Sun Rising," Donne depends more upon intellectual comparison than upon the force of imagery for effect.

The song "Go and Catch a Falling Star" and the poem "The Indifferent" will be used to illustrate the group of Donne's poems which are neither Platonic nor erotic in the strictest sense. In the first, the theme is a combination of love and inconstancy. The first stanza celebrates a list of impossibilities. No one can catch a falling star or make a vegetable root pregnant. Following these two sonewhat concrete examples, one finds himself in a deeper list of images which demand an intellectual comparison. Only in the nebulous limbo of incomprehensibility does one encounter time long gone or discover who cleft the devil's foot. Maddened sailors may have heard mermaids sing, but Donne recognizes the impossibility of anyone else ever having heard them.

From these images, Donne turns to images which differ from those of the first group in that they are, although abstract, within human consciousness. He would know how to keep off envy's stinging;

> And finde
> What winde
> Serves to advance an honest mind.

These build the atmosphere of impossibility, which is heightened by the contrast between the root and star images and the devil's foot and the

singing mermaids. The first two images are understood to be factually impossible. The last two, while they are more abstract, heighten the effect and are strangely meaningful.

Having built up this illusion of impossibility, Donne carries it farther in the second stanza. The person to whom the poem is addressed is told that if he has been born to see strange sights, he should travel the world over and live until he is gray without finding a woman "both true and fair." She, then, is the strange sight, the thing "invisible to see." The lines indicate an abrupt and clear break with the Elizabethan tradition.

> And swear
> No where
> Lives a woman true and fair.

He is saying that there is no such woman in existence as the one of which the traditionalists wrote.

The third stanza continues to reflect upon the improbability of such a woman's existence. "Such a pilgrimage were sweet... ," the poet reflects. To search for such a woman would be a holy search, one that carries with it connotations of all that is pure and good. Immediately his tone changes, however, and he tells his friend that he would not make the journey; for he recognizes the fallibility of the shrine.

> Yet shee
> Will bee
> False, ere I come, to two or three.

The whole poem has been building to this climax. Inconstancy is treated as a universal failing. Donne does not deny it but accepts it as the inevitable and the expected. Do not tell me, even though you should find her, he tells his listener. Although it would be a sweet search, a pilgrimage, he cannot and does not expect to make the journey.

In this poem, even more than in the first three, Donne treats the theme of inconstancy. Here he accepts it. Love is incidental; inconstancy is the primary theme.

The title, "Song," which is given to this poem illustrates Donne's satiric approach to his subject. "Go and Catch a Falling Star" is rhythmical, but it is not lyrical in the sense that it might easily be sung. The basic iambic foot alternates between trochaic and amphabraic feet, and the spondee is once more used frequently. A close examination of the three stanzas reveals that there is no set similarity among them, even though it may seem so before examining them.

Donne's approach to the fair tradition and his revolt against it is best illustrated in "The Indifferent." He says

> I can love both fair and brown,
> Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betrays.

It matters little to him whether she is fair or dark, country-bred or city-bred, or whether she does or does not have an agreeable temperament. He can love anyone, whatever her appearance or faults, "...so she be not true." Inconstancy is his sole requirement.

"Will no other vice content you?" he asks. Constancy is treated as the sin rather than inconstancy. It would serve the mistress to be as women before her have been; she should not try to establish this new vice in the world. Men are not constant; women should not try to be different.

> Let mee, and do you, twenty know,
> Rob me, but bind me not, and let mee go.
> Must I, who came to travaile thorow you
> Grow your fixed subject, because you are true?

He cares not how many lovers she has. His only request is that she should not try to make him her "...fixed subject..." because she would be true to him.

The goddess of love has heard his song, the poet states, and has sworn by "...Love's sweetest part, Variety..." that this is the first time she has heard of this heretical doctrine of constancy. She has examined the word and reported there are in all only two or three "Poore Heretiques in love..." who think "...to stablish dangerous constancie." She has told them that since they insist upon being constant despite the prevalence of inconsistancy, they can be true only to those who will be false in return.

This treatment of constancy as a vice rather than as a virtue is another sharp break with tradition. Donne states that he could love twenty or even more. All he asks of them is that they do not demand constancy. Variety is the most delightful thing about love, and the poet is unwilling to give it up. Those who expect constancy expect the impossible. Constancy, and not inconstancy, is the dangerous thing.

"Venus heard me sigh this song..." Donne states. Here again he is mocking tradition. The poem is not a song; for while it does have a basic rhythm, it cannot easily be set to music. Regular only in that it has three nine-line stanzas, its form diverges rhythmically from stanza to stanza.

Donne wrote several poems which fall into neither of the two groups which have already been considered. In this last group, he transcends his treatment of the physical aspects of love and attains a highly Platonic outlook toward a subject which he has formerly treated as a physical relationship. Those who contend that Donne had become less sensual when he wrote these poems have some basis for their supposition, for erotic imagery is entirely absent from then. In them, he succeeds in ignoring the "Hee and Shee" and approaches, though in a different manner, the moods of the earlier writers.

"The Undertaking" represents one of Donne's more simple approaches to Platonism. In it, the poet states that he has done two deeds braver than any worthy has ever done; he has loved, and he has managed to keep that love hidden from the world. There was reason to hide it, for the inconstant world would never have believed that it existed. It would have been madness to try to convince the unbelievers, and it would have been useless. Just as it would be foolish to teach an apprentice to carve a type of stone that he could not find; so it would be foolish to tell the world of this love when none else but he could find it. It is possible for such a relationship to exist only between him and his love. Others would continue to love as they had loved before. Their relationship would continue to be inconstant.

The love of which Donne writes has been able to transcend the physical; it is the inward loveliness, rather than the outward attributes of beauty, which the poet worships. This inward beauty causes him to loathe all outward appearances. It also causes him to forget physical attraction, which is traditionally fed by the beauty of the mistress.

> For he who color loves, and skin,
> Loves but their oldest clothes.

Donne then tells the listener that if he, too, has been able to see the virtue in woman, dared to love that alone and to forget the physical attraction he might feel for her, he has also done this worthy thing.

One notices Donne's insistence upon the necessity of keeping this love hidden from the eyes of the world. The poet still accepts as the rule both physical attraction and inconstancy. That he has been able to "...forget the Hee and Shee..." does not make him forget the weakness of other men and women. Only between him and his love is there this pure relationship, and it must be kept hidden from the eyes of "...prophane men... ."

In some early manuscripts, this poem was entitled "Platonique Love," a title which bears out the treatment of the theme which has already been noted. The relationship between the two is Platonic in the highest sense.

The strange thing about the form of "The Undertaking" is the fact that it follows in entirety the old ballad form form and meter. The tone is constant; the mood does not change throughout the poem. With the exception of the substitution of <u>you</u> for <u>I</u> in the last stanza, these two are identical.

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" carries the tone of Platonic love still further. This particular poem was written by Donne to his wife; the occasion was his leaving her to go on his trip to France. In it, he develops still another religion of love. This is a Platonic religion, and differs from the overt religion in the poems considered in the first two groups.

Donne compares the separation between him and his wife to the death of virtuous men. Just as they die, mildly and with no fear of the future, so much Donne and his wife part. They have nothing to fear in separation.

> Let us melt, and make no noise,
> No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,
> T'were a prophanation of our joys
> To tell the layetie of our love.

They part without tears and sighs; there is no reason to tell of this love to those who do not enjoy this relationship. Once more, Donne speaks of keeping the knowledge of this love hidden from the rest of the world. To tell of it to the rest of the world would be to profane it.

Donne goes on to say, in the third stanza, that even the movements of the world may cause fears. This may be considered the introduction to a

new phase of the poem, for the poet is contrasting the emotion which exists between him and his wife with the emotion of other lovers. These others are "Dull, sublunary lovers..." who are tied to the mundane world and to its customary relationships. They are the moon-maddened lovers who are ruled by physical passion. Of him and his wife, Donne says in contrast,

> But we by a love so much refined,
> That ourselves know not what it is,
> Inter-assured of the mind,
> Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

Their two souls are one; therefore, their love will endure not a breach but an expansion. He compared it to "...gold to ayery thinnesse beat." In this image, he chooses the most expandable metal known to illustrate his emotion.

The last three stanzas use what is one of Donne's most effective intellectual images. He compares the love he and his wife bear for each other to a geometric compass. She is a fixed foot, the force which ever draws his love. He is the moving arm, the person who must leave her. Even when the moving arm must leave the center, the fixed foot leans after it, growing erect only when it returns to the center.

> Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
> Like the other foot, obliquely run;
> Thy firmness makes my circle just,
> And makes mee end where I begunne.

Donne uses the circle as a symbol of constancy. The compass like love which he and his wife enjoy holds no hint of inconstancy. Only the moon-stricken lovers much care for eyes, lips, and hands. He and his wife are not dependent upon such externals for the continuation of their love. She, for him, is the beginning and the end.

This poem is divided into nine four-line stanzas. As has already been suggested, they fall into three different divisions. The first two

develop the idea of a new religion of love, a Platonic religion. Three and four begin to build the contrast between the love of the "Dull, sublunary lovers..." and Donne and his wife. This contrast is completed in stanzas five and six. The last three stanzas complete the development of the theme of Platonic love. The compass image is very successful in showing just how the souls are joined.

Contrasting these poems, as well as those of the other two groups, to the poems of the Elizabethan writers, one is inclined to decide that the treatment of constancy in Donne is also proof of his revolt against Elizabethan tradition. In the poems of this latter group, he follows accepted forms with little variation; he does not seem so eager to create new stanza forms and rhyme schemes. Even in these, however, his treatment of the theme of constancy in love differs from that of the traditionalists. He has not returned to the traditional sonnet form of Spenser and Sidney, but has preferred to use forms that are less often used. One must admit that Donne did not follow the traditions of the Elizabethans. Too much attention has been paid to the biographical basis for these poems in an effort to explain his later religion poetry.

It is quite clear, from an overall examination of the poems analyzed, that John Donne was revolting against tradition. In an effort to counteract the staid, set language, rhythm, and mood of the Elizabethans, he went to the other extreme; but this is only an indication of his revolt. In order to show this more clearly, it is necessary to review the facts about both types of poetry. Both Spenser and Sidney, along with their followers, built those "...pretty rooms..." of sonnets which were frames for the set picture of the fair, constant, virtuous woman whose love the poet did not deserve. The structure was most often the English sonnet. If the paean of

praise took the form of a song, it still celebrated the beauty and virtue of the lady. The tone was most often melancholy, for the lover had little expectation of being loved in return.

Donne's break with the idiom and approach, as well as the frequently melancholy mood; of these writers is easily discerned. His images are harsh, clear-cut, and intellectual; the descriptions of the Elizabethan writers were composed of colorful, sensuous images. Contrast, for example, one of Spenser's descriptive passages in his "Epithalamion" with a passage of comparable content in Donne. In speaking of night, Spenser takes two lines to describe it.

> Now welcome night, thou night so long expected,
> That daies long labor doest at last defray... .

Turning momentarily to one of Donne's own epithalamions, one finds him saying of night:

> ...and night is come... .[3]

Spenser and his fellow-writers appealed to the reader's emotions, his love of color, and his regard for classical mythology. John Lyly's "Cupid and My Campaspe" is an excellent example of this. Donne appealed to the reader's intellect and through it to his emotions. The Elizabethan sonneteers used the subjective method of appeal; Donne's method was extremely inductive. Through his images, he first built up an intellectual concept of whatever emotions he wished to produce and then presented the emotion itself in terms which were equally intellectual.

Love for the Elizabethan sonneteers was idealized to the highest degree. Whatever their personal behavior, they wrote consistently of the

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[3]John Donne, "Epithalamion on the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine," The Poems of John Donne, p.113.

fair, virtuous woman who would be forever adored. The love becomes so idealized that the lover virtually makes a deity of his mistress. Frequently he loves with no expectation of any consummation of that love. It is this troubadour aspect of the relationship which is responsible for the melancholy mood of the poet.

Donne, in contrast, veers so sharply from this whole tradition that his idiom, his approach, and often his form differ radically from those of his Elizabethan contemporaries. Breaking with this tradition, Donne satirized the insipid, malignant disease which was crippling English poetry. What has been called his "conceit" is this constant effort to refrain from using the idiom of this tradition. There is often a deliberate straining for the unusual and the traditionally unacceptable in his work. He brings into his poetry the direct erotic imagery which had been frowned upon by his predecessors. Love to him became the actual consummation of desire rather than any idealized relationship. His images come from the developments of his own time. He makes frequent use of exploration, scientific and philosophical beliefs, and even of current superstitions. He neither discredits nor accepts the images he uses, and he can change his approach toward an idea from poem or within the confines of a particular poem. He makes use of maps, ships, storms, religion, politics, and even mathematical instruments. The erotic images which are found in his poems often have both overt and hidden meanings. The mandrake root and the verb die, both of which he uses more than once, are examples of this. Donne used his "...bracelet of bright hair around the bone..." more than once also, and he continually refers to himself and his love as rulers of a whole universe.

In contrast to the Elizabethan dependence upon classical mythology, Donne builds his own religion of love. He and his mistress are the

deities of this new religion, which has as its central object of worship the act of love. This religion is best exemplified in "The Canonization," but he carries the theme throughout many of his love poems.

Donne's treatment of the theme of constancy, as has already been noted, varies among the poems. In some, as, for example, "The Indifferent," it is the vice and not the virtue. In his Platonic poems, constancy is an accepted part of the love theme; but he stresses the necessity of keeping it hidden from an inconstant world. The Elizabethan treatment of this theme was always the same; constancy was one of the major virtues of the lovers. Donne's acceptance of inconstancy as the rule is one of the characteristics of his approach to the love theme.

Another of Donne's characteristics is his dependence upon intellectual analogy. In "The Flea," he presents a sophisticated excuse for inconstancy by building his comparison between the bite of the flea and the act of love. His use of intellectual comparison in the song, "Go and Catch a Falling Star," has already been noted. It is in this manner that he succeeds in presenting his point of view.

Donne breaks with the idea that his poetry will serve as a means of immortalizing the woman he loves. In contrast to this idea, Donne says in "The Triple Fool,"

> I am two fools, I know,
> For loving, and for saying so
> In whining poetry.

Donne speaks of his poetry as a lasting monument to the act of love, never to the beauty and virtue of the beloved. There is never any indication that Donne considers his poetry as a vehicle unfit to express his emotions, as Sidney did in "Oh Joy too High." This extremely confident attitude is another part of his satiric reaction to the Elizabethan tradition.

Donne's mood varies from poem to poem and within the poems themselves. To attempt to determine which mood represents the true Donne is both impossible and unimportant; one is concerned with the change of mood rather than with the veracity of it. The important fact is that throughout the three groups into which the poems have been divided, the mood is at constant variance with the mood of melancholy which was a part of the Elizabethan tradition. He can be harsh, as in "The Apparition;" indifferent, as in "The Indifferent;" or chiding, as he is in "The Canonization"; but he is never melancholy.

In contrasting Donne's treatment of subject matter and imagery with the treatment of the traditionalists, one sees his revolt against the Elizabethans quite clearly. His approach to his basic theme was entirely different. He used rhythmic variations more often than is customary in poetry, and he satirized tradition when he entitled some of these rhythmically irregular works songs. He used words which were overly erotic in his poetry, and he purposely strained to achieve images which would be unlike the sensuous, extravagant, colorful images of the Elizabethans. The final analysis of his attempt is found in the fact that although there were many who imitated his method and approach, he had no equal.

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