

ON JOHN DONNE'S SUBTLE SUBVERSION
OF OVID'S *AMORES* I, XIII

The parting of lovers at dawn as a literary commonplace can be traced back to the works of such classical authors as Homer or Sapho. However, it is in *Amores*, I, xiii where Ovid definitely sets the model for literary imitation within the Western tradition. In this sense, John Donne's «The Sun Rising» is usually taken as an excellent example to illustrate the theory of *imitatio* and *variatio*, and the concept of originality as understood in the Renaissance. The originality of Donne's poem comes from a totally subversive but subtle process of variation operated on Ovid's passage which prepares the reader for the surprising final conceit.

A first reading of «The Sun Rising» is misleading: it falsely presents the poem as if respecting the formal and logical structure of Ovid's text. However, Donne has wisely begun by suppressing the first introductory, descriptive lines in Ovid: all narrative traces are done away with so that the poem begins in that vocative, direct manner which is so familiar in *Songs and Sonnets*. This beginning sets the pattern for the poem.

This pattern is perfectly shown in stanza 1, where the Sun's powerful authority is belittled and ridiculed by means of a carefully balanced structure of reproaches (lines 1 & 5) surrounding two rhetorical questions (lines 2-4). This structure rests on two imperative sentences replacing Ovid's descriptive lines in *Amores* and substituting the Ovidian lover's hypothetical disposition to sacrifice for the boldness and egotism of Donne's lover.

In stanza 2 Donne gives the screw another turn by making use of a despising attitude towards the Sun which does not appear in such an overt way in Ovid's text, where the reverential tone is never lost. That it

was Donne's intention to set his poem clearly against Ovid's model, while at the same time keeping the contact with it, is further proved by the Goliath-like challenge at the end of the stanza.

The lover's saucy sense of superiority in that challenge makes the reader at ease with the development of the bold final conceit in stanza 3. The lover's mockery of the Sun is given another and most surprising turn of the screw by divesting the Sun of its divine nature and power and transferring it to the lovers and their bed. The resignation of Ovid's lover is replaced by the energy of a single lover who dares to challenge Time and wins the fight.

In this sense, Donne has re-interpreted Ovid's text in such a way that, in terms of Renaissance cosmovision, man's self-trust is highlighted and pushed to the fore.

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