

FUSION OF DRAMA AND ARGUMENT IN DONNE'S POETRY II

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This essay was derived from my previous essay "Fusion of Drama and Argument in Donne's Poetry."¹⁾ In that essay, it is stated that the speakers' attitudes concerning love are dramatic. They are dramatic in spite of their themes which stage honest arguments at times and unrealistic arguments at other times. In this essay we will discuss these arguments in each poem and how they fuse dramatic elements.

When we look at these arguments in "The Flea" whose dramatic elements were also examined in the previous essay,²⁾ "The Flea" establishes a situation and the speaker ultimately perceives the flea imaginatively. Through the course of the poem, he is not interested in the flea as a real insect, but interested in the flea as a means for his own argument. By using this conceit (even though Donne himself did not invent it), the poem becomes less concerned with whether the speaker succeeds in seducing his mistress and more concerned with how cleverly he manipulates his argument. The poem directs the reader to the dramatic situation and focuses on a conceptualizing process.

Each stanza in "The Flea" directs the reader to two different meanings. In the first stanza the speaker's imperative invites the reader to consider an objective flea by referring to the present, "this". The speaker enforces this immediacy by referring to the presence of a hypothetical listener; the speaker's mistress, "thou".

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is ;
Mee it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee ;

注1) Asakura, H., "Fusion of Drama and Argument in Donne's Poetry", Bulletin of HOKURIKU GAKUIN JUNIOR COLLEGE No. 20, 1988, pp. 49-66.

注2) id. p. 64.

is that the flea holds life, and its secondary sense is that it holds the blood which it sucked when biting the lovers.

By the third stanza the speaker has established a conceptual stage that supersedes the concerns of an objective, external reality and that allows him to respond to the final defiant gesture of his mistress.

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence ?
In what could this flea guilty bee,
Except in that drop which it sucket from thee ?
Yet thou triumph'st and saist that thou
Find'st not thy selfe, nor ; mee the weaker now ;
'Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee ;
Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee,
Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.

The "flea" is once again merely a flea, but is not something that has only a particular, concrete reality. In lines 26-27 it is nothing more than an insect, and its death, though the speaker see it as something more than an insect's death is not more than something that has been treated cruelly and unjustly. The reader becomes aware, not of an objective, concrete, phenomenal world, but of a malleable reality that the speaker shapes and gives meaning to according to his needs. We begin to wonder whether "this flea" can be understood empirically at all. We also begin to wonder whether the imaginative perception of the flea is any less valid than the empirical perception of its nature : by the end of the poem, our awareness of a reality shaped and defined by the speaker dominates any sense of a particular, concrete, objective reality.

The poem concludes without indicating whether the speaker succeeds in the seduction. Although the poem initially establishes a situation, a sense of here and now, the end emphasizes the speaker's conceptualizing impulse. In considering questions about how the poem resolves the implied dramatic element, the reader becomes aware of how adroitly the speaker fuses together drama and the arguments.

Many poems reflect the inner life of John Donne. For instance, in "Loves Exchange" the speaker tells the god of Love in a gentle tone ;

Love, any devil else but you.

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Would for a given soul give something too.
 At Court your fellowes every day,
 Give th'art of Riming, Huntsmanship and Play,
 For them who wee their own before ;
 Onely' I have nothing which gave more,
 But am, alas, by being lowly, lower.
 (11.1-7)

Between the dissolution of the Parliament of 1597 and the sommoning of Elizabeth the First's last Parliament, there were two monentous domestic events. One was the death of Lord Burghley³⁾ in August of 1598 who worked almost forty years since the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. From 1597-98, he was the dominant member of the whole Parliament. So no one replaced, or could replace, him. There was a big confusion in Parliament. The other event was the rebellion of the Earl of Essex in February, 1601. Had it not been for the Essex Rebellion, Parliament would probably have been summoned for the beginning of 1601, when in fact it was expected. The last payment of the "Treble Subsidy" granted between 1597-98 had been due in October of 1600. Money was more desperately needed than ever. The financial burden was becoming too much for the prudential management of Queen Elizabeth, and the Tudor state was moving inexorably into bankruptcy.

Only the crisis of a domestic rebellion could have sommoned Parliament by October of 1601. Another important magning was that the Queen had to insist on a short session in order to collect its first subsidy without delay. Moreover, it is important for the present essay that John Donne was sitting there in that Parliament as one of four secretaries of Egerton, Lord Keeper. At that time John Donne was twenty nine years old. In this Parliament of 1601, confusion, discontent and complaint over monopolies, patents and privileges reached its height. In "Loves Exchange", the speaker begins to complain to the god of Love.

I aske not dispensation now
 To falsifie a teare, or sigh, or vow
 I do not sue from thee to draw
 A *non obstante* on natures law,

注 3) William, Baron Burghley (1521-1598) principal adviser to Queen Elizabeth I through most of her reign.

These are prerogatives, they inhere
In thee and their ; none should forswear
Except that hee Loves minion were.

(11.8-14)

The speaker gives up asking 'dispensation' (here the word 'dispensation' means licence from the Queen to set aside the law in a particular case), even though any other devil besides the god of Love arranged specious bargains with men by granting them trivial demonic powers in exchange for their soul.

Give mee thy weaknesse, make mee blinde
Both wayes, as thou and thine, eies and minde ;
Love, let me neuer know that this
Is love, or, that love childish is.
Let me not know that others know
That she knows my paine, least that so
A tender shame make me mine owne new woe.

(11.15-21)

In this poem the speaker's anger is hidden. It is to the god of Love that he gives offense there, but the speaker might be Donne himself and we can say that Donne burns with rage against Queen Elizabeth I. As a former rebel against Love's tyranny the speaker refused the licence. The dramatic words with anger fuse into an argumental statement. The last lines say that the corpses of men who have been stretched on a rack make poor subjects for anatomical dissection.

The emphasis of many poems in the *Songs and Sonnets* is on a conceptual, an internal, rather than material, external reality. Poems often focus on words, and on the shaping, informing, and realizing potential of words. In many poems the properly chosen words can modify one's perception: i.e. "endure not yet/A breach, but an expansion" ("Valediction: forbidding Mourning"); "All was but All" ("Loves Infiniteness"); "These burning fits but meterors bee" ("A Feaver"); "let me call/This houre her Vigill" ("A Noctrunall upon S. Lucies Day").

The semantic differences between "breach" and "expansion", "All" and "but All", "burning fits" and "meteors", and "houre" and "Vigill" juxtapose different ways of

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seeing or interpreting reality. In “A Valediction”, the difference between the meanings of the words “breach” and “expansion” contrast the way the speaker sees the reality of his departure with the way one generally understands departure. For the speaker, departure does not mean separation ---a “breach”--- but an “expansion” in which the souls of the lovers, because they are one, span the distant separation with their bodies and thus remain united.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
 Though I must go endure not yet
 A breach, but an expansion,
 Like gold to aery thinness beat.

(11.21-24)

And the famous compass image is followed to these lines.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
 Like th' other foot, obliquely run ;
 Their firmness makes my circle just,
 And makes me end, where I begun.

(11.33-36)

Argument in the poems may be a flimsy, sometimes not a veritable argument. Donne doesn't use the arguments for beauty, goodness or truth, but for poetic effect, 'a flexible poetic accessory'.⁴⁾ These arguments are very furious at times, while very gentle at other times. But the dramatic elements and the arguments melt together.

Deare Love, for nothing lesse than thee
 Would I have broke this happy dreame,
 It was a theame
 For reason, much too strong for phantasie,
 Therefore thou wakd'st me wisely ; yet
 My Dreame thou brok'st not, but continued'st it,
 Thou art so true, that thoughts of thee suffice,

注 4) John Carey, John Donne : Life, Mind and Art, Faber and Faber, 1980, p. 231.

To make dreames truth ; and fables histories ;
 Buter these armes, for since thou thoughtst it best,
 Not to dreame all my dreame, let's do the rest.

The speaker's dream of his mistress was one of the commonplaces of Renaissance love verses.⁵⁾ The matter of the dream is better fitted to waking reason than to sleeping fancy. The speaker's mistress appears as a person who disturbs his dream. These lines are dramatic. And soon the speaker directs us to the arguments about reason and fancy. When he confesses "Thou art so true, that thoughts of thee suffice,/To make dreames truth," he recalls the relationship between men and God. He, who tells his mistress "and fables histories," declares to her the common love poems's phrase: "Enter these armes, for since thou thought'st it best,/Not to dreame all my dreame, let's do the rest." The result of this shift in two different modes of meaning startled the seventeenth-century readers and startles us.

As lightning, or a Tapers light.
 Thine eyes, and not thy noise wak'd mee ;
 Yet I thought thee
 (For thou lov's truth) an Angell, at first sight,
 But when I saw thou saw'st my heart,
 And knew'st my thoughts, beyond an Angels art,
 When thou knew'st what I dreamt, when thou knew'st when
 Excesse of joy would wake me, and cam'st then,
 I doe confesse, it could not chuse but bee
 Profane, to thinke thee any thing but thee.

Only God immediately can apprehend the thoughts of the heart but an angel cannot. Here the speaker discusses the difference between God's and angels' nature. And he continues to say that the attribute of his mistress belongs to God's. She cannot be defined or described like Deity. We would rather say that his mistress herself is the nature of God. Since his mistress knew what the speaker dreamed, she came to wake him up. The speaker confesses, as he prays to God for mercy, his sins to her: "I do confesse, it could not chuse but bee/Profane, to thinke thee any thing but thee."

注 5) M. Praz cites some Renaissance version in *A Garland for John Donne*, 1931, p. 53-6.

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Comming and staying show'd thee, thee,
But rising makes me doubt, that now,
Thou art not thou.
That love is weake, where feare's as strong as hee ;
'Tis not all spirit, pure, and brave,
If mixture it of Feare, Shame, Honor, have.
Perchance as torches which must ready bee,
Men light and put out, so thou deal'st with mee,
Thou cam'st to kindle, goest to come ; Then I
Will dreame that hope againe, but else would die.

Though he confesses his profaneness, the speaker also has a doubt whether his God is the true God or not. He insists that fear is as strong as love, that love is not true, and that if love contains fear, shame and honor, it is not made of a "pure, and brave" spirit. He is dealing with a theological problem. In those days soldiers lit a new torch so it could be rekindled easily. His mistress came to kindle his heart. That fire went out, but will again be rekindled. "Then I/will dreame that hope againe, but else would die."

Donne tried to reconcile two opposite arguments which loose the world while gaining it. In these poems Donne fuses drama and arguments. Donne's speakers direct us through words to a situation and then show that the dramatic elements can express higher, more abstract realities.

Notes

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