

FUSION OF DRAMA AND ARGUMENT IN DONNE'S POETRY

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.....and the rightest companie
Of Players which upon the worlds stage bee,
.....On his Mistres

But I forgive. Repent thou honest man.
Gold is restorative ; restore it then.
Or if with it thou beest loath to depart
Because 'tis cordiall, would 'twere at thy heart.
.....The Bracelet

John Donne has three gifts as a poet. The first is for song, that is to make pure melodic phrasing (despite his reputation for 'harshness'); the second is for establishing the situation by dramatic dialogue; and the third is for arguing in verse. Song, drama and argument; these gifts would have been thought incompatible, but Donne can fuse them in a single poem. This article, in particular, is to examine aspects of his use of drama and argument.

One says "Donne's poetry is dramatic and argumentative" with caution: the terms are treacherous, and "dramatic" has been used among critics in various ways¹⁾. "The

注 1) For various discussions of "dramatic" as it applies to Donne's poems; Edward Dowden, *New Studies in Literature*, (London, 1895), p.103; H.J.C. Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. (1912; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 2: xlii; Pierre Legouis, *Donne the Craftsman: An Essay upon the Structure of the Songs and Sonnets* (1928; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1952), p.50 ff.; J.B. Leishmann, *The Monarch of Wit: An Analytical and Comparative Study of the Poetry of John Donne*, (1951; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), pp.61, 75, 88, 159-60; A. J. Smith, *John Donne: "The Songs and Sonnets"* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), pp.7-8, 16; Helen Gardner, ed., *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. xix-xxii; Donald Guss, *John Donne, Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in the Songs and Sonnets* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), pp.67, 91-92; Earl Roy Miner, *The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley* (Princeton University Press, 1969), pp.15-23, 54-90; Patrick Cruttwell, *The Shakespearean Moment* (1954; rpt. London: Chatto and Wundus, 1970), pp.43-44; Patricia Garland Pinka, *This Dialogue of One: The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, (The University of Alabama Press, 1982), pp.x-xi et passim.

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The second listener is the reader who is reading the poem. In "The Curse", the speaker also addresses the reader.

Who ever guesses, thinks, or dreames he knowes
Who is my mistris, wither by this curse ;
(11.1-2)

Madnesse his sorrow, gout his cramps, may hee
Make, by but thinking, who hath mode him such :
(11.9-10)

May he dreame Treason, and beleeve, that hee
Meant to performe it, and confesse, and die,
(11.17-18)

The third listener is the speaker himself: he soliloquizes.

Vpon this Primrose hill,
Where, if Heav'n would distill
A shoure of raine, each severall drop might goe
To his owne primrose, and grow Manna so ;
And where their forme, and their infinitie
Make a terrestriall Galaxie,
As the small starres doe in the skie :
I walke to finde a true Love ; and I see
That 'tis not a mere woman, that is shee,
But must, or more, or lesse then woman bee.
"The Primrose", 11.1-10)

But when I have done so,
Some man, his art and voice to show,
Doth set and sing my paine,
And by delighting many, frees againe
Griefe, which verse did restraine.
To Love, and Griefe tribute of Verse belongs,

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But not of such as pleases when 'tis read,
Both are increased by such songs :
For both their triumphs so are published,
And I, which was two fooles, do so grow three ;
Who are a little wise, the best fooles bee.

(“The Triple Foole”, 11.12-22)

The listener whom the speaker addresses may be a woman, but may also be the god of Love, a spectator, a ghost or the sun. By these means Donne forces the reader to be drawn into the situation. For example, “Loves Exchange” invokes the god of Love, and the reader is as a father confessor. He is an hypothetical spectator in “The Extasie”, an entering ghost in “The Apparition”, the sun in “The Sunne Rising”, the man who comes shroud the speaker in “The Funeral”, and one of the speaker’s friends in “The Canonization”.

However at first the reader doesn’t know whom the speaker is upbraiding in the opening lines of “The Canonization” :

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsie, or my gout,
My five gray haire, or ruin’d fortune flout,

(11.1-3)

In a strong voice, and imperatively, the speaker begins to upbraid the listener ; he has indeed silenced the listener, and insists on his own opinion. (When this poem was circulated among Donne’s friends, it may have amused a few of them.) In the next lines, it appears that the listener seems to be the speaker’s friend.

With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honour, or his grace,
And the Kings reall, or his stamped face
Contemplate :

(11.4-8)

The speaker ironically suggests a worldly-wise rejection of a private and imprudent world of love, and depicts the world of ambition from which he and his mistress have daringly excluded themselves by their love :

what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

(11.8-9)

There are two opposing worlds ; a private world of love and a public world of ambition. The speaker conveys the state of these different worlds by addressing the listener, but of the two he chooses to sing the praises of the world of love. Those of Donne's love poems which are called "dramatic" are so devised that they turn their back upon the public world in favour of a private world based on love.

The tone of the second stanza becomes much more defensive of the speaker's private world of love, as the speaker asks the listener : "What merchants ships have my sighs drown'd?", "Who said my teares have overflow'd his ground?", "When did my colds a forward spring remove?", and "When did the heats which my veines fill/Add one more to the plague Bill?" These interrogatives are important not only for defending the private world of love, but also for making the situation dramatic. For by directly asking these questions of the listener, the immediacy of the situation is brought out. Petrarchan terms of love... "sighs", "teares", "colds", and "heats"... are well contrasted with the contemporary world, which as a whole is characterised as negative and destructive :

Soldiers finds warres, and Lawyers finde out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

(11.16-18)

In the first stanza the speaker forces the listener to remain silent with the imperative, "hold your tongue". And in the second stanza the speaker tries to defend his own world with the interrogative forms. These interrogatives, which are based on exaggeration of Petrarchan clichés, are meant to defend by attacking...that is, they demonstrate the absurdity of the supposed opposition without formal argument. In the third stanza...the middle stanza of the poem...again with the imperative the

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speaker suggests to the listener that he should form his own opinion about the speaker and his mistress, in whatever way he likes.

Call us what you will, wee 'are made such by love,
Call her one, mee another flye,
We' are Tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And wee in us find the 'Eagle and the Dove ;
The Phoenix ridle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it,
So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit.
Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

(11.19-27)

After establishing dramatic immediacy by using the imperative form, the speaker shows that the private world of love is one which is self-destroying and self-consuming: the moth burnt in the candle and the burning candle itself. These images of "the flye", "the Tapers", "the Eagle and the Dove", "the Phoenix" have their own coherence. In particular the image of the Phoenix illustrates the paradox that death gives the speaker and his mistress a new life. Moreover, since the image symbolized Christ throughout the Renaissance, the speaker's audaciously blasphemous image is being used to shock, (including as it does the sexual meaning of the word "die"). Instead of rebuffing the listener's public world, the speaker ironically reforms his own world of love to fit the detailed procedure for canonization in the Roman Catholic church⁴⁾.

The fourth stanza begins on a decisive note in the affirmative form :

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombes or hearse
Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse ;
And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove.
We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes ;

(11.28-32)

注 4) Clair, John A., "Donne's "The Canonization", PMLA 80, 1965, pp.300-302

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The legend of the speaker and his mistress is not fit for tombstones but for verse. Their private world of love has no concern with time, so it has no history. The speaker and his mistress can be as appropriately celebrated in sonnets as in chronicles, just as an urn, provided that it be well wrought, is as fit for the ashes of the great as "halfe-acre tombes".

The peak of paradox in this poem is reached at the close of stanza four, concentrated in the word "canonized" :

And by these hymes, all shall approve
Us Canonized for Love.

(11.35-36)

The fifth stanza offers the invocation to be pronounced by future lovers :

And thus invoke us : You whom reverend love
Made one anothers hermitage ;

(11.37-38)

Dead, they have become saints ; while alive, they retired to their hermitages to escape the public world of the laity. The invocation suggests the superiority of that private world, and makes a serious supplication :

You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage ;
Who did the whole worlds soule extract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes,
So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize,
Countries, Townes, Courts : Beg from above
A patterne of your love!

(11.39-45)

"The Canonization" shows a witty paradox, where the poet exaggerates his own world and heightens his defence of it with hyperbole, even though that defence is put into the mouths of lovers not yet born.

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Moreover, it is by using the imperative or the interrogative that Donne suggests the directness or immediacy of the situation his love poetry. At first, there are many examples of the imperative forms :

If thou findst one, let mee know,
Such a Pilgrimage were sweet,
Yet doe not, I would not goe,
Though at next doore we might meet,
("Song : Goe, and catch a falling starre", 11.19-22)

Come live with mee, and bee my love,
And we will some now pleasures prove
Of golden sands, and christall brookes,
With silken lines, and silver hookes.
("The Baite", 11.1-4)

Yet, love and hate mee too,
So, these extreames shall neythurs office doe ;
Love mee, that I may die the gentle way ;
Hate mee, because thy love's too great for mee ;
Or let these two, themselves, not me decay :
So shall I live, thy Stage, not Triumph bee ;
Then, least thy love, hate and mee thou undoe,
Oh let mee live, yet love and hate mee too.
("The Prohibition", 11.17-24)

"The Curse", full of invention, depends almost wholly upon the imperative or the jussive subjunctive.

Who ever guesses, thinks, or dreames he knows
Who is my mistris, wither by this curse ;
His only, 'and only' his purse
May some dull heart to love dispose
And shee yeeld then to all that are his foes ;
May he be scorn'd by one, who all else scorne,

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Forsweare to others, what to her he' hath sworne,
With fear of missing, shame of getting, torne :

Madnesse his sorrow, gout his cramps, may hee
Make, by but thinking, who hath made him such :
And may he feele no touch
Of conscience, but of fame, and bee
Anguish'd, not that 'twas sinne, but that 'twas shee :
In early and long scarcenesse may he rot,
For land which had been his, if he had not
Himselfe incestuously an heire begot :

May he dreame Treason, and beleeve, that hee
Meant to performe it, and confesse, and die,
And no record tell why :
His sonnes, which none of his may bee,
Inherite nothing but his infamie :
Or may he so long Parasites have fed,
That he would faine be theirs, whom he hath bred,
And at the last be circumcis'd for bread :
(“The Curse”, 11.1-24)

The speaker in “A Valediction : of Weeping” is looking for sympathy from his mistress, but in “The Will” or “Love Usury” he supplicates the god of Love for mercy.

Let me power forth
My teares before my face, whil'st I stay here ;
For thy face coins them, and thy stampe they beare,
And by this Mintage they are something worth,
For thus they bee
Pregnant of thee ;
(“A Valediction : of Weeping”, 11.1-6)

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Before I sigh my last gaspe, let me breathe,
Great love, some Legacies ;
(“The Will”, 11.1-2)

Or

Till then, let my body raigne, and let
Mee travel, sojourne, snatch, plot, have, forget,
Resume my last years relict : think that yet
We 'had never met.

Let me thinke any rivalls letter mine,
And at next nine
Keep midnights promise ; mistake by the way

The maid, and tell the Lady 'of that delay :
Onely let mee love none, no, not the sport ;
From country grass, to comfitures of Court,
Or cities quelque choses, let report
My minde transport.
(“Loves Usury”, 11.5-16)

In “Loves Exchange” the speaker supplicates the god of Love in a bold and ironical tone. He invokes the god of Love, but he does not beg for predictable gifts :

I aske not dispensation now
To falsifie a teare, or sigh, or vow,
I do not sue trom thee to draw
A *non obstante* on natures law,
These are prerogatives, they inhere
In thee and thine ; none should forswear
Except that hee Loves minion were.
(11.8-14)

Instead, he asks to have Love's weakness.

Give mee thy weaknesse, make mee blinde,
Both wayes, as thou and thine, in eies and minde ;

Love, let me never 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)

The imperative forms of supplication are highly dramatic, as he begs for death, instead of torture. The shocking paradox at the end is most surprising, in that the tone of it is so unlike the dramatic tone of the imprecation which precedes it.

For this, Love is enrag'd with mee,
Yet kills not. If I must example bee
To future Rebels ; If th' unborne
Must learne, by my being cut up, and torne :
Kill, and dissect me, Love ; for this
Torture against thine owne end is,
Rack't carcasses make ill Anatomies.

(11.36-42)

Other devices serve to establish a dramatic context for a poem. Direct speech itself becomes more dramatic when it employs means which imply action (or imminent speech) by a second person ; and hence many poems make use of interrogative formulae :

And thence a law did grow,
One should but one man know ;
But are other creatures so?

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Are Sunne, Moone, or Starres by law forbidden,
To smile where they list, or lend away their light?

Are birds divorc'd, or are they chidden
If they leave their mate, or lie abroad a night?
(“Confined Love”, 11.5-11)

Chang'd loves are but chang'd sorts of meat,
And when hee hath the kernell eate,
Who doth not fling away the shell?
(“Communitie”, 11.22-24)

Yet call not this long life ; But thinke that I
Am, by being dead, Immortal ; Can ghosts die?
(“The Computation”, 11.9-10)

In the case of interrogatives in the past tense, something more subtle occurs. What looks like being retrospective is in fact an attempt (in this case, by grotesque contrasts) to define the present :

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?
But suck'd on cuntry pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we i'th seaven sleepers den?
(“The Good-morrow”, 11.1-4)

The case of interrogatives in the future tense also applies entirely to the present :

Will no other vice content you?
Will it not serve your turn to do, as did your mothers?
Have you old vices spent, and now would finde out others?
Or doth a feare, that men are true, torment you?
(“The Indifference”, 11.10-13)

In “Womans Constancy” the speaker addresses the hypothetical listener and the present is emphasized :

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Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,
To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow?
Or say that now
We are not just those persons, which we were?

In effect, although the poems are so constructed that questions seem to be dramatic, most of Donne's interrogatives are (strictly speaking) rhetorical questions : he pretends to indulge in dialogue, but the listener has—necessarily—no chance to reply. In "The Good morrow", by looking into his mistress eyes, he attempts to assure himself of her fidelity :

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares,
And true plaine hearts do in the faces rest,
Where can we finde two better hemispheares
Without sharpe North, without decling West?
(11.15-18)

In "Loves Alchemie" the poet asks a rhetorical question which the listener, if he could reply, could not answer in the affirmative. The listener in "Confined Love" is expected to answer negatively :

Our ease, our thrift, our honor, and our day,
Shall we, for this vaine Bubbles shadow pay?
Ends love in this, that my man,
Can be as happy as I can ; If he can
Endure the short scorne of a Bridegroomes play?
(“Loves Alchemie”, 11.13-17)

Who e'r rigg'd ship to lie in harbors,
And not to seeke new lands, or not to deale withall?
Or built fair houses, set trees, and harbours,
Only to lock up, or else to let them fall?
(“Confined Love”, 11.15-18)

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The interrogatives of why's and how's make the situations of the poems dramatic. As P. G. Stanwood and H. R. Asals stated in *John Donne and the Theology of language*⁵⁾ "why" and "how" are the "dangerous monosyllables" and the important tools of sophistry in Donne's poetry. We can see these single words working at crucial lines not only in "Holy Sonnets"⁶⁾ but also in "The Blossome", and "The Sunne Rising".

How shall shee know my heart ; or having none,
 Know thee for one?
 ("The Blossome", 11.29-30)

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
Why doest thou thus,
 Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?
 ("The Sunne Rising", 11.1-3)

Finally we see in Donne's poems sudden shifts of direction, the effects of which are usually dramatic, but hard to isolate and analyse. We can find something of it in "Womans Constancy", where the speaker acts as spokesman for the listener, who is required to make an excuse with various kinds of questions :

注 5) Stanwood, P. G. and Asals, H. R., *John Donne and the Theology of Language*, Missouri, 1986, p. 70

注 6) Gardner, H., *John Donne : The Divine Poems*, Oxford, 1952

"How shall my mindes white truth to them be try'd?"
 ("Divine Meditation" 4.1-8)

"Why are wee by all creatures waited on?
 Why doe the prodigall elements supply
 Life and food to mee, being more pure than
 Simple, and further from corruption?
 Why brook'st thou, ignorant horse, subjection?
 Why dost thou bull, and bore so seelily
 Dissemble weaknesse, and by' one mans stroke die,
 Whose whole kind, you might swallow and feed upon?"
 ("Divine Meditation" 8. 11.1-8)

Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,
To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow?
Or say that now
We are not just those persons, which we were?
Or, that oathes made in reverentiall feare
Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?
Or, as true deaths, true marryages untie,
So lovers contracts, images of those,
Binde but till sleep, death image, them unloose?
Or, your owne end to Justifie,
For having purpos'd change, and falsehood ; you
Can have no way but falsehood to be true?
(11.1-13)

After that, the speaker springs a sudden trap.

Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could
Dispute, and conquer, if I would,
Which I abstaine to doe,
For by to morrow, I may thinke so too.
(11.14-17)

This is typical of that shift of direction in Donne's poems which subverts the argument without warning. The unexpectedness of it is the "sudden reversal"⁷⁾ of which Patrick Cruttwell writes, and it helps to heighten the effect of drama. In "The Apparition" the speaker threatens to come as a ghost to his former mistress' bed :

When by thy scorne, O murdresse, I am dead,
And that thou thinkst thee free
From all solicitation from mee,
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
And thee, fain'd vestall, in worse armes shall see :
(11.1-5)

注7) Cruttwell, P., *The Shakespearean Moment*, 1954, rpt. London, 1970, p.43

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And then poore Aspen wretch, neglected thou
Bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lye
A veryer ghost then I ;

(11.11-13)

But with the next line the speaker changes his attitude :

What I will say, I will not tell thee now,
Lest that preserve thee ; 'and since my love is spent,
I 'had rather thou shouldst painfully repent,
Then by my threatnings rest still innocent.

(11.14-17)

Just so, the persuasive speaker in "The Flea", whose 'tone of impatient confidence sweeping aside all objects'⁸⁾, produces a similar dramatic reversal. First, he propounds his theme :

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is ;

Then in the second and the third stanzas, there are unexpected actions :

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more then maryed are :

.....

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?

.....

(12.10-12, 19-20)

And finally, in the last lines comes the unexpected twist :

注 8) Gardner, H., *John Donne : The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, Oxford, p.xx

'The 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

(11.25-27)

In "The Sunne Rising" two opposing worlds are neatly distinguished and the unexpected conclusion derives from that distinction. Through a series of interrogatives and imperatives the speaker upbraids the personified sun for intruding on the domain of the speaker and his mistress. He disputes its authority and attacks the great ruler of time. In the second stanza, the speaker lists his proofs of the magnificence of the world of love :

Aske for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt here, All here in one bed lay.

(11.19-20)

With eloquent simplicity he eulogizes that world. The speaker addresses the sun : "Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee/To warme the world, that's done in warming us".

He orders the sun to shine to them because their bed is the earth and the centre around which the sun is to revolve and the walls are the sun's sphere of activity. The speaker modulates from the astronomical sun to the confined sun in their room. This is a surprising and unexpected close :

Shine here to us, and thou art every where ;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare.

(11.29-30)

As J.B. Leishman remarked⁹⁾, the dramatic element in Donne's life and genius and poetry is significant, for it seems to us that on our response to that, on our attitude to that, our response to Donne and to his poetry in general must finally depend. I agree wholeheartedly, and I have tried, in this short article, to show in some detail just what it is we mean when we say Donne's poetry is dramatic.

注 9) Leishman, J. B., *The Monarch of Wit*, 5th ed., 1962 rpt. New York, Harper and Row, 1966, p.274

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