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Elegies of John Donne: A Study

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Abstract

Donne wrote some twenty elegies, nearly all, if not all, in his youth. An elegy is commonly defined as a poem that deals either with a general sadness, or mourning the loss of someone specific. Thus John Milton's poem Lycidas is about the death of a former fellow-student. Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a more general meditation on death and fame.

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Donne wrote some twenty elegies, nearly all, if not all, in his youth. An elegy is commonly defined as a poem that deals either with a general sadness, or mourning the loss of someone specific. Thus John Milton's poem Lycidas is about the death of a former fellow-student. Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a more general meditation on death and fame (or lack of it).

However, Donne's elegies are totally different. Originally, the elegy was a poem written in ancient Greek times in a certain poetic form, the elegiac metre. This form, like another, the Ode, came to be associated with mournful subjects, but not exclusively so. The Roman poet Sextus Propertius, for example, wrote books of elegies, nearly all of which were fairly light-hearted love poems, with dramatised scenarios of lovers. It is this model that Donne is following in his elegies. Book 1.2 of Propertius' Elegies has one entitled Love Goes Naked.

Elegies do not have to be only funeral poems: in ancient Rome "elegy" meant a poem written in a specific kind of metre, which could be about death as well as about love. For instance Ovid's Amores are elegies. Donne dropped the metre requirement which would not have worked out in English and imitated Ovid in writing love elegies. The lovers depicted in the poem apparently have to keep their love a secret and they are in fear of the wrath of the lady's father.

The poem begins with a series of imploring requests, recalling all the troubled circumstances of their courtship: the necessity to hold back their love, spies and rivals, "thy father's wrath" and so on. Now the poet uses all them to swear by them in order to ask his mistress not to do something that dangerous. She should stay back and remember him, and if she should die before he comes back, her soul is going to call his soul and he is going to die too. Her beauty is not mighty enough to calm the raging seas and she should remember the fate of Orithyia, whom Boreas, the god of north wind loved and inadvertently killed. (I don't think it's the most popular version of the myth.) Moreover, she should not dissemble anything, even with good intentions. Then

Donne indulges in some national stereotyping, warning his lover that the notoriously amorous Frenchmen will recognize her as a woman and “know her” in the biblical sense, while the homosexual Italians will want to pursue her as boy. He does not specify what the Dutchmen will do to her except for calling them “spongy, hydroptic”, i.e. drinking all the time, so maybe his point is just that they are not pleasant to be with and she’s better off at home. England is the only gallery worth of her, through which she can walk until she is called to be presented at court. In the meantime, she still should hide her love, and especially don’t frighten her nurse with her nightmares about her lover being killed and dead. Instead she should foresee for him a better fate, unless God thinks having been loved by her was enough happiness for him.

There is a brief analysis of Donne's elegy To his Coy Mistress: a love scenario depicting his girlfriend's desire to accompany him on a dangerous voyage disguised as his page boy and the reasons why he does not think this a good idea. Another elegy, not analysed, is His Picture, which imagines his return from such a voyage, weather-beaten and having lost his good looks. At least the picture of himself that he gave his girlfriend will remind her with what she originally fell in love. Most of the poems are very funny, Donne's wit making the various scenarios absurd, or just very clever with his conceits and arguments.

Donne's wit and humour in issuing an invitation to sex prevent his poems becoming pornographic. There is far too much intellectual play to arouse lustful images.

Donne's eighth elegy, "The Comparison," is generally understood as an exercise in contrasting hyperbole, a poem in which the superlative beauty of the speaker's mistress is contrasted with the superlative ugliness of the addressee's mistress. It is true that the poem is constructed as a set of contrasting passages, but I believe that the end of the poem alters our understanding of just what was being contrasted. The elegy has what amounts to a punch line, but we have missed Donne's joke. The poem builds to a surprise, humorous ending in which what had previously seemed to be two different mistresses is revealed to be in fact a single woman.

Editors and critics typically, and understandably, treat the poem as though it compares two different women. Grierson and Gardner both speak of the poem as involving a contrast between the speaker's mistress and that of his "enemy”. John Carey says that the poem is one in which the speaker's "own girl's perfections are contrasted with the filthy deformities of another's”. Similarly, Arthur Marotti speaks of the poem as contrasting the "antagonist's mistress" with "the speaker and his mistress”.

Only Achsah Guibbory considers that "perhaps the two mistresses described in the poem are not different women but rather a single woman seen in two ways”. The speaker's and the addressee's mistress are, I believe, undoubtedly the same woman; indeed, the very point of the poem is to compel in readers a belated recognition that the speaker and the addressee love the same woman.

As a first indication that only one woman is being discussed, consider some

otherwise puzzling aspects of the dramatic situation depicted in the poem. If the addressee is so unfortunate in his mistress and the speaker so happy with his own, what motivates this venomous outpouring? Why does the speaker not simply go enjoy his mistress and leave the poor addressee in his miserable state? The speaker, of course, might be gloating, but the tone seems too aggressive for mere gloating; Marotti is on to something when he speaks of the addressee as an "antagonist." But what offense can the addressee have committed against the speaker by loving a loathsome mistress? More particularly, what motivates the speaker's insistence that the addressee "leave" his mistress? What sense does it make to say "I have a wonderful mistress, and I will not stop harassing you until you leave your horrible one"?

The reason for the speaker's peculiar emotional investment in the romantic affairs of his addressee, I believe, becomes clear late in the poem when we discover that what had seemed like a contrast between two women is actually a description of one woman as the speaker sees her from two contrasting states of mind. When he believes she is involved with him exclusively, she seems ideal; when he considers that she is also involved with his addressee, he finds her loathsome.

The pronouns in the closing couplet are what reveal that only one woman is being discussed. In the penultimate line of the poem, the speaker commands the addressee to break off with his mistress by telling him to "leave her." But throughout the poem, the pronoun she has, with only one exception, been used to refer to the mistress of the speaker (lines 5, 15, 24, 28, 38). When he speaks of the addressee's mistress, he uses the word thy (7, 19, 25, 32, 34, 39). In fact, after the phrase "my Mistris" in line 4, the word she serves as the speaker's sole means of indicating that he is talking about his own mistress. When at the close of the poem he tells his interlocutor to leave "her," the pattern of pronoun reference established earlier in the poem prompts us to realize that it is the speaker's own mistress whom he wants the addressee to leave.

The one time that she is used to refer to the mistress of the addressee comes in line 14, when the speaker refers to the skin of the addressee's mistress as "her skinne." This lone use of "her" in reference to the addressee's mistress serves to intimate the surprise ending, for it is confusingly followed by a line in which the pronoun "her" is used again, but this time in reference to the speaker's mistress: "And like vile lying stones in saffrondtinne / Or warts, or wheales, they hang upon her [i.e., your mistress's] skinne. / Round as the world's her [i.e., my mistress's] head" (13-15). Line 15 will initially sound like a continuation of the abuse in 13 and 14, so that at this stage of the poem, it is only by a deliberate effort that we supply different referents for the two hers.

The penultimate line, then, strongly suggests that the addressee's mistress is the same woman that the speaker loves, an identification that is subtly underscored by the pronoun in the final line: "she." The word she had not previously been used in the poem to refer to either mistress; it has been reserved for this moment, when the reader realizes that a single woman has been the object of both the idealization and the vilification in the poem.

With the dramatic, belated reversal, the elegy resembles some of Donne's other poems that are constructed almost as versified jokes. For example, the ending of "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star" operates almost like a punch line, resolving the tension carefully built up through the previous four verses. And "Woman's Constancy" similarly closes with an abrupt and humorous reversal.

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