Ministry of Higher Education
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Renaissance Poetry

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Lectures 1+2: Renaissance

The English Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement in England dating from the late 15th century to the early 17th century. It is associated with the European Renaissance that is usually regarded as beginning in Italy in the late 14th century. As in most of the rest of northern Europe, England saw little of these developments until more than a century later. The beginning of the English Renaissance is often taken, as a convenience, to be 1485, when the Battle of Bosworth Field ended the Wars of the Roses and inaugurated the Tudor Dynasty. Renaissance style and ideas, however, were slow to penetrate England, and the Elizabethan era in the second half of the 16th century is usually regarded as the height of the English Renaissance.

The English Renaissance is different from the Italian Renaissance in several ways. The dominant art forms of the English Renaissance were literature and music. Visual arts in the English Renaissance were much less significant than in the Italian Renaissance. The English period began far later than the Italian, which was moving into Mannerism and the Baroque by the 1550s or earlier. In contrast, the English Renaissance can only truly be said to begin, shakily, in the 1520s, and it continued until perhaps 1620.

Introduction

The English Renaissance, the age of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Sir Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and John Milton, was one of the most brilliant periods in Western literary history for the production of great poetry. Yet the scope of its achievement is so varied that any effort to account for its multiplicity is inordinately challenging. Between 1509, with the reign of Henry VIII, until the end of the Commonwealth in 1660, nondramatic poetry of the most varied kind—from epic to ballad—found a voice and an audience in recitation, manuscript circulation, and print. The period's ideals were inscribed in the heroic narratives of Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene and John Milton's Paradise Lost, in a culture that embraced the epic as a means of political and theological reflection. But just as Renaissance poets looked outward at the turbulent world of early modern history, which they measured in terms of a mythic glorious past, they simultaneously gazed inward to focus on basic issues of identity and subjectivity, being especially attentive to the intricate trajectories of human desire. Beginning with the lyric poetry of John Skelton and Sir Thomas Wyatt, the blending of native, classical, and Continental influences added richness to verse that easily moved from the high to low, from earnest self-scrutiny and entreaty to mockery, play, disdain, and detachment. These qualities would mature in Shakespeare's Sonnets. English Renaissance poetry is customarily divided chronologically in two ways. Scholars distinguish between either the 16th and 17th centuries, or between Tudor (1485–1603) and Stuart (1603–1649) periods. The division between Tudor and Stuart poetry is useful, for instance, in tracing how different poetic concerns, such as satire and religious poetry, challenged sonnet and epic. It helps account for how a growing insistence on "strong lines" of condensed poetic thought found expression in both the measured Augustan style of Ben Jonson and John Donne's mannered wit. But these divisions can also obscure significant similarities as well between writers such as Spenser and Jonson or Sidney and Milton who share surprisingly similar

attitudes on a variety of literary, political, and social issues. For quality, rhetorical genius, emotional complexity, depth, and variety, the poetry of the English Renaissance is unsurpassed.

THE RENAISSANCE

A golden age of English literature commenced in 1485 and lasted until 1660. Malory's Le morte d'Arthur was among the first works to be printed by William Caxton, who introduced the printing press to England in 1476. From that time on, readership was vastly multiplied. The growth of the middle class, the continuing development of trade, the new character and thoroughness of education for laypeople and not only clergy, the centralization of power and of much intellectual life in the court of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs, and the widening horizons of exploration gave a fundamental new impetus and direction to literature. The new literature nevertheless did not fully flourish until the last 20 years of the 1500s, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Literary development in the earlier part of the 16th century was weakened by the diversion of intellectual energies to the polemics of the religious struggle between the Roman Catholic church and the Church of England, a product of the Reformation.

The English part in the European movement known as humanism also belongs to this time. Humanism encouraged greater care in the study of the literature of classical antiquity and reformed education in such a way as to make literary expression of paramount importance for the cultured person. Literary style, in part modeled on that of the ancients, soon became a self-conscious preoccupation of English poets and prose writers. Thus, the richness and metaphorical profusion of style at the end of the century indirectly owed much to the educational force of this movement. The most immediate effect of humanism lay, however, in the dissemination of the cultivated, clear, and sensible attitude of its classically educated adherents, who rejected medieval theological miss teaching and superstition. Of these writers, Sir Thomas More is the most remarkable. His Latin prose narrative Utopia (1516) satirizes the irrationality of inherited assumptions about private property and money and follows Plato in deploring the failure of kings to make use of the wisdom of philosophers. More's book describes a distant nation organized on purely reasonable principles and named Utopia (Greek, “nowhere”).

Renaissance Poetry

The poetry of the earlier part of the 16th century is generally less important, with the exception of the work of John Skelton, which exhibits a curious combination of medieval and Renaissance influences. The two greatest innovators of the new, rich style of Renaissance poetry in the last quarter of the 16th century were Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser.

Sidney, universally recognized as the model Renaissance nobleman, outwardly polished as well as inwardly conscientious, inaugurated the vogue of the sonnet cycle in his Astrophel and Stella (written 1582?; published 1591). In this work, in the elaborate and highly metaphorical style of the earlier Italian sonnet, he celebrated his idealized love for Penelope Devereux, the daughter of Walter Devereux, 1st Earl of Essex. These lyrics profess to see

in her an ideal of womanhood that in the Platonic manner leads to a perception of the good, the true, and the beautiful and consequently of the divine. This idealization of the beloved remained a favored motif in much of the poetry and drama of the late 16th century; it had its roots not only in Platonism but also in the Platonic speculations of humanism and in the chivalric idealization of love in medieval romance.

The greatest monument to that idealism, broadened to include all features of the moral life, is Spenser's uncompleted Faerie Queene (1596), the most famous work of the period. In each of its completed six books it depicts the activities of a hero that point toward the ideal form of a particular virtue, and at the same time it looks forward to the marriage of Arthur, who is a combination of all the virtues, and Gloriana, who is the ideal form of womanhood and the embodiment of Queen Elizabeth. It is entirely typical of the impulse of the Renaissance in England that in this work Spenser tried to create out of the inherited English elements of Arthurian romance and an archaic, partly medieval style a noble epic that would make the national literature the equal of those of ancient Greece and Rome and of Renaissance Italy. His effort in this respect corresponded to the new demands expressed by Sidney in the critical essay The Defence of Poesie, originally Apologie for Poetrie (written 1583?; posthumously published 1595). Spenser's conception of his role no doubt conformed to Sidney's general description of the poet as the inspired voice of God revealing examples of morally perfect actions in an aesthetically ideal world such as mere reality can never provide, and with a graphic and concrete conviction that mere philosophy can never achieve. The poetic and narrative qualities of The Faerie Queene suffer to a degree from the various theoretical requirements that Spenser forced the work to meet.

In a number of other lyrical and narrative works Sidney and Spenser displayed the ornate, somewhat florid, highly figured style characteristic of a great deal of Elizabethan poetic expression; but two other poetic tendencies became visible toward the end of the 16th and in the early part of the 17th centuries. The first tendency is exemplified by the poetry of John Donne and the other so-called metaphysical poets, which carried the metaphorical style to heights of daring complexity and ingenuity. This often-paradoxical style was used for a variety of poetic purposes, ranging from complex emotional attitudes to the simple inducement of admiration for its own virtuosity. Andrew Marvell wrote metaphysical poetry of great power and fluency, but he also responded to other influences. The involved metaphysical style remained fashionable until late in the 17th century.

The second late Renaissance poetic tendency was in reaction to the Spenserians and to the metaphysical poets. Best represented by the accomplished poetry of Ben Jonson and his school, it reveals a classically pure and restrained style that had strong influence on late figures such as Robert Herrick and the other Cavalier poets and gave the direction for the poetic development of the succeeding neoclassical period.

The last great poet of the English Renaissance was the Puritan writer John Milton, who, having at his command a thorough classical education and the benefit of the preceding half-century of experimentation in the various schools of English poetry, approached with greater maturity than Spenser the task of writing a great English epic. Although he adhered to Sidney's and Spenser's notions of the inspired role of the poet as the lofty instructor of

humanity, he rejected the fantastic and miscellaneous machinery, involving classical mythology and medieval knighthood, of The Faerie Queene in favor of the central Christian and biblical tradition. With grand simplicity and poetic power Milton narrated in Paradise Lost (1667) the machinations of Satan leading to the fall of Adam and Eve from the state of innocence; and he performed the task in such a way as to "justify the ways of God to man" and to express the central Christian truths of freedom, sin, and redemption as he conceived them. His other poems, such as the elegy Lycidas (1637), Paradise Regained (1671), and the classically patterned tragedy Samson Agonistes (1671), similarly reveal astonishing poetic power and grace under the control of a profound mind.

Characteristics:

The Renaissance was characterized by a revitalized interest in classical Greek and Roman thought, an increased receptiveness to humanist philosophies, a commercial revolution, and the inception of the modern state. The Renaissance, or "Rebirth," was a revival of learning and art in Europe after the Dark Ages. Here are major characteristics of this period:

1. Rebirth and rediscovery

Though historians debate the precise origins of the Renaissance, most agree that it began in Italy in the late 1300s, with the decline in influence of Roman Catholic Christian doctrine and the reawakening of interest in Greek and Latin texts by philosophers such as Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca, historians including Plutarch and poets such as Ovid and Virgil. One spur was the fall of Constantinople (Istanbul) to the Turks in 1453, which encouraged many scholars to flee to Italy, bringing printed books and manuscripts with them. The extraordinary flowering in visual art that occurred in the great Italian city states of Florence and Venice in the early 16th century, including artists such as Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael, was another. Yet another was Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press around 1440, which enabled books to be mass-produced in the Western world for the first time. Aided by a quickly shifting political landscape, and an increase in trade and economic activity, these new ways of thinking began to spread northwards across Europe. The fact that it was a transnational movement, which came to touch every country in Europe, is one of the most crucial things about the Renaissance.

The influence of the Italian scholar Petrarch revitalized interest in the classical thought of the Greeks and Romans. This revival of classical thought was a rejection of the "barbarism" and the "corruptions" of the centuries since the times of the Greeks and Romans.

2. Humanism

Gradually, the concept of a 'humanistic' curriculum began to solidify: focusing not on Christian theological texts, which had been pored over in medieval seats of learning, but on classical 'humanities' subjects such as philosophy, history, drama and poetry. In Britain, humanism was spread by a rapid increase in the number of 'grammar' schools (as their name indicates, language was their primary focus, and students were often required to speak in Latin during school hours), and the jump in the number of children exposed to the best

classical learning. Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser, Jonson, Bacon: almost every major British Renaissance intellectual one can name received a humanist education.

The embracing of Humanism made sweeping changes. Whereas medieval scholars had been concerned with the harnessing of reason in the service and defense of religion, the Renaissance scholar, poet, and philosopher concerned himself with the real world, the world of nature and men, As a consequence, universities became more secular, producing now educated laymen; heretofore, only those of the religious orders had been scholars. Renaissance art, too, became more natural and realistic.

3. New worlds

As much as the rediscovery of old culture was important, it's impossible to understand the European Renaissance without referring to the way in which its horizons increased – both scientifically and geographically. In 1492, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas while seeking a westward passage to Asia, initiating a headlong rush by European powers for resources and territory in this so-called 'New World'. Throughout the 16th century, maritime powers such as Spain, Portugal and – later – England battled for control of what became America and the West Indies, while adventurers and traders also pushed eastwards, around Africa, towards East Asia. Money was the driving force (there were fortunes to be made in minerals, spices, cloth and other goods, not to mention the slave trade), but so was political and religious ideology, with colonial expansion presented as a Christian crusade to bring enlightenment to 'uncivilised' populations. While the cost for indigenous people was vast – it is still being counted – Europe profited enormously from these encounters, with new wealth flowing into major population centres and exotic goods such as silk, spices and ceramics available for the first time.

Geographical discoveries mirrored scientific ones. The Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) posited that the Earth moved around the Sun, not the other way around, as had been assumed for centuries – a theory proved through close observation by the Italian polymath Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), who also refined the mechanical clock. The magnetic compass (first used by Chinese sailors in the 11th century) was belatedly rediscovered in early 14th-century Italy, revolutionising navigation. The use of another Chinese invention, gunpowder, also spread across Europe, with a dramatic and brutal effect on warfare. And – yet again – the printing press helped in incalculable ways, spreading ideas faster and faster.

4. The Reformation

Humanism produced a strange paradox: European society was still overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, yet the writers and thinkers now in vogue came from classical, pre-Christian times. The clash was made more obvious in 1517, when a renegade German friar called Martin Luther, appalled by corruption in the Church, launched a protest movement against Catholic teachings. Luther argued that the Church had too much power and needed to be reformed, and promoted a theology that stressed a more direct relationship between believers and God.

Another central plank of his thinking was that the Bible should be available not just in Latin, spoken by the elite, but democratically available in local languages. Luther published a German translation of the Bible in 1534, which – assisted by the growth of the printing press– helped bring about translations into English, French and other languages. In turn, this increased literacy rates, meaning that more people had access to education and new thinking. But the political consequences for Europe were violent, as war raged and Protestant and Catholic nations and citizens vied for control.

5. The commercial revolution began as feudalism died and different areas of the European countries developed important urban commercial centers. Regional self-sufficiency also began as areas concentrated on what they best produced, such as raw materials, grain and other foods, or creation of needed tools, etc. By the middle of the period, small-scale trading evolved into commercial capitalism and a revolution had certainly begun as trading was conducted overseas.

Lecture 3: Sonnets

Definition of Sonnet

A sonnet is a poem of fourteen lines using any of a number of formal rhyme schemes, in English typically having ten syllables per line. The word sonnet is derived from the Italian word "sonetto," which means a "little song" or small lyric. In poetry, a sonnet has 14 lines, and is written in iambic pentameter. Each line has 10 syllables. It has a specific rhyme scheme, and a volta, or a specific turn.

Generally, sonnets are divided into different groups based on the rhyme scheme they follow. The rhymes of a sonnet are arranged according to a certain rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme in English is usually abab–cdcd–efef–gg, and in Italian abba–abba–cde–cde.

Function of Sonnet

The sonnet has become popular among different poets because it has a great adaptability to different purposes and requirements. Rhythms are strictly followed. It could be a perfect poetic style for elaboration or expression of a single feeling or thought, with its short length in iambic pentameter. In fact, it gives an ideal setting for a poet to explore strong emotions. Due to its short length, it is easy to manage for both the writer and the reader.

Types of Sonnet

Sonnets can be categorized into six major types:
1. Italian Sonnet
2. Shakespearean Sonnet
3. Spenserian Sonnet
4. Miltonic Sonnet
5. Terza Rima Sonnet
6. Curtal Sonnet

1. Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet

Italian or Petrarchan sonnet was introduced by 14th century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch. The rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet features the first eight lines, called an octet, which rhymes as abba–abba–cdc–dcd. The remaining six lines are called a sestet, and might have a range of rhyme schemes.

2. Shakespearean Sonnet

A Shakespearean sonnet is generally written in iambic pentameter, in which there are 10 syllables in each line. The rhyme scheme of the Shakespearian sonnet is abab–cdcd–efef–gg, which is difficult to follow. Hence, only Shakespeare is known to have done it.

3. Spenserian Sonnet

Sir Edmund Spenser was the first poet who modified the Petrarch's form, and introduced a new rhyme scheme The rhyme scheme in this sonnet is abab–bcbc–cdcd–ee, which is specific to Spenser, and such types of sonnets are called Spenserian sonnets.

Lecture 4: Sir Thomas Wyatt's "They flee from me"

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,
That now are wild and do not remember
That sometime they put themself in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range,
Busily seeking with a continual change.
Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once in special,
In thin array after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small;
There with all sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this?"
It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
But all is turned thorough my gentleness
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;
And I have leave to go of her goodness,
And she also, to use newfangleness.
But since that I so kindly am served
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

Summary:

Lines 1-5

The poet directly asserts that the acquaintance to whom the poem is about once actively sought his company, yet now avoids him. The acquaintance had formerly been exposed in his chamber, and presented as a mild, disciplined and docile character; but is now unpredictable and has forgotten their former intimacy. The relationship has been unsafe for the acquaintance on occasion.

Lines 6-9

The danger has been in being close to the poet, eating together. The change now sees the acquaintance looking further abroad in search of new interests. The poet is grateful that this was not the situation in the past; the relationship has been at least twenty times better.

Lines 10-14

Wearing thin clothing, after a pleasant show, 'her' loose dress fell from her shoulders. She took the poet in her arms and kissed him tenderly. She then asked him directly if he was happy.

Lines 15-17

He recalls that this was not a dream as he was fully awake. He next notes that everything has now changed because of his mild nature, to a cruel situation of his abandonment.

Lines 18-21

He is now released from her for decency's sake, and she is released to allow a new encounter. However, he questions, has he has been treated badly, what is the reader's view? What is 'she' now worthy of?

Analysis

The poem employs the technique of rime royal, used most notably by Geoffrey Chaucer. The technique consists of a seven-line structure, using iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme ABABBCC. There are two ways in which the septet is structured: the tercet and two couplets (ABA, BB, CC) and the quatrain and tercet (ABAB, BCC). 'They Flee From Me' uses both structures within its 21 lines: the tercet and couplets in lines 1-7 and the quatrain and tercet for lines 8-14 and 15-21. The poem presents three key ideas which are enhanced by this structure: that the poet is now rejected, that he was once favored and that there is a question as to how his lover should fare now she has abandoned him.

Lines 1-7

The poet begins in direct fashion, showing a paradox within the first line. 'They' now run from him, who formerly sought him out. The image of the 'naked foot' implies an intimate liaison, and the verb 'stalking' suggests that the visitor was the instigator of the association. Line 3 explains that this association was set in the poet's room, adding to the tone of intimacy and secrecy in the relationship.

In line 3, the former acquaintance used to be calm, obedient and tame, but line 4 explains they are now uncontrollable and have forgotten the past. This second contrast of the past and the present emphasizes the dramatic change in the relationship. Line 5 expresses that the subject has taken risk to be with the poet.

The unnatural division between the poet and his lady is further highlighted by lines 5 and 6; which are connected by enjambment, then line 6 is divided within itself through the

caesura. These techniques reflect the unconventional union and the poet's distress at the end of it.

The image of taking bread may refer to the act of Holy Communion, or implies an intimacy in the sharing of bread with close associates. There is also a suggestion of deference to the poet. After the caesura, the seemingly obedient and loyal partner is roaming, actively searching for new attractions. It is implied that the variety and frequency of the new liaisons is what the lady seeks, not just a new partner; which suggests a licentiousness in the lady.

Lines 8-14

The poet expresses a bitter resignation that at least he has experienced a situation better than his present state. Fortune is personified as the benefactor of his earlier happiness; the poet is suggesting that the past joys were the product of luck, as opposed to love or deliberate action. His recollection is an occasion 'Twenty times better' when he recalls the lady, after a show for him in flimsy dress, held him and kissed him and asked if she was giving him pleasure. It seems at this time she was devoted to him, which makes the change in situation more intense.

Lines 15-21

Caesura is used again in line 15; where he asserts that the past, and this experience, was not a dream. Now though, it appears that the liaison was a dream as the relationship is 'turn'd'. He blames his own manner: that of mildness, gentility and propriety, for the end of the affair, and he feels the harsh effects of the rejection.

The poet's expression that he has released his lover to move on communicates an initial tone of acquiescence. However, the final lines of the poem show the real resentment and anger that the poet has in being rejected and left behind. He appeals directly to his audience, asking for their view as to what response her actions and behavior warrant.

It is possible to see the poem as a reflection on his liaison with Anne Boleyn before her union and marriage to Henry VIII. However, the tone of anger and frustration at being forsaken for another could apply equally well to Wyatt's first marriage as he separated from his wife due to her adultery. The relationship could also be a metaphor for the courtly relations, platonic and romantic, which were born and died with dangerous haste.

Lecture 5 & 6: Sir Philip Sidney's "Astrophel and Stella"

Astrophil and Stella is a sequence of sonnets and songs written by Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586). It tells the story of Astrophil (or Astrophel), whose name means star-lover, and his hopeless passion for Stella, whose name means star.

Stella and Lady Penelope Rich: the inspiration behind Sidney's work?

The poems seem to have been inspired by Sidney's relationship with Lady Penelope (1563–1607), of the Devereux family. When she was 14, Penelope's father, the Earl of Essex, tried to make a match between his daughter and Sidney. But at that time nothing came of it, and Penelope was married to Robert Rich in 1581.

Nevertheless, Sidney and Penelope seem to have met at court around the time of her marriage, and his feelings for her developed – at least in poetic form. There's no proof that they had an affair, but there are many puns suggesting that Stella is based on Lady Rich. In Sonnet 35, for example, Astrophil says 'long needie Fame / Doth even grow rich, meaning my Stellas name' (p. 15).

What is a sonnet?

Sonnets are rhymed 14-line poems, usually on the theme of love. They were made popular in Italy by the Renaissance poet, Petrarch, and brought to England in the mid-16th-century. English sonnets usually have an iambic pentameter rhythm – each line has ten syllables with a ti-tum, ti-tum metre.

The Elizabethan craze for sonnets

The 108 sonnets and 11 songs of Astrophil and Stella were probably written around 1582, and circulated in manuscript form amongst Sidney's noble friends. The book was not printed until 1591, when it seems to have kick-started a craze for sonnet sequences in late Elizabethan England.

Before this, English poets such as Thomas Wyatt had produced individual sonnets. But Sidney was the first to create a longer sequence, inspiring others such as Edmund Spenser to do the same. These poems are usually voiced by a male lover, who idealises his beloved but tells us little about them, focussing instead on his own joy and pain. The beloved is unattainable, socially out of reach or – as in Sidney's case – married.

Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare used, but also subverted, the sonnet conventions employed by Sidney and others. The 'Dark Lady' with 'raven black' eyes in Shakespeare's Sonnet 127 seems a little like the dark-eyed Stella of Sidney's Sonnet 7 . Indeed, Lady Penelope Rich has been seen by some as the real 'Dark Lady' behind Shakespeare's last sonnets. But, unlike Stella, Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' is described with disdain as well as admiration, and, of course, in Shakespeare's first group the beloved is a young man. The 1609 edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets is sometimes said to signal the end of the sonnet craze in England.

Astrophel and Stella, an Elizabethan sonnet sequence of 108 sonnets, interspersed with 11 songs, by Sir Philip Sidney, written in 1582 and published posthumously in 1591. The work is often considered the finest Elizabethan sonnet cycle after William Shakespeare's sonnets.

The cycle tells the story of Stella ("star"), beloved by Astrophel ("star lover" or "beloved of a star," a play on Sidney's name), who loves poetry almost as much as he loves her. He details his passionate feelings for Stella, his struggles with conflicting emotions, and his final decision to abandon his pursuit of her in favour of a life of public service. In observance of contemporary poetic conventions, Sidney discourses in the sonnets on reason and passion, wit and will.

The publication of "Astrophel and Stella" generated a vogue for the sonnet sequence, and among the English poets who responded was Edmund Spenser, who also wrote the elegy "Astrophel" after his friend Sidney's death in 1586.

Lady Penelope Rich, née Penelope Devereux, (born 1562?—died 1607), English noblewoman who was the "Stella" of Sir Philip Sidney's love poems Astrophel and Stella (1591).

She was the daughter of Walter Devereux, 1st Earl of Essex. From an early age she was expected to be a likely wife for Sidney, but after her father's death her guardian, Henry Hastings, 3rd Earl of Huntingdon, arranged her marriage in 1581 to Robert Rich, 3rd Baron Rich (afterward Earl of Warwick). The marriage was unhappy from the start, and Sidney continued to have an emotional attachment to her until his death in 1586. Sidney celebrated her charms and his affection for her in the series of sonnets collected in Astrophel and Stella.

Though married and the mother of seven children, she became the mistress of Charles Blount, 8th Lord Mountjoy, in about 1590; they had five children. Her husband abandoned her in 1601 after her brother, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, was executed for plotting a revolt against Queen Elizabeth, and she thenceforth lived openly with Mountjoy (afterward Earl of Devonshire), marrying him in 1605 after having obtained a divorce from her first husband.

Astrophil and Stella 1: Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show

By Sir Philip Sidney

A summary of sonnet I from Astrophil and Stella

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) is often credited with writing the first sonnet sequence in English, and he was certainly the first English poet to write a long cycle of sonnets. Composed in the early 1580s, Astrophil and Stella (sometimes Astrophel and Stella) is a sequence of 108 sonnets – and a few songs – inspired by Sidney's unrequited love for Penelope Rich (nee Devereux), who was offered to him as a potential wife a few years before. Sidney turned her down, she married Lord Robert Rich, and Sidney promptly realised he was in love with her. What follows is a brief analysis of the opening sonnet in the sequence, beginning 'Loving in Truth, and fain in verse my love to show'.

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,

That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,—

Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,

Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;

Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain,

Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow

Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.

But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;

Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;

And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.

Thus great with child to speak and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,

'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart, and write.'

How autobiographical the sonnets in Astrophil and Stella actually are is disputed, and many scholars incline towards thinking Sidney is adopting a persona in these poems. Still, 'Astrophil' (meaning 'star-lover'; sometimes rendered as 'Astrophel') is clearly meant to bring 'Philip Sidney' to mind, partly because of the 'phil' contained in the name, and partly because of an obscure pun ('Astro' means 'star', punning on the 'Sid' of Sidney – similar to the Latin sidus, 'star'). So Sidney clearly did 'look into [his] heart' before he wrote.

This opening sonnet sees Sidney introducing – and, indeed, inducing – the sonnet sequence as a whole. In summary, he acknowledges that he truly loves the woman he is to write about, and wants to convey that through the poetry he writes, so that his pain – in being transmuted into great verse – will please the woman he loves. This will have the knock-on effect of making her want to read on, and through reading on she will come to know how deeply he loves her, and when she realises this she will pity him, and thus he will win her 'grace' or attention and blessing. So far, so courtly love: that medieval tradition in poetry whereby the hopeless lover admires the woman from afar, and wishes to please her by praising her beauty in poetry, through immortalising her in verse. (Later on in the sonnet sequence, Sidney will critique this idea and give it a Renaissance twist.)

But Sidney says that he made the mistake of studying other writers' words and trying to emulate them in order 'to paint the blackest face of woe'. Sidney then creates a somewhat unusual 'family' whereby Invention (i.e. the poet's creativity) is the child of Nature (Mother Nature, of course), but Invention is being governed here not by his natural mother, Nature, but by his stepmother or 'step-dame', Study. And study is not the best way to beget invention – not if the words one invents are to ring true. What's more, through copying

what others have written, Sidney finds other writers hinder rather than help him, because – to use the old line – it's all been said before. And because of that, his words will ring hollow and his beloved won't believe them.

Sidney then returns to the mothering analogy, and likens himself to a woman 'great with child' – (so) to speak. Suffering the pangs or 'throes' of childbirth, he bites his pen and beats himself for not being able to write, and then – his Muse speaks, chiding him for a fool, and commanding him to look in his heart and start writing. Forget books, forget study: just be true to yourself. Look inside and write what you find there. ('Heart' in Sidney's time wasn't simply used to refer to romantic emotion; there was no strict divide made between the brain and the heart. So 'look in thy heart' isn't a foolishly romantic command: it also means 'examine your thoughts'.)

Thus, in a neat opening sonnet, Sidney declares that what follows will be 'from the heart'. This is also a convention of courtly love, but Sidney is already giving it a twist. In terms of the form he employs, careful analysis reveals that Sidney innovates right from the start, in deploying twelve-syllable lines (known as 'alexandrines') rather than the conventional ten-syllable lines typically found in a sonnet.

Lecture 7 +8: Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

The narrator of Sonnet 73 is approaching death and thinking about how different it is from being young. It's like the branch of a tree where birds once sang but the birds have gone and the leaves have fallen, leaving only a few dry yellow leaves. It's like the twilight of a beautiful day, where there is only the black night ahead. It's like the glowing ashes of a fire that once roared. The things that one gave him life have destroyed his life. From that experience he has learnt that one has to love life as strongly as one can because it will end all too soon.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west;

Which by and by black night doth take away,

Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,

That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,

Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

The sonnet is the third in the group of four which reflect on the onset of age. It seems that it is influenced partly by lines from Ovid's Metamorphoses, in the translation by Arthur Golding. However the verbal parallels are somewhat sparse. Shakespeare's presentation is much more individualistic and cannot easily be attributed to any one mould or influence. It is worth noting that, if the sonnet were written in 1600, Shakespeare would only have been 36, and it is quite probable that it was written before that date. An age that we would not consider to be the threshold of old age. Of course the group of four sonnets, of which this is the third, begins with a putative skirmish with death and finality, so that it is in a sense merely thematic within that group to discuss the autumn of one's years, which will shortly lead to parting and separation. We can therefore allow that it uses some poetic licence in painting a gloomy portrayal of the withered tree.

Nevertheless it is slightly surprising that the statements are so definite and uncompromising. This is how he is now, it is not some prognostication of decay, or a brief

glimpse forwards to some imaginary time. The picture is more like that of age on his death-bed, of the autumn tree, of the onset of night, of the actuality of dying. The thought seems closer to the anonymous 16th. century poem:

As ye came from the holy land 0f Walsinghame

Met you not with my true love

By the way as you came?

which becomes a lament for love's faithlessness as age comes on.

She hath left me here alone,

All alone, as unknown,

Who sometime did me lead with herself,

And me loved as her own.

What's the cause that she leaves you alone

And a new way doth take,

That sometime did love you as her own,

And her joy did you make?

I have loved her all my youth,

But now old, as you see:

Love likes not the falling fruit,

Nor the withered tree.

Some lines from The Passionate Pilgrim of 1599, which are often attributed to Shakespeare, are also relevant. Perhaps Shakespeare was offering this sonnet as a charm to ward off rejection. Perhaps the rejection was already evident and this is just a historical analysis of what he already knows to be the truth, a deja vu of love's forgetfulness. Or perhaps he genuinely felt that age had stolen a march on him.

From The Passionate Pilgrim:

Crabbed age and youth Cannot live together: Youth is full of pleasaunce, Age is full of care; Youth like summer morn, Age like winter weather; Youth like summer brave, Age like winter bare.

Commentary

1. That time of year thou mayst in me behold

You may observe in me that time of life which is like the time of year when etc. The word behold, meaning 'to see or to observe', is mostly literary and not often used nowadays.

2. When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

The line, by its pauses, almost re-creates the blowing away of the last resistant fading leaves by the autumn wind. Only a few stalwart ones finally remain. Cf. Coleridge The one red leaf, the last of its clan, That dances as often as dance it can. Christabel. 49-50 There is a suggestion also of the faded, yellowing papers with the poet's lines written on them, as in Sonnet 17: So should my papers, yellow'd with their age. The poet is like a tree with his decaying, worn out verses being dispersed in the wind.

3. Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

shake against the cold = tremble in anticipation of cold days to come; shiver in the actual cold; shake in the cold blast of the gale. against is used in the sense of 'in anticipation of, in preparation for' in Sonnets 49 and 63.

4. Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

4. The emendation of Q's rn'wd quiers to ruined choirs is generally accepted. 'Choir' was the spelling adopted from the close of the 17th century. In Shakespeare's day it was quyre, quire, or quiere. The choir is the part of the church at the top, eastern end, the chancel, where the choristers stood and sang. Shakespeare uses the word seven times, only twice with this meaning. .....The rich stream Of lords and ladies, having brought the queen To a prepared place in the choir, fell off A distance from her; H8.IV.1.62-5. and Our valour is to chase what flies; our cage We make a quire, as doth the prison'd bird, And sing our bondage freely. Cym.III.3.42-4 Elsewhere the meaning is that of a group of singers, presumably choristers, as in this from 2H6: myself have limed a bush for her, And placed a quire of such enticing birds, That she will light to listen to the lays, 2H6.I.3.86-8 In Midsummer Night's Dream it is used to mean a company of friends or gossips: The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale, Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me; Then slip I from her bum, down topples she, And 'tailor' cries, and falls into a cough; And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh, And waxen in their mirth and neeze and swear MND.II.1.51-6.

Since the publication of Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity in 1930 (the extract is given at the bottom of this page) commentators tend to agree that the imagery recalls the many ruined abbeys and churches which were left to decay after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Churches were also vandalised or abandoned at various times in Elizabeth's reign. In the early years of the reign there were few parish priests, and later, after the religious settlement and with the spreading influence of European reformist ideas, churches could be seen as symbols of popery and reaction and of the old religion. Enclosures of common land, with the consequent abandonment of villages, would also have caused some churches to fall to ruin. However it is not possible to say with certainty that the image of a ruined chancel was primarily what Shakespeare had in mind. He tends not to use the word ruin(s) or ruined other than in a figurative or general sense, as in: Ruin hath led me thus to ruminate Sonnet 64 or in .....The king has cured me, I humbly thank his grace; and from these shoulders, These ruin'd pillars, out of pity, taken A load would sink a navy, too much honour. H8.III.2.380-3. But the above is the only instance where the word specifically refers to a building or a part of a building, and the lines were possibly written by Fletcher.

Generally Shakespeare is more interested in wreckages of human personalities - .....She once being loof'd, The noble ruin of her magic, Antony, Claps on his sea-wing, AC.III.10.18-20. (loofed = with the head of the ship turned towards the wind). Perhaps the most famous line featuring ruin is from Julius Caesar, when Antony speaks over Caesar's corpse: Thou art the ruins of the noblest man That ever lived in the tide of times. JC.III.1.257-8.

I remain unconvinced that the rich stream of suggestions listed by Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity, (see below), which has led to much debate on this line, is entirely justified. It is a mattter of opinion whether branches of trees look very much like ruined abbeys. Readers must judge the matter for themselves. Other fleeting references in the line may be to quires of paper which contain songs and sonnets. Or to the composer William Byrd, who moved away from London in the 1590's, probably owing to his Catholicism.

5. In me thou see'st the twilight of such day

of such day = of such a day of late autumn or winter as I have been describing. Or day could be a synonym for 'light', allowing the meaning to run on to the next line. 'In me you see such a time of life which is like twilight, when the daylight, after sunset, fades away in the West'.

6. As after sunset fadeth in the west;

See note above.

7. Which by and by black night doth take away,

Which = the twilight. by and by = fairly rapidly; soon. Cf. Hamlet's response to Polonius - I will come to my mother by and by. Ham.III.2.373. take away = As well as the meaning of 'remove' there is also the implication of doing away with, killing, destroying by underhand means. Thus Macbeth, contemplating the murder of Duncan, fears that Duncan's virtues Will plead like angels, trumpet tongued, against The deep damnation of his taking off. Mac.I.7.19-20. Night kills off the daylight, as a murderer kills his victim.

8. Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

Sleep is often portrayed as a second self of Death, or Death's brother. Compare: Care Charmer Sleep, son of the sable Night, Brother to Death, in silent darkness born: Samuel Daniel, Sonnets to Delia, liv. (c 1600). But in this sonnet Night takes the place of sleep as the grand slayer. Three images are possibly condensed here. That of sealing a coffin; sealing a letter, or a will, or a sentence of death, (i.e. folding it up and using sealing wax to seal it: envelopes were a later invention); covering over the eyes (seeling), as one did with tamed birds of prey. Similar imagery is used in Macbeth: .....Come seeling Night, Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day. Mac.III.2.46-7. But the thought in Mac. is somewhat different, being concerned with Macbeth's determination to ally himself with evil forces in Nature.

9. In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,

such fire = such as is seen at twilight; such as is described in the next line.

10. That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

his youth = the fire's youth. The possessive 'its' was not yet in use in Elizabethan England, so we should not assume that the word 'his' adds more to the sense of personification than if it had been 'its youth'.

11. As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,

As the death-bed - the ashes of his youth are as a death-bed; whereon it must expire = on which it, the fire, or the youth, must at last die.

12. Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

Consumed with that = consumed, eaten away, at the same time as; eaten away by those things (which also nourish it). Similar to the line from Sonnet I : Feeds thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel. Life's progress from beginning to end is summed up in one line.

13. This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,

Possibly a wish, rather than a statement of fact. 'When you perceive this, it will strengthen your love'. this presumably refers to the poet's waning life, described in the quatrains.

14. To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

that = that person, spirit, dream of your imagination, me, the poet. Alternatively - your youth and freshness which is doomed to the same fate. well - could include a pun on Will, the poet's name. leave = depart from, abandon; give up. A sidelong glance also at 'to come into leaf'. SB points out that the couplet could have a bawdy interpretation.

Additional notes (Empson's comment on line 4.)

The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once. To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling in Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang, but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare's feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.

W. Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, Ch.I.

Lecture 9: Ben Jonson's "Song to Celia" (1616)

Drink to me only with thine eyes

And I will pledge with mine;

Or leave a kiss but in the cup,

And I'll not look for wine.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise

Doth ask a drink divine:

But might I of Jove's nectar sup

I would not change for thine.

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,

Not so much honouring thee

As giving it a hope that there

It could not withered be

But thou thereon didst only breathe

And sent'st it back to me:

Since, when it grows and smells, I swear,

Not of itself but thee.

Lines 1-2

Drink to me only with thine eyes
And I will pledge with mine;
 The poem opens with the speaker addressing a woman (presumably). Because of the title, we're guessing she's named Celia.

 He tells her to "drink" to him "only" with her "eyes." In other words, he's telling her that she doesn't have to hold up a beer and say cheers, but only has to use her eyes. It's kind of like when you say, "I'll drink to the Bears winning the Super Bowl."

 The speaker says that he, too, will "pledge" – i.e., "drink" or say "cheers" or something to that effect – with his eyes.

Lines 3-4

Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine;

 If she doesn't want to "drink," the speaker says she can just leave a kiss "but in the cup," and he won't care if there's no wine in it ("I'll not look for wine").

 "But" in line 3 means something like "just" or "only," and it sounds funny because it's out of place. The line really means "just leave a kiss in the cup, baby" or "only leave a kiss in the cup."

Lines 5-6

The thirst that from the soul doth rise,
Doth ask a drink divine:
 The speaker explains his desire for a drink that is not a drink. You know, he's asking for a cup with a kiss in it instead of wine.

 He says that his thirst isn't a bodily thirst (in other words, he's not dehydrated in the desert and craving water), but rather a more spiritual one (it is a thirst "from the soul").

 Because his "thirst" is from the "soul," it requires something more "divine" than, say, "wine" to satisfy it.

 Notice that line 6 is a shorter line than the previous five; they all contained eight syllables, while line 6 only contains, fittingly, six syllables.

Lines 7-8

But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
I would not change for thine.
 The speaker next delivers a couplet (a pair of lines) that is meant to express how he feels about the refreshing spiritual beverage Celia can offer him.

 He says that even if he could drink nectar from Jove's cup ("might I of Jove's nectar sup") he wouldn't; he would rather have Celia's cup ("thine").

 While this is the gist of these lines, the word choices are a bit awkward. The speaker seems to be saying "if I were allowed to drink Jove's nectar, I wouldn't 'change' the way things are, 'for' I prefer your beverage, my lady."

 It is also possible that the speaker means he wouldn't exchange Jove's nectar for Celia's "nectar" of love, an interpretation that contradicts a lot of what the speaker has been saying.

 Hold up! Who the heck is Jove? Good question. Jove is another name for the Greek god Zeus (or Jupiter to the Romans), the king of gods who live on Mount Olympus. The gods on Olympus are big fans of drinking "nectar."

Lines 9-12

I sent thee, late, a rosy wreath,
Not so much honoring thee,
As giving it a hope that there
It could not withered be.

 The speaker stops talking about thirst and drinking. Now he moves on to tell a little story about his relationship with the girl.

 He says he sent her a "rosy wreath." Why? "Not so much" because he wanted to show her how much he likes her. Instead he wanted to give "it" (the wreath) the hope of everlasting life ("it could not withered be").

 In other words, the speaker views Celia as some sort of divine or enchanted figure that can keep things alive that will normally wither and die (like a wreath of flowers).

Lines 13-14

But thou thereon did'st only breathe,
And sent'st it back to me;
 Hmm. Seems like the speaker's experiment didn't quite turn out as planned. That "but" at the beginning of line 13 tells us as much. The speaker basically says, "rather than keep the wreath to see if it wouldn't die, she sent it back to me."

 Apparently, the woman breathed on the wreath before she sent it back.

Lines 15-16

Since when it grows, and smells, I swear,
Not of itself, but thee.
 The speaker knows that the woman must have breathed on the wreath "since" when it grows it smells, not like a wreath of flowers, but like Celia.

 The phrase "I swear" is a bit odd. It sounds like the speaker is saying, "I swear it smells of thee," but that is awkward because then we are left with an incomplete clause. For it to make sense, the speaker would have had to say, "since when it grows, [it] smells, I swear, not of itself, but [of] thee." Of course, it is possible that the speaker is engaging in the age-old poetic practice of leaving things out.

 Alternatively, the speaker could just be saying, "I swear," like when we say "it's true, I swear." Either way, it's pretty clear what the lines mean.

 It's also important to note that the wreath still "grows." But wait. Don't you have to cut the flowers or plants to make a wreath? So how could it still be growing? Well, it seems like the speaker's wish from line 12 has come true (the wreath hasn't "withered"). Still, we bet he wasn't hoping to get the wreath back.

Song: to Celia' by Ben Jonson is a two stanza poem which is separated into sets of eight lines. This piece follows a consistent and structured pattern of rhyme which conforms to the pattern of abcbabcb defeeefe.

The choice to use this rhyme scheme allowed the poet to unite lines which are scattered in their indention and length. The repeated use of "-ee" as an ending has been utilized to emphasize lines four, five, and six in the second stanza. These lines are the climax of the speaker's narrative and provide a fitting ending to the piece.

Summary of *Song: to Celia*

'Song: to Celia' describes the deep love which exists between the speaker and his lover and how it transcends normal bounds.

The poem begins with the speaker suggesting that his lover "Drink to" him with only her eyes. He will reciprocate this act by, with his own eyes, pledging himself to her. This wordless communication is extremely intimate and is a suiting introduction to the dynamic which exists between the two.

The poet is invested in comparing his love, and the indulgent way he participates in it, to drinking. He could find her love, if she placed it there, within a wine glass. In the last part of this stanza he says that the thirst he has for love could only be sated by the strongest, and most divine of drinks.

In the second stanza the speaker describes an interaction which he instigated. This situation is utilized as a perfect representation of how he sees his lover and how they communicate with one another.

He sends her a "rosy wreath" and instead of keeping it, she sends it back to him after breathing on it. The speaker declares that the smell of the plant has been supplanted by the smells of his lover.

Analysis of *Song: to Celia*

The first stanza of this piece begins with the speaker asking that his lover "Drink" to him with only her "eyes." These first lines define the emotional depths of their partnership.

The speaker wants his lover to devote herself entirely to him and with her eyes, indulge in him as she would a drink. The next line describes what it is he will give back to her if she chooses to commit herself fully. He will "pledge" himself to her with his own eyes. This wordless communication is quite intimate. The poet is allowing the reader into the world of this speaker.

Additionally, a reader should take note of the fact that the characters in the poem are not well-defined. The speaker's emotions are on display but there are no lines devoted to who he is or who his lover is. This choice allows any type of reader to cast their own experiences onto the text. One will, ideally, be able to relate to the emotions the couple experiences.

The speaker moves on from the idea of communicating through glances in the next lines as he tells his lover she is welcome to "leave a kiss…in the cup." It is here that he will look for her, knowing full well there will be no wine to drink. The poet has chosen to connect the indulgence of drink with that of love. These two acts, ways of being, and emotional states are one in the same.

In the following lines he states the "thirst" for love which exists within the soul can only be quenched by a "drink divine." It is only something like "Jove's nectar," or the drink of the gods, which could sate his thirst. In contrast to this statement he says that if he could indulge in "nectar" that he would not change for "thine." His emotions for his lover would not change.

In the second stanza the speaker begins by describing how of "late," or lately, he sent his lover a "rosy wreath." This was an action which was deeply thought through and meaningful to both of them. In the following lines he describes why he made the choice to send her this gift and what he meant by it.

The speaker chose the "wreath" as a gift not for his lover's sake, but for that of the wreath. He professes his choice stemmed from a desire to give the wreath hope that it "could not withered be" in her presence.

This hyperbolic scenario has a deeply romantic intention. He wants his lover to see how highly he regards her. It is as if she could stave off death in anything or anyone around her. She revitalizes everything near her.

The speaker's lover did not react to the wreathe as he expected. She did not keep it as a monument to their love but instead chose to send it back to him after breathing on it. She did this intentionally, knowing how he would be impacted by it.

When he wreath came back to him, he smelled it and declared that it did not smell like it did before. It now smelled of "thee," his lover. Through these depictions of their love the speaker is hoping to both flatter his lover and improve their relationship further. *'Song: to Celia'* is a true love poem which is wholly dedicated to the promotion and continuation of a relationship.

Lecture 10: Pastoral Poetry

- Pastoral poetry is a very ancient genre of poetry. It deals with the loves and lives of shepherds and shepherdesses, and other such country folk. They live far from towns, and spend their lives singing, sometimes mourning the loss of a sheep or a fellow shepherd or a love affair that has gone wrong.

Characteristics

 Pastoral poetry is a very ancient genre of poetry.

 It deals with the loves and lives of shepherds and shepherdesses, and other such country folk. They live far from towns, and spend their lives singing, sometimes mourning the loss of a sheep or a fellow shepherd or a love affair that has gone wrong.

 The countryside is idealized, since writers of the genre are usually city people.

 It is simple and the poetic expression uses a set of conventions that has varied little over the centuries.

 Sometimes, it is used symbolically. Often the shepherd is a poet; his songs become his poetry.

 A typical theme is the corruption of city life, and, through this theme, political statements are sometimes made.

- Arcadia (Greek: Ἀρκαδία)

refers to a vision of pastoralism and harmony with nature. The term is derived from the Greek province of the same name which dates to antiquity; the province's mountainous topography and sparse population of pastoralists later caused the word Arcadia to develop into a poetic byword for an idyllic vision of unspoiled wilderness. Arcadia is a poetic shaped space associated with bountiful natural splendor and harmony.[1] The 'Garden' is often inhabited by shepherds. The concept also figures in Renaissance mythology. Although commonly thought of as being in line with Utopian ideals, Arcadia differs from that tradition in that it is more often specifically regarded as unattainable. Furthermore, it is seen as a lost, Edenic form of life, contrasting to the progressive nature of Utopian desires.

The inhabitants were often regarded as having continued to live after the manner of the Golden Age, without the pride and avarice that corrupted other regions.[2] It is also sometimes referred to in English poetry as Arcady. The inhabitants of this region bear an obvious connection to the figure of the noble savage, both being regarded as living close to nature, uncorrupted by civilization, and virtuous.

- Carpe diem

Lexical Meaning: It is used to urge someone to make the most of the present time and give little thought to the future.

Origin: Carpe diem is a Latin aphorism, usually translated "seize the day", taken from book 1 of the Roman poet Horace's work Odes

Carpe is the second-person singular present active imperative of carpō "pick or pluck" used by Horace to mean "enjoy, seize, use, make use of".[2] Diem is the accusative of dies "day". A more literal translation of carpe diem would thus be "pluck the day [as it is ripe]"—that is, enjoy the moment.

Meaning

In Horace, the phrase is part of the longer carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero, which can be translated as "Seize the day, put very little trust in tomorrow (the future)". The ode says that the future is unforeseen and that one should not leave to chance future happenings, but rather one should do all one can today to make one's future better. This phrase is usually understood against Horace's Epicurean background. The meaning of carpe diem as used by Horace is not to ignore the future, but rather not to trust that everything is going to fall into place for you and taking action for the future today.

The Characteristics of a Pastoral Poem

As the name of the genre suggests, a pastoral poem is about pastures i.e. the countryside where shepherds tend their sheep on pasture land.

A pastoral poem promotes the characteristics of the countryside over those of the town or city, presenting an idealized image of country life that may have been quite at odds with the reality of a hard life in harsh conditions. Shepherds are presented as living an idyllic and innocent life in a delightful environment. In fact, imminent starvation during harsh winter conditions or when the harvest had failed was a reality of everyday life in past centuries. Nevertheless, the vivid imagery in The Passionate Shepherd to His Love has ensured that it has remained one of the most-loved poems in the English language.

Lecture 11: Marlow's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love"

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,
That Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.
And we will sit upon the Rocks,
Seeing the Shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow Rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing Madrigals.
And I will make thee beds of Roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of Myrtle;
A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty Lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;
A belt of straw and Ivy buds,
With Coral clasps and Amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.
The Shepherds' Swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.

What is a Madrigal?

A madrigal is a song for several unaccompanied voices, or a poem, usually about love, that is suitable for being set to music. At the time that Marlowe wrote The Passionate Shepherd

to His Love the popular form of madrigal in England was a polyphonic song in the vernacular language, written for four to six voices.

A Summary of 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love'

The speaker in The Passionate Shepherd to His Love is urging his beloved, who presumably dwells in an urban environment, to join him in a life in the countryside. He attempts to seduce her by presenting an enticing image of delightful and varied vistas with a background of sweet birdsong. The voice claims that, so many are the flower blooms in the countryside, he will make flower beds of roses, a thousand fragrant posies, a bonnet and petticoat bedecked for the loved one. The beloved one's gown will be made of finest wool spun from lamb wool and her slippers will be wool-lined. Also, there is the promise of riches in the form of golden buckles, and adornments made from semi-precious coral and amber. And to add to these physical pleasures there will be dancing and singing on May Day. Who could resist such enticements?

A Brief Analysis of 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love'

 The form of the poem is six four-line stanzas written in an iambic tetrameter rhythm (four feet of two syllables with the stress on the second syllable).

 The rhyme pattern (allowing for and including consonance at the end of lines 1,2,23,24) is AABB CCDD EEFF GGHH IIJJ KKAA

 You may feel that tone of the poem is seductive (though Walter Raleigh in his poetic response to it, The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd, chastised Marlowe for what he regarded as naivety and a juvenile tone.

 The most striking aspect of The Passionate Shepherd to His Love is the imagery. Marlowe evokes in the readers' mind a picture of a delightful and varied landscape, filled with rivers and the song of numerous birds; of thousands of flowers that can be used in a variety of ways to adorn the beloved - a cap, embroidered petticoats, a belt.

 Note the repetition - the insistent and positive we will, I will, and the repetition of the opening abjuration Come live with me and be my love in line 20 and at the end of the poem in line 24. Also, note there repeated consonance at the end of lines 1 and 2 in lines 23 and 24.

 Alliteration has been employed throughout the poem - eg. live, love, we will, pleasures prove, seeing the shepherds, pretty lambs we pull, Coral clasps

Lecture 12: Cavalier Poetry

The cavalier poets was a school of English poets of the 17th century, that came from the classes that supported King Charles I during the English Civil War (1642–1651). Charles, a connoisseur of the fine arts, supported poets who created the art he craved.

Definition of Cavalier Poetry

The Cavalier poets, members of the aristocracy, wrote in the 17th century and supported King Charles I, who was later executed as a result of a civil war. They were known as Royalists. Cavalier poetry is straightforward, yet refined. Many of the poems centered around sensual, romantic love and also the idea of carpe diem, which means to 'seize the day.' To the Cavalier poet, enjoying life was far more important than following moral codes. They lived for the moment.

Cavalier poetry mirrored the attitudes of courtiers. The meaning of cavalier is showing arrogant or offhand disregard; dismissive or carefree and nonchalant; jaunty. This describes the attitude of Cavalier poets.

Some of the most prominent Cavalier poets were Thomas Carew, Richard Lovelace, Robert Herrick, and John Suckling. They emulated Ben Jonson, a contemporary of Shakespeare. These poets opposed metaphysical poetry, such as that of John Donne.

While poets like John Donne wrote with a spiritual, scientific, and moral focus, the Cavalier poets concentrated on the pleasures of the moment. Metaphysical poets also wrote in figurative, lofty language, while the Cavaliers were simple, being more apt to say what they meant in clear terms. The Cavalier poet wrote short, refined verses, and the tone of Cavalier poetry was generally easy-going.

Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins"

From the title, we can tell that the speaker is addressing this poem to a group of virgins. He's telling them that they should gather their "rosebuds" while they can, because time is quickly passing. He drives home this point with some images from nature, including flowers dying and the sun setting. He thinks that one's youth is the best time in life, and the years after that aren't so great. The speaker finishes off the poem by encouraging these young virgins to make good use of their time by getting married, before they're past their prime and lose the chance.

'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may' has become synonymous with the Latin sentiment expressed by Horace: carpe diem, 'seize the day'. Don't tarry or waste time: you get just one life, so grasp the nettle and make the most of it. In his poem 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time' – often known by that 'Gather ye rosebuds' first line – Robert Herrick brilliantly captures the 'seize the day' sentiment. Here is the poem, with a short analysis of it:

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,

Old Time is still a-flying;

And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,

The higher he's a-getting,

The sooner will his race be run,

And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,

When youth and blood are warmer;

But being spent, the worse, and worst

Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,

And while ye may, go marry;

For having lost but once your prime,

You may forever tarry.

The poem's meaning or message is relatively straightforward: as mentioned above, the poem is an example of 'carpe diem literature', enjoining the addressee to 'seize the day' and make the most of life. We say 'addressee' but, as the poem's title makes clear, Herrick is really addressing more than one person: 'the virgins'. This provides another clue as to what he is driving at: like Andrew Marvell's seduction lyric 'To His Coy Mistress', Herrick is advising the virgins to 'make much of time' by enjoying themselves before their youth and beauty fade. This is hinted at by the imagery employed in the first stanza:

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,

Old Time is still a-flying;

And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow will be dying.

Gathering flowers can be seen as a metaphor for sex or wooing here, for plucking the flower and enjoying it while it's still in the bloom of youth. The tautness of the quatrain (i.e. four-line verse or stanza) is reinforced by the rhyme, both at the end of the lines (may/today, flying/dying) and within the lines (while/smiles, still/will). This lends the lines a purposeful and decisive feel: make no mistake, the poet says, even your youth will fade, the flower will wither, and – eventually – die. The internal rhymes are delicately balanced, so that

while and smiles come at the same point in the first and third lines respectively (the sixth syllable in the line) and still and will come at the same point in the second and fourth lines (the fourth syllable in each case). Not only do these pairs of words rhyme internally with each other, but they also cross over and echo the other pair of words: while and will, smiles and still. This is, technically speaking, highly efficient and tightly constructed verse – and this is important because the poet wants to convince us of the certainty of what he says. Note how 'may' becomes 'will'.

The other three stanzas of the poem extend the central sentiment so pithily and perfectly expressed in that opening stanza. They are less remarkable than the first verse, but they do display a similar use of repetition of contrasts and opposites: higher/sooner/nearer in the second stanza, best/first/worst in the third (leaving that missing complement, last, unspoken but lurking ominously behind the lines), and time/prime (not simple opposites, though it is the passing of time which will lead to the passing of one's prime) in the final stanza.

'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time' is, in the last analysis, a carefully constructed poem expressing a fairly straightforward sentiment. It says what it wants to say with extraordinary technical proficiency, yet without sacrificing the simplicity of its central message.

Lecture 13 : Puritanism

Puritanism is a religious reform movement in the late 16th and 17th centuries that sought to "purify" the Church of England of remnants of the Roman Catholic "popery" that the Puritans claimed had been retained after the religious settlement reached early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Puritans became noted in the 17th century for a spirit of moral and religious earnestness that informed their whole way of life, and they sought through church reform to make their lifestyle the pattern for the whole nation. Their efforts to transform the nation contributed both to civil war in England and to the founding of colonies in America as working models of the Puritan way of life.

Puritanism may be defined primarily by the intensity of the religious experience that it fostered. Puritans believed that it was necessary to be in a covenant relationship with God in order to redeem one from one's sinful condition, that God had chosen to reveal salvation through preaching, and that the Holy Spirit was the energizing instrument of salvation. Calvinist theology and polity proved to be major influences in the formation of Puritan teachings. This naturally led to the rejection of much that was characteristic of Anglican ritual at the time, these being viewed as "popish idolatry." In its place the Puritans emphasized preaching that drew on images from scripture and from everyday experience. Still, because of the importance of preaching, the Puritans placed a premium on a learned ministry. The moral and religious earnestness that was characteristic of Puritans was combined with the doctrine of predestination inherited from Calvinism to produce a "covenant theology," a sense of themselves as elect spirits chosen by God to live godly lives both as individuals and as a community.

King Henry VIII separated the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, and the cause of Protestantism advanced rapidly under Edward VI (reigned 1547–53). During the reign of Queen Mary (1553–58), however, England returned to Roman Catholicism, and many Protestants were forced into exile. Many of the exiles found their way to Geneva, where John Calvin's church provided a working model of a disciplined church. Out of this experience also came the two most popular books of Elizabethan England—the Geneva Bible and John Foxe's Book of Martyrs—which provided justification to English Protestants to view England as an elect nation chosen by God to complete the work of the Reformation. Thus, Elizabeth's accession in 1558 was enthusiastically welcomed by these Protestants; but her early actions while reestablishing Protestantism disappointed those who sought extensive reform, and this faction was unable to achieve its objectives in the Convocation, the primary gover Puritanism, begun in England in the 17th century, was a radical Protestant movement to reform the Church of England. The idea of a Puritan poet may seem a bit of a contradiction as Puritans disagreed with the practice of using metaphor and verbal flourishes in speech and writing. The Puritan movement was one for very literal expression and teaching. But, over time, some room for creative expression arose and Puritan poets such as John Milton, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor and John Dryden produced some of the greatest verse of their age.

The poet in puritan age :

John Milton (1608 to 1674), most famous for his epic poem "Paradise Lost" in 1667, was an English poet with religious beliefs emphasizing central Puritanical views. While the work acted as an expression of his despair over the failure of the Puritan Revolution against the English Catholic Church, it also indicated his optimism in human potential. A sequel entitled "Paradise Regained" was published in 1671. Other notable published works by Milton include, "On Shakespeare" (1630), "Comus" (1637), "Lycidas" (1638) and the tragedy, "Samson Agonistes" (1671).

In "On His Blindness," Milton writes of his experience of blindness. He asks if God wants him to keep working, in spite of the fact that his job caused him to lose his sight. A personified Patience tells him that God rewards even those who stand and wait to be of service.

 Milton went blind working for the English Republic. His service to the government often required that he stay up late reading and writing. This caused him to lose his sight.

 The poem takes the form of a Petrarchan sonnet. Petrarchan sonnets traditionally focus on love and romance, but Milton subverts this in order to explore his relationship with God.

 Milton fears that his blindness will prevent him from doing God's work. Patience tells him that even his idleness is useful to God if he continues to have faith.

Lecture 14: “On his Blindness”

When I consider how my light is spent

Ere half my days in this dark world and wide

And that one talent which is death to hide

Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent

To serve therewith my Maker, and present

My true account, lest he returning chide;

"Doth God exact day labor, light denied?" I fondly ask.

But Patience, to prevent

That murmur, soon replies,. "God doth not need

Either man's work or his own gifts.

Who best Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.

His state Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed,.

And post o'er land and ocean without rest;

They also serve who only stand and wait.

 Notes

 1....light is spent: This clause presents a double meaning: (a) how I spend my days, (b) how it is that my sight is used up. 2....Ere half my days: Before half my life is over. Milton was completely blind by 1652, the year he turned 44. 3....talent: See Line 3: Key to the Meaning. 4....useless: Unused. 5....therewith: By that means, by that talent; with it 6....account: Record of accomplishment; worth 7....exact: Demand, require 8....fondly: Foolishly, unwisely 9....Patience: Milton personifies patience, capitalizing it and having it speak.

10..God . . . gifts: God is sufficient unto Himself. He requires nothing outside of Himself to exist and be happy. 11. yoke: Burden, workload. 12. post: Travel. .

 . Examples of Figures of Speech

 Alliteration: my days in this dark world and wide (line 2) Metaphor: though my soul more bent / To serve therewith my Maker (lines 3-4). The author compares his soul to his mind. Personification/Metaphor: But Patience, to prevent / That murmur, soon replies . . . (lines 8-9). Paradox: They also serve who only stand and wait.

Summary and Analysis

John Milton's poem "On His Blindness" is an autobiographical sonnet in which Milton meditates on his own loss of sight. For most of his life, Milton had been able to see perfectly, but his late-night reading and writing on behalf of the government of the short-lived English Republic, in which he held a very prominent position, helped ruin his eyesight. This sonnet—written in the "Petrarchan" rhyme scheme associated with the fourteenth-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarca—is divided into an eight-line "octave" and a six-line "sestet." The octave rhymes a/b/b/a/a/b/b/a. The sestet rhymes c/d/e/c/d/e. The sonnet is therefore a typical Petrarchan sonnet in form, but in subject matter, the poem departs from the topics usually associated with Petrarchan poems. Petrarch (the English version of Petrarca's name) was most famous for writing about love; Milton departs from that conventional topic to deal with a very practical, very physical problem, but a problem with many broader spiritual implications.

By beginning line one with the word "When," Milton immediately signals that he is opening with a subordinate clause (a dependent clause) that introduces the main idea to follow. Beginning the poem this way creates a certain suspense; the main idea is postponed so that we have to continue reading in anticipation of its eventual arrival. Shakespeare also often used this kind of sentence pattern in constructing his own sonnets. By opening with a dependent clause, Milton heightens our sense of anticipation by delaying the key statement.

The word "consider" implies careful, rational thought rather than purely emotional reaction. Here and throughout the poem, the speaker uses his reason, which Renaissance Christians considered one of the greatest gifts that God had bestowed upon human beings. The ability of humans to reason, they believed, linked them to God and distinguished them from animals. The speaker feels that his "light" is "spent" (extinguished) in several senses of the word "light." This word clearly alludes, at least eventually, to the speaker's loss of sight,

but "light" may also suggest one's intelligence. The opening line may at first seem to mean "When I think about how I have used my intelligence," but it soon comes to mean "When I ponder how my ability to see has become extinguished." This latter meaning is, of course, foreshadowed by the poem's title.

The idea of losing one's sight is obviously a deeply troubling one. The blind person is suddenly at risk in all kinds of ways. The speaker in the poem feels vulnerable; he can no longer literally see his own way or easily protect himself from dangers. The special tragedy of this particular speaker is that he has lost his sight at an unusually early stage of life. Rather than becoming blind when elderly, he has become blind in middle age. He now inhabits a world that seems "dark" (2) in at least two senses: it is no longer physically visible, and it is a world full of sin and spiritual darkness. The world, moreover, is not only dark but also "wide": the speaker will somehow have to navigate, both literally and figuratively, in a world which, because of its width or breadth, will prose many dangers. If the speaker were confined to a single dark room, he might quickly and easily learn his way around. Instead, he will have to make his way through a "world" that is both "dark" and "wide" and thus especially challenging.

In line three, the speaker refers to "one talent," thereby alluding to the famous passage in the Bible (Matthew 25:14-30) in which a master gives three servants different numbers of "talents" (coins) before he departs. The servant given five talents invests them wisely and earns five in return, which he gives to his master when the master reappears. Similarly, the same happens with the servant given two talents. However, the servant given one talent, mistrustful of his master, buries that talent.

Lines 3 to 6 of the poem allude to the "Parable of the Talents" in Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 14 to 30. In this famous parable, an employer who is going away for a time gives his three servants money in proportion to their ability to increase its value. He distributes the money in talents, a unit of weight used in ancient times to establish the value of gold, silver, or any other medium used as money. Thus, a Roman might pay ten talents of gold for military supplies or seven talents of silver for a quantity of food. In the "Parable of the Talents," the employer gives the first servant five talents of silver, the second servant two talents, and the third servant one talent. After the employer returns from the trip and asks for an accounting, the first servant reports that he doubled his talents to ten and the second that he doubled his to four. Both men receive promotions. The third servant then reports that he still has only one talent, for he did nothing to increase its value. Instead, he buried it. The employer denounces him for his laziness, gives his talent to the man with ten, and casts him outside into the darkness.

Meter: All the lines in the poem are in iambic pentameter. In this metric pattern, a line has five pairs of unstressed and stressed syllables, for a total of ten syllables. The first two lines of the poem illustrate this pattern:

When I | con SID | er HOW.| my LIFE | is SPENT

Ere HALF | my DAYS | in THIS | dark WORLD.| and WIDE

Lecture 15: Metaphysical poetry

The term metaphysical poets was coined by the critic Samuel Johnson to describe a loose group of 17th-century English poets whose work was characterized by the inventive use of conceits, and by a greater emphasis on the spoken rather than lyrical quality of their verse.

Definition of Metaphysical Poetry

You've probably heard of haikus, lyrical poems and limericks. All of those types of poetry have specific qualities that allow us to group them together. Metaphysical poetry is a little bit different. The poems classified in this group do share common characteristics: they are all highly intellectualized, use rather strange imagery, use frequent paradox and contain extremely complicated thought.

However, metaphysical poetry is not regarded as a genre of poetry. In fact, the main poets of this group didn't read each other's work and didn't know that they were even part of a classification.

Literary critic and poet Samuel Johnson first coined the term 'metaphysical poetry' in his book Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (1179-1781). In the book, Johnson wrote about a group of 17th-century British poets that included John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan. He noted how the poets shared many common characteristics, especially ones of wit and elaborate style.

What Does Metaphysical Mean?

The word 'meta' means 'after,' so the literal translation of 'metaphysical' is 'after the physical.' Basically, metaphysics deals with questions that can't be explained by science. It questions the nature of reality in a philosophical way.

Here are some common metaphysical questions:

 Does God exist?

 Is there a difference between the way things appear to us and the way they really are? Essentially, what is the difference between reality and perception?

 Is everything that happens already predetermined? If so, then is free choice non-existent?

 Is consciousness limited to the brain?

Metaphysics can cover a broad range of topics from religious to consciousness; however, all the questions about metaphysics ponder the nature of reality. And of course, there is no one correct answer to any of these questions. Metaphysics is about exploration and philosophy, not about science and math.

Characteristics

The group of metaphysical poets that we mentioned earlier is obviously not the only poets or philosophers or writers that deal with metaphysical questions. There are other more specific characteristics that prompted Johnson to place the 17th-century poets together.

Perhaps the most common characteristic is that metaphysical poetry contained large doses of wit. In fact, although the poets were examining serious questions about the existence of God or whether a human could possibly perceive the world, the poets were sure to ponder those questions with humor.

Metaphysical poetry also sought to shock the reader and wake him or her up from his or her normal existence in order to question the unquestionable. The poetry often mixed ordinary speech with paradoxes and puns. The results were strange, comparing unlikely things, such as lovers to a compass or the soul to a drop of dew. These weird comparisons were called conceits.

Metaphysical poetry also explored a few common themes. They all had a religious sentiment. In addition, many of the poems explored the theme of carpe diem (seize the day) and investigated the humanity of life.

One great way to analyze metaphysical poetry is to consider how the poems are about both thought and feeling. Think about it. How could you possibly write a poem about the existence of God if you didn't have some emotional reaction to such an enormous, life-altering question?

The term “metaphysical," as applied to English and continental European poets of the seventeenth century, was used by Augustan poets John Dryden and Samuel Johnson to reprove those poets for their “unnaturalness.” As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, however, “The unnatural, that too is natural," and the metaphysical poets continue to be studied and revered for their intricacy and originality.

John Donne, along with similar but distinct poets such as George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughn, developed a poetic style in which philosophical and spiritual subjects were approached with reason and often concluded in paradox. This group of writers established meditation—based on the union of thought and feeling sought after in Jesuit Ignatian meditation—as a poetic mode.

The metaphysical poets were eclipsed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by romantic and Victorian poets, but twentieth-century readers and scholars, seeing in the metaphysicals an attempt to understand pressing political and scientific upheavals, engaged them with renewed interest. In his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," T. S. Eliot, in particular, saw in this group of poets a capacity for “devouring all kinds of experience.”

Donne (1572 – 1631) was the most influential metaphysical poet. His personal relationship with spirituality is at the center of most of his work, and the psychological analysis and sexual realism of his work marked a dramatic departure from traditional, genteel verse. His early work, collected in Satires and in Songs and Sonnets, was released in an era of religious oppression. His Holy Sonnets, which contains many of Donne’s most enduring poems, was released shortly after his wife died in childbirth. The intensity with which Donne grapples with concepts of divinity and mortality in the Holy Sonnets is exemplified in "Sonnet X [Death, be not proud]," "Sonnet XIV [Batter my heart, three person’d God]," and “Sonnet XVII [Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt].”

Herbert (1593 – 1633) and Marvell (1621 – 1678) were remarkable poets who did not live to see a collection of their poems published. Herbert, the son of a prominent literary patron to whom Donne dedicated his Holy Sonnets, spent the last years of his short life as a rector in a small town. On his deathbed, he handed his poems to a friend with the request that they be published only if they might aid "any dejected poor soul." Marvell wrote politically charged poems that would have cost him his freedom or his life had they been made public. He was a secretary to John Milton, and once Milton was imprisoned during the Restoration, Marvell successfully petitioned to have the elder poet freed. His complex lyric and satirical poems were collected after his death amid an air of secrecy.

Lecture 16 : John Donne, Founder of Metaphysical Poetry "The Flea"

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,

How little that which thou deniest me is;

It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,

And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;

Thou know'st that this cannot be said

A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,

Yet this enjoys before it woo,

And pampered swells with one blood made of two,

And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,

Where we almost, nay more than married are.

This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;

Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,

And cloistered in these living walls of jet.

Though use make you apt to kill me,

Let not to that, self-murder added be,

And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since

Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?

Wherein could this flea guilty be,

Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?

Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou

Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;

'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:

Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,

Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

Summary

The speaker tells his beloved to look at the flea before them and to note "how little" is that thing that she denies him. For the flea, he says, has sucked first his blood, then her blood, so that now, inside the flea, they are mingled; and that mingling cannot be called "sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead." The flea has joined them together in a way that, "alas, is more than we would do."

As his beloved moves to kill the flea, the speaker stays her hand, asking her to spare the three lives in the flea: his life, her life, and the flea's own life. In the flea, he says, where their blood is mingled, they are almost married—no, more than married—and the flea is their marriage bed and marriage temple mixed into one. Though their parents grudge their romance and though she will not make love to him, they are nevertheless united and cloistered in the living walls of the flea. She is apt to kill him, he says, but he asks that she not kill herself by killing the flea that contains her blood; he says that to kill the flea would be sacrilege, "three sins in killing three."

"Cruel and sudden," the speaker calls his lover, who has now killed the flea, "purpling" her fingernail with the "blood of innocence." The speaker asks his lover what the flea's sin was, other than having sucked from each of them a drop of blood. He says that his lover replies that neither of them is less noble for having killed the flea. It is true, he says, and it is this very fact that proves that her fears are false: If she were to sleep with him ("yield to me"), she would lose no more honor than she lost when she killed the flea.

Form

This poem alternates metrically between lines in iambic tetrameter and lines in iambic pentameter, a 4-5 stress pattern ending with two pentameter lines at the end of each stanza. Thus, the stress pattern in each of the nine-line stanzas is 454545455. The rhyme scheme in each stanza is similarly regular, in couplets, with the final line rhyming with the final couplet: AABBCCDDD.

Commentary

This funny little poem again exhibits Donne's metaphysical love-poem mode, his aptitude for turning even the least likely images into elaborate symbols of love and romance. This poem uses the image of a flea that has just bitten the speaker and his beloved to sketch an amusing conflict over whether the two will engage in premarital sex. The speaker wants to, the beloved does not, and so the speaker, highly clever but grasping at straws, uses the flea, in whose body his blood mingles with his beloved's, to show how innocuous such mingling can be—he reasons that if mingling in the flea is so innocuous, sexual mingling would be equally innocuous, for they are really the same thing. By the second stanza, the speaker is trying to save the flea's life, holding it up as "our marriage bed and marriage temple."

But when the beloved kills the flea despite the speaker's protestations (and probably as a deliberate move to squash his argument, as well), he turns his argument on its head and claims that despite the high-minded and sacred ideals he has just been invoking, killing the flea did not really impugn his beloved's honor—and despite the high-minded and sacred ideals she has invoked in refusing to sleep with him, doing so would not impugn her honor either.

This poem is the cleverest of a long line of sixteenth-century love poems using the flea as an erotic image, a genre derived from an older poem of Ovid. Donne's poise of hinting at the erotic without ever explicitly referring to sex, while at the same time leaving no doubt as to exactly what he means, is as much a source of the poem's humor as the silly image of the flea is; the idea that being bitten by a flea would represent "sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead" gets the point across with a neat conciseness and clarity that Donne's later religious lyrics never attained.

Detailed analysis:

The speaker uses the occasion of a flea hopping from himself to a young lady as an excuse to argue that the two of them should make love. Since in the flea their blood is mixed together, he says that they have already been made as one in the body of the flea. Besides, the flea pricked her and got what it wanted without having to woo her. The flea's bite and mingling of their bloods is not considered a sin, so why should their love-making?

In the second stanza the speaker attempts to prevent the woman from killing the flea. He argues that since the flea contains the "life" of both herself and the speaker, she would be guilty both of suicide and a triple homicide in killing it.

The woman in question is obviously not convinced, for in the third stanza she has killed the flea with a fingernail. The speaker then turns this around to point out that, although the flea which contained portions of their lives is dead, neither of them is the weaker for it. If this commingling of bodily fluids can leave no lasting effect, then why does she hesitate to join with him in sexual intimacy? After all, her honor will be equally undiminished.

Analysis

Donne here makes use of the wit for which he eventually became famous—although in his own day his poetry was often considered too lurid to gain popular notoriety, and little of it was published during his lifetime. One of his earlier poems, "The Flea," demonstrates his ability to take a controlling metaphor and adapt it to unusual circumstances. "The Flea" is made up of three nine-line stanzas following an aabbccddd rhyme scheme.

He begins the poem by asking the young woman to "Mark this flea" (line 1) which has bitten and sucked blood from both himself and her. He points out that she has "denied" him something which the flea has not refrained from enjoying: the intimate union of their bodily fluids (in this case, blood). This commonplace occurrence, he argues, "cannot be said/A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead" (lines 5-6); if this tiny commingling of the two people is not wrong, then how can a greater commingling be considered evil or undesirable? He even points out that the flea is able to enjoy the woman's essence "before he woo" (line 7), the implication being that he need not court the woman in order to enjoy her sexual favors.

In the second stanza the poet argues for the life of the flea, as his desired lady has made a move to kill it. He paints the flea as a holy thing: "This flea is you and I, and this/Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is" (lines 12-13). (Note also the reference to the Christian concept of "three lives in one" (line 10), suggesting that a spiritual union already exists, although unlike a spiritual marriage in a "marriage temple," the third being in the trio is not God but a flea.) Besides arguing for the sanctity of the flea's life, the speaker is also arguing that he and the lady have already bypassed the usual vows of fidelity and ceremony of marriage; thus, he pushes toward his point that the two of them have already been joined as one in the flea, so there is no harm in joining their bodies in sexual love.

There is a hint that he has already attempted to gain the lady's favors and failed, either through her response or that of her parents: "Though parents grudge, and you," (line 14) he says, suggesting that even her opinion does not matter anymore. The flea has already "cloister'd" them within its body's "walls of jet" (line 15, possibly also suggesting that they are alone together in a dark room). The woman's disdain for him and his suit becomes more apparent as he claims she is "apt" to kill him (line 16), following her habit of killing fleas, but he offers that she should refrain from harming the flea because in so doing she would add suicide ("Let not to that self-murder added be" line 17) by destroying the vessel holding her blood. In fact, he says, she would be guilty of "sacrilege, three sins in killing three" (line 18) since his own blood is there too.

He fails in his defense of the flea, for she has "purpled" her finger with the flea's blood by the opening of the third stanza (line 20). It is a "sudden" but perhaps inevitable betrayal of an innocent being. The woman claims triumph over the lover's argument, responding that neither she nor the man is weaker for her having killed the flea (lines 23-24). In this way she attempts to unravel the speaker's argument that the flea represents a sacred bond

between them; the flea is simple to kill and nothing has been lost, and the single drop of blood will not be missed. Thus there is no reason to have sex.

The poet, however, is quick-witted enough to turn her argument back against her: if the death of the flea, which had partaken of just a tiny amount of their life-essences, is virtually no problem, despite his pretended fear, then any fear she might have about her loss of honor is equally a “false” fear. The act of physical union would cause virtually no serious harm to her reputation. That is, as much as she lost to the flea, “Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me, / Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee” (lines 26-27). He thus returns to his original argument from the first stanza: the flea’s intimate contact with the woman has caused her no harm, so a physical encounter with the poet will cause no harm either.

Although the lover suggests that he is in control and that it is a matter of "when thou yield'st," some feminist scholars have noted that he is powerless to do anything until the woman makes her decision. He merely utters his words of warning, but she can raise her hand and kill the flea; similarly, she can exercise her power by continuing to deny the man his desires. The flea could take what it wanted without stopping to woo, but the lover uses no force beyond the force of argument. He has not been successful so far, but we do not know what will happen next.

Style:

Donne here makes use of the wit for which he eventually became famous although in his own day his poetry was often considered too lurid to gain popular notoriety, and little of it was published during his lifetime. One of his earlier poems, The Flea, demonstrates his ability to take a controlling metaphor and adapt it to unusual circumstances. The Flea is made up of three nine-line stanzas following an aabbccddd rhyme scheme.

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Good Luck