

## Lecture 17: John Donne & Petrarchan Tradition

Petrarchan Innovations:

Rather than sublimating/transcending earthly love,  
as Petrarch struggled to do,  
English Songsters typically resist Platonic transcendence;  
they may end in Despair, like Astrophel,  
or in Marriage, like “Spenser.”

But they share with Petrarch the theme of **CONSTANT allegiance** to a beloved, who **disciplines** their ardor (often by being or appearing inconstant) & who variously rejects or ultimately accepts their courtship.

Perhaps the most compelling expressions of this theme are found in Shakespeare’s Sonnets. As, for example in Sonnet #116 (B1072-73):

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments; love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O, no, it is an ever-fixed mark. . . .*

*If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved. (1-5, 13-14)*

Unfortunately, that affirmation is not borne out by the experience of the Sonnets, which is a story of “alteration” and betrayal. The problem then becomes, how do we live in an ever-changing world that does not answer to our desire for permanence and/or transcendence? Religious faith offers one answer: Suffer now, reap the rewards later, in heaven, for ever. Shakespeare offers another, very different answer in Sonnet #73 (B1068):

*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 seest the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth steal away,  
Death's second self, which seals up all in rest.  
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.  
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.*

**What do you think of that “solution” to the problem of inconstancy?**

**How do you think Donne “solves” the problem?**

Donne offers many answers to the problem of change, by loving, if not always well, at least intensely.

Reflecting on the Petrarchan/anti-Petrarchan scheme of CONSTANCY, we can see fairly easily the striking novelty of John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*. He **REFUSES the discipline** of Cupid/Desire; that is, he refuses to remain CONSTANT to any one role or to any single idea/l of love. He celebrates, sometimes perversely, an "ideal" of INCONSTANCY.

As a love poet, Donne resists any attempt to define him or his poetry; his themes range from ironized Platonic transcendence, as in "The Canonization" (B1267-68) and "The Ecstasy" (B1276-78):

*When love with one another so  
Interinanimates two souls,  
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,  
Defects of loneliness controls.*

*We then, who are this new soul, know,  
Of what we are composed, and made,  
For th' atomies of which we grow  
Are souls, whom no change can invade.*

Why did I use the word “ironize” to describe the speaker’s transcendence?

Because next stanza is an urgent call for physical action:

*But, O alas ! so long, so far,  
Our bodies why do we forbear?*

Irony is, perhaps, the defining characteristic of Donne’s love poetry. It manifests itself in facetious, witty seduction poems, like “The Flea” (B 1263),

and even in virtual pornography, as in “Elegy 19: To his Mistress Going to Bed” (B 1283-84):

*Licence my roving hands, and let them go* 25  
*Before, behind, between, above, below.*  
*O, my America, my Newfoundland,*  
*My kingdom, safest when with one man mann’d,*  
*My mine of precious stones, my empery ;*  
*How am I blest in thus discovering thee !* 30  
*To enter in these bonds, is to be free ;*  
*Then, where my hand is set, my soul shall be.*

It's not really possible to categorize Donne's poetic voice. Poems in his *Songs and Sonnets* (B 1263-81) range from the cynical to the sublime, from execrations of love to exaltations. (We'll look closely on Monday at one of the exaltations, a poem called "The Canonization," which makes love both an Incarnation of the Word and the Sacrament that celebrates that mystery.)

The only constant in Donne's poetry is INCONSTANCY. This INCONSTANCY is universal. It is a property of the beloved **object**, of course, but also, often defensively, of the **subject**.

E.g.: "Song" imputes faithlessness to women (B 1264-65):

*Go and catch a falling star,  
Get with child a mandrake root,  
Tell me where all past years are,  
Or who cleft the devil's foot,  
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,  
Or to keep off envy's stinging,  
And find  
What wind  
Serves to advance an honest mind.*

*If thou be'st born to strange sights,* 10  
*Things invisible to see,*  
*Ride ten thousand days and nights,*  
*Till age snow white hairs on thee,*  
*Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,*  
*All strange wonders that befell thee,* 15  
*And swear,*  
*No where*  
*Lives a woman true and fair.*

*If thou find'st one, let me know,*  
*Such a pilgrimage were sweet;* 20  
*Yet do not, I would not go,*  
*Though at next door we might meet,*  
*Though she were true, when you met her,*  
*And last, till you write your letter,*  
*Yet she* 25  
*Will be*  
*False, ere I come, to two, or three.*

Here is another, "The Indifferent" (B 1267), in which the subject/speaker celebrates his own inconstancy as a correlative of female faithlessness:



*Venus heard me sigh this song ;  
And by love's sweetest part, variety, she swore,      20  
She heard not this till now ;*

*and that it should be so no more.*

*She went, examined, and return'd ere long,  
And said, "Alas ! some two or three  
Poor heretics in love there be,  
Which think to stablish dangerous constancy.      25  
But I have told them, 'Since you will be true,  
You shall be true to them who're false to you.'"*

### **What makes this conclusion ironic?**

Irony can be a way of dealing with an unsatisfactory reality, acknowledging it while keeping it at a "safe" distance. In this case, however, defensive irony sounds more like a recipe for disaster than a "solution" to the problem of inconstancy or faithlessness.

To be continued . . .