

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 3.9

Vol. 5 Issue 2 April 2019

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

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THE SATIRIC VEIN IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine Donne as a satirist through his various poems and to show to what extent these satiric elements cast light on the person of Donne himself. It also includes a justification for the study and statement of the different techniques used by Donne in expressing his satiric attacks. We will see that Donne's satires are directed at various objects in the contemporary scene (the puritan middle class, bad poets and worse lawyers, the search for religious truth, the court and courtiers, and legal abuses). Also shows Donne as a man of diversified learning and learning wit. Donne's attitude may sometimes be flippant, even irresponsible by accepted standards, but it is masculine and it does take account of the real world. The outright mockery of people and sects, and the impugning of the motives in general, in Donne's works certainly isn't cynical. It expresses a perspective which takes the world's activities as ludicrous feverishness in respect of bedrock human certainties; not however occasion of for despair, but diverting by their own zestful life. The overturning of accented evaluations seems the more convincing because it is the reverse of solemn; and because it emphatically doesn't imply any rejection of experience, but rather a delight in it. The true greatness of Donne as satire arises not only from his extraordinary mental agility in moving from one heterogeneous concept to another, nor from his mental vigor, nor from his stupendous learning. It arises from the fact that his satires are not merely a way of saying things, not merely verbal dexterity or mere embellishment of style, but that it fuses admirably with his thought and feeling. It is an expression of his poetic sensibility, of his attitude to life.

Keywords

Satire, Renaissance, Patrarchan, Contemporary

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Introduction:

There was an unprecedented rise of the spirit of satire in the last decade of the 16th century and on the opening of the 17th century. The exhaustion of the renaissance spirit, religious and political controversies, and uncertainty as regards the accession to the throne, the clashes between the old and new philosophies, all contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment and defeat, self introspection and self criticism. It was but natural that satire should flourish under the circumstances. Donne is the greatest of the satirists of the periods, others being John Marston, Joseph Hall, Ben Johnson. The satirist may condemn directly or bring out a subtle point of criticism, but this is done with a background of concern for values, with a view to evoking a sense of realization and thus opening the door to betterment and it is so with Donne also: "Donne is one of the most humanistic of the great English poets and therefore one of the least typical of satirists. With Donne this concern for value doesn't become an opportunity for idealism; rather his sense of realism gives him a chance to satirize the idealists. This can be specifically perceived in his love poems. He has no patience with patriarchal idealists whose notions of love are not to be comprehended on the plane of reality". He forbids "tear-floods" and "sigh tempests" and advertisement of love (*A Valediction; Forbidding Mourning*) and he would not "purchase" his love with such "stocks" and "treasures" (*loves infiniteness*).

The poem simply titled "Song" is often referred to by its opening line, "*Goe, and catche a falling starre*" to distinguish it from other poems published as Donne's Songs and Sonnets. This 27-line poem is deceptively light, upon first reading, as so much of Donne's poetry appears. On the

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surface, it suggests attitudes about love and the relations between the sexes, but once again Donne's poem carries a spiritual metaphor. The tone is lightly satirical, with deeper truths peeking out from underneath the poet's assumed worldliness and cynicism.

The meter for this poem is slightly unusual for Donne. It is not a typical "song" meter, even though that is its title. The title "Song" also gives a certain lightness and flippancy to the poem which is matched by the early lines about doing impossible things. The early lines prepare us for a cynical perspective that calls to mind the attitude of the jaded courtier singing to a collection of adults who are well-schooled in the vagaries of love. The poem reveals Donne's satirical-cynical attitude towards womanhood. He thus breaks away from the patriarchal tradition of woman worship. He has himself experienced woman's inconstancy, and so regards a constant woman as a rarity. However, if perchance, such a woman is ever met with, she would deserve all honor, worship and adoration.

Originality of Donne: The All Pervading Satiric View:

Though Donne was considerably influenced by the contemporary love of antiquity, he was too great a genius to be a mere imitator or camp-follower. Donne was no imitator, for he could not but stamp his individuality upon anything that he wrote. Thus Donne may borrow from the Romans and we find the elements of satire in his works working beyond the bounds of five formal satires that he wrote. Gransden stresses the historical significance of Donne as a satirist when he writes: "*Donne put much more into satire than any English writer did before him, and in any history of English verse his satires would have to be described as a landmark*". The satiric vein in Donne over-flows the five formal satires and is to be found everywhere in his poetry whether the early *songs and sonnets, the Elegies*, or the later religious poetry. All aspects of contemporary London life, life at court, its immortality and indecency, women and their inconsistency, ;love and its follies, the greed, hypocrisy and dishonesty of London Lawyers, and the folly and cupidity of their clients; in short, a thousand contemporary vices and affections find a satirical treatment in the poetry of Donne.

The opening lines of *Satire 3* confront us with a bizarre medley of moral questions: Should the corrupted state of religion prompt our anger or our grief? What devotion do we owe to religion, and which religion may claim our devotion? May the pagan philosophers be saved before Christian believers? What obligation of piety do children owe to their fathers in return for their religious upbringing? Then we get a quick review of issues such as the participation of Englishmen in foreign wars, colonizing expeditions, the Spanish auto-da-fé, and brawls over women or honor in the London streets. The drift of Donne's argument holds all these concerns together and brings them to bear upon the divisions of Christendom that lead men to conclude that any worldly cause must be more worthy of their devotion than the pursuit of a true Christian life. The mode of reasoning is characteristic: Donne calls in a variety of circumstances, weighing one area of concern against another so that we may appraise the present claim in relation to a whole range of unlike possibilities: "Is not this excuse for mere contraries, / Equally strong; cannot both sides say so?" The movement of the poem amounts to a sifting of the relative claims on our devotion that commonly distracts us from our absolute obligation to seek the truth.

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Some of Donne's sharpest insights into erotic experience, as his insights into social motives, follow out his sense of the bodily prompting of our most compelling urges, which are thus wholly subject to the momentary state of the physical organism itself. In "Farewell to Love" the end that lovers so passionately pursue loses its attraction at once when they have gained it. Yet the poet never gives the impression of forcing a doctrine upon experience. On the contrary, his skepticism sums up his sense of the way the world works.

Satire on Contemporary Life:

Donne frequently satirizes contemporary life, and glimpses that we have of this life are very revealing, whether it be the ordinary social circle or life at the court. In the first satire he tells us of the fashionable London society in which the externals are the things of consequence; the picture is one like that of the fashionable society of the adolescents in the modern age. In the fourth satire we have his reflection on the life at the court, and the satire is carried on *The Sun Rising*, in the sneering suggestion to the sun, then "Busie old foole" and "Sawcy pedantique wretch".

"Goe tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride"

A suggestion the application of which to the select circle mentioned above may well be based upon the subtle assumption that they have an affinity with the sun as regards the epithets used as salutation to the latter (*Busy old fool; pedantic wretch, etc*). The sycophancy and non-entity of the courtiers are exposed in *Love Exchange*;

*Love, any devil else but you,
Would for a given Soule give somethings too
At court your fellows every day,
Giveth art of Riming, Hunstsmanship, or play,
For them which were their owne before".*

One cannot trace a link between the devil and the fellows at the court in the lines quoted above. It is the same strain that makes the lover in *Canonization* advice the railing cynics to concentrate upon, "the King's reall," face; the advice of the lover is rather a statement of the daily and favored pursuits of those people, and not a list of suggestions. In the *Canonization* he mocks at the cynical adversaries of love and advises them to take up some more fruitful employment and leave the lovers themselves:

*For God sake hold your tongue, and let me love
Or chide my palsie, or my gout,
My five grey hairs, or ruined fortune flout,
With wealth your state, your mind with Arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honor, or his stamped face
Contemplate, what you will, approve,
So you will let me love*

Thus, even while Donne is speaking of love, his satiric vein finds outlet in various forms, for he is not committed to any creed of love and would not but work for a totality of vision that does not permit him to forsake reality. In Donne's poetry satire is everywhere. In Donne's satires what

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strikes the eye at first sight is their extremely rugged nature. Indeed, Donne`s satires are notorious for their harshness, unevenness and unpleasantness. But this doesn`t mean that he does not know the laws of versification or that he could not keep accent. His harshness can be accounted for in a number of ways. As both Saintsbury and Leishman notice, most of the Elizabethan satirists are harsh, because they believed that the harsh and unpleasant nature of satire needed a correspondingly harsh versification. In this way satiric effect was heightened.

Conclusion:

Donne`s satires are as rough and rugged as the unhewn stones that have just been blasted from their native quarry; and they must have come upon the readers at whom they were leveled, with the force and effect of the same stones flung from the hand of giant. The element of satire in Donne`s poems is all pervasive and is not confined to any particular subject; here elsewhere in Donne the range is cosmic, for Donne can satirize love, religion, social life, scientific discoveries, old idealism- every kind of exuberance that produces a gap between what things are and what they appear to be. We must agree with K.W Gransden`s view that in any literary history of England, Donne`s satires must be described as important landmarks.

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