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Renaissance Poetry

Explore the use of wit and
paradox in Renaissance poetry

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To begin with, it is necessary to mark out exactly what we might mean by the terms posed in this essays' title: what do we mean by wit, paradox, and, perhaps most crucially, Renaissance. In common use today, "wit" is taken to mean, broadly, funny or amusing, but we must attach a different meaning to it for the purposes of our study, a meaning the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as "the unexpected, quick, and humorous combining or contrasting of ideas or expressions," in particular the use of metaphor in rhetorical argument. Paradox, ironically, is more straightforward: a self-contradictory or absurd statement, especially one that is seemingly sound.

With these definitions in mind, one might expect an essay dealing not with Renaissance poetry, but metaphysical poetry. The works of poets like Donne is traditionally lauded for its elaborate wordplay, whilst being kept healthily segregated from the classically-derived courtly poets of the Elizabethan era. Yet in this essay I want to confirm the validity of looking at Elizabethan court poetry in the same mode that one would address the metaphysicals, and in doing so deconstruct the boundary between the two schools, arguing that in many senses the two sets of writers are of the same mettle, and both deserve to be accorded full respect for their skilful use of wit and paradox.

Interestingly, some of the most relevant work in this area has been done by approaching the texts from the opposite direction. In her hefty tome, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, Rosemund Tuve links the works of the earlier sixteenth century poets with that of the metaphysicals (and indeed on to Yeats), but by *reducing* the opportunity in the work for paradox and the kind of wit – the simultaneous holding together in the mind of unusual combinations – that I will seek to explore. Her concept is one of unified images within a text, and universal images in a reading of that text, arguing against a modernist reading of particularised imagery being imposed back on the sixteenth century. According to Tuve, the ideas of individual moments of being, of consciousness, and of experience are twentieth notions, and that even when the Elizabethan writers do deal with seemingly personal or autobiographical events, they are in fact working out a didactic meaning that is universal. I hope that a quotation from Tuve will suffice to give some understanding of her argument:

The fact that Donne's images [in Elegy XI] and his logical pattern lead us to an unconventional and satirical conclusion (what lady is worth *good* money?) is neither here nor there. It would not operate in the least to make his subject or images indecorous either to his contemporaries or to his predecessors. The Elizabethan demand for a unified and coherent meaning does not confuse coherency with moral orthodoxy. The requirement that images be 'significant' of a coherent meaning rationally imposed by the author and rationally apprehensible by the reader holds in Donne's poem, with just the same kind of effect upon images, as it holds in poems that state the more usual conclusions made about ladies during this period. ¹

Aside from the interesting suggestion that the didactic conclusion one might draw from this poem "is neither here nor there" – which begs the question, why read it? – the crucial element of Tuve's argument here is that there was an "Elizabethan demand for a unified and coherent meaning." Although such a critical line does not preclude the use of wit and paradox as a subsidiary pursuit, it does relegate it to that manner of supporting role, subservient to a "true" meaning. I hope to show that to engage in such a style of criticism is to rob the poems of the period of much of their charm as well as much of their meaning, true or otherwise. I believe that in the work both of poets traditionally called Renaissance and metaphysical, the use of wit and paradox through imagery and metaphor was more than a casual means to an end, but was in some very real sense the end in itself, that the self-awareness of an author, the self-awareness of writing as a character was as prevalent in the poems as the surface topics, which were heavily personal themselves. This, I am afraid, will bring me in direct conflict with Tuve:

Our suspicion is waked when we find that the Elizabethan was not generally writing (rarely even for the length of a single image) "here is the thing that happened, here the object, the landscape, the human being that was seen." It still more wakes our suspicions to notice that he was not generally writing "this is how *I* felt about the experience, how *I* saw the object, the landscape." A Renaissance poet's conception of the subject of poetry and of the nature of truth allowed him to present true meanings of things without looking first to the local particularities they exhibited (which the Romantic and late Romantic did not dare to do); and his conception of poetry's aim and of the nature of truth led him to stress the "concept" without stressing the conceiver (which the modern does not care to do). ²

Yet I am in good company in having my suspicions raised, and rightly so, when so much of the development of the poetry of the sixteenth century was in movement away from purely Platonistic aspirational approaches to the universal to the embodiment of an "I" within the text, and in terms of the love poetry that I will look at shortly, a movement from the objectified Petrarchan image of the deified loved and dejected lover to an imperfect loved and a personalised lover with real personality, desires and physicality. It is this

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1 Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Poetry*, p44

2 *Ibid*, p49

emergence of a individual voice in the midst of a more general message than generates the poetic mess that, for me, is one of the most interesting aspects of Elizabethan poetry, and one that Tuve is seeking to remove in the interests of “decorum”. In his response to Tuve, William Empson, expresses similar concerns:

Owing to Donne’s complete control of the rhetorical instrument, says Miss Tuve, it is particularly “illegitimate” in his case “to fit out his poems with overtones which diverge ambiguously from his apparent meaning and which are only to be traced in the connotations of his image-terms”. It seems to me, on the contrary, that much of the haunting quality of Donne comes from writing about a total situation, without realizing quite how much of it he was getting into his language or even what all his cross-currents of feeling about it were; he broods like a thundercloud, as well as flashing like one.³

Tuve argues that as poets schooled in classical rhetoric and reason, the Elizabethan and metaphysical poets wrote in a rhetorical style, rhetoric demands an argument, and so there must be one meaning. I, and I believe Empson, are arguing for the poets as people rather than rhetoricians, and as such have confusion and contradiction, wit and paradox, as much in their poems as in their hearts; that may be too modern a sounding a conviction for Tuve, but, as the Freudians and feminists have pointed out, simply because the terms did not exist at a certain point in history, it does not mean that what the terms signify was absent too.

Sir Phillip Sidney, in his *Astrophil and Stella* sonnet sequence is perhaps the best example of the link between the Elizabethan and the metaphysical poets. The sequence engages with the traditional Petrarchan notion of the love poem, and therefore the traditional notion of what Elizabethan court poetry was all about, by eulogizing over an exulted love, Stella, the fixed star on as high a pedestal as possible. However, the poems in the book are also riddled with witty conceits that do more than list the beauty and grace of Stella, dealing playfully with the notion of writing and reading – both of the poems, and of Stella, as a particular woman and as mysterious womankind – with courtly actions and morals and a variety of miscellaneous pursuits. More than that, they also give Astrophil, the true star cross’d lover, a voice and presents him as an admirer who is not particularly happy simply to gaze at a distance: Sidney is just as likely as Donne to flatter and praise his subject whilst at the same time crossing his fingers that his silver tongue will smooth the way to her bedroom.

The opening sonnet to *Astrophil and Stella* contains hints to this change in the direction of the courtship poem, as Sidney discovers that simple imitation is not going to be enough to satisfy his desire, either as a

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3 Empson, “Donne and the Rhetorical Tradition”, p70-71

poet or as a lover:

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 sunburnt brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled stepdame Study's blows,
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.⁴

Although Sidney's didactic intention is clear enough here, as Tuve would desire it to be, the simple message that "recycling other poets' work is not good enough" is hardly the be all and end all of the poem. The pleasure of the poem comes not simply through the skilful execution of rhetoric, but the implications of that rhetoric and through lingering over it, and without providing an Empson-esque directory of possible meanings, we may profitably indulge a quick exploration of one element of the sonnet. The extended metaphor of running – "halting forth", "fled", "others' feet" – is not a subsidiary point, but adds, paradoxically, a stifled haste to Astrophil's endeavour (and a slightly cringe-worthy pun on "feet"); it adds, much as Tuve would like to deny it in the interests of a clean and decorous poem, a sense of moment to the work. It is given that the moment and the message is universal, it has a "truth", but is also intensely personal, and it is that paradox of public intimacy that gives the sonnet, and the whole sequence, much of its power. Tuve, of course, will have none of this, and gives a very different analysis of the poem's final couplet:

Feigned or pedantic or lifeless art does not find its opposite in the natural feelings of the heart, rebelliously bursting through the trammels of form. Sidney says "look in they heart and write" but he is talking about "inventing" or finding matter; and, anyhow, no one gives as poetic advice the Elizabethan analogue to what this counsel means to most moderns – no one bids the poet look into his liver to find words.⁵

Tuve does her argument a disservice by turning a simple metaphor into a bad joke, but perhaps she does so to shield the weakness of what she is proposing. "Pedantic or lifeless art" actually *does* find its opposite in natural feelings in Sidney, because that is precisely the point of *Astrophil and Stella*; it is a personal exploration of love *not* an epic or allegorical one. Elizabethan poets like Sidney and Shakespeare matched precisely the same blend of physical and mental feelings - perhaps natural and spiritual, base and platonic - as the metaphysicals. "Matter", as anyone who's familiar with Hamlet's quibbling with Polonius will know⁶,

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4 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, Sonnet 1, lines 5-11

5 Tuve, p39

6 Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 2.2.190-192

has a wealth of meanings: physical, mental and bibliographical. Sidney, even if he is “talking about ‘inventing’ or finding matter”, is talking about finding sex, love, and poetry.

Kalstone finds this complicated form in Sidney too. In comparing Sonnet 71 to Petrarch’s *Chi vuol veder quantunque pò Natura*, he finds paradox within the poem, and one that requires the metaphors within the verse to hang over the entire work, in a way Tuve would not allow:

Sidney’s sonnet opens with a promise of the same majestic harmony and ends with a devastating comment on the whole Petrarchan vision. It is a troubled poem, inviting multiple interpretations. For the first thirteen lines Sidney’s poem appears to be a version of Petrarch’s praise of Laura; then in the last line the poem departs completely from its model and our attention is pivoted to Astrophil, forcing a re-evaluation of all the lines that have come before.⁷

The sudden move from the exulted praise of Stella to the base desire of “ ‘But ah,’ Desire still cries, ‘give me some food.’ ” is a purely personal moment, where the weakness of the individual breaks through the demanded artifice. It is, in spite of Tuve, “the natural feelings of the heart, rebelliously bursting through the trammels of form”, and it is the same individual yet universal motivation that drives Donne in *The Flea*, and indeed Ovid in his elegies:

The came Corinna in a long loose gown,
Her white neck hid with tresses hanging down,
Resembling fair Semiramis going to bed,
Or Lais of a thousand wooers sped.
I snatched her gown; being thin, the harm was small,
Yet strived she to be covered therewithal,
And striving thus as one that would be case,
Betrayed herself, and yielded at the last.⁸

Sidney’s Astrophil, more restrained than Ovid, manages only a stolen kiss from Stella, but the passion is the same, though the expression of it is entirely personal, as Kalstone insists: “[Sidney] chooses to ride on the dial’s point of the moment and to dramatize the demands of appetite on the world of the ideal.”⁹

If Sidney were the only Elizabethan writer to exhibit these qualities, we might be able to regard him as a blip and return happily to our labels of Renaissance and metaphysical, but he is not. As we have already seen, Marlowe’s translations of Ovid fall into this argumentative love tradition (although the metaphor use

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7 Kalstone, “Sir Philip Sidney: The Petrarchan Vision”, p198

8 Ovid, trans. Marlowe, “Elegia V: Corinnae concubitus”, lines 9-16, in *Elegies*, Book I

9 Kalstone, p200

is more traditional images of castles, gates and battles, than the inventive wit we associate with the metaphysicals), and so does the most famous Elizabethan poet, Shakespeare.

The opening sonnets of the Shakespeare sequence are reasonably straightforward rhetorical musings on time, praising the addressee and exhorting them to marriage. But midway through the sequence, the tone and topic takes a twist. In Sonnet 70, for example, we find the our exulted lover has become tainted: “That thou are blamed shall not be thy defect”, although it is not yet enough to put off Shakespeare. By Sonnet 82, it is clear the his beloved is also receiving another’s affections, and Will is far from happy about it, with the verse taking on a sharp edge:

Thou, truly fair, wert truly symphatized
In true plain words by thy true-telling friend;
And their gross painting might be better used
Where cheeks need blood: in thee it is abused.¹⁰

This is not general rhetoric, this is jealousy. Shakespeare is indulging in paradox, complaining at another writer for doing what he has done in the past, although claiming that their work is as overblown as that Sidney ascribes to “Pindar’s apes”¹¹. This is far from the Petrarchan ideal of praise, where poetry was *supposed* to encourage others to share the poet’s affection, yet it is close to the paradox detailed by Ovid in Elegy XI, Book III of his *Elegia*.¹²

His venom turns more towards his beloved in the following two sonnets, where, depending on the reading, he can be seen to be disparaging his addressee for succumbing to poetry, a truly paradoxical scenario, and one that could hardly be driven solely by rhetoric.

I never saw that you did painting need,
And therefore to your fair no painting set.
I found – or thought I found – you did exceed
The barren tender of a poet’s debt¹³

Who is it that says most which can say more
Than this rich praise: that you alone are you,

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You to your bounteous blessings add a curse,
Being fond on praise, which makes your praises worse.¹⁴

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10 Shakespeare, Sonnet 82, lines 11-14

11 Sidney, *Astophil and Stella*, Sonnet 3, line 3

12 *Dolet amicam suam ita suis carminibus innotuisse ut rivales multos sibi pararit*, trans. *He complains that his mistress is so well known through his poems that she is available to many rival lovers.*

13 Shakespeare, Sonnet 83, lines 1-4

14 Shakespeare, Sonnet 84, lines 1-2 & 13-14

The vanity of the beloved is being chastised here, because, it seems, they have chosen a new scribe over Shakespeare. This fickleness is the same that vexed Donne in *Song* and *Womans constancy*, but it is a personal experience of that frustration, and that is what links it with the work of the metaphysicals as much as the rhetorical style. We are witnessing the prioritising of the “I” over the “eye”; the internal mental imagery over the beautified external imagery.

I concede that the wit – the juxtaposition of unusual or surprising elements – is not as thoroughly worked in to this poetry as it is in later metaphysical works, but the link I am proposing between the Elizabethan and the metaphysicals is a transitional one, not an absolute one.¹⁵ A simple glance at the work of Sidney or Shakespeare next to Donne shows that they are of very different styles, but I contend that they are all working in the same direction, towards a self-awareness and the re-telling of a personal moment through rhetoric, wit and paradox.

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- 15 That said, consider the metaphors in Shakespeare’s plays. Hamlet’s “sea of troubles” and Macbeth’s candle are both strong images that can contend with Donne’s compass, and they are not unique in his drama.

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