

## THE POETRY OF JOHN DONNE: FANTASY AT WAR WITH REASON

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### ABSTRACT

In his poetry, John Donne creates a unique style that embraces a constant battle of emerging reality and the realm of fantasy. This paper intends to show the presence of playful images and arguments, which grow even more fantastic, the more the poet is overwhelmed by the denials offered by the woman or the realities of the world. For Donne, fantasy resides beyond its 'crude' implication, it is a mixture of argument and inventiveness to overcome the limits of reality and here lies the 'twist' that Donne is so famous in making. In addition, this paper will focus on how most of Donne's love poetry consists not of general aspiration and terms of praise but implies the existence of a very specific situation; not only daybreak or the moments before the lovers make love but where the lovers themselves are given characters almost as they would be in a drama. Moreover, how this never-ending confrontation offers no solution, does not acclaim any winner, and while doing so justify the uses of sheer wit and intelligence in Donne's poems that portray a 'real vs. fantastic' domain.

**Key words:** Realistic approach, Playful images, Fantasy, Confrontation, Thematic Twist.

The situations in Donne's love poetry are, notoriously, specific and detailed and this is not simply a clever recreation of the issues of chivalric and Renaissance Platonic verse within the greater realism of ancient and specifically of Latin love poetry. The particularities work in a single direction, always to threaten and limit the lover's freedom of desire and action. In the poetry of his contemporaries the lover's desire was limited by the woman's reluctance, because she was chaste or heartless, more specifically already married as in *Astrophel and Stella*. But in Donne's love poetry the woman's resistance is only one among many elements that hamper the free expression of desire and the lover's own fears of betrayal, the demands of time, the irksome sense that the world is calling him, the need to part and, most of all, doubts about the value of love itself and a preference for the simpler activity of sexual exchange, all complicate the terms of praise and honour and love-longing. These limitations upon the aggressive and demanding voice in the poems, with their insistence on the use of the personal pronoun, constitute a reality that presses in upon its desires. The only resource the poet has lies in image and argument which grow the more fantastic the more the poet is outraged by the denials offered by the woman or the world. In Jonson's court masques the

threats to order were themselves fantasies, inefficient witches in *The Masque of Queens*, the content of dreams in *The Vision of Delight*, effortlessly defeated by nobler fantasy, the visions of heroic virtue or the permanent spring tide of the court. In Donne's love poetry, the threats to the poet are circumstances beyond his control and the only strength he has left lies in the fantasy that can momentarily persuade him that he has after all won.

To do that the voice of fantasy must assume the tones of rational argument. *The Flea*, for example, opens with a severe demonstration, apparently arguing for a realistic sense of proportion:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,  
How little that which thou deny'st me is.<sup>1</sup>

The argument seems primary but what inspires the poem is the reality, put into the secondary clause, that the lady denies him sexual satisfaction. The situation indicates a very specific occasion; the lovers are very close to each other in physical proximity for both to be watching the tiny creature

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 53

The relationship is illicit; 'parents grudge' like the usual threats in Donne's love poetry, however the primary difficulty lies in the denial of the lady who doesn't want to lose her chastity. The lover uses fantastic arguments in his persuasion:

This flea is you and I, and this  
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;<sup>2</sup>

He uses the flea to prove that what she is refusing him has already happened. In most of the love poetry of Donne we find that the physical attachment is important to strengthen the love-bond. In order to express its positive implication he fantastically compares the 'flea' with their 'marriage bed', and giving an illicit affair the sanctity of religious ceremony.

The delusory image is appropriate, however, to the equally fantastic idea of honour. The woman does not have any honour to lose though she pretends to be chaste. Her fears, misgivings, her appeal to honour are all themselves fantasies which he can dismiss by creating his own fantasy about the flea:

Mee it suck'd first, and now sucks thee  
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;  
Confesse it, this cannot be said  
A sinne, or shame, or losse of maidenhead,<sup>3</sup>

As in say 'Love's Alchemy' or 'The Indifferent' the physical facts threaten the status of love itself. By fantasizing the idea of mixing their bloods through the flea, however, he can use the idea of this sacred consummation to struggle against the woman's obduracy and the fantasy also helps him to overcome his haunted sense of reality and its reduction of love to 'imposture all' ('Love's Alchemy'; 1.6)

Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,  
And cloyster in these living walls of Jet.<sup>4</sup>

The beloved tries to put on a masque about honour and he removes the absurdity of the masque by presenting the anti masque of the flea. The fantastic

argument is playful; it magnifies the flea to a gigantic scale and presents it as kind of masque scenery, 'living walls'. Donne presents here noble and low fantasy at the same time. The lover is using a noble analogy in order to make his beloved say 'yes' while never allowing the reader to forget the reality of the actual flea.

The more complex poems transcend this simple sense of an external barrier. They grant the existence of a reciprocal love but the threats now come from within the dependence on another person. The poems locate an insecurity within the lover himself which prompts in the poem the extension of reference, the precarious exaggeration and the wildness of argument that was demanded by external reality in simpler poems, like 'The Flea'. In 'The Good Morrow' Donne discards the clowning and antic poses of his early love poetry and treats love with gravity and a richness of thought and emotion which suggest a personal involvement with his subject. And the particular subject of 'The Good Morrow' is the sense of joyous discovery and sudden intellectual revelation in finding that the long inner debate of body and soul can be resolved in a wholly satisfying love which includes physical sex but remains essentially spiritual. It records both the poet's happiness and his intellectual puzzlement in discovering a resolution for the bitter dilemma of, say, 'Love's Alchemy' in finding that body and soul can be fully compatible in love.<sup>5</sup>

Most of Donne's love poetry consists not of general aspiration and terms of praise but implies the existence of a very specific situation. Very often that involves not simply locating the poem in a particular time like daybreak or the moment before the lovers make love but very often puts it in specific situation where the lovers themselves are given characters almost as they would be in a drama. The lady, for example, will be described as herself claiming to be chaste when in fact the lover knows her to be promiscuous ('The Apparition'). Or the lover will present himself as experienced and the lady by implication almost as knowledgeable as himself ('The Good Morrow'). These particular elements of realism in the poems are often presented as a threat to the lover's

<sup>2</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 53

<sup>3</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 53

<sup>4</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 53

<sup>5</sup> For more argument about the triumphant love, see Patricia Garland Pinka, *This Dialogue Of One: The Songs And Sonnets Of John Donne* (Alabama: The University Of Alabama Press, 1982), specially p.105

success. They contribute the challenge which has to be met by the exercise of his intelligence and wit. This means in effect that at a specific point the poem calls upon the powers of fantasy in a kind of mixture of argument and inventiveness to overcome the limits that reality is imposing on him.

As we start reading the poem 'The Good Morrow' we find that the lover seems to be dramatizing, in a rangy, somewhat sardonic manner, the excitement of his first discovery of love:

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I  
Did, till we lov'd?<sup>6</sup>

The lover is astonished to discover what he and his mistress have been missing: they have been simple-minded babies; they have wasted their time on naive diversions when they might have been enjoying this unique relationship. The lover explains that in comparison with the vivid actuality of this present pleasure of love, all the earlier sexual relations he has known seem insubstantial and imaginary.<sup>7</sup> The reality of past life is willed away and changed into a fantastic dream in order to honour the present:

If ever any beauty I did see,  
Which I desir'd, and got, 'twas but a dreame of thee<sup>8</sup>

It is now clear that Donne is using love in a sharply proscriptive sense to transform the present into a relationship which is not primarily sensual. He has been playing with the ambiguity of the word, manipulating the reader's mind by suggesting to him first fantastic ideas, only to bring him later to the dawning realization that this is not what 'love' means at all, and the true love is actually the revelatory experience which is the subject of the poem.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 70

<sup>7</sup>For more of this critical reading, see Patricia Garland Pinka, *This Dialogue Of One: The Songs And Sonnets Of John Donne* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1982), especially p.108

<sup>8</sup>Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 70

<sup>9</sup> For this critical reading see Clay Hunt, *Donne's Poetry: Essays In Literary Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), especially p.56

The generally Platonic cast of Donne's thought appears also in his use of the stock metaphor of a 'dream' to characterize sensual love, and it is further revealed when the lover says:

And now good morrow to our waking soules,<sup>10</sup>

This line performs several functions in the imaginative structure of the poem and operates on more than one level of significance. Taken literally, the line refers to the fact that the lovers have just waked up: their souls, or minds, have awakened after sleep, and they greet one another with 'Good Morrow'. But Donne uses this concrete situation to generate a powerful symbol for the whole poem. Donne's actual subject is not this waking up situation but rather the nature of a love which has been, for both lovers, a psychological and intellectual awakening as well.

Yet the triumphant opening to the second stanza is followed by a line that throws the whole claim into jeopardy:

Which watch not one another out of feare;<sup>11</sup>

It is not just that the denial raises the idea which otherwise would have had no place in the poem. It is the selection of the verb 'watch' in place of the neutral 'look' or the more loving 'gaze at' which introduces a wariness, a sense of potential danger in the relationship which the rest of the poem must then argue against.

Within this real situation of love Donne needs to create an ideal world of fantasy which is bigger than the reality. In order to create a special claim for the love which only the lovers can possess Donne develops a fantastic argument:

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
Let Maps to others, worlds on worlds have showne,  
Let us possesse our world, each hath one ,and is one.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 70

<sup>11</sup>Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 70

<sup>12</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 70

The lovers must be made happy with their own world because other possible desires and ambitions have entered the lover's mind. The world is well lost because, since each of the lovers is, from a philosophic standpoint, a complete world, each has gained an entire world merely in possessing the other. By paralleling the experience of the two lovers with all which the geographical discoveries of new lands had meant to the Renaissance imagination, Donne communicates the sense of exciting discovery and enlargement of the horizons of experience which they have found in the love affair.<sup>13</sup> But he has also by increasing the claims made the argument less tenable.

At the end of the poem the disparity of scale is taken even further; the worlds that others seek are made inferior even to the eye balls of the two lovers:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,  
And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest,  
Where can we finde two better hemisphaeres  
Without sharpe North, without declining  
West?<sup>14</sup>

As the lovers lie gazing at one another, the images enter their eyes and are manifested in their faces. It is faithful and constant, frank and without guile. And the connotations of 'plain' and 'rest' suggest its evenness of temper and emotional stability.<sup>15</sup> The world of their love is, in other words, like a celestial sphere. The celestial sphere doesn't have the physical characteristics of the earth; it is immutable and eternal, free from painful seasonal change and not subject to decay and death. It is immortal because it is 'mixed equally' - it is composed, that is, of materials which are uniform and physically compatible, and it is therefore free from the internal physical stresses produced by the combination of the heterogeneous qualities of the four elements. Like this sphere their love will be

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<sup>13</sup> For more about this glorification of love, see Clay Hunt, *Donne's Poetry: Essays In Literary Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), especially p. 69

<sup>14</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 70

<sup>15</sup> For more of this argument, see Peter Amadeus Fiora, ed. *Just So Much Honor: Essays Commemorating The Four-Hundred Anniversary Of The Birth Of John Donne* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State university Press, 1972), especially p. 49

permanent, because it also is 'mixed equally' and is therefore not in the category of mortal things:

What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;  
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I  
Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can  
die.<sup>16</sup>

Since their love is the product either of a complete fusion of their souls into a single identity or of a conjunction of two separate love experiences which are identical and inherently stable, it is, in essence, a homogeneous mixture, and therefore, by the principle of physics, it cannot die. The astrophysical analogies of these lines provide, therefore, both an analogical philosophic argument to prove the enduring character of this love-affair, and a suggestion of the metaphysical cause of its distinctive qualities - its purity, constancy, evenness of temper, and emotional peace.

Yet if this seems to have brought the poem to rest in the noble fantasies of Jonsonian masque, as against the earlier moments of internal doubt, what we notice is how the words of insecurity keep recurring even in those apparently stable lines.<sup>17</sup>

The image of the hemispheres inevitably brings to mind 'sharp North' and 'declining West' which, even as they are denied, are recognized by the reader as images all too familiar for how love comes to an end. The whole Platonic image of mixed souls in the last lines is made to depend on an 'if' and the desire for the immortality of love has to rely on conditions almost impossible. The defiance of 'none can die' wonderfully answers the earlier possibility of fear but only by making a claim which in a world of mortality seems untenable.

It is the pressure exerted upon the lover's self by the world and most of all by the changes of time which is the most powerful of the threats posed by what reason recognises as reality. This is the subject of the most powerful of the love poems, for example, 'The Sunne Rising'. He apparently dismisses the heavenly body, the creator of time, in the first line with surprisingly scornful ease. In

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<sup>16</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 71

<sup>17</sup> See Patricia Garland Pinka, *This Dialogue Of One: The Songs And Sonnets of John Donne* (Alabama: the University Of Alabama Press, 1982), especially p. 106

'The Sunne Rising' Donne using fantastic ideas to try to preserve a sense of supreme value of his love. The poem explodes into fiercely rhetorical argument, pursued through three stanzas of sustained exaltation. First the sun is rebuked as a kind of elderly voyeur; then sent about his business; then accused of vanity; then dismissed (unsuccessfully) to look for 'both 'the 'India's'. Contempt gives way to patronage, and the sun is invited to perform his duties with the inertia more fitted to age, standing still.

As the poem starts we find fantastic arguments about the splendor and greatness of love. After the love-making the lover wants to get rid of the realistic sense of time by ignoring the universal presence of the sun:

Sawcy pedantique wretch, goe chide  
Late schoole boyes, and sowre prentices,  
Goe tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,  
Call country ants to harvest offices;<sup>18</sup>

He glorifies love by making the world of the lovers different from the ordinary busy life which doesn't possess such status.<sup>19</sup> If men are indeed exalted by love beyond the temporal, are they not entitled to 'look down' on those enslaved by its commands? Man might be rapt beyond mortality', in the eternal intimations of Love:

Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,  
Nor houres, dayes, monthes, which are the  
rags of time.<sup>20</sup>

Even the world's princes and potentates are mere shadows, an imitation in terms of these timeless ideals:

Princes doe but play us; compar'd to this,  
All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Helen Gardener, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 72

<sup>19</sup> For more about the lover's ideal world of fantasy, see Patricia Garland Pinka, *This Dialogue of One: The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1982), especially p.112

<sup>20</sup>Helen Gardener, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 72

<sup>21</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 73

For Donne love has got the supreme power which can defy the materialistic world of honour and wealth.

Yet there is a difference between the confidence of this first stanza and the strain and excess of the ensuing ideas. The lover compares himself with the sun, for instance:

Thy beames, so reverend, and strong  
Why shouldst thou thinke?  
I could eclipse and cloud them with a winke,<sup>22</sup>

At the same time he acts as a devoted lover because he doesn't want to stop looking at her even for a single moment. Yet to close his eyes scarcely make the sun disappear, of course. The serious Platonism of stanza one is replaced by a fantasy that is purely subjective in its claims and in its battle with external reality has to seek ever greater exaggerations. The lover must argue that the whole universe is here with him in the one bed. Since his beloved is lying down with him he can forget about the whole world. For him she is the whole world but the expression of feeling is instantly translated into the fantasy that the East and West Indies 'lie here with me'.

Throughout the poem the lover makes claims to defend love. The enemy here is the sun itself and the lover makes use of fantastic arguments to dismiss the threat. For him even the whole world is contracted between them:

She's all States, and all Princes, I,  
Nothing else is<sup>23</sup>

What we read first as an analogy is disconcertingly taken by the poem as literal fact on which to base further claims. At the same time we find that the lover is also aware of the truth that he must surrender to time. At the end of the poem we find him accepting the reality but pretending that he is not:

Shine here to us, and thou art every where;  
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy  
sphaere<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 72

<sup>23</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 73

Here the poem is a combination of reality and fantasy. The lover is not denying time anymore; time is no more the enemy which is intruding upon them. Instead he now boasts that time and the sun exist only for their sake. He wants to become oblivious of the real world; even he wants to transcend time.

In Donne's love poetry there is always an underlying sense of reality often registered as fear. In 'The Sunne Rising' lover knows very well that their hours of love making are gone; he has to immerse himself in the everyday world and its business even if he doesn't like it. At the end fantasy is necessary to disguise that acceptance of reality. Donne wonderfully portrays how the lover comes back to reality by the route of a fantastic claim. The effect in 'The Sunne Rising' is that statements and questions come alive with alternative meanings, none of which can be wholly suppressed. The poem thrives on extremes and quintessences, on paradoxes which look at the moment like intellectual scaffolding round simple emotions, at the next like internal complexities threatening the emotions themselves. It is not so much its certainties as its doubts that make Donne's love poetry different from that of his contemporaries.<sup>25</sup>

This attempt to overcome the facts of the case, always present in the poems, the fantastic operations of the mind, are the basis of even the religious poems. Hence in 'Good Friday, 1613; Riding Westward' he writes an excuse for not observing the holy day. His reason is 'Pleasure or Business' (l.7) and to excuse himself he invokes the Fall of Man, the structure of the universe and ends by arguing that his failure is really a devout and penitential action. The most extreme example of such interplay between reality and fantasy occurs, however, in the 'Two Anniversaries'. Elizabeth Drury, the twelve year old girl he scarcely knew, becomes by her death a manifestation of the degeneration of the world; a feeling not even his own, intense grief, is translated into ideas of the decline of the universe on a scale that makes the

use of the image in 'The Sunne Rising' seem modest.

Elizabeth Drury's regenerated status becomes an image for the created perfection of man and nature, the innocence and goodness man first enjoyed when made in the image of God. Her premature death is a fit illustration, therefore, of the effects of original sin. But this serious claim then allows the poet to elaborate an image of universal decline. Donne uses the language of fantasy and presents the picture of an utterly decaying world where the older cosmology has been destroyed by modern discovery:

The Element of fire is quite put out;  
The Sunne is lost, and th'earth, and no mans  
wit  
Can well direct him, where to looke for it.  
And freely men confesse, that this world's  
spent  
When in the Planets, and the Firmament  
They seeke so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out againe to his Atomis.  
'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone;  
All just supply and all Relation:  
Prince, Subiect, Father, Sonne, are things  
forgot,  
For everyman alone thinkes he hath got  
To be a Phoenix, and that there can bee  
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.<sup>26</sup>

The world is not perfect. It is moving towards destruction. Even the solar system is no longer organized. The natural laws of relationship are lost - sons are no longer obedient to their fathers. There is no hierarchical order to guide the universe in a proper way.<sup>27</sup> In one sense, this is simply knowledge, discovering in the present what had been always true, but the discovery alters the human mind and intensifies contemporary individualism.

The reason for this great dilemma of the universe is made to be the loss of Elizabeth Drury. The primal goodness was reiterated and restored in her, as a regenerated soul - through grace, the only way in

<sup>24</sup> Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies And The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 73

<sup>25</sup> See K. W. Gransden, *John Donne* (London: Longmans, Green And Co, 1954), especially p. 64

<sup>26</sup> Frank Manley, ed. *John Donne: The Anniversaries* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1963, repr. 1968), p. 73-74

<sup>27</sup> See also Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Donne's Anniversaries: And The Poetry of Praise: The Creation of A Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1973), especially p.242

which it can be regained by man.<sup>28</sup> Realizing that even she is subject to the death which pervades the entire natural order, the speaker detaches himself from any involvement with man as natural man. The argument is an even more extreme version of the method of writing in the love lyrics. Reality or facts contradict human feeling so argument then surrenders to fantasy in order to restore priority to feeling. The private grief of a father means there is now no hope anywhere. The presence of Elizabeth Drury gave the world a fulfillment because:

Shee that was best, and first originall  
Of all faire copies; and the generall  
Steward to Fate; shee whose rich eyes, and  
brest,  
Guilt the West Indies, and perfum'd the East;<sup>29</sup>

The description reminds us of the glorification of the beloved in 'The Sunne Rising'. But here Elizabeth Drury is given higher status even than the lady in that poem.

In his love poems and in 'The Anniversaries' Donne uses fantasy in order to overcome the realities-time, the woman's reluctance, the claims of work, the relative unimportance of Elizabeth Drury's death. Donne wants to be oblivious of the real situation and therefore he wants to escape into the realm of fantasy, in a different way not unlike Keats. Donne makes fantastic claims to glorify love because he is at the same time aware of its frailty. In 'The First Aniversarie' he fantasizes the death of Elizabeth Drury and shows her as a symbol of 'goodness' which the world needs and without it the world is now in absolute decay. Fantasy helps him to liberate himself from the world of painful realities by making the objective subject to the purely personal.

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<sup>28</sup>For more of this praise, see Barbara Keifer Lewalski, *Donne's Anniversaries: And The Poetry Of Praise: The Creation of A Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1973), especially p. 252

<sup>29</sup> Frank Manley, ed. *John Donne: The Anniversaries* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1963, repr. 1968), p. 74

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