



Research Paper

## The Satiric Vein in John Donne's Poetry

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**ABSTRACT:** *There was an unprecedented rise of the spirit of satire in the last decade of the 16th and opening one of the 17th century. The exhaustion of the Renaissance spirit, religious and political controversies, uncertainty as regards the accession to the throne, the uncouthness and unpopularity of James I, his extravagance and immorality, the clash 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. Men felt that the times were out of joint, eyes were focussed on the many ills of society and so satire had its heyday. Donne is the greatest of the satirists of the period, others being John Marston, Joseph Hal, Ben Jonson, etc.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Satire, Donne, Religion, Ideal, Contemporary*

*Received 04 October, 2020; Accepted 17 October, 2020 © The author(s) 2020.*

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### I. RUGGEDNESS OF DONNE'S SATIRES: ITS CAUSES

Donne has left behind him only five satires, all belonging to the early years of his poetical career, but the satiric vein penetrates even those lyrics of his which are not professedly satiric. In Donne's poetry, satire is everywhere. In Donne's satires what 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 does not mean that he did not know the law of versification or that he could not accept. The harshness can be accounted for in a number of ways. As both Saintsbury and Leishman notice, most of the Elizabethan satirists are harsh, they believed that the harsh and unpleasant nature of satire needed a correspondingly harsh versification. In this way the satiric effect was heightened. Most of the satirists believed that they were imitating Horace, Juvenal and Persius, but with a few occasional exceptions, it seems that all they really succeeded in reproducing the imaginary harshness of those poets' verses. In the Roman satirists we have generalisations about human nature, its weaknesses and ruling passions, illustrated by occasional examples which seldom descend to minute detail; in the Elizabethan satirists generalisation is almost completely absent, and we have page after page of detailed, realistic descriptions of particular follies, affectations and abuses, and of the perpetrators thereof. On these occasions when, without any particular object before him, an Elizabethan satirist indulges in general invective, he nearly always gabbles like a thing most brutish, unable to endow his purposes with words. "They had been taught that the model satirist was Persius, and that his chief characteristics were harshness of style and hardness of conceit." This supposedly indispensable hardness, some of them, notably Donne, deliberately cultivated: "It cannot be too often insisted that the harshness of which Dryden and others accused Donne, and which is most apparent in his satires, was deliberately cultivated, although it is much more apparent in his last two satires, the Fourth and the Fifth. And we must remember that when Dryden and the eighteenth century critics accused Donne of hardness, they were thinking chiefly, if not exclusively, of his satires." Moreover, Donne did not intend to publish his satires, so he did not take care to polish them up. Further, the laws of versification were not fixed and much license was allowed in the age.

### II. ANALYSIS OF DONNE'S SATIRES:

(a) **Satire I:** The originality of Donne as a satirist, his themes, and his many merits and demerits are easily brought out by a brief analysis of his five satires. In the First Satire, Donne describes how he was persuaded to leave his books and take a walk with a foolish companion, who, after smiling at 'every fine silken painted fool' they met, left him, first for a celebrated tobacco-smoker, then for a celebrated judge of clothes, and finally for his mistress, in whose house he quarrelled with other gallants and was turned out of doors with a broken head....

Here realistic detail, such as Jonson loved, predominates over mere wit, although there is a passage in which he insists on his companion's inconsistency and absurdity in hating naked virtue, although he loves his naked whore, and although souls only enter into felicity when they are naked of bodies, and although man was naked in the state of innocence.....“The poem is also much more dramatic than most Elizabethan satires, which generally deal in mere description and denunciation.”

**(b) Satire II**

The Second Satire, on poets and lawyers, is much less individual and characteristic and much closer to the general run of Elizabethan satires. Poets who starve themselves by writing for idiotic actors, who ‘write to Lords, rewards to get’, who plagiarise- these Donne declares, like other monstrous miners, don't trouble him, for they punish themselves- but he cannot stand Cocus, who is proud of a lawyer. Then, by a very abrupt and obscure transition, Donne proceeds to satirise men who take up the practice of law for mere gain, and who, like that William Gardiner on whom Doctor Leslie Hotson flashed his lantern, combining law with usury, cheat prodigal heirs out of their estates.

**(c) Satire III**

In his Third Satire, on search for true religion, says Leishman“ Donne is inspired and his wit and his similes never get out of hand. He is not merely witty but passionately witty, or Wittily Passionate, and the poem gives an unforgettable picture of an eager mind at work- for even here Donne is in a sense dramatic, as he is nearly in all his best and most characteristic work.”The poem proves, too, that his investigation of the rival claims of the Roman and the Anglican Churches, although it may have begun partly, and even, perhaps, largely from motives that we should call worldly, was nevertheless prosecuted with what we should call 'sincerity', a burning sincerity, for the roughlines of this satire are penetrated by an intense eagerness for truth, for what to the young Donne, no less than to Spenser, was saving truth, truth on the discovery of which the soul's salvation depended, and by a deep contempt for indifference.

We must seek for truth, he exclaims, but where is she to be found? Some seek her at Rome, because she was there a thousand years ago, others at Geneva, others at home, while some are content to suppose that all religions are the same:

but unmoved thou

Of force must one, and forc'd but one allow;

And the right; aske thy father which is shee,

Let him ask his; though truth and falsehood lee

Nearetwins, yet truth a little elder is;

Be busie to seeke her, beleeve mee this,

Hee's not of none, nor worst, but seekes the best.

To adore, or scorne an image, or protest,

May all be bad ; doubt wisely, instange way

To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;

To sleepe, or runne wrong, is. On a huge hill,

Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will

Beach her, about must, and about must goe;

"An unforgettable picture..... an almost dramatic expression, of an eager mind at work."

**(d) Satire IV**

“The Fourth Satire is the longest of Donne's satires, the roughest in versification, and on the whole, the least interesting, the nearest to the common run.” Donne describes how, having been foolish enough to go to court, he was unable to escape the unwelcome attentions of an absurdly dressed person who pretended to be a great traveller, linguist, and repository of secrets. Having got rid of him by lending him a crown, Donne went home and reflected on the folly and futility of those whom he had seen at Court. There is no clear plan or dominant idea, detail is piled upon detail and although lines are often striking, they do not cooperate to produce the desired effect.

**(e) Satire V**

“The Fifth and last of Donne's satires is on suitors and law officers. Here we feel continually that the particular abuse Donne professes to be satirizing is merely a topic for the display of his wit, which is a thing we almost never feel in reading Dryden's satires, however true it may be that he never writes as one inspired by his subject in itself.” Almost the whole point of the following passage turns on the exploitation of the double meaning of the word angel:

Judges are Gods ; he who made and said them so,

Meant not that men should be forc'd to them to goe.

By means of Angles; when supplications  
We send to God, to Dominations,  
Powers, Cherubins. and all heavens Courts if wee  
Should pay fees as here, Daily bread would be  
Scarce to kings.

### **Summary**

"To summarise the result of this survey of Donne's satires, we may say that it is only in the Third, on the search for true religion, that Donne is consistently inspired by his subject in itself; and there, too, he writes with that moral earnestness which inspires most of Jonson's best work in the heroic couplet. In the other satires there are many touches of vivid realism, which remind us of Jonson, both in his comedies and in some of his epigrams and epistles, but there is much that is not clearly distinguishable from the general run of Elizabethan satire, including an absence of clear outline and plan, a tendency to pile detail upon detail and to present us with just one damned thing after another. What is more characteristic of Donne is that dramatic quality which is noticed in the First, and that tendency to indulge in mere wit for its own sake which is especially noticeable in the Fifth."

### **Originality of Donne: The All-pervading Satiric View**

Though Donne was considerably influenced by the contemporary antiquity, he was too great a genius to be a mere imitator or a camp-follower. Donne was no imitator, for he could not but stamp his individuality upon anything that he wrote. Thus Donne may borrow something from the Romans and yet we find the element of satire in his works working beyond the five Satires that he wrote. Gransden stresses the historical significance of Donne as a satirist when he writes: "Donne put much more in 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 immorality and indecency, women and their inconsistency, love and follies, the greed, hypocrisy and dishonesty of London lawyers, the folly and cupidity of their clients, in short, a thousand contemporary vices and affectations find a satirical treatment in the poetry of Donne."

### **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 in *The Sunne Rising*, in the sneering suggestion to the sun, the *Busie old foole* and *Saw cypedantique 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 haven affinity with the sun as regards the epithets used as salutations to the latter. The sycophancy and non entity of the courtiers are exposed in *Loves Exchange*:

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

One cannot but 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* advise the railing cynics to concentrate upon, "the King's Real", face; the advice of the lover is rather a statement of the daily and favoured pursuits of those people, and not a list of suggestions:

Withwealth your state, your mindwith Arts improve,  
Take you a course, get you a place,  
Observe his honour, or his grace,  
Or the Kings real, or his stamped face  
Contemplate.....

The lust for wealth and favours, in the high circle society-looking, in particular, is mocked at with a negative method and a sense of pleasant- looking, subtle irony. In *Love's Growth* Donne does not spare even the rulers, for he knows and lets others also know that rulers tax the public, initially for an urgent cause and for a tentatively short duration that hardly and seldom knows an end.

### **Satire on False Sense of Honour**

Donne is conscious of the apparent concern of the Renaissance people with honour, when he speaks of their greed for wealth and favours. The exuberant sense of honour as an object of display is ridiculed both by Shakespeare and Ben Jonson in their plays. Donne also recognizes honour as a mere affectation in a society dazzled by the brilliant externals. The only point of distinction between the attack by the dramatists and Donne is that while Shakespeare and Ben Jonson do it through their Falstaffs, Corvinos, etc., Donne does it through self-dramatization. Only a person, who penetrates beneath the externals to know that unreality of honour which is wrongly and vainly exalted, can write in *The Sunne Rising*, the famous passage beginning, "All honorsmimique...ete." "For Donne, honour bears relation to inner life, it is no appendage, but an integral part of the very personality of a person. He prefers to respond unflinchingly to such a comprehensive and real sense of honour than to a straw or a breath." It is this integrity that is conveyed in, *Break of Day*, through the following lines, with the subtle suggestion that the worldly sense of honour is a fake:

Light hath no tongue, but is all eyes;  
If it could speak as well as pie,  
This were the worst, that it could say,  
That being well, I faine would stay,  
And that I lov'd my heart and honorso,  
That I would not from him, that had them, go,

"The lover and the beloved have been together during the night and would not endure separation at the break of day for day for fear of being seen by others, because they have their own notion, rather conviction, of the sense of honour, and they should not mind even if there is a clash between their attitude and that of the outside world.

### **Religious Poetry: The Satiric Vein**

In fact Donne could not be committed to anything partial; the total was all important for him. He was not fascinated and over swayed by the Renaissance stress on reason; rather he questions and shows its limitations when he says in *Holy Sonnet XIV*:

Reason your viceroy in mee, me should defend,  
But is Captiv'd and proves weake or untrue.

In his religious poetry also Donne often writes in a satirical vein. He positively asks people to seek "true religion".

### **Satire on Religious Controversies**

In *Satire III* his consciousness includes knowledge of the contemporary religious controversy, the claims of the Roman Catholics, the Protestants and the Anglicans, each sect deeming itself to be the true follower of God by being committed to a particular creed, and he satirizes each of them in a tone that suggests the worthlessness of the dogmatic protestation and submission to creed. He attacks even those who entertain an indifferent sense of contempt for every sect, because he generalises and thinks that none of them can be good:

Careless Phygious doth abhorre  
All, because all cannot be good, as one  
Knowing some women whores, dares marry none.  
He condemns the corrupt practices in the church and them is giving's; he is not making out a case for Catholicism, as some people may think on reading:  
Though truth and falsehood bee  
Near twins, yet truth a little elder is;  
nor is he commending Protestantism when he writes:  
Keepe the truth which thou hast found  
nor is it a jumble of witty exercises, it is a plea for true religion, a concern for virtue and truth that he voices in the very beginning:  
Is not our Mistress faire Religion,  
As worthy of all our soules devotion  
As vertue was to the first blinded age?  
He pins his faith upon God and is not with those who turn their interpretation of the faith into a creed and so the condemnation:  
So perish Soules, which more chuse mens un just  
Power from God claym'd, then God himself to trust.  
He does not believe in the rigid contraries of the controversialists, for he can understand the significance of the relative approach, even matters religious:  
As women do in divers countries go  
In divers habits, yet are still one kinde,

So doth, so is Religion;

“He feels that truth must be sought and that truth cannot be found through over simplified ways; that the path to truth is tortuous and he is convinced that perseverance is a necessary condition to achieve the complexity of truth.”

### **The Progress of the Soul**

It is the same liberality of outlook that embraces the satire in *The Progress of the Soul*, wherein the intention of Donne is to parade all the heretics of history from Eve to Calvin and Queen Elizabeth by tracing the progress of the soul of the apple which Eve tasted in the Garden of Eden, and his conclusion is what the moderns may very well appreciate:

"There's nothing simply good nor ill alone;  
Of every quality comparison  
The only measure is and judge.

### **Donne's Originality**

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 or satirists. With Donne this concern for value does not become an opportunity for idealism; rather his sense of realism gives him a chance to satirise the idealists. This can be specifically perceived in his love poems. He has no patience with Petrarchan 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 and he would not “purchase” his love with such “stocks” and “treasures”. On the other hand, he would not even be with the protagonists of physical love that cannot stand any test of endurance:

Dull sublunary lovers love  
Whose soule is sense cannot admit  
Absence, because it doth remove  
Those things which elemented it.  
The satire cannot be missed in what the lover imagines the heart will tell him:  
You goe to friends, whose love and means present  
Various content

To your eyes, ears, and tongue, and every part.  
If then your body go, what need you a heart?

The element of satire is implicit in the progress of thought in *The Prohibition* from the two apparently contradictory warnings in the first two stanzas to the synthesis in the final stanza:

Yet, love and hate mee too

He can satirize the prevalent flirtation and philandering, which probably he had experienced and witnessed in contemporary society. In *The Indifferent*, Venus surveys the contemporary loveaffairs and makes the following report that cannot be taken literally:

...Some two or three

Poore Heretiques in love there bee,  
Which think to establish dangerous Constance.

In *The Broken Heart* he cannot bear lovers who can bind love to the fragments of time, for he knows that love is not to be comprehended in this way. In *Love's Alchymy*, he supports composite attitude to love and yet he is not prepared to believe a person who professes to have comprehended love in its entirety, for such profession is no better than the unreality of the achievements of alchemy:

And as no chymique yet th'Elixir got,  
But glorifies his pregnant pot,  
If by the way to him befall  
Some odoriferous thing, or med'cinall,  
So, lover's dreame a rich and long delight,  
But get a winter-seeming summers night.

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 to themselves:

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
Or chide my palsie, or my gout,  
My five grayhair's, or ruined fortune flout,  
With wealth your state, your mind with Arts improve,  
Take you a course, get you a place,  
Observe his honour, or his grace,

Or the Kings reall, 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."

### III. CONCLUSION

To conclude: the element of satire in Donne's poems all pervasive, and is not confined to any particular subject; here, as 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 really are and what they appear to be; in fact, the incongruity in any sphere is what forms the basis of his satires. His individuality is seen in his realistic attitude that is expressed through wit, dramatization, and with a marked vividness that leaves no scope of obscurity. Despite some shortcomings, Donne must be ranked very high as a satirist. We must agree with K. W. Gransden's view that in any literary history of England, Donne's satires must be described as important landmark.

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Dr.Suchitra Vashisth. "The Satiric Vein in John Donne's Poetry." *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 08(08), 2020, pp. 35-40.