



# 17<sup>th</sup> Century Poets: Metaphysical Poetry

Dr. Alan Haffa

# Metaphysical poetry

- Term coined by Samuel Johnson in 18<sup>th</sup> century
- John Dryden had used it to describe John Donne:  
“He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love.”
- Baroque: spiritual, emotional, intellectually complex

# Objective Description

- Quest for true religion in theme
- Use of conceits
  - A conceit is a comparison that is striking more for its ingenuity than for the justness of the likeness
- Extended metaphors
  - The metaphor extends for multiple lines of verse and multiple points of comparison.
- Intellectual poetry
  - In the late sixteenth century and early 17<sup>th</sup> the taste was for a poetry that had more substance.

# John Donne, 1572-1631



- Well to-do Catholic family; Jesuit uncle was drawn and quartered; brother arrested for harboring a priest; 1590s, converted to Anglicanism
- Secretly married the 17 year old daughter of patron; imprisoned and dismissed
- 12 children
- 1615, ordained a minister

# A Valediction: forbidding mourning

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173387>

■ As virtuous men pass mildly away,  
And whisper to their souls to go,  
Whilst some of their sad friends do say  
the breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
‘Twere profanation of our joys  
To tell the laity our love.

# Holy Sonnets: Divine Meditations 6

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate  
men,

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well

And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,

And death shall be no more; Death thou shalt die.

# The Flea

■ Mark but this flea, and mark in this,  
How little that which thou deniest me is;  
Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;  
Thou know'st that this cannot be said  
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,  
Yet this enjoys before it woo,  
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,  
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

# George Herbert, 1593-1633

- Mother was patron to Donne. His first poems were for his mother and attempted to explain how love of God was greater than love of woman.
- Cambridge; appointed “public orator” for university; elected to Parliament in 1624; Ordained a minister in 1630 at a country parish
- Common tropes: anxiety about not being worthy of Christ; Christ as “friend”; anxiety about inability of Poet to give proper praise to God
- Common Metaphor: Christian as a plant that God needs to water and prune



# Man

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173633>

■ My God, I heard this day,  
That none doth build a stately habitation,  
But he that means to dwell therein.

What house more stately hath there been,  
Or can be, than is Man? To whose creation  
All things are in decay,

# The Pulley

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173635>

- When God at first made man,  
Having a glasse of blessings standing by;  
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can;  
Let the worlds riches, which dispersed lie,  
contract into a span.  
So strength first made a way;  
Then beautie flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure:  
When almost all was out, God made a stay,  
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure  
Rest in the bottome lay.

# Andrew Marvell, 1621-1678

- Son of a Clergyman; Cambridge; London, briefly converted to Catholicism; Taught at Cambridge;
- Tutor to Cromwell's nephew, William Dutton; joined Milton as Latin Secretary to Cromwell
- Accepted Restoration; favored religious toleration and constitutional gov.
- Served in Parliament from 1659-1678
- Complex poetic style; difficult to identify the poet's point of view



# To His Coy Mistress

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173954>

- Had we but world enough, and time,  
This coyness, lady, were no crime.  
We would sit down and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long love's day;  
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side  
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide  
Of Humber would complain. I would  
Love you ten years before the Flood;  
And you should, if you please, refuse  
Till the conversion of the Jews.

# Observations

- The 17<sup>th</sup> century poets, more so than the 16<sup>th</sup> century, come from the rising Bourgeois class; many from clerical families and many become clergyman
- Display the religious conflict of the time as several of them convert from or to Catholicism
- While some, like Herbert, write passionately Christian poetry, others write passionately secular poetry; some display the ambivalence of the battle of the secular and the spiritual (Donne, Jonson, Herrick, Marvell)
- Metaphysical Poetry—use of complex and extended metaphors—School of Donne
- Baroque: emotional; complex; spiritual