

The Search for True Love in John Donne's "The Extasie"

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ABSTRACT

"The Extasie" is one of John Donne's most well known poems that demonstrate his distinctive understanding of love. Critics have argued over the interpretations of "The Extasie". Some critics have conceived it as an expression of spiritual love and others looked at it as a satirical criticism. This paper attempts to show how "The Extasie" presents an example of great satirical poetry. The poem takes advocates of Platonic love in a mesmerizing journey when reading the first two-thirds of the poem. Ironically, the poem ends with a criticism of Platonisms who exclude the body from the notion of love.

INTRODUCTION

At the verge of his maturity and life experience, John Donne wrote "The Extasie".¹ As the title infers, the poem talks about a state of rapture, of affinity with God. The plain definition of this word would not insinuate the mystical understanding it has.² Critics have argued over the interpretations of "The Extasie" through the years. The various readings that examine "The Extasie" have contradictory views. It has been conceived as an expression of love by some critics and as a satirical criticism by others. Austin Warren notes, "'The Extasie' has been interpreted in most opposite senses, on the one hand, as a poem of highest spirituality expressive either of Platonic love (that is, love without sex) or of Christian love, to which both the soul and the body are requisite; on the other hand, as the supreme example of Donne's dramatism and pseudo-logic, as the seduction of a defenseless woman by sophistical rhetoric" (472). Hence, the provision of a conventional interpretation of "The Extasie" is challenging. Merritt Hughes stresses that "Donne's Extasie is so difficult a poem that we ought, perhaps, to welcome all critical disagreement about it and to be wary of any attempt to establish an orthodox interpretation" (1).

According to Joe Nutt, the mystical sense of the word 'extasie' has "a religious content to it" (67). In other words, some views of divinity would be anticipated. However, the poem highlights the dismissive tone that criticizes Platonic

love with which mystical interpretations and medieval allusions are associated.

The poem begins with an image of two lovers sitting on some landscape gazing at each other and holding hands—an image of great love that would never be consummated physically, as Platonic love advocates:

Where, like a pillow on a bed,
A pregnant bank swelled up, to rest
The violet's reclining head,
Sat we two, one another's best.

Our hands were firmly cemente
By a fast balm, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes upon one double string.

The choice of words such as 'pregnant', 'pillow', 'bed', and 'reclining head' may extrapolate the physical act of love. However, in these stanzas, the speaker attempts to explore the conception of love, as the Renaissance understood it, by demonstrating the non-sexual union. This is clearly displayed through the joining hands as if they were one hand and the beaming eyes that link the lovers in a magnificent amalgamation. The situation here is not obscure. Donne establishes Platonic love through the provision of such ecstatic image.

The poem goes into another realm when the speaker expresses that the robust state of love the two lovers are expe-

riencing takes them to another deeper dimension where their souls get attached:

As, 'twixt two equal armies, fate
Suspends uncertain victory,
Our souls (which to advance their state,
Were gone out) hung 'twixt her and me.

And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay,
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all the day.

The speaker compares the lovers' souls to armies. They are both equal and victory is not momentum, for which fate keeps it ambiguous. Donne here draws an outstanding, yet cynical, metaphoric depiction of the two souls talking and negotiating while the lovers have said nothing the whole day. Elizabeth Teresa Howe notes "although the reference to "Armies" suggests the traditional comparison of love-making to warfare, Donne injects a novel twist when he stresses the equality of the two opposing forces. Neither soul is able to dominate the other, hence, the necessity for the ecstasy" (32). Yet Donne establishes further the non-physical union as the culmination of love when he presents a metaphor of lovers. Warren states that "the physiological aspect of 'ecstasy' is defined by the image, 'like sepulchral statues lay'; that is, the lovers lie side by side like the recumbent effigies, common in the Middle Ages, of husband and wife (574). However, in these lines we observe the first indication of an upcoming change of tone in the poem. Intelligently, the speaker mocks the idea of having a talking abstract and a silent concrete by saying "All day" twice to emphasize this meaningless act. Then, he reveals satirically that only the lovers of such profane love can cognize the language of the soul—the negotiating language of their souls. He indicates that these two souls speak as one soul; they may take a concoction and leave that place better off than when they arrived.

In the following stanzas, Donne substantially explicates the state the two lovers are undergoing:

This ecstasy doth unperplex
(We said) and tell us what we love;
We see by this, it was not sex.
We see, we saw not, what did move:

But as all several souls contain
Mixture of things they know not what,
Love these mixed souls doth mix again,
And makes both one, each this and that.

A single violet transplant,
The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poor and scant)
Redoubles still, and multiplies;

When love, with one another so
Interanimates two souls,
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls.

We then, who are this new soul, know,
Of what we are composed and made,
For th' atomies of which we grow
Are souls, whom no change can invade.

Donne illuminates here that the state of ecstasy does not confound what they are experiencing and what triggered this rapture was not sex. They are one soul and each one embodies the other. The two souls are now one and nothing can change this perfection and aptness. These lines give a solid and relieving support to advocates of Platonic love because Donne explicitly expresses that the soul needs be planted in another soul to create one soul that overhauls the blemishes of their souls.

The fact that sex plays no roles in their love comforts readers who stand in favor of Platonic love. However, in an abrupt turn, the tone of the poem shifts drastically. Donne employs his intelligent sardonic criticism in the conceding stanzas:

But, O alas ! so long, so far,
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They are ours, though not we; we are
Th' intelligences, they the spheres.

We owe them thanks, because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their senses' force to us,
Nor are dross to us, but alloy.

On man heaven's influence works not so
But that it first imprints the air,
For soul into the soul may flow,
Though it to body first repair.

The choice of the conjunction "but" followed by the expression "alas" implies an invitation to reconsider the preceding lines. Howe highlights "Donne unexpectedly shifts his argument by presenting the case for the body's role in man's experience of love (35). Donne invites the readers to contemplate Platonic love. Simply, he introduces the idea that even if such love exists, bodies are the essential proponents of this love. No matter how love is elevated, bodies control everything—a candid attack on the notion of spiritual love. Michael Mccanles points out that Donne presents, "...an assertion of interdependence between body and soul which is just the reverse of the Platonic view" (74). Donne compares the relationship between the body and the soul to that of the intelligences (angels) and the sphere (a revolving body in the sky). The souls are the spheres; they flow out of the bodies but the bodies control them. Although Donne uses the medieval cosmologic understanding of gravity (intelligences), he emphasizes the importance of the flesh in love. He establishes very exquisitely that importance when he considers bodies as "alloys" that boost love—they are not the dross that deteriorates it. Consequently, bodies have to interact.

Donne criticizes Platonic love that believes that spiritual love is beyond the confines of the physicals. René Graziani believe that "although Donne's dialogue gives the impression that the souls argue their bodies into union. Donne is

surely suggesting the absurdity of a too facile reconciliation of the two sides of the lovers' experience, and imposing an irony on the Neoplatonic idealism" (123). Donne reveals his notion of love as the union of both body and soul after he has presented the Neoplatonic conception of human love, which may surprise readers this shift in dialogue.

Later in the poem, Donne broadens this thought of spiritual love based on medieval beliefs:

So must pure lovers' souls descend
To affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies.

To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love reveal'd may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.

Souls without the physical act of love are imprisoned in a prison. Regardless of the state of rapture—the state of descending—any two lovers experience, the inability to adopt bodies in this process would lead to imprisoning the souls. The image here is intense. Howe states, "In one of his more remarkable images, Donne reverses the traditional Platonic notion of the body as prison of the soul. Posing a contrary argument, he compares the soul in ecstasy to a prince forcibly removed from his kingdom and, thus, effectively prevented from exercising his proper role as ruler (37). These lines offer a clear dismissive tone on the nature of platonic love. Body is the book of love where the story of love is emblazoned. Therefore, the book must be read.

In the last stanza, Donne finishes up drawing the whole picture:

And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change when we're to bodies gone.

Here, Donne presents an image of a bystander who watches these two lovers making love. The speaker states that the bystander would not understand the perfect union the two lovers have. By ending with these lines, Donne rejects the concept of Platonic love. Charles Mitchell stresses that "Donne's achievement lies in his attempt to demonstrate not merely figuratively, but quite literally, that the union of man and woman in love creates the fusion of male and female elements—soul and body—within man" (93). Donne shows that spiritual love is imperceptible through the eyes of other people regardless of its powerful elevation. Hence, what is acknowledged and perceived is the physical rather than the metaphysical.

In closing, "The Extasie" takes advocates of Platonic love in a mesmerizing journey when reading the first two-thirds of the poem. Ironically, Donne shows the fallacy of the Platonic fallacy. It would be an expression of spiritual love if the poem ended with these lines:

We then, who are this new soul, know,
Of what we are composed and made,
For th' atomies of which we grow
Are souls, whom no change can invade.

But Donne masterfully manipulates readers' feelings and staggers them in an abrupt turn in order to criticize spiritual love and emphasize the needs of bodies. Graziani notes "considering that the poem is about ecstasy it may be that this makes some readers feel cheated (130). This turn made the French critic Pierre Logouis argue that *The Extasie* is a display of "skillful seduction" (Donne & Redpath 323). The speaker's lover is deceived into the greatness of spiritual love for the sake of giving up the body.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "The Extasie" was printed in 1633. In some editions, "The Extasie" is printed as one long verse, but many other editors of Donne's poetry have chosen to print it into quatrains constituting 19 stanzas—of which the rhyme scheme sets as ABAB. See Guibbory 41.
- 2 The name *extasie* is derived from the two Greek words: *ek* which means (outside) and *stasis* which means (stand).

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