

# Two Examples of Poetic Parallelism between John Donne and Lope de Vega

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The identification and comparison between English metaphysical poetry and Spanish *poesía conceptista* was suggested for the first time by James Smith, and then studied by Frank J. Warnke and Lowry Nelson. Later bibliography has focused almost exclusively on the analysis of Francisco de Quevedo's affinity with metaphysical poetry, and John Donne in particular. Critics and scholars have studied Quevedo's use of the conceit, and the metaphysical themes of some of his poems, and quite recently, the comparative study of Quevedo's and Donne's poems has been undertaken.

As a contrast, only a few authors have dealt with John Donne in relationship with Lope de Vega, or vice-versa, even though some of Lope de Vega's poems also belong to the *conceptista* vein. Frank Warnke included two sonnets by Lope de Vega in his collection of European metaphysical poems, and he pointed to the stylistic similarities between the devotional poems of Quevedo and Lope and those of Donne's (52, 59-60). Octavio Paz mentioned the existence of similarities between the passion, both amorous and religious, of Lope de Vega and Donne. Daniel L. Heiple discovered that Lope had used the term "metaphysical" in much the same way as John Dryden and Dr. Johnson did later. Not long ago, Laurie Ann Kaplis, wrote, as her doctoral thesis, an extensive, yet not definitive, comparative study of Donne and Lope. She provided a general study of the autobiographical and sincere character of their poems, and how the adoption of *personae* diluted it somewhat. Kaplis indicated the common characteristics of *conceptismo* and metaphysical poetry, and she also pointed out the basic similarities and differences between Donne's poems and those of Lope de Vega's as regards to the themes of profane and religious love, although she did not really focus on the very analysis of pairs of poems. This is not surprising for after all, none of her predecessors actually compared texts to prove this parallelism. Curiously enough, Octavio Paz even deemed this unnecessary since "este género de comparaciones, fundadas en el gusto tanto o más que en la razón, no necesitan pruebas ni demostraciones" (7).

I definitely disagree with this statement for, indeed, we must find arguments and proofs to support such comparisons and show that, in fact, they respond to reason rather than taste.

In my opinion, the correspondences and similarities between John Donne and Lope de Vega are of course limited, given their different evolution and the greater variety and amount of Lope de Vega's production. However, within the compass of these limits, it is possible to find remarkable similarities between some of their compositions.

If Richard E. Hughes's division of Donne's life into three periods is to be followed,<sup>1</sup> the poet's works can also be roughly divided into three groups accordingly: one, satires and cynically antipetrarchan love poems; two, sincere, deeply-felt neoplatonic amatory poems, and philosophical complimentary verses to

influential female friends; and three, his devotional poems.

In a similar way, if Dámaso Alonso's four-period division of Lope de Vega's poems is accepted but partly amended by adding one more group, his works fall into five classes: one, written in the Petrarchan tradition; two, devotional; three, formally obscure or *gongorinos*;<sup>2</sup> four, philosophical or difficult as to content or *conceptistas*;<sup>3</sup> and five, antipetrarchan and full of literary self-mockery.

Bearing in mind these classifications, it is quite evident that the possible parallelisms between Donne and Lope de Vega must be restricted to just three groups of poems, namely: those that are a subversion of Petrarchan conventions, those that express neoplatonic love, and those that give vent to a sinner's religious crisis.

It is the aim of this paper to contribute a study of two pairs of poems, which, in my opinion, perfectly illustrate two of the aforementioned resemblances: the authors' antipetrarchism and their addresses to God seeking help to achieve repentance and forgiveness. The first couple of poems is that of Donne's "The Flea", from *Songs and Sonnets*,<sup>4</sup> and Lope de Vega's "La pulga, falsamente atribuida a Lope", from his volume *Rimas humanas y divinas del licenciado Tomé de Burguillos*, published under a pseudonym in 1634 and containing poems written throughout his career. The second pair is formed by the practically contemporary number five in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, a sequence written *circa* 1609-1614, and sonnet VI from Lope de Vega's *Rimas sacras*, a volume published in 1614.

The poems dealing with the naughty, little arachnid may belong to a fairly common Renaissance *topos* that developed in France, Italy and Spain and which John Donne and Lope de Vega may have been acquainted with as R. O. Jones has pointed out in a very enlightening essay. However, whether Donne and Lope de Vega knew the French and Italian poems on fleas that impudently bite beautiful ladies in most inappropriate points of their anatomical geography is not especially relevant for the purpose of this essay. The parallelism between their poems is quite clear as regards subject matter even if we do not take into account those precedents. If both authors read some of those poems, they worked within the limits of a common background. If they struck on a happy coincidence quite by chance, then, this only underlines the idea of the existence of resemblances between some of the poets' works.

It is evident that the approach to the same incident is different in each poem, but, in any case, the common elements of these two poems are more important than their differences. In both of them a flea bites a lady who, in retaliation, suddenly punishes the poor flea's effrontery with death. In both poems, the speaker piquantly relates the biting to his sexual desire. Apart from the fact that, according to Jones (166-67, 172), one of the traditions that shaped the lady-bitten-by-flea *topos* may have its ultimate origin in Petrarch's sonnet CXLI,<sup>5</sup> these two compositions are parodies of Petrarchan conventions. Far from being poems praising a real or fictitious lover, they focus on a more banal subject with the same erotic end and using a very similar technique.

Donne's "The Flea", as opposed to Lope de Vega's "La pulga...", is a longer poem free from the sonnet's formal limitations, and, therefore, an apter vehicle for experimentation, originality, and full-blown ingenuity. In this poem, the flea is the foundation upon which the speaker builds the edifice of a rhetorical and cynical lesson in love with which he tries to appease an anonymous lady's misgivings and persuade her to lay with him and put an end to her maidenhood. The flea remains the centre of attention of the speaker (Donne or his persona), the lady, and the reader. Contrary to the Petrarchan habit of praising the beauties of the loved lady, by comparing teeth to pearls, lips to rubies, hair to gold, and so on and so forth, or extolling her virtues by relating them to religious ideas in witty conceits, Donne, in a bold,

hyperbolic inversion of values and imagery, diminishes the importance of the lady and that of the loss of her virginity, and stresses the significance of the flea. He equates the loss of maidenhood to the flea's bite and therefore establishes an implicit and jocular, if inappropriate, association between the two losses of blood. On the other hand, he transforms the flea into "something rich and strange", a living emblem of their prospective intimate union, by means of several conceits. As the flea has "sucked" both the speaker and the lady, thus mixing their bloods, it turns into a nuptial bed and a temple where their marriage takes place *de facto*. The flea's shining, black, keratinous exoskeleton becomes a precious cloister with "walls of jet". The flea undergoes the same poetical transformation as Laura's features do in Petrarch's poems. This has a double, if paradoxical effect. The importance of the flea is greater than that of the lady, as I have already said, but, at the same time, the union of such dissimilar terms to create those conceits produces a debasement of the religious referents that almost results in sheer irreverence, if not blasphemy.

Then, the speaker beseeches the lady not to kill this symbol of their union alleging the act would be a triple sin: murder, because of the speaker's blood in it; suicide, because of their own blood in it, and sacrilege for the flea is now sacred as it has transformed into a temple.

However, the lady kills the arachnid as a presumably enraged rejection of his twisted arguments. Far from being taken aback, the speaker remains aloof and he chides the lady for her behaviour. He has the last word. Prompted by the lady's observation that she does not find him or herself any weaker after having been bitten by the flea, the speaker, this cynical teacher, concludes his "didactic" monologue with an irrefutable point, an observation that is still dependent on the image of the loss of blood and intended to dispel her fears definitively: she will not find herself any weaker either after making love for the first time, and so much fuss about honour and chastity will prove to be futile nonsense.

Lope de Vega's poem is closer to the Petrarchan model both in form and imagery, but the very occasion that the sonnet celebrates and its festive mood are a significant baroque departure from the usual Renaissance seriousness of the form. This contrast constitutes Lope de Vega's subversion and parody of the Italian conventions.

Leonor is one of the fictitious lovers of Tomé de Burguillos, Lope de Vega's persona at the end of his life and career. Leonor is beautiful, her skin is white and rosy, and her fingers look like ivory as the commonplace metaphors indicate. Her beauty is so special that it even makes the flea attractive, contrary to what it might be expected. As in Donne's poem, the flea undergoes a transformation by means of metaphors. The sharp contrast of the flea's dark body with Leonor's white skin transmogrifies it into a precious stone, a different but inoffensive arachnid, even a quite seductive mole on Leonor's breast.

However, Leonor, like the anonymous lady in Donne's poem, crushes the flea with a sudden, mortal finger twist, thus avenging both her bitten breasts in a single action.

The ejaculation, and I mean the flea's words, of course, is a very skilful, humorous, rhetorical device, that consists in a personification of the flea and a dramatization of its death. These words, put in the flea's mouth, so to speak, allow Tomé de Burguillos, Lope de Vega's persona, to retort with an ingenious, exaggerated request full of innuendo aimed at bringing his desire home to Leonor, the presupposed listener of this theatrical sonnet. This is not an altogether dissimilar artifice from the argumentation Donne used in "The Flea", both of them belong to the resources of rhetoric, they seek the same end, and they certainly are as witty.

Inspiration, antipetrarchism, rhetoric, wit, finality, these are the common elements between Donne's

“The Flea” and Lope de Vega’s “La pulga...”.

In the same way that the flea poems have a most likely common background, Donne’s religious sonnets and those of Lope de Vega’s also share a common source. Laurie Ann Kaplis (365) points out<sup>6</sup> quite convincingly that both John Donne and Lope de Vega based their devotional verses on the method of meditation created by Ignatius of Loyola in his *Ejercicios espirituales* (1521-1541).<sup>7</sup> As Kaplis explains (374-77), these exercises, which were quite popular in England of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, were intended to provoke repentance and contrition in a three-step process: first, meditation had to be initiated with a vivid visualization of a religious scene, the *compositio loci*, then followed an analysis of sins by using feelings, affections and senses, and finally, a direct address to God expressing feelings, misgivings, asking for help to avoid the way to perdition. For Kaplis, John Donne and Lope de Vega follow the Ignatian meditation method and their religious poetry can be divided into three phases corresponding to the three stages of this kind of meditation. Thus, she states (385) that Lope de Vega’s *Romancero* and Donne’s *La Corona* belong to the first, visualisation stage, *Soliloquios amorosos de un alma a Dios* and the *Hymns* correspond to the second one, that of self-analysis, and *Rimas sacras* and *Holy Sonnets* parallel the last stage, that of direct communication and prayer to God.

Therefore, both Lope de Vega’s and John Donne’s sonnets not only share the same background, but also express similar feelings and ideas. In them, their authors admit their sinful natures, their unworthiness of salvation, they express their powerful sense of guilt and their equally ardent desire for help so that they can repent from their sins, be forgiven, and obtain divine grace. They even put these ideas in very passionate, sincere, similar words, although as a rule John Donne’s mood tends to be more pessimistic than Lope de Vega’s.

However, there is an important difference related to the fact that the authors belong to different persuasions: Anglican and Roman Catholic respectively. Donne addresses God only, but Lope also demands help and support from the Virgin Mary and the Saints. As a consequence, and as Kaplis points out, only those poems that the authors address to God can be fully analogous.

That is precisely the case with both sonnet five from the *Holy Sonets* and sonnet VI from *Rimas sacras*.<sup>8</sup> Both sonnets are a supplication to God. The two of them express their authors’ fear of death, not only physical, but also spiritual, and they constitute anxious demands of divine help to attain repentance, expiation for their sins, unbending faith and religious steadfastness.

Curiously enough, not only do these poems share the same feelings, they also render them in practically identical terms, for Donne and Lope de Vega use contemporary scientific notions to convey their longings. They base their imagery on closely related ideas within the still medieval dominant worldview, namely: the four elements as constituents of the universe, their correspondences in the four humours of Hippocratical medicine, and the scholastic cosmology based on the Ptolemaic geocentric system.<sup>9</sup>

Donne sees himself as a microcosm, a little world, composed of, on the one hand, the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire that make up his body, and on the other, the “angelic sprite” which is his soul. Because of his sins, he risks death on a double plane of existence, he is not only in danger of physical death, but also metaphysical death: both his body and soul are condemned.

Continuing with the scientific imagery, Donne resorts to the discoveries of his age and the idea of the universe structured in Earth-centred concentric spheres to express, quite grandiosely, his desire for and need of help to repent from his past sins by shedding abundant, sincere tears.

Donne desperately wants to weep profusely, until his microcosm of self is flooded. This image harks

back to the biblical deluge and, by doing so, it also offers an alternative to destruction and death. God promised, as recorded in Genesis, IX. 11, that the Earth would not be flooded again. Thus, in a perfect correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, Donne's tears may be not his end, but the means to cleanse all trace of sin from his soul.

However, in a cry of despair and in contraposition to the water of his tears of remorse and the somewhat cryptic reference to the deluge, Donne introduces fire as the cause of the end of both the microcosm and the macrocosm. He implicitly associates fire with the flames of Hell, where his soul will go because of his sins, and apocalyptic fire, as prophesied in St. John's Book of Revelation. Indeed, Donne says a sinful fire has consumed him so far, ruining him physically and spiritually, so it can be perfectly identified as the means of his own destruction. Donne is persuaded he must burn and he is resigned to his fate, but, quite adroitly, he asks God for a totally different kind of fire. He demands the fire of zeal, that is to say, religious enthusiasm, strong faith, and self-restraint all rolled into one, which far from destructive, is restorative, as the paradox in the last line indicates.

Thus, along his train of thought, Donne reduces the four elements introduced at the beginning of the poem to just two: water, which stands for repentance, and fire, that represents the Day of Doom, the flames of Hell, sin and finally grace.

In Lope de Vega's sonnet we find the same preoccupation in very similar images. Like Donne, Lope de Vega finds himself close to dying both a physical and a spiritual death. The first indications he has of his impending death are dryness and cold. These symptoms can be interpreted in the light of the theory of the four humours as typical of the melancholic "complexion", for black bile or melancholy was a cold and dry humour, often associated to the stage previous to death.<sup>10</sup> However, they also mean, together with Lope's hard frozen heart, his irresponsiveness to God and, presumably, his sins.

Lope needs to reform as badly as Donne and his change is expressed as a variation in the predominant humour in his body. He needs to turn his complexion from melancholic to sanguine, that is from cold and dry, to warm and moist. The only way in which Lope de Vega can aspire to both keeping his earthly and spiritual life is through showing real repentance, symbolised metonymically by tears as in Donne's sonnet. His warm feelings for God and his desire to cry a river of tears, analogous to Donne's will to weep seas, are the only way in which he will melt the ice of sin and find salvation and true life. Lope will send his tears to God, the author of the supreme sphere, a clear reference to the contemporary ideas about the structure of the universe. This river of tears will reach God's pity and grace, which is as vast as the sea, the final destination where all sinners' tears go.

In the same way as Donne created an opposition between water and fire, Lope contrasts ice, water and fire. However, Lope does not ask for burning zeal, for he is already experiencing it. He seems to be in a better situation than Donne, but, in fact, this does not make a difference with Donne's plight because Lope, just like the English poet, needs God's grace to avoid sin. In order to melt the ice of sin and indifference completely, he needs God's intervention. Lope expresses this with a complex conceit that might have been created by Donne himself. Besides, this conceit shares with Donne's paradox at the end of sonnet number five an identical function of closing the poem by posing an intellectual problem to the reader. In the last two lines of his sonnet, Lope asks God for the beams of his holy fire and the crystals of his sacred heaven. It is quite easy to ascertain that God's holy fire stands for spiritual illumination and divine grace, however it is quite hard to realise what the meaning of the crystals is. I was puzzled myself for some time trying to decipher the meaning, but, finally, I succeeded in elaborating an interpretation

after poring over the sonnet. In fact, the crystals hark back to line eight where Lope de Vega refers to God as “the author of the supreme sphere”. Here he introduces the notion of the universe being a set of concentric spheres. To understand the relationship between the spheres and the crystals, it must be taken into account that, according to some theoreticians, these spheres were made of crystal and a planet was “inlaid” in them, while according to others, all the spheres, including the *Primum Mobile*, the outer limit of the created universe, were encompassed by a crystalline sphere beyond which the Empyrean heaven and God Himself could be found. In any case, God’s light and grace have to go through a crystal to reach sinners here on Earth. Therefore, the meaning of this image is quite evident now. Lope employs a true metaphysical conceit in which a religious concept and a common optics experiment are linked up. In fact, Lope is asking God for light beams and lenses to help him melt the ice that symbolises his sins and unheeding attitude to God.

This conceit has no equivalent in Donne’s sonnet number five, but it is very similar in its inspiration to that in the final couplet of sonnet number one in which the effect of grace on Donne’s hard heart -as hard as Lope’s- is put in terms of magnetism: “Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his [the Devil’s] art / And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.”

Suffering, repentance, tears and a demand for help to overcome sin, as well as the expression of these ideas by means of images taken from the incipient scientific experiments of the time are the similitudes between these religious sonnets.

Here ends my limited contribution to the analysis of the parallelisms between the poetic arts of John Donne and Lope de Vega, I only hope that it has provided you with new ideas and encouraged you to find similarities that, I am sure, are waiting to be found and discussed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard E. Hughes, *The Progress of the Soul: the Interior Career of John Donne* (New York: William Morrow, 1968) 13-17, 56-59, 226-229 (qtd. in Kaplis, 56, 95n).

<sup>2</sup> «Gongorian», after Luis de Góngora y Argote, would be the best translation of the Spanish term into English.

<sup>3</sup> «Conceptist» would be a fit Englishing of the term, though «metaphysical style» is also close (see Kaplis, 270).

<sup>4</sup> Donne’s poems were published posthumously in 1633; it is very difficult, if not impossible, to establish their chronology.

<sup>5</sup> The number of the sonnet is wrongly indicated as XCLI for CXLI on page 166.

<sup>6</sup> Warnke (8n, 55, 56, 56n, 59) mentions that Louis L. Martz holds this view in *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven, 1954), however, Warnke sees a parallelism between both genres rather than a cause-effect relationship. Although he does not reject the influence of meditation on Donne, Herbert or La Ceppède, he states that many of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry are not a consequence of the influence of religious meditation, but a result of the spirit of the time. For the opinion that Ignatian meditation did influence metaphysical poetry see also “Spanish and English Religious Poetry of the Seventeenth Century” in Edward M. Wilson, *Spanish and English Literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Studies in Discretion, Illusion and Mutability*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 237-249.

<sup>7</sup> See Jorge Checa, ed. *Barroco esencial* (Madrid: Taurus, 1992) 154-230.

<sup>8</sup> Kaplis (396-98) compares Donne’s sonnet number five with Lope de Vega’s sonnet number two from his *Rimas*

*sacras*, with which it also shows some resemblances.

<sup>9</sup> The following lines can give an idea as to the close relationship between the idea of the four elements and the theory of humours:

Four humours reign within our bodies wholly,  
 And these compared to four elements:  
 The *Sanguine*, *Choler*, *Pblegm*, and *Melancholy*:  
 The latter two are heavy, dull of sense;  
 The other two are more jovial, quick, and jolly,  
 And may be likened thus without offence.  
 Like air both warm and moist is *Sanguine* clear;  
 Like fire doth *Choler* hot and dry appear,  
 Like water cold and moist is *Pblegmatic*,  
 The *Melancholy* cold, dry[,] earth is like.

From an excerpt of *The Englishman Doctor, or The Schoole of Salerne*, 1608, translated from a medieval Latin text by Sir John Harington, in G. Blakemore Evans, ed. *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama* (London: A. & C. Black, 1987) 327, ll. 1-10.

<sup>10</sup> See previous end note.

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## APPENDIX

This is my own Englishing of Lope de Vega’s two sonnets discussed in this paper.

*‘The Flea, falsely attributed to Lope de Vega.’*

A daring, living atom suckèd  
 Fair Leonór’s white breasts,  
 A garnet amidst pearls, a mite in a rose,  
 A brief mole with an invisible tooth.

She, two points of shining ivory,  
 with sudden disquiet, whining, bathed,  
 and with her twisting its boisterous life,  
 in a single torment, it feels a double revenge.

When the flea expired, it quoth: “Alas me, wretch,  
 for such a petty wrong, so sharp the pain!”  
 ‘Oh, flea!” quoth I, “happy thou wert,

‘Hold thy ghost, and tell Leonór  
 to let me suck where thou wert  
 and I’ll exchange my life for thy death.’

## VI

If stern and fearsome death’s  
 beginnings are dryness and coldness,  
 my hard heart, this ice of mine,  
 signs are of which I could be afraid.

Yet if life expects to keep itself  
in warmth and moisture, let my eyes form  
a river, which to thy merciful sea I send,  
divine author of the supreme sphere.

Warmth will my love give; water, my tears,  
let dryness go hence, let ice forsake me  
which from life diverted me so much.

And thou, who know'st now my burning zeal,  
give me the beams from thine holy fire,  
and the crystals from thy sacred heav'n.