

# From a Preeminent Metaphysical Poet to a Half-orphan Poet: Misrepresentation of John Donne as a Full-blown Metaphysical Poet

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The purpose of this article is to depart from the conventional belief that John Donne, a vibrant 17th-century writer, is a full-blown metaphysical poet as widely claimed while also acknowledging the poetic ingenuity of John Donne. While Donne's poetry is rich in matter and manner, and his poems are caked in wit, intellectual superiority, and apt exploration of telling themes, dressing him fully in borrowed robes seems a stretch. Some of Donne's poems, without a shred of doubt, contain flavors of metaphysical poetry, but the term "metaphysical" seems to be unsuitable for poems such as "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning".

*Keywords:* metaphysical, metaphysics, misrepresentation, exaggeration, half-orphan, full-blown, half-baked, ingenuity

The locus or core contention of this terse article is the urge to depart from the orthodox belief that John Donne—an iconic 17th-century English poet, scholar, soldier, lawyer, and clergy—is a full-blown metaphysical poet, as many claimed, while appreciating his sterling poetic acumen. That is, the assertion that Donne is a half-baked metaphysical poet does not ipso facto crush the lushness of manner and matter in his poetry. His wit, intellectual superiority, and apt exploration of telling themes are evident in the approximately two hundred poems he wrote in his career. Nevertheless, dressing him fully in borrowed robes seems a stretch. As the title of this article intimates, not all of Donne's poems fit the features of metaphysical poetry. While some of Donne's poems such as, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" contains elements that were used to classify certain seventeenth century writers as metaphysical poets, the term "metaphysical" seems to be unsuitable for this poem. The term "metaphysical" comes from the word "metaphysics", a branch of philosophy that deals with first principles and includes ontology and cosmology and is intimately connected with epistemology. Metaphysical has its roots in ancient Greece where it was used to describe the collected works of Aristotle.

William Drummond was one of the first to use the term in a letter written to Arthur John in 1630. John Dryden, in his *Discourse of the Origin and progress of Satire* (1662), claims that Donne "affects the metaphysics not only in his satire, but in his amorous verses where nature only should reign, and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with niece speculations of Philosophy" (Cuddon, 1976, p. 392). 18th-century Samuel Johnson then established the term as a label in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) to describe writers of the previous century. Therefore, the term "metaphysical" was first applied to a group of seventeenth century poets, including John Donne (1572-1631), Thomas Carew (1595-1640), George Herbert (1593-1633), Richard Crashaw (1612-1649),

Henry Vaughan (1622-1695), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), and Thomas Traherne (1637-1674). Their poems are rooted in the use of conceit, wit, powerful and emotional argument, analytical approach to subject matter, intellectual tone, colloquial language, rough and irregular rhythmic patterns, flexibility of meter, awareness of morality, and treatment of themes that are complex, sacred, and profane. But not all the poems of Donne fully align with metaphysics.

“A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”, which deals with the temporal separation of two lovers presents Donne as half-orphan child of the metaphysical movement. In this poem, the speaker, who is a male, advises his female counterpart to take separation calmly, without weeping and without sighing like the death of virtuous men. He tells her that inferior lovers, “dull sublunary lovers” (Line 13) cannot endure absence because it removes all the elements that made their love. He compares the separation of inferior lovers to an earthquake, contrary to the harmlessness of trepidation of the sphere, the separation of refined lovers whose souls are unified, pure, and tend to grow like gold that is beaten. He goes further to compare his soul and that of his partner to two feet of twin compasses that one expands, makes a circle and the other remains at the center to support it. This poem has some elements of metaphysical poetry, but applying the word “metaphysical” seems misleading or an exaggeration.

In this poem, Donne makes use of conceits, “the use of paradox images from arcane sources not usually drawn upon, by poets, and an original and usually complex comparison between two dissimilar things” (Murfin, 1997, p. 212). The speaker compares their two souls to gold:

Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat (Lines 21-24).

The word “gold” in this quotation refers to Alchemy, one of the main controversies of the seventeenth century scientists, who believed that they could make anything out of gold, including the elixir of life. This can be considered as mere vocabulary that contains the beliefs of an age and not an attempt to explain or prove the principles of science.

The speaker further compares their two souls to twin compasses:

If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two,  
Thy soul the fixed foot makes no show  
To move, but doth if th’other do (Lines 25-28).

This comparison creates a perfect imagery where the expansion of the compass, like the expansion of “gold” to airy thinness beaten correspond to the growth of the unified, purified soul. Through the foregoing metaphors, Donne uses high wit, and an intellectual and analytical approach typical of the writers of this era, to preach faithfulness. The center and the circle represent seventeenth century beliefs about Cosmology, the position and shape of the earth, the moon, the sun, and the stars. They believed that the earth was spherical and situated at the center of the universe. They also believed that the planets moved in uniform circular motion (Kuhn, 1957). They also saw the sky as a fixed place. Thus, the word “sublunary” also reflects their belief about the position of the moon. In spite of these references, the poem cannot be considered as Metaphysics because, the poet does not seek to explain any principle, theory or perform an experiment. The speaker equally refers to “the souls of virtuous men” (Line 2). One may consider this as a reference to Ontology, a branch of Metaphysics that studies the nature

of existence or being. This stands for thoughts of life after death, but the reference alone does not make the poem a metaphysical work. It may only show proof of Donne's faith in God.

Donne also combines passion and thought, expressed in colloquial language in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning". He uses irregular meter and rhythmic patterns. The rhythmic patterns change from one stanza to another, corresponding to the turns that the speaker's argument takes. The rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd ced ed ef cf c gegebhbheieiegeg*. The first two stanzas are smooth when he is talking about the passing away of virtuous men and the separation of true lovers as melting, a simple change of form. Donne's love for paradoxes is also seen in the idea of two souls in one but two. It is interesting that some of the characteristics of Metaphysical poetry, as the ones just listed, have nothing in common with Metaphysics. They characterize the poetry of an era, but one wonders why the slang "Metaphysical" has lasted so long.

Metaphysical poetry should be poetry that explains metaphysics or that which, like Divine Comedy, has been "inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the drama of existence" (Grierson, 1962, p. 3). This does not seem to be the case with "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning". It is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker bids his lover farewell and advises her to be faithful while he is away. It can be considered as a mere love poem that reflects the poet's faith. This is evident in the historical fact that Donne wrote this poem for his wife, Ann Donne, before going abroad with Sir Robert Drury in 1611. His sick and pregnant wife had protested being left behind for a tour of Europe (Bald, 1970, pp. 237-263).

Helen Garner believes that certain poems of Donne such as "The Canonization", "The Good Morrow", "The Anniversary" and "The Ecstasy" "have the right to the title metaphysical in its true sense since they raise, even though they do not discuss it explicitly, the great metaphysical question of the relationship between the spirit and the senses" (Garner, 1962, p. 59). Again, these poems and "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", are love poems in which the beliefs of an age, and those of the author are reflected. No metaphysical ideas may be derived from these poems without reading the history of the seventeenth century. Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" does not explain how the spiritual union is achieved.

T. S. Eliot also doubts how far the so-called metaphysical poets formed a school or a movement, and how far the movement is a digression from the main current. He states how difficult it is to define metaphysical poetry and to know which poets practice it and in which of their poems. These poets do not also use common conceits. Eliot observes that Donne, Crashaw, Vaughan, Marvell, King, Cowley, Herbert, and Lord Hertbert, "have been enough praised in terms that are implicit limitations because they are 'metaphysical' [...] though at their best, they have not these attributes more than other serious poets" (Eliot, 1962, p. 30). Like other writers, these poets are in the main current of English Literature. They were the normal development of the precedent age, and their influence also exists in the writers that follow them. Eliot is right to consider the term 'metaphysical' as prejudice because it shrinks the interpretation of a work of arts. Highlighting the primitive beliefs of the seventeenth century may shade the relevance of the work.

Murfin Ross seems to support Eliot's view that seventeenth century poets did not have more metaphysical attributes than other serious poets, when he holds that the term "metaphysical" can be applied today to any poetry that deals with philosophical or spiritual matters. This may explain why Emily Dickinson is called a metaphysical poet of the nineteenth century. Sara Elmsley holds that Dickinson is a metaphysical poet because she uses conceit and a meditative style. She claims that metaphysics "wasn't and isn't a style; it is a subject" (Elmsley, 2003, p.

251) and considers Donne's compass metaphor as an engagement in Ontology. It may not be so given that Donne's concern was his relationship with his wife and Ontology although it is implied in his faith.

In sum and for the reason foregoing, one can safely and firmly acknowledge the poetic potency of John Donne but also infer that Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" contains elements that reflect the characteristics of metaphysical poetry, but the term "metaphysical" is inappropriate. It seems an exaggeration. The poem in question contains references that can be interpreted using the metaphysical ideology of the seventeenth century, but it may not be called metaphysics because it explains no theory, principle, and carries out no experiment. Like most works of art, Donne's diction reflects the ideas of his society and his personal beliefs.

### Notes

Alan Rudrum, Joseph Black and Holly Faith Nelson (Eds), *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Verse & Prose*. Vol. 1. Ontario: Broadview P, 2000. All citations from "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" shall be drawn from this edition.

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