

A Pattern for Love — The Structure of Donne's "The Canonization"

A. P. RIEMER

The witty brilliance of "The Canonization" has ensured it a place among the most widely admired of Donne's *Songs and Sonets*. It seems to illustrate supremely well the modern belief that the best poetry of the Renaissance engages "in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling".¹ But, as Rosemond Tuve warned many years ago, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would not have found quite so admirable poetry which describes "single moments of consciousness, single mental experiences seized and carefully represented for their own interestingness, inducing extremely delicate and precise recording of sensuous impressions involved in the experience".² Such criteria, we are now beginning to realize, would have aroused suspicions of intellectual incoherence in Donne's lifetime.

Yet "The Canonization" lacks objective, externally determined truth-content; its sole unifying factor seems to be its speaker's flamboyant and spirited defence of love. The poem gives the appearance of a sustained argument, but, on closer examination, this proves to be a tissue of unsubstantiated and insubstantial assertions, false trails, deductions drawn from a play on words, abuse instead of demonstration — in short, a species of *suggestio falsi* and *suppressio veri* against which the Renaissance, of all cultures, claimed most to be on guard.

There is no absolute requirement, of course, for a poem to demonstrate the rigidity of syllogistic proof, but many of Donne's poems ("The Extasie", for instance) reveal tightly-knit argumentative structures, once their fantastical premisses are allowed as valid. In "The Extasie", the progression from the lovers recumbent on the bank of violets in the opening lines to the assertion of the propriety of carnal love at the end, *via* the elaborate Platonic doctrine of the middle section, is logical and sequential, even if we feel that logic and argument are put into the service of a jesting recommendation of promiscuity. "The Canonization" pre-

1 T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", in *Selected Essays*, London 1951, p. 289.

2 R. Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, Chicago 1961, (Phoenix Edition), p. 14.

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sents a different case: here, the structures of argument dissolve; all that remains is the stance or the pretence of a logical method.

The Canonization

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,
 Or chide my palsie, or my gout,
 My five gray haire, or ruin'd fortune flout,
 With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve,
 Take you a course, get you a place, 5
 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.

Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love? 10
 What merchants ships have my sighs drown'd?
 Who saies my teares have overflow'd his ground?
 When did my colds a forward spring remove?
 When did the heats which my veines fill
 Adde one more to the plaguie Bill? 15
 Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still
 Litigious men, which quarrels move,
 Though she and I do love.

Call us what you will, wee are made such by love;
 Call her one, mee another flye, 20
 We're Tapers too, and at our owne cost die,
 And wee in us finde the'Eagle and the Dove.
 The Phoenix ridle hath more wit
 By us, we two being one, are it.
 So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit, 25
 Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
 Mysterious by this love.

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,
 And if unfit for tombes and hearse
 Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse; 30
 And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,
 We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
 As well a well wrought urne becomes
 The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes,
 And by these hymnes, all shall approve 35
 Us *Canoniz'd* for Love:

And thus invoke us; You whom reverend love
 Made one anothers hermitage;
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
 Who did the whole worlds soule contract, and drove 40
 Into the glasses of your eyes
 So made such mirrors, and such spies,
 That they did all to you epitomize,
 Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg from above
 A patterne of your love! 45

The first stanza, with its arresting admonition to the anonymous critic of the speaker's love, draws on that group of rhetorical figures which deal with the abuse of an opponent by belittling his arguments with ridiculous comparisons. This stanza could have been classified by the rhetoricians of the time under the heading of *Diasyrmos* (*Elevatio*, *Irriso*, *Vexatio*) against which Peacham in particular warned as being unseemly in grave disputations.³ Palsy and gout, despite the speaker's protestations, are hardly negligible complaints; a ruined fortune and the onset of age, too, might be regarded as calamities by people other than the person addressed, whose attitudes are made to appear so grudging and ungenerous, and whose judgement is made to seem, by implication, so unfair. The advice in the second part of the stanza that this person should engage in a variety of mundane pursuits but leave the lover and his mistress in peace might, moreover, be considered an instance of pleonasm — the employment of an overabundance of words to express a simple proposition.

There are, consequently, several worrying things about the argument at the beginning of the poem. The second stanza elaborates the exclusion of all worldly concerns and pursuits from the lovers' existence. Having told his opponent, in violently forth-right terms, to mind his own business, the speaker stresses the isolation of his love from the rest of the world by claiming that it does not impinge at all on the world's problems and preoccupations. Once more, the procedure adopted arouses several suspicions.

As most commentators have noted, the catalogue of disasters in this stanza is a witty employment of clichés used by the courtly sonneteer when describing the sufferings of unrequited love and the frustrations of scorned lovers. The speaker, by mocking these hyperboles, asserts that his love is essentially harmless, having no effect on anyone or on anything but on the lovers themselves. But the argument seems sophisticated, as Tuve noted in her comment on the stanza:

Donne piles up questions using the conventional 'things adjoined' to the lover — his sighs, his tears, his coldness, his heats. But since he wishes to use the figure to argue mockingly against love's unprofitableness, addressing those dolts who would rather improve their worldly position than be love's saints, he attaches to each adjunct another subject which *literally* is accompanied by strong

3 L. A. Sonnino, *A Handbook to Sixteenth Century Rhetoric*, London 1968, p. 84 (under *Elevatio*).

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winds, floods of water, low temperatures and fever . . . such an image cannot remain simple. It has too much to do.⁴

This admirable account of the stanza's complex and jesting organization fails to register an essential feature of its argument — its total inappropriateness to the context. The *cri de coeur* "Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?" refers, presumably, to the complaints of the person addressed in the opening lines. But would such a person, the representative, apparently, of materialistic values, seriously entertain the possibility that the harmfulness of love would manifest itself in these fanciful states? The last three lines of the stanza are more pertinent, perhaps, to the attitudes such an adversary would adopt, but their effect is minor when compared with the jesting emphases of the earlier section. It is difficult to escape the feeling that this speaker is throwing a veil of obfuscation over precisely those ill-effects of his love which are dismissed with such derision in the first stanza — disease, decrepitude and poverty.

At the beginning of the third stanza, the terms of the previous disputation are abruptly abandoned: "Call us what you will, we are made such by love". What follows is an elaborate string of paradoxes, an attempt to define the essentially indefinable nature of love. This is by far the most complex and the most "meta-physical" of the stanzas: it plays on antitheses and impossibilities, on the simultaneous presence in the lovers of states which, in quotidian experience, are exclusive of each other. These lovers are both the moths which are attracted to the candle's fatal alluring flame, and also the candle (that which consumes them and itself, too). They are both predator and victim, male and female at the same time, possessing gender, yet neutral, plural and singular. At the end of the stanza, with reference to the frequently encountered sexual pun on dying, the ground is prepared for the fourth stanza which, playfully at least, presents the lovers as the sainted dead.

They are canonized, as we have seen, by means of a jest on the semantics of sexuality. A witty description of coitus and of post-coital fatigue is now taken literally, just as the conventional disasters of the "Petrarchan" tradition are treated literally in the second stanza. This, in turn, leads to the elaborate commemoration of the lovers in legends (the appropriate vehicle for recording a saint's miraculous deeds) and — by way of a learned pun on the Italian word for a room — their celebration

4 Tuve, p. 313.

in love poems, as well. The last stanza follows, significantly perhaps, without a grammatical break. The sainted lovers receive the invocations and prayers of adoring worshippers, and, we may notice in passing, they have come to epitomize all that was apparently excluded from their state while alive.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know how these peculiarities stand in relation to Donne's intentions in "The Canonization". The poem may be one of his failures — a flamboyant exercise which overreaches itself, a bravura performance in which the poet's brilliance militates against the intended and necessary coherence of argument. But the evidence of Donne's other poems suggests that he was far too good a rhetorician and much too well versed in logical techniques to produce such an obviously sophisticated argument containing so many dubious procedures. Nor is the poem likely to be a mere *jeu d'esprit*, an elaborate jest, for such poems of the period are usually less complex and the point of their joking is usually much more readily apparent.

It is better, on the whole, to presume a "seriousness" of intent in the poem and a coherence of achievement, and these qualities become available if the poem's complex structure is considered. "The Canonization" is one of the most obviously symmetrical of the *Songs and Sonets*: its symmetry is difficult to perceive at first because the poem's superficial brilliance deflects attention from it, and because it is a symmetry of contrasts as much as a symmetry of similitude.

The first and the last stanzas of the poem mirror each other in the manner of reversed images. The first is sarcastic and abusive in tone, the last is reverential and adoring. With a grandiloquent gesture, the speaker, at the beginning of the poem, excludes the lovers and their love from all worldly pursuits:

With wealth your state, your minde 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.

The mode of address in the last stanza is the opposite of this: a single voice insulting another has been replaced, at least in the speaker's fancy, by the humble voices of the community of lovers invoking these saints of love; an oath gives way to prayer. But, in addition to this, the world which has been so rigorously excluded from the experience of the lovers in the first stanza

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comes, in the last, to be incorporated in their whole existence:

You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
Who did the whole worlds soule contract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes
So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize,
Countries, Townes, Courts . . .

The contrast is obvious, the similarity less so; but there is, nevertheless, a similarity between the excessive stance adopted in each stanza. Standing at the extremities of the poem, they incorporate its most hyperbolic statements.

This is the structural principle on which "The Canonization" is built. The pressure is borne, so to speak, by the central stanza, the keystone of the structure, the other stanzas exert equal but antithetical forces on this unifying element. The analogy may seem too mechanical, yet such is the manner in which the poem is constructed. Accordingly, the second and fourth stanzas stand in less marked contrast to each other, while their similarity, though jesting and obscure, is more readily apparent once their basic conceit is recognized.

Ostensibly, each deals with a type of disaster: the second contains a mock-catalogue of *social* calamities; the fourth, concerned as it is with burial and entombment, records the personal and emotional disaster of death. But clearly, neither stanza is at all seriously engaged with the disaster it catalogues; each is hypothetical and, to a degree, fanciful and jesting. What holds them together is that the conceit in each is drawn from the art of poetry. No sensitive reader of our time, and certainly none of Donne's audience, would fail to recognize the literary reference of the calamities in the second stanza, while the fourth stanza is filled with images drawn from literature itself. Legends, of course, are not merely accounts of fabulous adventures (and often the miraculous deeds of saints, as in *The Golden Legend*) they are also inscriptions of the sort to be found on tombstones. The reference to the chronicles is self-explanatory, and the line "We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes" depends, in all probability, on the dual meaning of the Italian word *stanza* — a room or chamber, and a strophe.

So the poem presses inwards towards its third stanza, and there, too, we find a replica in miniature of the shape of the poem as a whole. Each stanza of "The Canonization" contains nine lines, the fifth line of each is, in consequence, the central line. The central lines of the first two stanzas do not seem to

possess in either case any particularly striking features. But the central line of the third (and middle) stanza contains the important reference to the Phoenix, and it is highly appropriate that this mythical creature, charged with symbolic significances, should stand at the dead-centre of the poem. The riddle of the Phoenix — which, according to the speaker, is clarified in meaning by the paradoxical state of the lovers who consume themselves and rise again, who are compounded of disparate elements, yet forge a new entity — provides the turning-point of the entire poem. Up to this point, it has dealt, initially in sarcastic and derisory terms, with exclusion and disaster, and, in the opening lines of the third stanza, with the predatory nature of love. But no sooner is the paradox of “And wee in us finde the’Eagle and the Dove” stated than the central line arrives, and the poem takes on a markedly different tendency and direction:

The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it.
So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,
Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

After this, the poem moves upwards — towards peace, celebration, and towards the final litany addressed to the saints of love. We find, accordingly, that the last stanzas also stress their central lines — these are, respectively, “We’ll build in sonnets pretty roomes” and “Into the glasses of your eyes”, both images suggestive of the containment of material in a small, focal place, and both important achievements in the terms of each stanza’s argument, unlike the fifth lines of the first two stanzas (“Take you a course, get you a place” and “When did the heats which my veines fill”) which are merely details in extended and continuing catalogues.

Those familiar with the currently fashionable theories concerning the numerological organization of much Renaissance poetry will recognize here a structure cognate with some of those described by Alastair Fowler in *Triumphal Forms* and elsewhere.⁵ The point to stress, though, about the “numerological” scheme in “The Canonization” is that it is relatively simple, and that it is based on assumptions that one may easily encounter in many places throughout the period, unlike some of the schemes suggested for various Renaissance poems where the researcher’s fancy and

5 Cambridge 1970. See also Fowler’s *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*, London 1964 and *Conceitful Thought*, Edinburgh 1975.

the sophistication of his calculating-machine often seem to be determining factors.

There is no doubt whatever that Renaissance culture placed special emphasis — in poetry, music, architecture and in theatrical tableaux — on the central point of a structure. Such stressing of the centre carried obvious hierarchical and ritualistic overtones.⁶ We find, therefore, ample evidence of such activity both in simple lyrics and in the stressing of the centre in a structure as elaborate and as extended as *Paradise Lost*.⁷ The Phoenix, the rarest of creatures, possessing miraculous powers of regeneration, the conventional symbol of resurrection, mysterious rebirth and of propagation without sexuality, is obviously a fitting occupant of the position of honour in the poem.

This stressing of the centre in "The Canonization" occurs in a structure compounded of five elements, and the number five was widely recognized in Donne's time as the symbol of marriage and of chaste love.⁸ There are many marriage odes, epithalamia, sections of marriage masques and so on which, one way or another, play elegant variations on this number. A particularly striking example (in the matter of explicit reference) may be found in Ben Jonson's masque *Hymenaei* of 1606, written to celebrate the ultimately disastrous marriage of the Earl of Essex to Lady Frances Howard. Reason, the presiding genius of this entertainment, which incorporates a learned replica of the Roman marriage-ceremony, explains the symbolism of the bridal-procession and of the five lighted tapers carried by page-boys into the masquing-hall, in the following manner:

And lastly, these five *waxen lights*,
 Imply *perfection* in the *rites*;
 For *five* the speciall *number* is,
 Whence hallow'd VNION claymes her blisse.
 As being all the summe, that growes
 From the vnited strengths, of those
 Which *male* and *female* numbers wee
 Doe style, and are *first two*, and *three*.
 Which, ioyned thus, you cannot seuer
 In equall parts, but one will euer
 Remaine as common; so we see

6 Fowler, *Triumphal Forms*, p. 62ff.

7 The central point of the 1667 (ten book) edition occurred at 1. 762 of Book VI, where Christ in glory has just "Ascended; at his right hand Victorie . . ." This is not the central point of 1674 (twelve book) edition which incorporates several additional lines of verse.

8 Fowler, *Triumphal Forms*, p. 148ff.

The binding force of *Vnitie*:
 For which alone, the peacefull gods
 In number, alwaies, loue the oddes;
 And euen parts as much despise,
 Since out of them all discords rise.⁹

The particular mathematical lore behind this passage had wide currency during the Renaissance. Pythagorean mathematics, which was linear and spatial, rather than numerical, regarded two and three as the first true numbers (because the number one, represented by a dot, was neither linear nor spatial). Even numbers, as Jonson states, are discordant and unstable since they are capable of being broken into two equal parts. Odd numbers, on the other hand, are stable and harmonious: if they are divided into two equal parts, there is always the remainder of one to bind their elements together. For obvious reasons, then, the first "real" number, two, came to be regarded as the female number, and the first of the odd numbers, three, came to be associated with masculinity. Five, the sum of these numbers, is the marriage-number wherein the instability of the bride is checked through the addition of the male principle of the bridegroom.

This curious belief is mirrored in the structure of "The Canonization". Its five stanzas are capable of being divided in two ways, each way reflecting the consequences of the symbolism inherent in the number five. In the first instance, the five stanzas may be divided into two two-stanza sections (the first and the fifth, and the second and the fourth) with the all-important third stanza providing the unifying factor. As noted above, the stanzas on either side of this spectacular stanza are in sharp contrast — the first two dealing with the world's hostility to and separateness from the lovers, the last two celebrating the lovers' fame, stability and excellence as they pass into the world of death. Each section, on its own, seems fantastic, hyperbolic and exaggerated. But the middle stanza, with its insistence on the paradoxical and mystical nature of love, provides, it seems, the link and the transition which permits the situation in the opening stanzas to be reconciled to the claims of the closing ones. The numerological conceit of five as the marriage-number is, in this stanza, given a complex embodiment in the three lines which cluster around the poem's central line. Here, metaphori-

⁹ Ben Jonson, *Hymenaei*, 196-211 in *Works*, ed. C. H. Herford and P. and E. Simpson, Vol. VII, Oxford 1941, p. 216.

cally, the sharp antitheses are welded into a firm unity:

And wee in us finde the'Eagle and the Dove.
The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it.

Moreover, the reference to "Tapers" in line 21 seems to pick up the connection between the number five and the symbolism of marriage-rites in much the same way as the extract from *Hymenaei* insists on the connection.

The other way of dividing the poem's five stanzas leads to similar suggestions. It may be apportioned into a section consisting of the first two stanzas and a section consisting of the last three. In this scheme, the turbulent opening stanzas, dealing with the world's hostility to the lovers, represent the instability of the number two as well as its discordant characteristics (as in the interval of the second). The last three, beginning with the sharp break in the argument ("Call us what you will . . .") and dealing, on the whole, with transcendence and with the stability that the lovers discover in their sainthood, stand for the masculine, stable connotations of the number three, as well as for the harmonious nature of the interval of the third. But the union of the two sections, resulting in the mystical marriage-number, and echoing the interval of the fifth, the basis of all harmony,¹⁰ endows the structure with a greater stability, one in which its disparate elements find their fullest expression.

Both these schemes lead, consequently, to a view of "The Canonization" as a celebration of married love, and the relationship between its rhetorical surface and its structural framework may be seen in terms of Platonic transcendence. If we take the actual *words* of the poem as representing the phenomenal world — that is to say, that part of the poem which is capable of being apprehended by the senses — it is reasonable (given the Platonic nature of much Renaissance thought) to find there the possibilities of incoherence noted at the beginning of this essay. This is so because the world of the senses, the material world, is incomplete, confusing and liable to mislead. But supporting this world there is the pure, abstract world of forms — the poem's five-stanza structure — and thus, since this world does not depend on local, partial and potentially ambiguous words, but on stable and

10 Since numerological doctrine drew heavily on "Pythagorean" teaching, an attempt was often made to import the properties of purely musical harmony into abstract or poetic notions of a harmonious state, concord in personal relationships, etc.

universally valid mathematical relationships, we may regard this structure as the "proof" of the assertions contained in the poem. The guarantee of its validity is that its seemingly wild and incoherent material is capable of being contained within a stable form. It is to this that the speaker refers in the closing lines of the poem as he recounts the litany invoked by the lovers of the world to love's newly canonized saints:

You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
 Who did the whole worlds soule contract, and drove
 Into the glasses of your eyes
 So made such mirrors, and such spies,
 That they did all to you epitomize,
 Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg from above
 A patterne of your love!

"The Canonization" is precisely this: the pattern itself.

But, as so often in Donne's poetry, these idealistic and transcendental suggestions are incorporated in a poem which contains some teasingly ambiguous material as well. Here, the reader's tact is called upon in deciding which possibility to allow as valid and which to discard as insignificant. We may note, for instance, that the first and last lines of each stanza both end with the word "love", giving us, therefore, ten solemn, ceremonial invocations of the key-word of the poem placed in significant positions throughout its structure. Ten represents perfection, the harmonious quaternion,¹¹ the closing of the decimal system of computation where numerical progression returns, as it were, to its inception. The significance of the number ten in this context is reinforced by the poem's being cast in nine-line stanzas, for nine is the number of heavenly perfection and immortality.¹² But there is another instance of the word "love" buried in the poem — line 39 reads "You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage", and eleven, as numerologists argued, contained several sinister possibilities.¹³ It is the number of transgression — that which goes beyond the perfect wholeness of ten. In consequence, it may be taken as a symbol of overweening pride, of an improper attempt to transgress the bounds of the permitted. But it is also the number of death, and thus the eleven instances of the word

11 So called because it is the sum of the first four numbers
 ($1+2+3+4=10$).

12 There is some confusion in Renaissance cosmology about the actual number of spheres, but the ninth was almost always regarded as the celestial sphere of immutability.

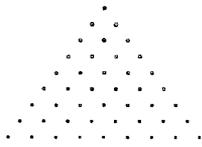
13 Fowler, *Triumphal Forms*, p. 7n and p. 189n.

“love” in the poem may not, after all, be an indication of the impropriety of the arguments contained in it, but a pointer to the location — in death — of its scheme of values. The poem gives us no directive about which, if either, of these alternatives we are required to stress, but what we know of the ingenuity of Renaissance numerologists makes it probable that this facet of the poem would not have passed unnoticed.

The most elaborate, witty and *recherché* possibility contained in the numerical organization of the poem is to be found in the fact that it contains forty-five lines. The more perceptive and numerologically sophisticated of Donne’s audience, apart from recognizing that this “triangular” or “pyramidal”¹⁴ number is most appropriate in a poem commemorating the sainted dead (as in “A Nocturnall upon S Lucies day”), noticed, perhaps, an elegant flourish or grace-note in this. February 14, St Valentine’s Day, is the forty-fifth day of the year, if we take January 1 as the beginning of the year — which many, though by no means all, of Donne’s contemporaries would have done.¹⁵ There is the possibility, therefore, that this poem celebrating sainted lovers is a fantastical gift commemorating the feast-day of the saint of love. Such a possibility is not without an analogue in Donne’s poetry: “An Epithalamion, Or mariage Song on the Lady Elizabeth, and Count Palatine being married on St. Valentine’s day” contains elaborate play on the saint of love, on tapers and on the *two* phoenixes — the chaste royal bride and her princely bridegroom.

The structure of “The Canonization” reveals, therefore, a greater degree of coherence than a purely “rhetorical” analysis is able to indicate. But the seriousness of intent in the poem, suggested by the philosophical possibilities inherent in its struc-

14 So called because $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9=45$. This could be represented by a system of dots as a pyramid (the shape of many funeral monuments) with nine dots at its base and one at its apex.



15 It is impossible to be sure how an individual in the early seventeenth century would have reckoned the beginning of the year: in addition to 1 January, 25 March (Lady Day) was frequently employed as the commencement of the year.

tural symmetry, is, perhaps, invalidated by the amount of incidental and—to modern readers—indecorous detail that an investigation of its structure uncovers. This is precisely the problem we encounter with so much of Donne's poetry—the nagging sense that what appears so idealized and so high-minded may be no more than an elaborate conceit. To think in such terms, however, is, perhaps, to import criteria into the poetry of the Renaissance which are alien to the age. Here is poetry which is simultaneously “serious” and flippant, dedicated and jesting, and entirely free of that essentially Romantic conviction that a work of art cannot (and should not) embrace both polarities at the same time. The evidence of the poetry of Donne's age suggests that his contemporaries encountered no such difficulty when contemplating the brilliantly multi-faceted world of “The Canonization”.