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DONNE'S «THE SUN RISING» and OVID'S «AMORES, I, xiii»

Ovid was the favourite of the renaissance poets, in England and elsewhere. Though Virgil was generally recognized as the greatest Latin poet, Ovid was admired by a small but highly influential class — the educated laity.

Ovid's Amores were translated into English by Christopher Marlowe and published c. 1597. Ovid's influence on Donne's poetry is most marked in the twenty elegies written by the English poet. It is also likely that the idea of the Sun Rising was suggested to Donne by Ovid's Amores, I, xiii. An attempt will be made in this brief analysis to trace the extent of Donne's debt to the above elegy of Ovid's, and also the English poet's startling departures from his model.

The setting is exactly the same. In both poems, the lovers are in bed and they are disturbed by the appearance of Aurora in Ovid's poem and the Sun in Donne's. Aurora and the Sun try to interfere with the perfect happiness of the couples and that is why the poets scold them. In both poems, there is a strong conversational tone. Ovid tells Aurora :

*Whither art thou hastening, O unwelcome to men,  
unwelcome to maids? Check with rosy hand the  
dewy rein.<sup>1</sup>*

In a similar, but more aggressive vein, Donne reprimands the Sun :

*Busy old fool, unruly Sun,  
Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?<sup>2</sup>*

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1. Ovid: *Heroides* and *Amores*, translated by Grant Showerman, The Loeb Classical Library, London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1963, p. 369.

2. Donne: *The Songs and Sonnets*, edited by Th. Redpath, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1956, p. 11.

The above are the opening lines of *The Sun Rising* and Donne at once succeeds in drawing the reader's attention. Ovid, on the other hand, begins at a more leisurely pace:

*She is coming already over the ocean from her  
too ancient husband — she of the golden hair who  
with rimy axle brings the day.*<sup>1</sup>

It is only in the third line that Aurora is addressed: «Whither art thou hastening, Aurora? Stay!» The effectiveness of this line is half lost, because it comes naturally, as a consequence of what came before. Donne's opening, however, captures the reader by surprise because the sun is addressed without any preliminaries. The sun comes under a salvo of adjectives, —«Busy old fool», «Saucy pedantic wretch»—in the first stanza. The sun is thus given no chance to breathe, one would say, while Aurora in Ovid's poem, is very mildly scolded.

Ovid's elegy does not display the individuality of thought which makes Donne's poem one of the wittiest in English literature. The elegy is not as strictly and continuously argumentative as Donne's poem. Ovid imagines Aurora hastening away from Tithonus, her old husband, and in doing so disturbs the peaceful sleep of the lovers. The poet argues that sailors, farmers, draught oxen, travellers, soldiers, labourers, schoolchildren, lawyers and pleaders are annoyed by the appearance of dawn. Donne does not use such a long and exhaustive list, but bids the Sun wake up «late schoolboys», «sour prentices», «court huntsmen», and «country ants»<sup>1</sup>. Ovid's appeal cannot be very effective because it is just a mild reprimand which never rises to the level of violent attack in Donne's poem. The last lines of the elegy

*I had brought my chiding to an end. You might  
know she had heard: she blushed — and yet  
the day arose no later than its wont.*<sup>2</sup>

simply draw a conclusion which fails to stir any feelings. In a very flat tone the poet announces the futility of his appeal and his defeat by Aurora. An unexciting statement of fact, concludes the poem.

In *The Sun Rising* the argument unfolds very naturally and the Sun

1. All quotations are from Donne, op. cit. p. 11.

2. Ovid: op. cit., p. 373.

is not given the chance to defend himself. The poet's irresistible attack keeps the Sun on the defensive. This is achieved through the constant use of the imperative: «Go chide», «Go tell», «Call country ants», «Look, and tomorrow late, tell me», «Ask for thore kings», «Shine here to us». The lover is confident in his strength and defies the sun: «I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink», «Thou, sun, art half as happy as we.» The poet here has the upper hand and after a severe attack of this kind, one feels that the Sun will do the poet's bidding. There is no feeling of futility and helplessness as in Ovid's poem. In the Latin poet's elegy, Aurora is omnipotent and the poet feels he is fighting a losing battle; the conclusion only confirms the attitude expressed throughout the elegy. Donne is confident that love will triumph in the end and thus dictates his own terms to the Sun: «This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere». The conclusion, logically brought out by the premisses, is not valid. The reader accepts it, for a moment, because it is part of the atmosphere created by Donne. Ovid's conclusion is valid but less acceptable to the reader. Donne's wit plays a vital role in this case; he makes the reader accept, even temporarily, the poet's false conclusion.

The imagery of the two poems is quite different. Ovid's is mainly classical, with references to Aurora, Tithonus, Memnon, Cephalus, Luna, Endymion, Jove and Alceme. There is also the long list including sailors, schoolboys<sup>1</sup> and others already mentioned above. These latter references are very extensive and cover a wide range of professions thus giving the reader a kaleidoscopic picture of society at that time. Donne's imagery is mainly taken from life in his period. There are references to individuals like «schoolboys», «prentices», «court—huntsmen», and institutions— «the King»<sup>2</sup>. There are also allusions to geographical discoveries— «The Indias of spice and mine», astronomy— «eclipse» and science— «alchemy». It is obvious that Donne's imagery is more vivid, perhaps because it is more varied and less extensive than Ovid's.

In Ovid's poem one seems to lose sight of the lovers, and the domination of Aurora is complete. In Donne's poem, the two lovers are in the foreground all the time and the Sun is the weak side: one always feels that the lovers are the dominant force.

The 30 lines of *The Sun Rising* never make the reader suspect that

1. Schoolchildren are mentioned by both poets.

2. Mr. J. B. Leishman in *The Monarch of Wit*, suggests that this reference may provide evidence that the poem was written in 1603 or after. Queen Elizabeth I (1558—1603) was succeeded to the throne by James I (1603—1625).

there is much ado about nothing; Ovid's 47 lines often make the reader forget the lovers. Donne sketches; On the whole, Donne uses a more economical style, and his poem is a much more compact unit than Ovid's elegy.