



## Deconstruction of Binary Oppositions in John Donne's A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

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**Abstract:** Deconstructionism, as a philosophical theory, originated in France in the 1960s. One of its ideological cores is to dispel the ideas of binary oppositions, break the traditional hierarchical model, and eliminate the rigidity of metaphysics. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the thoughts of deconstruction were reflected in the British poet John Donne's poems. As the pioneer of metaphysical poets, Donne demonstrates his philosophical thoughts in the poetry. Particularly, the deconstruction of the traditional binary oppositions of "male vs. female", "soul vs. flesh" and "sacredness vs. worldliness" in Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* distinctively embodies the advancement and modernity of his thoughts.

**Keywords:** Donne, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, binary oppositions, deconstruction.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Universally considered the representative and pioneer of metaphysical poets, John Donne (1572-1631) is one of the most established and remarkable poets of Britain in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His works touch upon several different genres including love poems, religious poems, Latin translations, epigrams, elegies, songs, satires and sermons, among which the poems make considerable literary achievements. In general, Donne's poems can be roughly divided into two categories --the youthful love lyrics and the later sacred verses. Different from many of the contemporary poets, Donne discards the vague poetry style of the late Elizabethan age and makes bold innovations in poetry. His poems break through the traditional constraints and reveal profound philosophy through colloquial language. Moreover, the ingenious conceits and unique images in his poems also inject fresh blood into British poetry.

As one of Donne's most prominent love poems, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* is a farewell poem given to Ann More, Donne's wife. It was written before Donne left for Paris as an ambassador in 1612. Without the gloomy tone and keynote of traditional farewell poetry, the poem displays Donne's calmness when he is about to be separated from his beloved wife for a while. On the occasion of departing, Donne comforts his wife to believe that their love is not only based on sexual desires, but also transcends carnal desires. As long as they are loyal to their love and they trust each other, the moment of their final reunion will come soon and they will compose a beautiful love song together.

Generally speaking, Donne's poetry is characterized by its vibrancy of language and inventiveness of metaphor, especially compared with that of his contemporaries. This feature, along with the dramatic or everyday speech rhythms, the tense syntax and tough eloquence, are a reaction against the smoothness of conventional Elizabethan poetry. Out of these and some other reasons, Donne's poems were excluded from the mainstream of British poetry in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was not until the 1920s that Donne's poems were once again attached great importance to, thanks to the utmost praises and promotions of T.S. Eliot and other modernists. The apparent change is concerned with the rediscovery of the advanced modernity of Donne's poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a matter of fact, Donne is indeed an eminent poet walking in the forefront of his time. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the epoch-making thoughts of deconstruction were embodied in Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. That is to say, the traditional binary oppositions are, in a way, deconstructed in this poem.

The idea of binary opposition has exerted far-reaching influences on westerners' mind and life, as well

as on traditional western philosophy and classical science for centuries. During that time, the world was "defined" by several different binary oppositions such as "life vs. death", "speech vs. writing", "truth vs. fallacy", "nature vs. culture", "mind vs. matter", "presence vs. absence", as well as "sensibility vs. rationality". With regards to binary opposition, the leader of Deconstructionism Jacques Derrida points out in his monograph *Dissemination*: "the two terms are not simply opposed in their meanings, but are arranged in a hierarchical order which gives the first term priority, in both the temporal and the qualitative sense of the word." (viii) Having been "ruled" by the thought of binary opposition for ages, certain acute philosophers of later generations began to question such a thinking mode. In this circumstance, the idea of deconstruction came into being and gradually developed into an ideological school named deconstructionism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the goals of deconstructionism is to deconstruct a series of binary oppositions set by western metaphysical tradition. Deconstructionists claim that there are only a few differences but no hierarchical orders between the two seemingly "opposite" terms, instead, they are inter-penetrative and inclusive. The goal of deconstructionists is to break the binary opposition of metaphysics and subvert the traditional hierarchical order.

On the one hand, Donne is inevitably influenced by the binary opposition of his own age. On the other hand, he consciously or unconsciously deconstructs such a thinking mode in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* as well. It can be found that the thought of deconstruction reflected in the poem just coincides with deconstructionists in a degree, through the close reading of it. Donne's deconstruction of the traditional binary oppositions such as "male vs. female", "soul vs. flesh", "sacredness vs. worldliness" in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* is undoubtedly a testimony for his excellent and extraordinary wisdom.

### 2. DONNE'S DECONSTRUCTION OF THE BINARY OPPOSITION OF "MALE VS. FEMALE"

As to the binary idea of metaphysics, males and females are in a relation of opposition and tension. It means that males are above females and they occupy an absolutely dominant position in social life while females are ruled and subordinated. Males can utter their voices in society, while females are in the position of "the other" and their speaking right is deprived. Males impose their wills on females, and females can do nothing but to endure and obey males' orders in silence, or they will be repelled by society. All in all, the two sexes are in a hierarchical relationship and their statuses are not equal. In Donne's love poems, the binary opposition of "male vs. female" is eliminated to a certain extent, and more of the cooperation, harmony and unity of the two sexes is shown. For instance, in *Good Morrow*, Donne compares a couple in love to the two hemispheres of a planet, which suggests that the two sexes are equal in a love relationship. The poem lines "If our two loves be one, or, thou and I / Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die" reflect the harmonious and unified relation between male and female. In this regard, some scholars think that Donne's poetry "reconstructs the sexual relations in the Petrarch era into equal and integrated" (Nan, Song 131-132). Furthermore, the females in Donne's poetry are no longer an appendage, but a leading figure endowing the males the meaning of life. The females enjoy love and have the predominant right in a love relationship, which is unprecedented in the history of literature.

In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, Donne compares More and himself to the two legs of a compass. It is quite novel and surprising to use such an image in geometry as a metaphor of love. Nevertheless, it is Donne's fantastic imagination and wisdom as well as his grasp of scientific knowledge that make the conceit fairly vivid and reasonable. The mutual cooperation of the compass legs indicates the harmonious coexistence of Donne and More in a love relationship, which deconstructs the traditional binary opposition of "male vs. female":

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 the other do;  
And though it in the center sit,  
Yet when the other far doth roam,  
It leans, and hearkens after it,  
And grows erect, as that comes home.

The above lines reveal Donne's careful examination and profound reflection on gender equality and harmonious love relationship. The poet compares More to the compass leg standing steadily in the center while Donne himself to the other leg making a circular motion around the center. The two legs are in a unity, and only through their cooperation can the compass draw a complete and beautiful circle. In addition, the lengths of the two legs are the same, and they are both indispensable for a compass. Similarly, in a love relationship, male and female are equally important and they are in a unity of love. They both have the responsibility for sustaining and developing love: the female should be as determined as the compass foot at the center, and offer strong spiritual supports for the male. The female's support will greatly motivate the male to strive for his career and eventually reunite with his lover. What is more, the male is also supposed to be loyal to his lover, and work hard to lay a solid material foundation for the development of love. To put it in a nutshell, it is the joint efforts of male and female that make "the circle of love" perfect.

Donne emphasizes the concept of holism and the multiplex symbiosis within the whole, and opposes the traditional binary opposition. Therefore, he pays attention to the harmonious equality between the two sides of love. He thinks that only in this way can souls be united. In this poem, Donne sketches an image of woman with initiative and subjectivity. "The status of female is raised. Male is no longer the center for female's life. Female becomes equal to male in a love relationship." (Li, Liu 30) In a way, female endows male a sense of life: female's firmness for love provides male with strong spiritual support, and encourages male to create a brilliant career with high spirits. Hence, the importance of female in a love relationship is self-evident.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when patriarchy still predominated the society, Donne made a positive attempt to deconstruct the binary opposition between the two sexes. Whether conscious or not, his attempt guides people to re-examine the gender relation. In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, Donne puts both male and female in a harmonious unity, depicts an eye-pleasing picture of the two sexes collaborating and cooperating with each other and appreciates the contribution of a loyal woman in a love relationship. At that age, Donne's attempts not only achieved great breakthroughs, but also effectively impacted the traditional binary oppositions of "male vs. female".

### 3. DONNE'S DECONSTRUCTION OF THE BINARY OPPOSITION OF "SOUL VS. FLESH"

The binary opposition of "soul vs. flesh" can be traced back to the western philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato in ancient Greece. They hold the view that soul is noble and immortal while flesh perishable and filthy. The reason why Socrates does not fear his final death penalty is that he holds the firm belief that only flesh perishes after death whereas soul still keeps eternal. Additionally, Plato deems that things like flesh are annoying, heavy and dusty. Both Socrates and Plato degrade flesh and think highly of soul. In particular, the "Platonic love" named after Plato in later generations refers to a pure spiritual love with almost no sensuality involved. Although it misinterprets Plato's erotic ideas, it also reveals the binary opposition of "soul vs. flesh".

In spite that the above-mentioned philosophers elevate the status of soul and belittle flesh, there is another scene in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. In Donne's point of view, the love of most people is based on sexual desires, which lacks soul communications. So they are not able to stand being separated from their lovers. Once they are incapable of staying with and having sex with their lovers, the elements maintaining their love will no longer exist, and their love will probably come to an end:

Dull sublunary lovers' love  
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit  
Absence, because it doth remove  
Those things which elemented it.

It can be seen that flesh and soul are split in the emotional life of most ordinary people. Instead of paying attention to the soul communication with their own lovers, most "sublunary lovers" just focus on physical love, which is likely to be extremely vulnerable because of temporary separation. In comparison, the love between Donne and More is terribly firm and cannot be damaged on account of separation:

But we, by a love so much refined  
That our selves know not what it is,  
Inter-assured of the mind,  
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.  
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.

The poem line "Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss" suggests there exists physical love between Donne and More, which is partly based on the close contact of the sense organs such as eyes, lips and hands. As a metaphysical poet, Donne inherits the humanistic tradition of the Renaissance. He is not only satisfied with the spiritual love popular in the Middle Age, but also focuses on real life and physical love. Donne does not neglect the role of sex in a love relationship, which can also be proved in his other poems. For example, the poem *The Flea* tells a short story that a flea bites a pair of young lovers, and the blood of the lovers fuses in the belly of the flea. Donne uses this conceit to imply the sexual relation of the two youngsters. Affected by the idea of *Carpe Diem* in the Renaissance period, Donne also produces a large number of poems depicting sex, which presents his frank attitudes towards it.

For one thing, Donne approves of the importance of physical love in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. For another, he puts emphasis on soul love as well: he skillfully uses the image of gold as a metaphor of the spiritual fusion between More and himself. Due to soul love, the short separation of flesh will not end their love relationship, but will further extend their love. Donne and More will not suffer a lot even if they are distanced from each other due to their "inter-assured of the mind" and strong belief in love. This is similar to the love view of the ancient Chinese poet Qin Guan -- "Eternal love between us two / Shall withstand the time apart". To conclude, no matter the image of compass or that of gold in *A Valediction: forbidding Mourning*, they both imply that spiritual love will form an invisible bond between lovers, thus they will be tightly linked. Even if they are separated one day and unable to enjoy the joy of physical love temporarily, the powerful spiritual love will also support them to spend the long days of separation. They will eventually greet the wonderful moment of reunion.

In Donne's point of view, physical love is the foundation and spiritual love is the sublimation of love, and these two kinds of love are both indispensable (Xiao 25). The poem *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* conveys Donne's longing for a kind of love integrating flesh with soul. It can be seen that physical love and spiritual love are both embodied and unified in Donne's love poems. Donne believes it is the combination of soul and flesh that makes love more permanent, thus deconstructing the traditional binary opposition of "soul vs. flesh".

#### 4. DONNE'S DECONSTRUCTION OF THE BINARY OPPOSITION OF "SACREDNESS VS. WORLDLINESS"

In medieval Europe, there was an extreme opposition and tension between sacredness and worldliness. It is because Christianity played a dominant role in social life at that time. In that situation, religious sacredness is above worldliness. In order to compete for the leadership of the state, there has been a long and fierce fighting between theocracy and kingship. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Renaissance advocates the liberation of humanity and the concern for secular life. Under this background, Donne merges and unifies sacredness and worldliness, and deconstructs the traditional binary opposition of "sacredness vs. worldliness".

The unity of sacredness and worldliness in Donne's poetry is concerned with the dual identity of Donne as both a poet and a clergyman. Donne combines his worldly experience with religious life, exhibits his profound religious meditation in the process of expressing his love experience and sentiment (Wang 63). Donne was once a devout Catholic, but it was difficult to be a Catholic in Elizabethan England. Therefore, he had to join the Church of England for a better living. In this regard, John Carey points out that "the first thing to remember about Donne is that he was a Catholic; the second, that he betrayed his Faith" (15). Out of the betrayal of Catholicism, Donne experiences painful struggles in his inner world. So as to find comfort, Donne tries to seek the spiritual salvation



from God, hoping to sense God's love through the love between secular man and woman (Cui 200). Thus, in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, we can see that the secular love between More and himself is elevated to the height of sacredness:

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
'Twere profanation of our joys  
To tell the laity our love.

Donne shows his calmness on the very occasion of separation. He comforts More not to cry nor lament, let alone tell other secular men about their love, because that behavior will blaspheme their love. Donne consciously distinguishes the love between More and himself from the love of laity. Compared with the latter, the love between More and himself is quite pure, noble and sacred. Although More and himself are also flesh and blood, the poet endows this secular love more sacred colour. In this sense, Collins Brooks comments that "Donne's imagination seems obsessed with the problem of unity; the sense in which the lovers become one -- the sense in which the soul is united with God" (17).

But we, by a love so much refined  
That our selves know not what it is,  
Inter-assured of the mind,  
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

In the above lines, the poet directly describes the purity of love between More and himself. In this poem, alchemy is associated with love, which forms the second classic conceit. "Like the alchemist extracts pure gold without impurities from the dirty soil, the spiritual couple also purifies the noble love from sexual desires." Moreover, this pure love seems to be controlled by a mysterious force so that even if they "know not what it is", they still keep loyal to and will never give up their love. This is also an expression of the "sacredness" of the worldly love. In addition, Donne uses the course of a compass drawing a circle from the starting point to the ending point, to indicate the process in which he is separated from More and finally reunites with her. This circular image also implies Donne's homage for God. Plato believes that circle is a symbol of the omnipresent and all-encompassing God. The neo-Platonic godfather Plotinus firstly used the circular motion around the center to describe soul's attachment to God. The circular image is a symbol of infinity, eternity or perfection. Donne integrates his own piety and love for God with the depiction of worldly love. While expressing the loyal love for his wife, he also shows his sincere love for God.

If Donne's love for God manifests his divinity as a clergyman, then his love for his wife shows his nature as a secular man. Sacredness and worldliness, in a way, are combined in him. Donne integrates his worldly experience with religious life, and voices his unique religious contemplation. In this way, he deconstructs the traditional binary opposition of "sacredness vs. worldliness".

## 5. CONCLUSION

Just as the splendid French writer Le Clézio said, "literature is beyond times, and it can be more immortal than the Great Wall built by stone." As a classic love poem, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* breaks through the constraints of time, shows the epoch-making ideas of deconstruction, and the extraordinary wisdom of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century poet. In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, Donne breaks the barrier of the traditional binary oppositions. "Male and female", "soul and flesh", "sacredness and worldliness" are not opposite any more, but are in a state of harmony and unity under Donne's pen. Although Donne's poetry was not generally understood and recognized by the majority of his own age, it was admired and complimented by the modernist masters such as T.S Eliot with its unique charm passing through time and space, which is also the best proof for the advancement of Donne's works.

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