

John Donne – An Introduction

U.G. Semester IV

MJC – 07

Unit 2

Dr. Md. Shahnawaz Alam

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty)

P.G. Department of English

Maharaja College, Arrah

John Donne was one of the most remarkable literary figures of the Elizabethan age. He was curious and singularly original figure in Elizabethan age though they were not published until 1670, after his death. Though an Elizabethan in time yet Donne had nothing of the essential Elizabethan spirit in him. He broke away from Elizabethan tradition and revolted against the easy, fluent style, stock imagery and pastoral convention of the followers of Spenser. He made startling innovations in the matter and form of poetry. "what distinguishes him from the great Elizabethans is the prevailing character of his conceits, his metaphysical wit. To the imaginative temper of Marlowe, Donne superadded the subtlety and erudition of a schoolman."¹ Mere romantic floppery and sensuous emotions were discarded by him as unsuitable for high class poetry.

1. H.J.C. Grierson : *The First Half of the Seventeenth Century*.

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Donne wrote various types of poems – Lyrics, Elegies, Satires and Religious poems. He introduced subtlety, witticism, reflective imagination in poetry and made it an amalgam of curiosity, vagueness, obscurity and wit. He incongruously brought together ideas as remote from each other as the antipodes mingling the lofty and the mean, the sublime and the trivial. He subjected everything – passion, feeling, sensuousness – to the play of wit. His subtlety and conceits coupled with witticism made him an obscure poet. His friend and admirer Ben Jonson said of him that he esteemed him “the first poet in the world for something” but he was not likely to be remembered “for not being understood.” To much of his poetry, we must apply his own verse on another’s crudities –

Infinite work! which doth as far extend

That none can study it to any end.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

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The Old Woman's Bargain

At last, the knight encounters an old, ugly woman who offers him the answer he seeks what women most desire is sovereignty over their husbands and their own lives. However, she gives him this knowledge on one condition: he must agree to do whatever she asks in return. Desperate, the knight agrees.

The Knight's Answer and His Fate

The knight returns to Queen Guinevere's court and gives the correct answer. The queen and her court agree that he has fulfilled the challenge, and his life is spared. However, the old woman then makes her demand—she wants the knight to marry her. The knight is horrified but has no choice but to honor his promise.

The Transformation of the Old Woman

On their wedding night, the knight is miserable, unable to hide his disgust at his bride's age and appearance. Seeing his reluctance, the old woman offers him a choice:

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1. She can remain old and ugly but be a faithful, devoted wife, or
2. She can become young and beautiful but may not remain loyal.

The knight, having learned his lesson, gives her the power to choose, granting her the sovereignty she desires. Pleased by his response, the old woman transforms into a young and beautiful wife who also promises to remain faithful to him. The knight is overjoyed, and the tale ends on a note of harmony and newfound respect for women's desires.

Conclusion

The Wife of Bath's Tale is a powerful critique of gender roles in medieval society, advocating for women's authority in marriage. It reinforces the idea that mutual respect and autonomy lead to happiness in relationships. By telling a story where a woman's wisdom and sovereignty bring about transformation, the Wife of Bath challenges traditional notions of male dominance and asserts her own views on love and marriage.