Tempus Edax Rerum

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Abstract:

A discussion of the 16th Century Poet, John Donne's sonnet "Death, be not proud", a work which includes traditional Petrarchan styles and Iambic Pentameter. The discussion focuses on the decompression and analysis of the sonnet in the interest of highlighting and better understanding the intentions, quality, and style of Donne's work as well as his delivery of serious messages within light tones.

Death, be not Proud

By John Donne

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

The 16th century poet, John Donne, hides metaphysical topics within Petrarchan style and structure. In his sonnet, "Death, be not proud", he presents a dark subject in the context of a one-sided, witty conversation between the speaker and an anthropomorphized and slighted death. The theme, at-a-glance,

could be considered morbid or macabre, but the way in which death is engaged is purposefully playful, indicating the speaker intended to approach a serious subject with a light tone.

Donne uses, as previously stated, Petrarchan style and seems to follow iambic pentameter as a strict guideline rather than as a rule. All but four lines (1, 3, 9, 11) stray from the rigid ten syllable format, though many are not aligned with the traditional "unstressed, stressed" syllable construction associated with iambic pentameter. Lines four, "Die not, poor death, nor... me" (4) and nine "Thou art slave to fate... desperate men" (9) almost seem to serve as an illustration of the disparity between his most traditional construction and the furthest extent of his deviation. When proceeding past ten syllables he often uses words that, when paired with purposefully poor elocution and lazy pronunciation, reduce the actual or perceived syllable count. He uses the word "desperate", often pronounced in two syllables rather than three, to reduce syllable count in line nine from twelve to eleven. He also uses the words "thou art", often pronounced quickly and together, which arguably reduces the perceived syllable count in line nine down to ten syllables. These attempts to keep to rigid format seem to serve as a tool to convey, facilitate, or even symbolize the theme and tone or even to symbolize the rigidity of death as a concept.

The tone used by Donne is difficult to label; the structure of the poem is rigid but it provides for a rhythm that, when matched with repeated rhyme, could be described as somewhat similar to a nursery rhyme if one disregards the fact that the style used was typical of an Italian sonnet: "...sickness dwell / ...sleep as well" (10-11). The speaker is having a conflict with death itself, which would lend itself to being accompanied by a dark tone, yet he uses seemingly light-hearted rhyme while the rhythm stays set in stone. This embodies an underlying theme of the poem itself: approaching serious subjects with a light tone.

Given that the conflict is metaphysical in nature, it makes sense that the poem conveys a scene that would likely only occur in the context of one's own thoughts or if a person under the influence were to speak to the abyss—perhaps after having too much to drink or while intoxicated by a sedative. This interpretation gains more weight when line 11 is considered, the speaker states: "And poppy... can make us sleep as well" (11). The speaker is attempting to reduce the perceived pride death has in itself, by stating that sedatives can make one sleep in the same manner; though it could also be possible that it is a subtle reference to the current mental state of the speaker. This insult is two-fold when paired with the previous insults, suggesting that not only does death have little control over when it ends life: "Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men," (9), but that sedatives perform the same duty as death: perceived nonexistence, albeit temporary. By comparing death to narcotic-induced slumber, the speaker assaults one of death's only points of pride. This is, without doubt, a barrage of silly and scathing attacks on death's character. Even the title and the first line are straightforward in suggesting that death should not be so full of itself: "Death, be not proud..." (1).

The speaker does a commendable job of ensuring an overarching metaphysical theme is concluded by concluding with rigid iambic pentameter. Like Shakespeare, he managed to layer meaning into this single line (14) multiple times over. It seems to form a bond between two Latin proverbs that carry a great deal of meaning. The first, "Ab Uno Disce Omnes", meaning "from one, learn all", which refers to situations in which a single example illustrates a universal truth or compatibility of concept. The second is "Tempus Edax Rerum", "time devours all things." The speaker states to death that once a person has died, death "dies" with that person, "One short sleep past... / and death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die." (13-14). We know from a single example, that all things end; with time, so does death by merit of its own function. Once a person's life has ended, death as a metaphysical concept dies with them because they will never again be subjected to the fear of death.

Throughout the sonnet, the speaker insulted death heartily before leaving it with this final blow, as if to make certain that the implications of this statement were clear before it was delivered. Stating that "Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow, / And soonest our best men with thee do go / rest of their

bones, and soul's delivery", suggests that the speaker wanted death to know that it actually brought pleasure, not pain. That our best souls sometimes leave early because they realize this. This last line ensures that Death understands the meaning behind the entire sonnet. It ensures that not only is Death made aware that it is not the feared villain it wants to be perceived as because it's a deliverer of mercy, but also that it dies—"just like the rest of us". As serious as this message is, the speaker manages to convey it light-heartedly.

Works Cited

Donne, John. *Death, Be Not Proud. Songs and Sonnets*. 1633. Book of Poems.