

God, the greeks, and  
dr. donne: carew's  
celebration of  
donne's monumental  
work



The poem "An Elegy Upon the Death of the Dean of Paul's, Dr. John Donne" presents the monumental claim that John Donne was a class of poet far above his peers, positing that his mastery of language, originality of thought, and intellectual connection with his art surpassed the work of his contemporaries. The immensity of an artist's legacy and the struggle to find a balance between modernity and tradition are explored throughout the poem; to exemplify these themes, author Thomas Carew uses the motif of gardening and metaphysical metaphors in the vein of Donne himself. Imagery pertaining to fire and allusions to the Greek tradition solidify the claim of Donne's literary superiority, which culminates in a final epitaph which recognizes the extent to which Donne succeeds in heralding the Greek tradition of the past while remaining a servant of God in the present.

The act of gardening, in particular that of planting and pruning, is a motif meant to convey the intensity with which Donne cultivated his work. The speaker says that, "the Muses' garden, with pedantic weeds o'erspread, was purged by thee; the lazy seeds of servile imitation thrown away, and fresh invention planted." (25-28.) The image of the garden is later revisited, with the speaker claiming that Donne's contemporaries did not pursue their craft to the extent or with the expertise that Donne did, implying that they were unsuccessful in their attempts to "cull the prime buds of invention," (54-55.) Rather than contribute to the literary canon as Donne did, other poets "left the fields" for "fear to touch the harvest," (56-57.)

Throughout the piece, fire symbolizes the value of Donne's work. The speaker first refers to Donne's artistic spirit, saying, "The flame of thy brave soul, that shot such heat and light as burnt our earth and made our darkness

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bright," (14-16.) Donne's work is considered so reinvigorating that it illuminated what the speaker considers to have been a lackluster period for literature. "Heat" symbolizes the passion of Donne's work, while "light" refers to its originality. The speaker goes on to say that the symbolic fire of Donne's work taught, or illuminated, "the deep knowledge of dark truths... what fancy could not reach," (19-20.) This is a reference to Donne's use of metaphysical conceits and metaphysical metaphors, which he implemented in attempt to describe such elevated "indescribable" feelings such as ecstasy, love and religious devotion. In turn, the work of his contemporaries is considered to be metaphorically "melting" (18, 54.) Fire then symbolizes the durability of Donne's work, which the speaker believes will endure beyond incapable of burning the "soft melting phrases," (54) of his contemporaries. Nearing the end of the poem, the speaker bestows upon Donne a "crown of bays," naming him a king among poets (84.) He wishes that Donne's legacy would burn further, but recognizes that, as is the nature of time, symbolized as a "swiftly turning wheel," (79), the fiery passion brought to the literary field by Donne's work will one day "turn to ashes," (86.)

The struggle to find a balance between modernity and tradition is explored throughout the poem in an attempt to establish the overarching theme celebrating Donne's legacy; the speaker draws a clear line between emulating the work ethic of great poets and emulating the work itself. The speaker claims that the work of his contemporaries is hollow because it merely imitates great poets such as Anacreon and Pindar; Donne, however, is compared to Prometheus, the Greek god of fire, for his success in

breathing in life into the literary field of his day. Donne used his mastery of Greek and Latin to differentiate from the limitations that these languages provided, creating what the speaker refers to as “burnished gold,” (43.) In the wake of his death, the speaker envisions that the contemporaries of Donne will return to rehashing and imitating works of the path, noting the *Metamorphoses* as an example.

Such a balance of the innovative and the traditional is returned to in the epitaph which closes the poem. The opening line of the poem refers to Donne as the widower of poetry (1), but as the poem progresses the speaker continually elevates his worth and esteem in the literary field. The closing epitaph is constructed through a pair of closed couplets, a departure from the structure of the body of the poem. It declares the pinnacle of Donne's success: he is not only akin to Apollo, king of poets, but also worthy of his place as a poet of God God, having used his talent to expand and create in the present.

#### Bibliography:

Carew, Thomas. “An Elegy upon the Death of . . . Dr. John Donne.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Norton & Company, 2013. p. 1696-98.