Volume 5: 2012-2013 ISSN: 2041-6776

The University of Nottingham
School of English

A Close Reading of Montgomerie's 'A Ladyis Lamentatione'

Matthew Purchase

'A Ladyis Lamentatione', a small collection of sonnets usually attributed to Alexander Montgomerie, describes the anguish of a woman who has fallen from grace through a sexual misdemeanour, and follows a seemingly psychological trajectory of blame and penance. The author explores themes of guilt and forgiveness, through the employment of techniques such as the borrowing of both secular and religious references, to produce intricate and occasionally ambiguous sonnets of acceptance and repentance. This essay explores the relationship between these themes and the ways in which they are expressed across sonnets I and III.

The sequence's opening sonnet is a largely narrative affair, providing the background context to the more allegorical second sonnet, and explicitly devotional third. In it, a female narrative voice blames fate for relinquishing her innocence ('Nor had (I) offendit', l. 4), and laments the dissolving of her happy marriage and previous status as 'Countes but compair' (l. 11), delaying the explanatory details, as if too painful to assign a full quatrain, to a rather ambiguous closing couplet. The largely descriptive nature of the poem is emphasised through its lack of clear addressee, in contrast to the following two sonnets, as well as the fact that its development through the quatrains is mostly chronological, often setting up an internal tension between 'then' and 'now': 'For I wes matchit with my match and mair… Quhill fickle fortun vhirld me from hir vheel' (ll. 9/12). This focus on the temporality of events is delivered in a suitably explanatory tone, with prominent notes of bitterness made apparent through the utilisation of, for example, multiple negative adjectives to modify 'threed' in line 2. Indeed, it is in such emotionally-charged lines that the author's use of alliteration, continuous throughout the sequence, takes on particular prevalence: the almost relentless 'string' of /th/, /l/ and /f/ sounds forces the tongue to shuffle between dental, labiodental and alveolar positions, not only producing a vague physical and sonic mirroring of the weaving of thread, but a cluster of phonemes which sound particularly 'flustered'. In this sense, the lines which immediately follow seem almost to try to compensate for the previous 'outburst' by adopting 'quieter', single alliterative sounds, whilst taking on a more formal and direct tone — even vaguely legalistic in the use of 'offendit' (l. 4).

The sonnet is largely a castigation of the fickleness of Fortune, mirrored in some of the contrastive techniques utilised. For example, though the figure is described as a 'wicked weard' in the opening line, the second quatrain portrays the narrative 'I' in an intimate physical stance with Fortune: 'In hir unhappy hands sho held my heed / And straikit bakuard wodershins my hair' (ll. 5-6). This apparently comforting, consolatory action, however, has an ominous undertone. The apparently tautological 'wodershins' carries connotations which 'bakuard' lacks. According to the *Dictionary of Old Scots Language*, the word is aligned to witchcraft and is 'construed as the direction opposite to that of the apparent motion of the

sun'.[1] It is therefore imbued with a sense of the abnormal and, along with the metaphorical image of hair-brushing, gives the sense of an ill-fated incursion of unnatural elements into an otherwise terrestrial sonnet: 'in this *eard*…No *worldly* woman…' (ll. 3/10). Moreover, this ambiguous image, at once intimate and foreboding, is also present in the 'double sentence' of Fortune's speech. All this gives the sense that the constancy of the natural world is at risk from the forked nature of Fortune's whims, reflected in the apparent failure of sexual constancy alluded to at the end of the poem.

The narrative nature of the poem is well-served by some of the formal aspects of the 'Spenserian; sonnet. Also known as a 'link sonnet'[2] by the 'linking' of stanzas through an interlocking rhyme scheme (ABAB/BCBC/CDCD/EE), it allows for some thematic emphasis to be placed on rhyme. In 'A Ladyis Lamentatione', the effect is akin to a slow bleeding of thematic concerns, with elements of her protestations of innocence in the first quatrain linking directly to the more abstract imagery of quatrain two through the use of full rhyme. This is particularly effective in lines 8 and 9, between quatrains 2 and 3, as the use of two monosyllabic adjectives to end the first line is complimented by the use of contrasting monosyllabic nouns to end the second, contrasting the negative present consequences with a wistful look back at her marriage before that, too, inevitably disintegrates as the quatrain progresses, along with the rhyme scheme. The end-couplet sets itself apart from the body of the poem through its unique rhymes, and it is relevant that in a sonnet which explores the alterations of past and present circumstances that they should affirm this metamorphosis by ending on past participles.

The couplet is also noticeable in that it does not reconcile the argument of the poem, since there is no discernible 'argument'; rather, it extends and reveals the nature of the Countess' fall from fortune's favour by filling in the temporal gap the sonnet has opened between the miserable present and the happy distant past. However, the narrative voice chooses to communicate this through the use of allusion. Despite being a rather clear allusion (Lucretia, a martyr to chastity after she committed suicide as the result of being raped, and Cressida, the adulterous mistress of Troilus, would have been well-known literary figures amongst readers of the time), the narrator nonetheless introduces an element of indirectness by using literary substitutes as a shorthand for her dilemma, whilst at the same time emphasising the sonnet's secular nature, in contrast to the overtly Catholic piety of sonnet III, where the classical figure of the condemned Cressida is substituted for that of the redeemed Mary Magdalene (l. 12).

The opening sonnet contrasts with the third in several key ways. By opening with an invocation of the Lord's name, the poet sets a prayer-like tone — as readers, we can expect a more reverent, perhaps less exclamatory tone. This is conveyed partly through the regular simple clauses and single sentences throughout, aided by the constancy of the iambic pentameter, to give the effect of a solemn prayer: 'Destroy me not that so of the estemes.' (l. 9). In some ways, the short sequence presents the development of a 'contrafactum' — the re-imagining of a secular poem into a religious one, replacing the mythological figures of Cressida and Melpomene in the first two sonnets with the Lord and Mary Magdalene in this. Similarly, the focus has shifted from criticism of 'my wicked weard' in the opening of sonnet I, to a consideration of her own agency in the making of her 'missis' (l. 1), further emphasised by an echoing of the almost indignant introductory interrogative ('Vhom suld I warie…?', sonnet I, l. 1) with a delicate, polite request ('micht I mak a mends…?', sonnet III, l. 1). The use of the emphatic pronoun in 'putting me' (l. 2) similarly highlights her determination in attaining forgiveness. The intensity of the request is to some extent echoed

1 *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, online edn. <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/index.html> [accessed 20 March 2013]
2 J. A. Cuddon, ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th edn. (London: Penguin Books 1999), p. 850

through the use of end-rhymes which share consonance or assonance, thus minimising the variation in sound between rhyme-changes: the long vowel of 'pleas'd' (l. 2) is remembered in the later 'semes' (l. 6) and even 'me' (l. 12).

There is, however, an undercurrent of doubt regarding the Lord's power of forgiveness, as the narrative voice implores 'God' to 'forgive offenders that offends' (l. 3), before almost backing this up with a legal prerogative through highlighting the 'Reversiones', usually employed in contractual circumstances (*DOST*). The sonnet negotiates a Penance and forgiveness through a mixture of imperatives ('Destroy me not', l. 10), contractual reminders (l. 8) and flattery ('blink on me euen with thy blisful beames', l. 11), which combine to give the impression of an individual wilfully adopting penitential mode, so long as it is sufficient. As a result, the sonnet develops along the more common lines of an 'argument', yet culminating in an ambiguous assertion: 'Forgive my gylt *sen nane bot God is gude*', (l. 13). This reference leads the reader to potentially re-question the identity of the addressee, particularly in conjunction with the speaker's apparent need for some form of clarification regarding the validity of her path of penance. It is possible, then, to re-read the sonnet as a conceit, adopting religious imagery and reference, and the surety of the attainment of God's forgiveness in the Catholic faith, to plead her 'Lord's, i.e., 'husband's clemency. The use of 'Lord', then, would be suitable in his office as 'mair', and the invocation of the *Peccavi Pater* communicating a desire to be returned to her husband, rather than her 'father'. Either reading remains possible, though by 'concluding' on a *Peccavi Pater* the poetic voice consciously and, for the first time, explicitly performs an act of penance.

Bibliography

Cuddon, J. A., ed., *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th edn. (London: Penguin Books, 1999)

Montgomerie, Alexander. 'A Ladyis Lamentatione' in *Love in a Cold Climate: The Sixteenth Century Scots Lyric Module Reader (Part 2)*

Internet References

Dictionary of the Scots Language, online edn. <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/index.html> [accessed 20 March 2013]