

# The Logic Game: Fallacy in Selected Poems by John Donne an Analytical Study

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**Abstract**—The aim of this paper is to analyze three seduction poems by John Donne regarding his use of fallacy as a technique for seduction. These poems are “The Flea,” “Confined Love,” and “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” Donne tries to manipulate reasoning in the arguments with the women in those poems cleverly through false beliefs, that is, fallacies, to convince them of the legitimacy and sanctity of sexual intercourse, whether it is premarital or adultery. He deploys strong fallacious arguments with the women, who are presented as cautious or dismissive, in all three poems to achieve his aim of convincing those women to voluntarily agree to his sexual desire.

**Keywords**—Poetry, Fallacy, Donne, Logic game

## I. INTRODUCTION

The very interesting aspect that makes a poem Donnean is the strong presence of logic. However, his use of logic does not in any way influence the literary aspect of his poetry. In Donne’s poetry, figurative language and formal logic are both fused wittingly. Wiggins (1945) attributes Donne’s “logical” poetry to the latter’s early study of theology as well as spending so much time on learning philosophy. Some critics have marked Donne’s use of logic as part of his metaphysical style, while actually his being one of the metaphysical poets has blurred his unparagoned argumentative style. This style is not free from his witty expression when he has the least truth. Therefore, being a master in logic and wit, Donne has made of some of his poems “logic game(s)” (Andreasen, 1967, p. 80). Each of these poems is a synthesis of logic and wit which is fallacious but amusing to the reader. Donne uses fallacy to make semi-logical assumptions that may convince the reader of the conclusions he is after. Marotti (2008) argues that Donne uses “false logic” (p. 47) to amuse and challenge his readers. The amusement lies in how Donne uses fallacious arguments in some of his seduction lyrics as an effective technique to seduce women into bed. The poems which are examined in this paper are “The Flea,” “Confined Love,” and “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” which are published in Donne’s Songs and Sonnets collection of poems except for “To His Mistress Going to Bed” which had been printed in a separate collection.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Being influenced by Puritan morality, the age of Donne is marked by the preservation of women’s sexual integrity. All expressions of premarital love might have posed a threat to woman honor and reputability. However, Donne had openly defied his society by composing seduction lyrics. Donne uses false logic as a technique by which he persuades the mistresses addressed in those lyrics to make love. He also uses its deceptive reasonableness to convince her of the rightness of lovemaking outside marriage in his three unconventional seduction lyrics, “The Flea,” “Confined Love,” and “To His Mistress Going to Bed.”

## III. DISCUSSION

“The flea” is a three-stanza conventional seduction poem. An argument in which the speaker seduces his mistress by comparing their sexual intercourse to the fusion of their blood inside the body of the insect. For each stanza of the three-stanza poem, Donne presents a logical fallacy to wisely albeit wittily convince his mistress of his unorthodox concepts. The first point he tries to make is the triviality of their sexual intercourse which she believes is a sin and a dishonor by comparing it to the triviality of the blood mingling inside the hematophagous insect. The fallacious logic which we may deduce here comes in the form of a syllogism; this insect is a trivial thing for you, the blood mingling inside it is trivial, and therefore, you should deem our lovemaking trivial too;

How little that which thou deniest me is;  
 It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,  
 And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;  
 Thou know'st that this cannot be said  
 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead, (2-6)

The argument of the second stanza is set to reach two ends, one is to prove to his mistress that their lovemaking is neither against law nor religion as she assumes it to be, and second is to prevent her from killing the insect. Donne here uses irony to help him achieve the two goals by making the killing of the insect, the symbol of lovemaking in the poem, a sin. The speaker of the poem tells his mistress that the mingling of their blood inside the insect makes it sacred because it has become their "marriage temple" (13). According to Guibbory (2015), Donne usually sanctifies and legalizes sexual intercourse based on true love in his poetry, even if it is not recognized by law or church. The speaker also tells his mistress that the flea carries the lives "bloods" of both of them; hence, by killing it she would commit a sin and a crime at the same time by murdering the three of them. Again the fallacy here is very much an implicit syllogistic fallacy; murdering lives is a sin; our lives "bloods" are in this flea, therefore, killing the flea is a sin. However, the lady rejects this faulty argument, so she kills the insect to prove that nothing of what the speaker is worried about would happen. In the third stanza, Donne adds a powerful conclusion to aim at proving the mistress wrong for rejecting the speaker from the very beginning. It is as if the speaker has been deceiving her by provoking her into killing the insect. The fallacy of the last stanza is cunning and deceptive and is presented to win the argument; committing the sin of killing is trivial for you, then committing the sin of lovemaking should be trivial too, which proves his first assumption that lovemaking is trivial. "The Flea" is an innovative poem by which Donne manipulates informal logic to satirize and devalue moral restraint imposed by religion and law upon individuals.

"Confined Love" is a controversial poem where the speaker seduces perhaps a married woman. It is not far from "The Flea," as it also satirizes, even though explicitly, imposing limitations on human freedom. Again Donne uses false logic as a technique of seduction, "to critique orthodox views on sexual relations" (Corthell, 1997, p. 66). He presents the male-female relation under law as being troublesome wavering between sexual possession and sexual freedom (Corthell, 1997). The woman in this poem is not less unyielding than the woman in "The Flea." The speaker tries to convince his mistress of promiscuity. He tells her that the law which imposes chastity upon her was first established by a man who did not want to confess weakness and impotence; thereby, he passed it to all men and women, which is perhaps one of Donne's cynical remarks of Man's formation and enforcement of law. In the second stanza, Donne uses his metaphysical conceit when the speaker makes a comparison between humans' relations and that of animals to come to the conclusion that marriage law is not set to protect women's rights but to restrict them. The speaker urges his mistress to make love to him and whomever she wants and should not

obey any law that denies her this right like all other parts of the natural, physical world. He tells her that all parts of the physical world do what they are created to do without restrictions, and animals are not bound by any rules of marriage or divorce nor they blame each other, "if they leave their mate, or lie abroad a-night" (11) which makes them better than us. This conceit is presented through a rhetorical question to make the argument more persuasive. The last lines might support the accusation of Donne's objectification of women, yet it promotes the logical fallacy in the poem. In a metaphor, he compares a woman who has one partner to objects; "ships" that are kept in harbors, also "fair houses," "trees," and "arbors" that are locked up or deserted;

Who e'er rigg'd fair ships to lie in harbors,  
 And not to seek lands, or not to deal with all?  
 Or built fair houses, set trees, and arbors,  
 Only to lock up, or else to let them fall? (15-18)

And he closes the poem with an emotional fallacy to win the argument by accusing those who share their love with only one partner of "greediness." This accusation may not only be against the man who has made a law of it, but also the woman (his mistress) who refuses to violate it.

Also known as "Elegy 19," "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is regarded as an erotic poem. It is the most daring among Donne's seduction poems that it was censored and rejected for publication by the licenser of the 1633 volume of Poems until it appeared in the edition of 1669 (Guibbory, 2006). The speaker in this poem tries to get his mistress in bed. He describes the way, whether imagined or real, of her undressing for him to his readers which makes this woman less unattainable than the women of the previously discussed poems. Helen Gardener (as cited in Brackett, 2008) states that, "as a love poet he (Donne) seems to owe nothing to what any other man in love had ever felt or said before him; his language is all his own" (p. 402). This is all too apparent in "To His Mistress Going to Bed" as he celebrates and sanctifies lust, a thing that no poet before him has ventured to do. The speaker verbally lures his mistress into "love's hallow'd temple" (18), his bed. He employs religion to connect sexuality to spirituality and the underlying aim is "sexual conquest" (Guibbory, 2006, p. 142). Therefore, he wittily draws analogies between the body and the soul to reach this aim; he argues, "As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be" (34). Many images and metaphors are also utilized to serve this aim, for example, when the undressed mistress is compared to an angel from, "Mahomet's Paradise" indicating the virgins that are offered to the men of Islamic paradise. However, this point makes the argument more fallacious as Donne here tries to sanctify nakedness playing on the sensual implications in the Islamic description of those virgins.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A professional juggler may start his career with throwing rubber balls in the air and develop it into throwing chainsaws. However, Donne had started in studying logic and developed

it into jugglery to display his skills in wit and entertain his readers. In his three seduction poems, "The Flea," "Confined Love," and "To his Mistress Going to Bed," Done uses faulty reason, namely, fallacy to persuade the three women to engage in a sexual relationship with him out of conviction that she is enjoying her right and not committing a sin or a crime.

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