I. Introduction

Decades of reading and striving to understand poetry have led me to formulate what I consider to be three indispensable principles for approaching poetry. Those principles are:

(1) One must possess a basic knowledge of metric techniques and poetic forms. Whether a poet writes within a tradition or against a tradition, that poet knows the tradition and expects the ideal reader to share that knowledge.

(2) One must never assume that the fictive speaker in a poem is the author. A poem is a fiction, an artful lie, and the author of the poem is free to experiment with a variety of personas and points of view. For example, a female poet may write a poem from the point of view of a male, and a male poet may write a poem from the point of view of a female.¹

(3) One must treat every poem (that is a monologue) as an implicit drama in which the speaker is the protagonist.² On the basis of what the speaker says, one should be able to reconstruct the implied dramatic situation within which he or she is placed.³

When I taught British Literature, the poem that I used to illustrate this framework to my students was John Donne’s “The Flea.” I chose this poem for three reasons:

(1) It is a good poem.
(2) It is short enough to do thoroughly in one class period.
(3) It invites the kind of reading that all poems require.

In what follows, I will provide the text of the poem, after which I will proceed to the kind of reading that, I believe, is paradigmatic for all poems.

¹ Even where the speaker shares a name with the author, as in The Canterbury Tales, that speaker is a fictionalized alter ego. In The Canterbury Tales, it is demonstrable that the Geoffrey Chaucer who undertakes the pilgrimage has life events and characteristics that differ from what is known about the “historical” Geoffrey Chaucer, who is different from both the pilgrim Geoffrey Chaucer in the pilgrimage and the older version of that pilgrim who later narrates that pilgrimage. See my “The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales: “all the condicioun of each of them”” on the Publications/Other Essays page of my web site (www.doczonline.com).
² Of course, dialogic poems are explicit dramas.
³ There is a fourth principle that is operative with all writers of substance, whether poets or not. That principle is the conviction that great writers are conscious craftspersons who construct their writings with care and conscious deliberation.
II. Text

The Flea

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny’st me is;
It suck’d me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;
Thou know’st that this cannot be said
A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead,
   Yet this enjoys before it woe, 5
   And pamper’d swells with one blood made of two,
   And this, alas, is more then wee would doe.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where wee almost, yea more then maryed are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, w’are met,
And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet. 10
   Though use make you apt to kill mee,
   Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,
   And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence? 15
Wherein could this flea guilty bee,
Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?
Yet thou triumph’st and saist that thou
Find’st not thy selfe, nor mee the weaker now;
   ’Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee; 20
   Just so much honor, when thou yeeld’st to mee,
   Will wast, as this flea’s death tooke life from thee.
III. Commentary: Technical

The poem consists of three nine-line stanzas written largely in iambic meter. Each stanza is set up to be constituted of eight lines of alternating tetrameter (odd-numbered lines through 8) and pentameter (even-numbered lines through 8) followed by a ninth line of pentameter. The only exception is the fourth line of the third stanza (line 22), in which the two central anapests make the line metrically tetrameter, even though it remains syllabically consistent since it contains ten syllables.

The rhyme scheme of the first two stanzas is aabbccdd, while that of the third stanza is aabbccbbb.

It remains to be seen how these technical characteristics function organically within the poem.

IV. Commentary: Dramatic

The speaker’s opening statement has the tone of a pedagogue teaching a lesson. The initial trochee (which is anti-iambic and hence against the naturally iambic flow of conversation) indicates that the interchange begun here is the middle of what might be a lecture in which the teacher has made a point to which his student interlocutor has raised an objection. To counter the objection, an emphatic example is required, an example whose importance is highlighted by the initial stressed syllable. The last three feet restore a more natural iambic conversational flow. The statement taken by itself (namely, ‘Look at this flea, and notice this about it’) could have been excerpted from a biology class. It seems to be an innocuous enough prelude to a scientific disquisition on the characteristics of the insect known as the flea.

Therefore, the second line comes as a tantalizing surprise: when the speaker explains why the flea should be noticed, one sees that what is at stake in this conversation is personal, not pedagogical. The interlocutor has denied the speaker something, and the flea is meant to be emblematic of why that denial is not justified. The natural iambic flow of the line suggests that the interlocutor is still listening and not trying to leave the conversation. However, one does not yet know what it is that the speaker wants that his interlocutor refuses to grant.

Since the speaker continues, one must presume that what he has said has piqued the curiosity of his interlocutor enough to keep that interlocutor listening to the completion of the point that is being made.

In the third line, the speaker begins to make that point explicit in a deliberately provocative way. The provocation is in the double use of the verb “to suck” instead of a more neutral verb like “to bite.” That verb use makes one begin to suspect that the personal issue at stake is sexual, something that was probably explicit in the unwritten prologue. In addition, the final spondee (“sucks thee”) pointedly places the speaker’s spotlight on his interlocutor, and it does so in a suggestively sexual way.

4 Of the one hundred twenty-two feet, only fifteen are non-iambic: seven trochees [1, 8, 16, 19, 20, 23 (bis)], six spondees [3, 10 (bis), 17, 21, 27], and two anapests [22 (bis)].

5 One now realizes that the unwritten prologue to the poem would have contained the speaker’s overture to his interlocutor and his interlocutor’s rebuff of that overture.
That sexual suggestiveness becomes gently more explicit in the next three lines. As it does, one realizes that what one is witnessing herein is an elegant and witty attempt on the part of the speaker to seduce his female companion [whose identity as a female is definitively established by the word “maidenhead” (6)].

In addition, that sexual suggestiveness has a double function. Intra-dramatically, it shows the subtle increase in rhetorical pressure that the speaker is trying to exert on his potential paramour. Extra-dramatically, at the same time as the speaker homes in on his erotic target, the reader is drawn more actively into the situation out of motives both literary and prurient. In other words, as the speaker seduces his companion, the poem seduces the reader.

Then the speaker makes (4-6) what he conveys to be a confidently natural (and therefore totally iambic) argument. The speaker becomes almost professorial again, pointing out that the flea has sucked first his blood and then hers, a temporal sequence that mirrors the movement of desire in the situation, namely from the speaker to his female companion.6

His message here is the following. Having sucked both their bloods, the flea now contains the intermingled blood of the two of them. Although the speaker does not draw the implied conclusion, he expects his companion to draw that conclusion for herself, an implicit compliment to her astuteness and perspicacity. That conclusion is that already within the flea, the two of them are having sex, already have had sex.

In carefully feigned innocence, the speaker (still rather professorial) asserts that their sexual congress in the flea is certainly not a sin, not even anything of which one ought to be ashamed. Finally, they have had sex and—miracle of miracles—she is still a virgin (“nor losse of maidenhead”). Of course, he means to insinuate that the same would be true if they had sex outside the flea, namely that she could acquiesce in his sexual desire and still remain a virgin.

Before she can reply, he leaps to meet another possible objection to his suit, the objection that premarital sex is a sin that brings upon oneself social and psychological pain and anguish. The way in which he meets that objection is outlandish. He claims that the flea, which he now treats as a couple, feels nothing but pleasure (“enjoyes”), even though it has had sex before marriage (“before it woee”).7

The speaker’s companion must already be starting to indicate her aversion to his proposal, because the speaker now heightens the pressure by lasciviously describing the swollenness of the flea from its containing their mingled blood. The finite verb “swells” suggests sexual arousal. However, the penultimate trochee [“blood made” (8)] breaks the flow of his speech. He may be realizing that his calculated eloquence is not carrying the day. In addition, the double stressed “one blood,” which is his desired goal, suggests that his goal is slipping away.

Therefore, he concludes with an attempt to evoke pity, sighing that what he wants them to do is far less than what they already have done inside the flea. In other words, the exchange of sexual bodily fluids is trivial compared to a blood transfusion.

When he cries out at the beginning of the second stanza (“Oh stay”), one realizes that his companion is about to swat the flea and kill it. He becomes somewhat desperate. His desperation expresses itself through the two spondees (“three

6 There is no implied reciprocity in the desire that the temporal sequence adumbrates.
7 Strictly speaking, he is saying that it has had sex before there is even any intention of marrying.
lives” / “flea spare”), which produce an eight-syllable line in which fully six syllables are stressed.

He must now be reaching out to stay her hand while he continues to make his erotic case. Indeed, her attempt to crush the flea has inspired him to a new level of argumentation.

The flea is now not simply a solitary insect. Rather, it is a living vessel within which two other beings (through their blood) reside. Therefore, the flea is actually three beings in one, a kind of perverse trinity that evokes the religious language of the second stanza.

The speaker’s argument is imaginatively tortuous. He claims that by refraining from killing the flea, his companion is actually saving three lives. He and his companion are in that flea, and in it, they “more than maryed are,” which is meant to suggest not only that they are married, but also that they have consummated their marriage.

Now the flea expands kaleidoscopically; the flea is she; the flea is he; the flea is the bed on which their marriage has been consummated; and the flea is the church (“temple”) in which their marriage ceremony has taken place. It is no accident that in this list, the consummation of the marriage precedes the marriage ceremony.

One should note how extraordinary his persistence is, even in the face of apparently insurmountable resistance and objections. For example, her parents would not approve (“parents grudge”), and she herself is unwilling. Despite all this, the two of them have merged (“met”) in a religiously sanctioned way (“cloyster’d”) within the black body (“living walls of Jet”) of the flea.

Meanwhile, his companion is struggling to free her arm from his grip so that she can rebut his argument in the most graphic and emphatic way, namely by killing the flea. This is why the speaker acknowledges that habit or convention (“use”) might explain her impulse to lash out at (“kill”) him, but habit or convention cannot justify suicide, an act that she would be committing by crushing the flea with her (i.e., her blood) in it. After all, suicide is sacrilege, and if she were to kill the flea, she would be committing three sins [two murders (the speaker and the flea) and one suicide (herself)].

This is finally too much for her, so she frees her arm and crushes the flea to death. This causes the faux-shocked speaker\(^8\) to call her cruel and violent, since she has killed an innocent creature (now the flea alone), and she carries the bloody proof (“Purpled”) of her deed on her fingernail. In this outrageous comparison, the flea is elevated almost to the level of Christ crucified by this unfeeling female.

The only trivial crime of which this poor innocent flea is guilty is that it sucked blood from his companion, hardly a reason to impose the ultimate sentence of capital punishment upon it (line 22). The two central anapests give the line a hurried quality: it is as if the speaker is throwing this in as an inconsequential afterthought in order to buy himself a little time to think.

Does the female companion feel remorse for her crime? — In no way. She speaks her triumphant rebuttal of his argument.\(^9\) One does not hear directly what she has said. Instead, one hears the speaker’s restatement of her remark. What she has said is that she has killed the flea, yet neither she nor the speaker has been killed along with it.

\(^8\) That he is at least startled is indicated by the initial trochee (19).

\(^9\) That he is stuttering as he prepares a new approach is indicated by the double trochee at the beginning of line 23.
Even more, they are totally unaffected, having suffered neither death nor even weakness (loss of life force). In short, despite the speaker’s hyperbolic claims, his companion has demonstrated graphically that in killing the flea, she and he remain exactly the same as they were before.

The speaker—in a final attempt to win her over—now tries to turn his defeat in the argument into an argumentative and erotic victory. He concedes her point (“’Tis true”) and admits that the fears that he expressed were unfounded. Therefore, he delivers what he hopes will be the concluding rhetorical coup de grace: if she grants him the sexual favors that he wants (i.e., if she yields to him), she will “wast” (= “waste”), i.e., lose, just as much honor as the life that the flea containing her blood lost when she crushed it to death, which is none at all. Consequently, he dares to assert emphatically that she has nothing to lose by having sex with him.

That is where one is left. One does not know with absolute certainty whether she will leave him in the lurch or will accede finally to his desire. That she has lingered through as much of the seduction as one sees here might suggest that as his intellectual and erotic equal, she is enjoying the play of words and actions, in which case her refusal might be a reverse seduction. On the other hand, she might be stringing him along only to abandon him to his frustration and embarrassment. One simply does not know whether—if one follows the pun in the title—she will flee to him or from him.

Nevertheless, the most likely scenario is telegraphed by the poem itself. Since the reader is left in a frustrated state with regard to the outcome of the seduction, one would assume that this is meant to mirror the frustrated state of the speaker at the end of a failed seduction attempt.

Therefore—although this must be put forth as only an educated conjecture—the woman leaves the speaker as frustrated as the poem seems to leave the reader.¹¹

However, the reader is one up on the speaker. Once the reader accepts this conclusion, the reader at least is able to go beyond the frustration to a resolution that provides literary and dramatic satisfaction. This would suggest that the word game between the poet and the reader is more truly gratifying than the sex game between the erotic pursuer and the erotic pursued. Of course, none of this is to suggest that one should sit out either game.

¹⁰ The emphasis is felt especially in the central spondaic foot.
¹¹ The frustration is also mirrored in the rhyme scheme of the third stanza. The new rhyme that one has been led to expect (from the first two stanzas) fails to appear, and in its place, the speaker reverts to the rhyme of the third and fourth lines of the stanza. In other words, the rhyme scheme expectation is frustrated to mirror the frustration of the speaker.