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GENERIC CHALLENGES: ENGLISH EPITHALAMIC TRADITION AND ITS DECONSTRUCTION (THE CASE OF JOHN DONNE)

The paper is an attempt at the analysis of generic flexibility as reflected in the minor literary genre of epithalamium, or wedding song. The problem is approached from the reader response and mythopoetic perspective by focusing on John Donne's Metaphysical instrumentarium employed in the experimental testing of the conventional boundaries. Although, on the one hand, Edmund Spenser's "Epithalamion" very successfully follows the Sapphic-Catullan conventions and is regarded as the best creative achievement in English literature, J. Donne's three epithalamions, in their turn, demonstrate the Baroque virtuosity of transformation. The poet daringly experiments with the responses of both the epithalamic and Metaphysically oriented audience inviting the readers into a challenging rhetorical game. Although he borrows the motifs from classical and Christian nuptial tradition, due to his poetic style marked by the structural and verbal ingenuity, the epithalamic relationships get reordered. The perspective of generic deconstruction with regard to Metaphysical conceited imagery invoked to dramatise the matrimonial marriage as seen in J. Donne's epithalamions is discussed for the first time in Lithuanian literary criticism.

KEY WORDS: epithalamium, Metaphysical conceit, generic deconstruction, cartographical imagery.

Introduction

In Lithuanian literary criticism, the nuptial poetic genre as the object of analysis has been researched mainly in relation to Casimirus Sarbiewski and his Latin epithalamia (Šarkauskienė 2003). The given paper attempts at the discussion of the reader's expectations with regard to the seventeenth-century English epithalamic genre. The special focus is on John Donne's Metaphysical epithalamia. In the given case, the readers' expectations may be of two types – they may approach the nuptial texts from the perspective of the requirements of the epithalamic format and thus remain dis/satisfied with their readings, or be in search of

whether and how much the Metaphysical author manipulates (or even inverts) their generic expectations providing a friction-based satisfaction. The former would most appreciate J. Donne's *An Epithalamion, or Marriage Song on the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine being Married on St Valentine's Day* (1613), which is generally considered as his third and most successful generic endeavour and the latter would eagerly delve into the poet's daring experimentations while testing the limits of the epithalamic genre reflected in his *Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn* (probably 1595, after the publication of Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion*) and *Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset* (1614), his first and second attempts respectively.

The epithalamic vogue in England started after the publication of Edmund Spenser's *Epithalamion* in 1595. Epithalamium achieved its absolute perfection in the last decade of the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries both as an independent genre and a poetic intertext in the Elizabethan drama and masque, by some critics viewed as subgenre (cf. Eastwood 2010: 259). As Virginia Tufté (1970: 2) affirms, the latter tradition is "a recurrence of a device seen as early as Aristophanes' comedies, the *Peace* and the *Birds*, both of which conclude with epithalamia".

Epithalamia were composed in verse or prose and beside drama they were used in "epic, erotic, epyllion, allegorical mythological poem, psychological treatise, devotional treatise, sermon, emblem book, textbook, and historical-geographical narrative" (Tufté 1970: 4). It is interesting to note that within the frame of the genre the literary characteristics were more compelling than any specific social environment. Among the literary sources that influenced the Elizabethan epithalamion are Hebrew, Greek, medieval Latin, neo-Latin, Italian, French and Spanish nuptial songs. On the other hand, as Patrick Cheney and Philip Hardie (2015: 331) maintain, the genre "confers the sight of the personal domain transposed into the public by a code of reference known to a small circle of contemporaries". It was traditionally devoted to noble weddings. Contemporary scholars are apt to stress the socio-cultural (i.e. ceremonial) paradigm which is poetically delivered. Epithalamists idealise marriage which is treated as a cultural and social event. Their poetry carries "resonances that were at once political, erotic, and communal" (Eastwood 2010: 242).

Dozens of English poets were inspired by the potentialities offered by the genre, even King James I was no exception. No doubt, John Donne could not resist the temptation to take up an intellectual challenge the more so that he was writing to a newly forming epithalamic community. In his first epithalamion, he makes daring experiments with the responses of the audience: the poet aims to shock and surprise by subverting the readers' epithalamic expectations.

John Donne's epithalamions as Metaphysical constructs

J. Donne is distinct from other Elizabethan epithalamists in that his wedding poems do not dwell on the conventional motifs. Rather, his epithalamions unfold as Metaphysical constructs. They demonstrate a pervasive intellectuality and erudition. As in his other writings, here the poet remains complex, learned and argumentative. Indeed, the author

introduces a new variety of the genre by putting on a substantial injection of “new vigor” (Tufté 1970: 243). Therefore his epithalamions should be read “in terms of J. Donne’s canon” (Schench 1988: 83).

As a dramatic poet, J. Donne was especially attracted by “the potentially tension-filled drama” (Eastwood 2010: 242) encoded in the nuptial hymn which had a dramatic structure based on a series of particular actions related with wedding. His familiarity with classical, neo-Latin and French, or in other words, pagan and Christian epithalamia is evident. According to P. Cheney and Ph. Hardie (2015: 329), the English epithalamic tradition is mainly indebted to the nuptial poetic schemes developed by Catullus in his longer carmina 61, 62 and 64 that are called epithalamia and “more distantly, [to] Sappho”. In fact, all three Donnean epithalamions include the conventional descriptions of the festive events of the wedding day. Hence in his nuptial poems certain basic motifs persist, yet the majority of the inherited conventions are re-modified.

Epithalamia could be written either for an actual marriage, or fictional wedding. J. Donne successfully exploited both possibilities: His *Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn* does not imply any particular marriage to be celebrated. The other two wedding songs clearly reveal the identity of the married couples – Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine (*An Epithalamion, or Marriage Song on the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine being Married on St Valentine’s Day*) and Robert Ker, Earl of Somerset and Lady Frances Howard (cf. Carey 1990: 469) (*Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*). Being not devoted to any particular person, J. Donne’s *Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn* gave more liberty to Metaphysical experimentation. It is agreed that the poet composed it soon after the triumphant publication of Edmund Spenser’s *Epithalamion* with its rich complex of romantic wedding imagery. J. Donne’s epithalamic discourse stands as a contrast to the mentioned highly serious Renaissance nuptial anthem and therefore is often viewed by critics as anti-epithalamion (Tufté 1970: 218), or even mock-epithalamion (Novarr 1976: 136). Schench (1988: 75) also claims that in it “Donne <...> bawdily fits fescenine <...> in a broadly parodic manner”, here the bride seems to gain the master-of-ceremonies’ full attention, the bridegroom entirely disappearing from the nuptial scene. The majority of the critics affirm that, similarly to J. Donne’s poem *The Flea*, this epithalamion was written entirely for entertainment to be performed during the Mid-summer revels and exclusively for the male audience when he was twenty-three-year old law student at Lincoln’s Inn.

The potential of the cartographical conceit in the epithalamic genre

In fact, his nuptial poems expose a playfully serious style. As other Metaphysicals, J. Donne was by temperament “alienated from Spenser’s rich Renaissance poetics” (Schench 1988: 83). His Baroque imagination enjoys transformation and deconstruction for their own sake. In this respect, he is a virtuoso. The poet plays variations on the traditional epithalamic mechanism thus displaying his specific rhetorical skills. His creative mind races from one image or comparison to another finding pleasure in the exciting process of argumentative persuasion. J. Donne employs Metaphysical dialectic to prove his point and always takes

such exercises as a delightful game. It is worth stressing here that the poet is an expert in controlling Metaphysical conceits. Consider his cartographical conceit extended in *Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*:

*The passage of the west or east should thaw,
And open wide their easy liquid jaw
To all our ships, could a Promethean art
Either unto the northern pole impart
The fire of these inflaming eyes, or of this loving heart.*
(lines 11–15)¹

In this wedding song, the map imagery is used with erotic implications. It should be noted that traditionally the epithalamia were accompanied with the fescenine elements. Initially, the function of the specific ritualistic fescenine songs was to drive away the evil spirits and bad omens in the marital life. Later on, the role of these elements was to support the so-called “doctrine of increase” (Tufté 1970: 136). It is worth remembering here that J. Donne is erotic in so far as he is dramatic.

In the quoted excerpt, the sexually charged imagery is ingenious and erudite. It requires the knowledge of the map and geography, the author addressing the audience delighted by map aesthetics. By “the passage of the west or east” (*Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, line 11) the poet means “the Arctic sea-routes to the West and East Indies round the north of America and Russia” (cf. Carey 1990: 469), or to be more precise, the Bering Straits, the Bering Sea and other Arctic seas. Consider the map of the Northern Pole presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The map of the Bering Straits and Arctic sea-routes

Source: Map 2017.

It should be marked here that the image of India is one of the central geographical codes used by J. Donne in his female portrayal, the epithalamions being no exception: *Make her <...>/ As gay as Flora, and as rich as Ind* (*Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn*, lines 21–22). Meanwhile, the bridegroom in *Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of*

¹ This and other quotations from John Donne's works are taken from: Donne 1990.

Somerset is viewed as a discoverer of new trans-Arctic trade routes represented by the moistening genitals of the bride when exited during consummation – a welcoming widely opened “easy liquid jaw” (line 12). Here the Monarch of Wit inventively combines the cartographical imagery with the imagery of fluidity and thus eroticises the map. According to John Carey (1981: 175), “the idea of melting irresistibly attracted him”, the liquid images abounding in the contexts of love and religion. On the other hand, J. Donne diminishes the sexual load of the poem because the readers’ attention is diverted by his ingenious conceit, in which imagery is moved from the nuptial bed to the map. Maidenhood is equalled to the icebound Bering Straits blocking the passage for the English ships to reach India. The poet imagines the vitality of the nuptial night to be able to thaw the polar ice. The image of thawing has a positive connotation suggesting warmth and tenderness of marital love which is praised as virtuous rather than lustful. It may be found as an original and most unexpected reworking of Theocritus’s comparison of the bride to “the bright spring as winter relaxes its hold” (Tufté 1970: 17). The traditional epithalamic motto – ‘What nature has frozen, love melts’ – is introduced through an intricate conceit. The difference is also seen in varying sets of imagery: as a Baroque poet, Donne is not fond of natural rustic images and often draws on the rich reservoir offered by cartography. His Metaphysical conceits are structured with exceptional precision. Through dynamically interactive shifts between contexts, a human flesh, as a microcosm, acquires a global projection. It is worth remembering here that in Roman epithalamia, it is Venus who addresses the bride by praising marriage in relation to cosmic processes (see Catullus’ *Carmen* 62; Statius’s nuptial hymns). To achieve a similar effect, i.e. to show that the union of the married couple acquires universal importance, J. Donne reconciles the bride with the loss of virginity in cartographical terms through microcosm-macrocosm relationship. The poet seems to have given a new life to the old epithalamic motifs. He modifies the Catullan topographical elements, such as “rivers, seas, mountains, torrents, hills, lakes, valleys, beaches” (Tufté 1970: 99) by developing his individual cartographical iconography, the map becoming one of the symbols of consummation.

Indeed, his Metaphysical imagination plays a significant role in constructing marital concord which is linked with national pride. As the epithalamic tradition insists, the author should connect the nuptial with the political to reveal the communal celebration of reproduction which Donne successfully achieves: the newly opened trans-Arctic trade routes would guarantee prospect to the country; so similarly, healthy prodigy will determine the safe future to England and its superiority in Europe. With the help of “conceited dress[ing]” (*Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn*, line 19), the poet dramatises the responsibility the young bride is about to assume.

Another traditional requirement to the epithalamic authors is that they should show their erudition and at the same time give pleasing verses. Donne successfully satisfies it by demonstrating his up-to-date knowledge. Moreover, his Metaphysical epithalamic apparatus embraces the contemporary issues, such as, for instance, Copernicus’s new theory of the Earth’s rotation: “*And were the doctrine new / That the earth moved, this day would*

make it true” (*Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, lines 186–187). It is interesting to note that this theory is mentioned to create a humorous effect which is based on the popular ‘proof’ of the opposite, i.e. that if one jumped at one point, he would unavoidably land on another due to the Earth’s movement (cf. Carey 1990: 470): the dancers at the wedding party seem to confirm Copernicus’s idea: “*For every part to dance and revel goes./ They tread the air, and fall not where they rose*” (*Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, lines 188–189).

A playful collusion of the cartographical and mythical codes within the epithalamic framework

In the above analysed cartographical conceit, Donne combines the cartographical with the mythical:

<...> could a Promethean art
 Either unto the northern pole impart
 The fire of these inflaming eyes, or of this loving heart.
 (*Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, lines 113–115)

As is customary in the traditional epithalamia, the accommodation of myth is associated with the motif of the marital union of deities. Thetis and Peleus, parents of Achilles, were regarded as an archetypal happiest couple of ages (Tufté 1970: 32) due to their legitimate marriage. Donne does not follow this tradition and introduces the mythical figures that at a first sight may seem not to be related with marriage. In the quoted excerpt, the author proclaims his interest in the Promethean myth. Since the leading image reiterated in each refrain of the discussed epithalamion is the image of the fire suggesting conjugal love which is radiating from the eyes of the bride and the heart of the bridegroom, the introduction of the Promethean intertext is logical. Prometheus is famous for secretly taking the fire from Olympus in the stalk of a fennel plant and bringing it to men after Zeus had deprived them of fire. Thus through myth, the fire of love experienced by the married couple acquires the value of the Olympic, or divine fire. On the symbolic level, Prometheus taught men the art of love based on sacrifice.

It is important to observe that although Thetis or Peleus are never mentioned in this epithalamion, Prometheus comes out to be related with their marriage. Thanks to his titanic foretelling the fatal future for Zeus that, if he marries a sea-goddess Thetis, their son will overthrow his father, Zeus gave up his mind to marry her and decided that Thetis must get married to a mortal man Peleus, king of Phthia (Grant, Hazel 1979: 338). Hence, in the poem, Prometheus becomes a potential personification of nuptial marriage.

As mentioned above, the divine married pairs do not appear in Donnean epithalamions. Yet, there are cases when the poet couples the mythical personages by opposition. Traditional epithalamists are apt to compare the bride to Phoebe (‘bright one’), a Titaness, daughter of Uranus and Gaia (Grant, Hazel 1979: 279) in order to describe her exceptional radiating beauty. Donne prefers the male mythical characters with alliterating names, *Phoebus* and *Phaethon*, to whom the bride is compared by affirmation or negation. Consider:

*Powder thy radiant hair,
Which if without such ashes thou wouldst wear,
Thou which to all which come to look upon,
Art meant for Phoebus, wouldst be Phaeton.*

(*Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, lines 142–145)

Phoebus (having the same connotation of brightness) is a name for Apollo, one of the greatest gods in the Greek and Roman pantheon, often associated with the sun. However, Phaethon whose name evokes negative associations is the illegitimate son of Helios (named Phoebus in the poem), the Sun-God and the Oceanide Clymene (Grant, Hazel 1979: 276). According to the myth, when Phaethon and Helios met, the father offered to grant his son any wish. Phaethon expressed his dangerous demand to act like his father, i.e. to drive the sun-chariot across the sky as his father used to do every day. Unfortunately, young Phaethon was not ready to control the four “red foaming horses” (*Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, line 132), as Donne puts it, that are yoked to the gleaming chariot. The fatal result was the scorched Earth plunged into drought and the blackened skin of the equatorial people (Grant, Hazel 1979: 276).

By having assumed the traditional master-of-ceremonies role, the poet centres his praise on the bride’s radiant beauty. Donne wittingly develops the mythical motif for humorous and light teasing effects that are important aspects in the epithalamic genre. Here humour and seriousness complement each other. The author stresses that the demonstration of beauty should be controlled and preserved in its full vigour exclusively to the bridegroom, otherwise it may be dangerous by evoking desire in other men, which is revealed with the introduction of the figure of an inexperienced yet ambitious Phaethon, the image of the scorched Earth and by visualising the black skinned faces of the participants in the wedding ceremony. Indeed, the conventional simile of the bride shining like the sun has been innovatively exercised.

On the whole, as have been noticed, both in the traditional and Baroque epithalamia, the bride and the bridegroom, to put it in Tufte’s (1970: 27) wording, remain “faceless” despite the offered extensive descriptions and therefore the wedding poems might be successfully applied to any married couple. Paradoxically, the minor mythical characters are given vivid portrayals demonstrating their individual identities.

To provide the bride’s modesty which is another nuptial accent, the author inventively combines the image of the ashes (also suggesting mutability and death) and the imagery of liquidity, i.e. the image of the passion-quenching tear:

*For our ease, give thine eyes th’ unusual part
Of joy, a tear; so quenched thou mayst impart,
To us that come, thy inflaming eyes, to him, thy loving heart.*

(*Epithalamion of the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, lines 146–148)

Paradoxically, if in Catullus’s *Carmen* 61 the readers hear the poet’s call to the bride to dry her tears caused by conflicting nuptial emotions, Donne asks the bride to do the opposite – to shed a tear that serves as an emblem of purity, innocence and modesty.

In the discussed epithalamion, the image of the sun is extended throughout several stanzas. The stanza titled “Her Appareling” further relates the bride in her nakedness with the sun. As men’s eyes are too weak to look at the shining sun directly and may only safely watch its reflection in the water, so similarly, the bride cannot appear in her nakedness before the wedding participants but rather dressed in silk and decorated with golden jewellery to cover her dazzling radiance:

*Thus thou descend'st to our infirmity,
Who can the sun in water see.
So dost thou, when in silk and gold,
Thou cloud'st thyself <...>*

(Epithalamion of the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset, lines 149–150)

The bride dressed in a silken wedding robe is viewed as the sun covered with the clouds. Here the image of the cloud has an erotic implication. Yet, Donne focuses on the Metaphysical category of nakedness rather than female nudity. As Charis Charalampous (2015) claims, Donne “encourages his readers to think via their body, which is capable of intuiting”. Therefore for him, complete nakedness deals with unbodied souls:

*<...> now disposes
Thee of these chains and robes which were put on
T'adorn the day, not thee; for thou, alone,
Like virtue and truth, art best in nakedness <...>*

(Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn, lines 76–79)

The author draws an analogy between matrimonial marriage and the marriage of soul, or mind and body. On the other hand, the image of the cloud evokes a light negative connotation of mutability which is further emphasised by the images of worm and dust. Thus, the elements of rejoicing get intermixed with the imagery of death. Consider:

*<...> since we which do behold,
Are dust and worms, 'tis just
Our objects be the fruits of worms and dust*

(Epithalamion of the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset, lines 152–154)

J. Donne works out a complex of Metaphysical imagery to entail the death of passage through the backward metamorphosis of silk into worms and golden jewelry into the dust of gold. In the epithalamic context, the collision of marriage and death is found in the loss of virginity and therefore the nuptial rite is treated by the poet as funeral service. The silken wedding dress of the bride is depicted as a funeral shroud and a product of silkworms. Gold, in its turn, becomes the emblem of dust reminding of the phrase from the funeral service given in the Book of Common Prayer: “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust”. Even the precious things that might be suggestive of eternity are, paradoxically, produced by worms or from dust. To the readers of Donne, the quoted epithalamic lines echo the morbid imagery of his famous sermon “Death’s Duel”:

The worm <...> covers them and is spread under them, *the worm is spread under thee, and the worm covers thee*. There’s the mats and the carpets that lie under, and there’s the state and the

canopy that hangs over the greatest of the sons of sun. Even those bodies that were *the temples of the Holy Ghost* come to this dilapidation, to ruin, to rubbish, to dust. (Donne 1990: 409)

Such references to death diminish the panegyric aspect of the wedding song. However, although associated with death they do not create the implication of approaching calamity. It is so because the chief message of the epithalamium is that through marriage all the world survives, otherwise all things decay and are turned to nothing: the nuptial bed “*is only to virginity / A grave, but to a better state, a cradle*” (*Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn*, lines 79–80). Women receive perfection through marriage, the bride is reborn to a new life as a wife. To say more, marital union offers the promise of immortality which is possible with children who are the couple’s reflection in all respects.

Reflection of Medieval tradition in J. Donne’s Baroque treatment of marriage in relation to death

While developing the motif of marriage in relation to death, J. Donne also relies on the Medieval tradition by focusing on the “mystic equation of marriage and death” (Schench 1998: 77). The intimacy of consummation against the virgin’s fear of the loss of virginity is depicted with particularly arresting imagery where sexual intercourse is viewed as the act of the bride’s sacrifice:

*So, she a mother’s rich style doth prefer,
And at the bridegroom’s wished approach doth lie,
Like an appointed lamb, when tenderly
The priest comes on his knees t’embowel her.*
(*Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn*, lines 87–90)

For a better understanding of the sacrificial undertones of the given scene consider also Figure 2 presenting the Mesopotamian mosaic that depicts the ritual sacrifice.



Figure 2. The ritual sacrifice of a ram depicted in the third-millennium B.C. Mesopotamian mosaic.
Source: Ritual Sacrifice 2011.

In the poem, the bride's entering matrimony is treated as a mystic rite of passage, the nuptial bed serving as love's altar. As A. L. Eastwood (2010: 240) poses, the epithalamium is generally "organised around the sexual consummation of marriage, celebrating the promise of the continuation of the generational line". For her submission to the husband through the institution of marriage the bride will be rewarded with rebirth in children and happy marital life in love. It should be stressed that it was quite common to compare the bride with the sacrificial lamb in the Medieval literature. But in the given case, the focus is on the act of disemboweling rather than the sacrificial animal itself – it is the institution of marriage which is important to be praised, not a particular bride. Through the oddness of details bearing an anatomical projection the Metaphysical conceit effectively reveals the paradox of marriage which contains both spiritual and physical elements, in other words, the "sexual drama of bridal deflowering" (Eastwood 2010: 242). The sacred aspect of the consummation is stressed by portraying the bridegroom as a priest, i.e. by showing his involvement in, as A. L. Eastwood (2010: 240) calls it, "the priesthood of love".

In *Epithalamion at the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*, the sacrificial code is introduced at the very beginning of the poem with the Promethean myth referring to the Titan's terrible sufferings when chained to a mountain peak with the eagle gnawing at his liver day after day which were caused by his love for mankind. In Donne's epithalamions, the mythical stories have an allegorical function.

Conclusions

The carried out analysis revealed that, as a literary genre, the epithalamium confirms the idea of generic fluidity which is defined by J. H. Anderson and J. C. Vaught (2013: 150) in the following way: "while every genre has conventions and social and material conditions, generic isolation, like generic stasis, seldom happens in practice". Donne organises the epithalamic voice in combination with the elegiac and satirical undertones showing hints at Baroque melancholy. The Monarch of Wit is led by the Metaphysical poetic ambition which is reflected in his creative strategies: "he employs the coincidence of opposites and turns it into a system of discourse that allows both himself and his readers to transgress <...> the boundaries posed by discursive reasoning" (Besbes 2011: 150). He intricately exploits the epithalamic matrix with its mode of marriage celebration thereby testing the flexibility of generic boundaries. His extravagant Metaphysical conceits expanding on bold images and oddness of detail to represent the union of the erotic and the spiritual demonstrate novel twists on nuptial conventions.

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