The Abject Lover of the Courtly Love Era

HALIMAH MOHAMED ALI
School of Humanities
Universiti Sains Malaysia
halimah@usm.my

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the courtly love era through the work of Samuel Daniel with reference to his sonnet sequence To Delia. The discussion is varied using the psychoanalysis lens proposed by Jacque Lacan and Julia Kristeva. It defines what courtly love is and how court poetry is used to woo the lady. The discussion defines love and sexual desire that is portrayed through the sonnets. It is concluded that the persona's flattery of the lady as well as verbal threats laced with the use of metaphors culminate in elevating his own self rather than the lady he is wooing.

Keywords: abject; Samuel Daniel. courtly love; psychoanalysis; court poetry

INTRODUCTION

> The lover is always abject. Obedience to his lady's lightest wish, however unjust, are the only virtues he dares to claim. There is a service of love closely modelled on the service which a feudal vassal owes to his lord
> (Lewis. C.S. 1936, p.2).

The above quote by C. S. Lewis is a description of a lover from the courtly love era. He describes the courtly lover as a dejected man who is ever willing to do his lady's bidding. Courtly love originated in Languedoc at the end of the eleventh century (Denomy 1965, p.20). According to Lewis, the emotion, "of course is love, but love of a highly specialised sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love"(1936, p. 2). However, it did not have a specific name until 1883 when a French medievalist, Gaston Paris labelled it as courtly love. "Under his influence scholars began to talk about a 'system' of courtly love, a 'code', a 'body of rules', and even a 'way of life'" (Lewis 1936, p.2).

What is courtly love? It denotes the absence of the love object. The image of the courtier, which is portrayed through the love poems of the Renaissance, is virtually always of an abject and melancholic lover who pines for his love (Denomy 1965, pp. 20-21). The love that he yearns for is most of the time absent and unattainable. The courtly lover worships and pines after a woman who is beyond his reach. Normally the woman is already married or is above the lover's status, which makes it impossible for the love to be consummated.

The genesis of courtly love can be traced to the First Crusade (1099), and it originated in the castles of four regions: ducal Burgundy, Provence, Aquaitane and Champagne, which are all situated in France. The troubadours wrote lyric poems, which manifested courtly love. According to Elizabeth Thompson (2011) the Trobadours,

> …flourished between 1100 and 1350 and were attached to various courts in the south of France. The troubadours wrote almost entirely

> about sexual love and developed the concept and practice of courtly love. There was no tradition of passionate love literature in the European middle ages before the twelfth century, although there was such a tradition in Arabic-speaking Spain and Sicily. This Arab love poetry was readily accessible to Europeans living in Italy and Spain and was a major source of the Troubadour-developed cult of courtly love. Troubadour love poetry, although conceptually adulterous, inspired the man (and perhaps the woman) and ennobled the lover's character.
> (http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/eng251/amourstudy.htm#troubadour)

Apart from the Troubadours, Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) should also be mentioned because he was one of the most eminent English poets before the Renaissance period and Shakespearian age. His work *Troilus and Criseyde* that was written between 1374-1386 discusses the idea of love. However, his work is aligned by critics not to the courtly love tradition, but more to the idea of Christian love as discussed by James Lyndon Shanley (1939) in *The Troilus and Christian Love***.**

This paper will concentrate on the how the lover uses refined techniques to entreat his lover, and the way he manipulates language to win his lady's heart. It will also consider absence–the absence of the lady, of mutual feelings of love or of sexual relations. The question is 'What does this absence create?' These elements will lead to the exploration of the representation of sex and power as they are constructed in the motifs of courtly love. To do this the English Renaissance poet Daniel's sonnet *To Delia* will be examined using the psychoanalytic approach of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva.

COURTLY LOVE AND PSYCHONALYSIS THEORY

Many thinkers, past and present have discussed courtly love. Denomy describes courtly love as a novelty and says that, "The novelty of Courtly Love lies in three basic elements: first, in the ennobling force of human love; second, in the elevation of the beloved to a place of superiority above the lover; third, in the conception of love as ever unsatiated, ever increasing desire" (1965, p. 20). Lewis points out that "...this love, though neither playful nor licentious in its expression, is always what the nineteenth century called 'dishonourable' love" (1965, p. 2). Lewis's thoughts represent the view of the nineteenth century thinkers who opposed it because it was seen as immoral for a man to be pining after another man's wife and this idea of love clashed with the Christian doctrines.[i] Lacan argues that courtly love is only an excuse used to fill the gap of a non-existent sexual relationship "by pretending that it is we who put an obstacle to it"; he also argues that courtly love is a fraud, therefore it should be exposed (Mitchell 1982, p. 9). Lacan is critical towards it because to him it exists only in order to compensate a lack.

Courtly love is defined by Andreas Capellanus as "...a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation of the opposite sex" (*Harvard Classics* 1910, p. 3). The idea that love constitutes suffering strengthens the thesis that the courtly lover is always abject. Abjection is a representation of that suffering which a lover feels.

Julia Kristeva defines abjection to be something that has been rejected, but which is still a part of the subject, and he or she will not guard themselves against it as they would guard themselves from an object (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Furthermore, abjection is much more than just unhappiness. It is a threat, which surrounds us, but we do not know how to deal with it because it is invisible, it is not as concrete as an object is. The earlier meanings of abjection

according to John Lechte (2003) are "'wretchedness' and extreme debasement" (p. 10). Abject as Lechte has pointed out means something that is not desired (2003, p. 10). Thus, the courtly abject lover that is discussed in this essay can be defined as someone that is not desired by the woman that he admires.

Love can be paralleled to abjection because both share the same features: suffering and invisibility. That is why love is difficult to fathom much less describe although throughout the centuries there has been so much written on love. Kristeva finds it difficult to relate her memories of love, no matter how far back they go. She equates the language of love to literature because she believes it is difficult to relate the language of love in a "straightforward" manner (Kristeva 1987, p. 1). Poetry is part of literature, and this is the genre that a courtier has used throughout the centuries to woo his love object.

ANALYSIS

Samuel Daniel (1563-1619) was a tutor as well as a poet. His poetry that will be discussed is a collection of sonnet sequence published in 1592 entitled *To Delia*. It is about a lover's plea to the woman he loves; he wants her to accept him as his lover, and he tries to persuade her through the use of language and manipulates it in his desperation to win her love. Though Daniel remains a poet that has been neglected by many scholars, his sonnet sequence has been referred to by Katharine A. Craik (2002) in order to defend Shakespeare's sonnet *A Lover's Complaint* (1602) and the conditions of early modern complaint (p. 437) since it was written before Shakespeare's sonnet. In order to give prominence to a talented poet that has been overlooked by the world of academia at large, this essay investigates the complaint of the abject lover in *To Delia.*

Daniel starts his sonnet sequence by making use of a persona who professes his love for Delia the woman after whom the sonnets are titled. This persona by the use of dramatic monologue presents her as beautiful and he renders his services and duty to her. As he puts forward his case, he says that his duty is to pay tribute to her beauty. This is his service of love for her. The sonnet begins with a very hopeful tone, which gives the impression that he is confident of his success. The persona uses words with expertise and finesse and starts by planting into Delia's mind the idea of her beauty. When he says: "Unto the boundless Ocean of thy beautie" (Sonnet 1, Quatrain 1, Line 1), he conveys to her the idea that she is a very beautiful and an attractive woman. However, at the same time, this man has laid solid ground work on which to defend himself in case Delia accuses him of not praising her enough later. The reason is that the words "boundless Ocean" convey the notion that her beauty is immeasurable, and that there are not enough words to describe it.

The persona that Daniel has created also knows how to appear humble before a lady. In the second line of the first quatrain, he describes himself as "poore". Other than relating to Delia how wretched he feels, he is also downplaying his importance to elevate hers. The word "river" which follows the word "poore" conjures an image of something endless; the lover conveys to this woman the idea that his love for her is endless. Daniel makes use of images successfully, especially the image of the flowing river which is juxtaposed with the image of the ocean. It can be imagined that the journey of the river is parallel to that of the speaker's. By giving Delia's beauty the attribute of the ocean, the speaker very cunningly intends to put into Delia's mind the notion that his journey will end when he reaches Delia or gets her. It can be argued that the persona is exaggerating so that she will fall for his words. This use of hyperboles is typical of courtly love poetry.

The river can be seen as a phallic image, and if we imagine the river to be phallic, then the ocean is a woman's vagina and womb. This phallic image, according to the speaker, is "charged with streams of zeale". This can be interpreted as the sexual excitement that the lover feels. Only by having a sexual relationship with Delia will he be paying tribute to her beauty and performing his duty towards her. The words "love" and "youth" carry a sexual innuendo. Inexplicitly he is saying to Delia that he can satisfy her sexual desires because he loves her and because he is young. This is also Daniel's social criticism of the norms of the time when young ladies married older men with money, who could not satisfy their sexual desire. The irony is that it is not Delia who is sexually frustrated, but the speaker. The word "plaints" that Daniel uses in the fourth line of the first quatrain reveal to us that the speaker is lamenting about his unfulfilled sexual desire for Delia.

In the second quatrain, Daniel presents the persona as an honest man. When he says "Heere I unclaspe the booke of my charg'd soule", the speaker is saying to Delia that "I am an open book for you to see. I have no secrets from you and am not ashamed for you to see me in this vulnerable state." By using the words "charg'd soule" he reveals to Delia that his desire for her has been built up. He lays bare his soul to Delia as a patient would to his psychoanalyst.

Benvenuto believes that, "Psychoanalysis...works mainly with the lover's discourse" (1994, p. 2). It is interesting to note that Lacan too parallels psychoanalysis and love (1994, p. 6). Psychoanalysis is a discourse of love by which a frustrated lover unburdens his soul. It is interesting that we can use Lacan to consider literature's treatment of love. Benvenuto also points out the two opposite features that love is given in tragic, courtly and erotic art: saviour as opposed to unavoidable hazard. She argues that the presentation of love in art is rather extreme and this presentation renders love unethical (1994, p. 6). Daniel's sonnets present love as a saviour, which can spare a woman from becoming a spinster. However, as shall be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs, his sonnet sequence becomes a little aggressive as the courtier pushed himself with the use of bombastic metaphors in order to win Delia's love and gain her total submission in order to consummate the relationship.

The persona tells Delia in sonnets 34, 35 and 36 that his love for her will save her from being an old maid. He says to her that even when she is old his love for her will not die, in fact it will be more inflamed:

> Though spent thy flame, in me the heate remaining:
> I that have lov'd thee thus before thou fadest,
> (Sonnet 36, Quatrain 2, Lines 2-3)

He claims that he will be an exception compared to other men and the world will be amazed at the idea of him loving an old woman whose beauty has deserted her:

> The world shall finde this myracle in mee,
> That fire can burne, when thou art in thy waining.
> (Sonnet 36, Quatrain 3, Lines 1-3)

This idea is presented by the use of religious metaphors, and this can be read as a radical, unethical and cunning presentation of emotions because religion is manipulated to the speaker's advantage. It is evident in sonnet 36 when the words "faith", "waxe" and "repent" are used to convey the message that there is a certain kind of holiness that exists in the emotions of love that the speaker professes. As an example,

My faith shall waxe, when thou art in thy waining.
The world shall find this myracle in mee,
That fire can burne, when all the matter's spent:
That what my faith hath beene thy selfe shalt see,
And thou wast unkind that thou maist repent.
Thou maist repent that thou hast scorn'd my teares,
When winter snows upon thy golden haires.
(Sonnet 36, Quatrain 2, Line 4, Quatrain 3, Lines 1-4, Couplet,Lines 1-2)

The word 'faith' connotes an act of devotion and it implies one's belief in God. Whereas 'waxe' suggests the increase of religious fervour, but in this sonnet the word is used as a metaphor to portray a lover's feelings towards his love object. 'Repent' means asking forgiveness from God and the persona presents the idea that it is a sin that the lady does not surrender herself to the persona. Thus, due to this she will have to regret her arrogance towards the persona when she is old as is presented in the couplet of sonnet 36 above.

This manipulative code of behaviour can be explained by applying Kristeva's theory of love. According to her when a person is in love he has to sacrifice his "desires and aspirations", and this in a way is a type of recompense for the violent passion that the lover feels towards the Other. The release of this passion can turn into "a crime against the loved one" (Kristeva 1987, p. 2). In sonnets 34, 35 and 36 the poet turns the persona into a desperate lover who is willing to make use of any tool which is at hand in order to win his lady. He uses her beauty, which he cherishes against her and puts into her mind the idea of old age and the passage of time to intimidate her and make her yield to his advances:

Men doe not wey the stalke for what it was,
When once they finde her flowere, her glory passe.
(Sonnet 35, Couplet)

He uses this threat not only to gain her love but also to gain a sexual relationship with her by putting in her mind the idea that no man will look at her when she is old, and only he will stay true to her. Sonnets 34, 35 and 36 present to us an aggressive lover. He tries to control Delia's thoughts by planting negative pictures of herself in her mind, and at the same time plants positive pictures of him and his motives. This is where Lacan's theory of the 'mirror-phase' comes into play.

According to Lacan, a baby attains his identity at about six months old when he looks at his image in the mirror. This primary stage is important for the child "to acquire an identity", although it is illusory because the child has not yet learnt speech and cannot assert itself as an 'I'. The term 'Imaginary' alludes to the baby's attraction to its own image as well as to its relationship with its mother. Lacan believes that the baby recognises its sexuality only when it starts to speak; that is when it can place itself as a 'he' or a 'she'. He also states that the relationship between mother and child is not perfect because it is an "emotional deadlock", and this can only be solved by acquiring a language and the 'castration complex' (Mentefiore 1987, pp. 99-101).

The "To Delia" sonnets can be read using Lacan's 'mirror-phase' because the man in the sonnet is striving to build an identity. He builds his identity by using Delia; she is his mirror, although he tells her that he is reflecting her beauty in his verse:

Looke on the deere expences of my youth,
And see how just I reckon with thine eyes:
Examine well thy beauty with my truth,

(Sonnet 1, Quatrain 3, Lines 1-3)

The difference between him and the baby is that he is aware of his sexuality. His manipulation of language is not intended to bring awareness to himself of his sexuality, but to make Delia recognise his sexuality as well as hers. He wants her to distinguish their sexual differences, and as early as sonnet 4 he tries to emphasise that difference. He places her apart from him by using the referent 'her' (Sonnet 4, Quatrain 1, Line 2, Quatrain 2, Line 3) when he is referring to her.

The persona's mission is to make Delia understand the fact that they are sexually distinct – man and woman with their own sexual attributes and desires, and he also wants to control her mind. This is evident is sonnet 34:

Looke, Delia, how we steeme the half-blowne Rose,
The image of thy blush, and Sommer's honour,
Whilst in her tender greene she doth inclose
The pure sweet beauty Time bestowes upon her:
(Sonnet 34, Quatrain 1, Lines 1-4).

He places in her mind the idea of her beauty, that her beauty is obvious. He emphasises the fact that she is a young and inexperienced beauty that is very much appreciated. He then contrasts this image by planting the image of a fading beauty in her mind:

No sooner spreades her glory in the ayre,
But straight her ful-blowne pride is in declining;
She then is scorn'd, that late adrn'd the fare:
So clowdes thy beautie, after fairest shining.
(Sonnet 34, Quatrain 2, Lines 1-4).

In the first three lines Delia is distanced from the woman whose beauty is fading. This picture is presented by the persona in order to intimidate Delia. However, in the fourth line by the use of the word 'thy' he accords her the image that he has drawn of the other woman. He is suggesting that Delia is not an exception. Like other women, her beauty will also fade.

The speaker knows that there is an 'emotional deadlock' in his relationship with Delia and he tries to solve it by using language skilfully. His effort of solving the 'emotional deadlock' is by castrating Delia from her beauty. He plays the part of the mirror that reflects her beauty. Nevertheless, at the same time the mirror also signifies the veiling of her beauty and her separation from it. The castration of Delia from her beauty is evident when he says: "No April can revive thy withered flowers" (Sonnet 34, Quatrain 3, Line 1)." The image that this line conjures is of flower petals falling off and that equates castration; it symbolises the castration of Delia's beauty.

The speaker manages to castrate Delia totally from her beauty in sonnet 36:

When men shall finde thy flower, thy glory passe,
And thou with careful brow sitting alone
Received hast this message from thy glasse,
That tells the truth and saies that all is gone;
(Sonnet 36, Quatrain 1, Lines 1-4)

By placing Delia in front of a mirror, the persona separates himself from her and ceases to become her looking glass. She is made to face the truth in front of a mirror and is distanced

from the gaze of her admirer. His castration of Delia's beauty symbolises his emotional freedom from her, and at the same time he acquires the image of a faithful lover.

However, it can be posited that he can never be free of Delia although he castrates her beauty with words. This is because the referents 'I' and 'Thee' exist simultaneously, "I that have lov'd thee thus before thou fadest" (Sonnet 36, Quatrain 2, Line 3). The speaker cannot free himself of Delia because he uses Delia to define himself. He is a faithful lover but at the same time a frustrated admirer and his frustration is manifested vis-à-vis the castration of her beauty. This act does not free him from her, but binds him even tighter to Delia, and his castration of her beauty as presented in Sonnet 36, Quatrain 1, Lines 1-4 reflects him as an aggressive lover who would deign to any level in order to guarantee that his love object does not forsake him for another lover.

Does Daniel present the persona as an aggressive lover in all the sonnets? No, he does not, and the first sonnet is proof of this. In sonnet 1 we are presented with an enthusiastic speaker:

> Unto the boundless Ocean of thy beautie
> Runs this poore river, charged with streames of zeale,
> (Sonnet 1, Quatrain 1, Lines1-2)

The words "charged" and "zeale" reveal that the persona is in a good mood and is hopeful of the future. However, this enthusiasm turns into abjection when he realises that Delia does not reciprocate his love of her. Sonnet 4 is a good example of his abjection; the diction that Daniel uses substantiates this. It is revealed by the words "griefe" and "sorrows". It is as Kristeva says: "I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself" (Kristeva 1982, p. 3).

The abjection of the persona gives him an identity and a means of portraying himself against Delia. He idolises Delia, puts her on a pedestal, and at the same time humbles himself in front of her as abjection engulfs him. The couplet in sonnet 4 establishes and emphasises the lover's abject state as he humbles himself to his lady:

> These lines I use, t'unburthen mine owne hart;
> My love affects no fame, nor steemes of art.
> (Sonnet 4, Couplet, Lines 1-2).

The picture that has been presented of this lover in sonnets 1 and 4 is of someone who is always obedient to his lady's wish and who accepts her rebukes without protest. This picture is very different from the picture portrayed in sonnets 34, 35 and 36. This can only be described by making use of the concept of abjection which Kristeva says is "imaginary uncanniness and real threat...that disturbs identity, system and order...that does not respect borders, positions, rules"(1982, p. 4). An abject lover has no respect for anything. He is fighting an unseen enemy that he cannot touch. His nemesis is abjection, which engulfs him. The lover in the three sonnets mentioned above struggles to win Delia's affection and a sexual relationship with her.

Can the abject lover that Daniel has created be defined only as a man who struggles to win his lady's love? If this is done then he can only be seen as a one dimensional, flat character that has no depth. Evidence from the text proves that the persona is a round character, because he develops from a zealous lover into a manipulative admirer who revels in the fact that he is abject. This is clear when he says in sonnet 4, quatrain 2, lines 3-4:

> Delia her selfe, and all the world, may view
> Best in my face, where cares hath till'd deepe furrows.

These lines reveal that he makes no secret of his sorrow. He wants Delia as well as the world to witness his abjection.

Daniel makes use of language intelligently in order to present to us a courtship between a Renaissance man and woman. The poet creates a persona who blunders and reveals his genuine character although he is presented to use language intelligently to woo the lady. His efforts to present himself as a humble, wronged lover go awry when he utters the lines quoted above. His whole argument that is presented in the first two lines of the second quatrain that his feelings are not pictured for appearance sake:

> Nor are my passions lymned for outward hewe,
> For that no colours can depaint my sorrows:
> (Sonnet 4, Quatrain 2, Lines 1-2)

And in quatrain three when he says that he does not wish to be honoured for his sadness: "No Bayes I seeke to deck my mourning brow" (Sonnet 4, Quatrain 3, Lines 1), erodes the image of him as a humble and wounded lover. When he humbles himself in the couplet, his statement affirms deceit. However, it can be deduced that he fails to convince Delia that his mission in life is to elevate her and worship her beauty. He worships his abject state too much, more than he worships Delia's beauty. This is evident when he equates his sorrow to a colourless painting.

The persona is not only masochistic but he is also narcissistic. This lover loves the image of himself too much, which hinders him from making a real effort to win Delia's love. Mentefiore argues that the courtly lover is not bothered by the state of his courtship; what is important to him is "the establishing of an identity through the dialectic of desire and response. Mentefiore sees a parallel in the relationship between the poet and his object to that of the mother and child which Lacan labelled 'Imaginary'" (Mentefiore 1987, p. 98).

To Delia is founded on the lack of Delia's responses towards the persona. Instead of elevating Delia, the persona transpires to elevate himself. When he says in sonnet 36:

> Though spent thy flame, in me the heate remaining:
> I that have lov'd thee thus before thou fadest,
> My faith shall waxe, when thou art in thy waining.
> The world shall finde this myracle in mee,
> (Sonnet 36, Quatrain 2, Lines 2-4, Quatrain 3, Line 1)

He puts more importance on his personality and feelings towards Delia, than on Delia or her beauty. This man is egocentric, but he hides it well behind his discourse on love and in presenting himself as a faithful lover. His ego lies in the picture that he draws of himself as a faithful lover who has been wronged.

CONCLUSION

To Delia is a collection of love sonnets, which start with the idea of the lover elevating his love object, but as they progress he elevates himself more than the lady he desires. This is evident throughout the sonnet sequence as Daniel makes use of different metaphors when he puts forward his persona's arguments. The courtly lover that has been portrayed by Daniel is a man who is trying to persuade his desired love object to succumb to his feelings towards her.

The sonnets have been read using Kristevian and Lacanian psychoanalysis tools. It can be concluded that the lover is abject because there is an absence of mutual feelings of love between the persona and Delia. This lack and his abjection lead him to manipulate language in order to win Delia's love. However, as the sonnet sequence progresses the persona reveals more of himself to his audience, the fact that is he is a very selfish lover. He is made to hide behind his discourse of love by the poet albeit unsuccessfully.

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i. Alexander J. Denomy, *The Heresy of Courtly Love* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1965) reveals that courtly love was formed and spread within a Christian sphere, and the men who were involved in writing courtly love lyrics were mostly Christians who were brought up in a Christian set-up. However, their love lyrics do not have any signs of Christianity. Even when God is referred to it does not correlate with the Christian idea. It is seen as immoral by the Christian thinkers because it is "wholly divorced from the Christian doctrines" (pp. 25-28) and Bernard O'Donoghue, *The Courtly Love Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982) denotes courtly love the status of a "pseudo-religion of an explicitly anti-Christian heretical kind." according to him Denomy made a valid case of this in his well-researched articles which were published in *Medieval Studies* between 1944 and 1953, and also presented this idea in his book *The Heresy of Courtly Love*.

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