Poetry analysis: ‘Death Be Not Proud’ by John Donne

John Donne shifted dramatically in his life. The early John Donne was the passionate lover and rebel, the later, the man consumed with his own spiritual journey. John Donne is known as the first and greatest of metaphysical poets – those of a genre in which the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ramshackle for illustrations, comparisons and allusions, as essayist and critic Samuel Johnson put it.

Here, John Donne has taken a Romantic form and transformed a trans-temporal struggle of life and death into a quiet ending, one in which death “shall be no more.”

Where Mr Johnson spied cumbrous force, John Donne’s style dazzles with soft and calm brilliance. Even in the cascade of calumnies against the great “equalizer” Death, “Fate, chance, kings and desperate men” are yoked together, not in bondage, but in freedom, in their power to inflint and manipulate death at will. The panorama of life and legacy has overcome death time and again, yet John Donne expounds the expansive exploitation of death in one verse.

It is the will of man that troubles him over the cessation of life, the will to believe in what cannot be seen, to dismiss “poor death” as more “miserable” compared to the substance of life infused with the Spirit.

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

- John Donne (1572–1631)

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John Donne has been known as the “passionate lover and rebel” of sense, the “monarch of destruction is an thou dost overthrow,” the critic Samuel Johnson put it.

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Arthur Christopher Schaper is an author and teacher who lives in Torrance, California.

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