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John Donne in *The Female Tatler*: A Forgotten Eighteenth-Century Appreciation

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Writing on John Donne's amatory poems in 1693, Great Britain's poet laureate, John Dryden declared that Donne

> affects the Metaphysics. not only in his Satires, but in his Amorous Verses, where Nature only shou'd reign; and perplexes the Mind of the Fair Sex with nice Speculations of Philosophy, when he shou'd ingratiate their hearts and entertain them with the softnesses of His Love (Smith, p. 11).

In a passage that sets the tone of Augustan criticism of Donne, Dryden continues by observing that even the poet's satires, with their abundant wit would have appeared

> more Charming, if he had taken care of his Words and of his Numbers? But he follow'd *Horace* so very close, that of necessity he must fall with him; And I may safely say it of this present Age, That if we are not so great Wits as *Donn,* yet certainly we are better Poets (Smith, pp. 151-52).

These remarks establish the view of John Donne that eighteenth-century critics would accept and repeat with varying degrees of harshness, for, while the poet was highly regarded as a satirist, Augustans generally regard him as the representative of a lyric tradition that had been reformed by Waller (Smith, p.247) and tended to ignore his love poetry except when treating his conceits with derision (see Smith, 190-92, 212-13, 214 ff.). Evidence that another, more positive

view of Donne persisted into the eighteenth century does, however, exist. That view is contained in an essay entitled "Emilia's Day," which appeared in *The Female Tatler* (No. 110. From Friday March 24 to Monday, March 27, 1710).

The essay in *The Female Tatler* is important for many reasons. First, it is the longest assessment of the poet and his works to appear between Dryden's "Discourse" and John Oldmixon's commentary on Donne's work in *The Arts of Logic and Rhetoric* (1728). It merits special attention because it offers an implicit rebuttal of Dryden's views of Donne and the response of women to him whereas other commentators of the period merely echo the dead laureate's pronouncements. Most importantly, because the essay presents the purported reactions of a group of female readers to two of Donne's amatory poems, "The Exstasie" and "The Anniversarie," it gives us insight into an aspect of Donne's reception in the early eighteenth century that is recorded nowhere else, and it is one that indicates that sophisticated women, reading the poems biographically, venerate Donne as a model lover whose poems expressed an ardent and sincere ideal of love and who had no counterpart among the beaux of the Augustan Age.

Because its history is complex, and because the authorship of the essays appearing in *The Female Tatler* has been the subject of extended critical debate, some commentary on these matters seems in order. The most successful of the many rival newspapers which sprang up in competition with Addison and Steele's *Tatler* (Baugh, p. 879), *The Female Tatler* had as its stated purpose the improvement of women. The newspaper, which appeared thrice weekly from July 8, 1709 until March 29, 1710, however, dealt mainly in gossip and scandal. The first forty-three issues were printed by B. Bragge while the remaining in issues in the series were printed by Mrs. A. Baldwin. The first 52 numbers were purportedly the work of Mrs. Phoebe Crackenthorpe, who has never been identified with any certainty, and the remaining issues were attributed to a Society of Ladies, identified as Lucinda, Artesia, Emilia, Sophronia, Arabella and Rosella. Bragge, the original printer, published 25 issues of a competing news paper also called *The Female Tatler,* which also was attributed to Mrs. Crackenthorpe, giving

London a pair of *Female Tatlers*, which both insisted on their "genuine" nature while characterizing its rival as a fraud (Morgan, p vii). Previous scholarship on *The Female Tatler* has focused almost exclusive upon the question of its authorship which once was frequently been assigned to the attorney-playwright, Richard Baker.[1] Paul Bunyan Anderson later argued that Mrs. Crackenthorpe was a *nom de plume* for Mrs. Mary de la Reviere Manley. While not all of the members of the Society of Ladies have been identified, Anderson believes that Dr. Bernard Manderville wrote as Lucinda and Artesia, and that the playwright Susannah Centlivre wrote the papers assigned Emilia and Rosella, basing his argument on the fact that Emilia provided an account of the opening performance of Centlivre's play *The Man Bewitched* on Dec. 14, 1709, which contains an account of quarrel between Centlivre and her producers over the inclusion of a lengthy ghost scene in the fifth act of the play. He also notes the possible dependence of a later Centlivre play, *The Artifice* (1722), on a story contained in one of Sophronia's contributions to *The Tatler*, and to Centlivre's tendency to treat Quakers in the same humorous way that was accorded them in the newspaper. Centlivre, herself, denies having written the account of her quarrel over a controversial scene in her "Preface" to *The Man Bewitched* (1709), but Anderson argues that she "protests too much," and uses the published denial to bolster his argument (See "Innocence and Artifice" and "Splendour and Scandal.") Mrs. Manley, who quotes Donne in her letters (Sullivan, p.159) and Mrs. Centlivre belong to the generation of women who grew up in the last half of the Sixteenth Century, when, as Sullivan points out, references to Donne appeared with every greater frequency in works by women writers, and when passages from his poems were often quoted in books instructing women in letters and polite conversation (See p. 33 ff.) Emilia clearly writes for such an audience and gives expression to views that those women brought up on Donne might have shared. In it, Emilia, who may well may have been Susannah Centlivre, wrote:

> Some Ladies of Thought and Conversation made me a welcome visit to day; we form'd an agreeable Tea-Table of Five, and

ventur'd to introduce Subjects altogether Novel, such as have been held utterly improper for that holy Circle, where News, Scandal, Fashions, and double *Entendres* seem'd to be fixed as Topicks only Fit and Entertaining. We enquired into Causes and Events, compar'd Times past with present, examin'd the Secret springs of Passion, and enquir'd after the second good below Virtue[,] all agree it to be the first, and many are of the Opinion Love ought to be allowed the next place, to set this Matter in a fair Light, We had recourse to the Oracles of that Deity, and could find none more expressive than those left us by the memorable Dr. Donne who describes Love thus:

Where like a Pillow on a Bed,
A Pregnant Bank swell'd up to rest,
A Violet's declining Head
Sat we two, One another's beste
Our Hands were firmly Cimented,
By warmth which from our Soules did Spring
Our Eye-beams twisted and did Thread
Our Hearts upon one double String:
So to engraft our Heads as yet
Was all the Meane's to make us One
And pictures in our Eyes to get
Was all our Propagation
As 'twixt to equal Armies, Fate
Suspends uncertain Victory,
Our Minds (which to advance our State
Were gone out) hung 'twixt her and me;
We like Sepulchral States Lay
All Day the same our Postures were,
And we said nothing all the Day:
If any so by Love refin'd
That he Soul's Longings understood
And by great Ardour grown all Mind,
Within Convenient distance stood:
He, tho he knew not which Soul spake,
Because both meant both spake the same,
Might there a new Digestion take,

And Part far purer than he came.
  This extacy doth unperplex,
(We said) and tells us what we Love,
  We see by this it was not Sex
    We see we saw not what did move.
But as all several Souls contain,
  Mixture of Things they know not what,
So love these does mix again
And makes both one, &c[2]

At this point, Emilia offers a commentary on the poem and the reactions of the ladies gathered with her:

> Here is not a word of contradiction in all this, 'tis one entire Scene of uninterrupted Delight: none of that fatal Sweetness, that pleasing Torture that bewitching Joy, which swells the Page of Elaborate Triflers, who after a long Discourse on the exalted Theme, leave us just where they found us, or a little wider off the Truth. If this be love who would shun it; there's nothing frightful in this Picture, nothing startling in this account, this must be the next excellency to Vertue, And meant its vast Reward. All were of my Belief, and one of the Ladies own'd, she till this Hour had been an Infidel, and never imagin'd any Poet in earnest before; of Love and of the Grand Elixir she had heard and read but both Arts being lost in this Sceptical Age, 'tis very much to be doubted whether there was ever any such thing in Nature or not, a diverting Notion, a necessary Amuzeent to busy the Fair and the Impertinent, was the utmost she could make of it, and all those fine Things we find in Poems and Romances serv'd but to confirm the Thought: But there is in this something so unforc'd and so convincing, that he must feel the Fire he Paints, or it could not have surprized us thus. Another added, that she had never held it difficult in any Annals to find a Thousand Lovers in the Same Year of the World and of One Nations producing, that in the pleasing expecting the Ignorance the Doctor speaks of, were as devoutly fond as tho' perhaps they might want the Skill to leave us any proof of it. There are few who have not lov'd their hour, ally their Homage and Visit the Temple of Love, tho' none

care to be his Priests, and feed the wasting Fires with Constant Zeal: The most Stupid Mortal breathing, that passes his Life away insensible of its cares and Pleasures, once is compell'd by fate to wake from his Lethargy, and taste of Nature's Univers[al] Cordial, after which he returns to his Indolence and Sleeps the sounder. The Sordid Wretch who thinks Gold the only Good on Earth, and Courts it for itself, not for its Attendants, may be drawn from drawn from his Bags for a short Interval, and made to confess a Power superior to Money, tho he soon recant and return, and this guess is all a Poet can pretend to. Whatever Mistress may hold him for a while, Fame and Interest are the Aim and Busyness of his Life, and his Passion very rarely outlives the Description of it. Here I was forced to turn to another date of my charming Author, here you will find he had lov'd a whole Year, and Celebrates his Fame on the Day it began.

All Kings and all their Favourites,
All glories Honours, Beauties Wits;
The Sun it self which makes Times as they Pass
Is Elder by a Year now than it was:
When Thou and I, first one another saw.
All other Things to their Destruction draw;
Only our Love hath no Decay;
This no tomorrow, hath, nor Yesterday,
Flowing, it never runs from us away,
But keeps his First, his Everlasting Day[.]

Two Graves must hide thine and my Coarse,
If one might, Death were no Divorce,
Alas! As other Princes we[,]
(Who Prince Enough in one another be)
Must leave at last in Death, these Eyes and Cares,
Oft Fed, with Faithful vows and Powerful Tears;
But Souls where nothing dwells but Love,
(All Other thoughts being Inmates) then shall prove
This or a Love increased above[,]
When bodies to their Graves, Souls from their Graves
remove;

> There 'tis we shall be truly Blest,
> None there will Envy or Molest [,]
> True and False Fears let us refrain,
> And Nobly Love and Live and add again;
> Years and Years, til we at last attain,
> To Write Threescore, this is the Second of our Reign.

Emilia uses this poem to demonstrate the superiority of Donne's passion over that of the contemporary young beaux whose "Passion very rarely outlives" its "description" in verse, exclaiming:

> He is in the same Mind he was in a Twelvemonth ago, Intimacy has not changed his desire nor lessen'd the value of his Happy Choice: thus this Great improved his Hours, and 'tis more than probable he ow'd the Brightness of his Genius to the Fire of his Love, and that he might not have Writ so much Superior to the Age he lived in, if he had not lov'd in the same Eminent Elevated degree: Sure he has left us the Examples of either Perfections, so Beautiful Wrought that late Posterity will preserve his Glories, and nothing be lost of him whilst there remaines one person. But all this while says a Third Lady, What are we the better to know the Advantages of the last Age,
> does it not serve to aggravate the Degeneracy of this? Where is there one that Coppies after this Noble Original; we have a great many Fine Wits in our fam'd Metrapolis, but Interest enslaves them all. They write for Gold, Marry for Gold; Fame and Love have lost their Influence, or if they are above the mean designs of Gain, they Live Silent and Dye Single; No, added the Fourth, you see there is a Spark of Vertue left, and tho' it be thought Weak and Unfashionable, some yet dare Wed for the value of the Mind, and Write for the Honour of the Bays. Here breaking up we concluded that the second Blessing of Humane Life was Love, from what the Immortal Poet had Said, and that Whose and Good, will be admitted to prove its Sweetness, and Ignorance and Vice be excluded.

The importance of Emilia's commentary should be self-evident to those acquainted with the criticism of Donne in the Restoration and

Eighteenth Century. As I have said, Emilia's commentary is the longest discussion of Donne found between Dryden's discussion of Donne and the commentaries of Hume, Warburton, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, forty to fifty years later. The response seems designed to refute the claims of Dryden, for the ladies at the tea table demonstrate a fine understanding of Donne's poetry and are not put off in any way by his metaphysical conceits. Emilia has as her purpose the definition of love and the explanation of its place in a system of human ethical values. She uses Donne both as an authority and as an example, perhaps choosing him because he was remembered as great Divine even when his poetry was not held in high esteem. She uses Donne, interestingly enough, to exemplify the sort of lover not found in her world, and his poems as examples of love poetry which have no equals among the poems of her contemporaries. Thus, for Emilia, John Donne provides a model of admirable human conduct in his roles as lover and artist, fulfilling a standard which all the ladies at her tea table find lacking in the behavior of men in the Beau Monde, who are obsessed with wealth.

At the outset, the author emphasizes the fact serious subjects such as Love and perhaps poetry as well, were "altogether novel," for a group whose usual concerns were news, fashion, and scandal. When the topic becomes serious, the ladies gathered at Emilia's tea table decide to determine which is the "Second Good below Virtue." Concluding it to be love, Emilia venerates her proposed authority in a paradoxical manner,calling him love's "Oracle," even as she notes that he was the memorable "Doctor Donne." Remembered as a cleric, his honorific intensifies a discussion of romantic love. Emilia's later reference to Donne as "Love's Priest" may indicate that she shared the views of Thomas Carew, who concluded his "Elegie" on John Donne: "Here lie two Flamens, and both of those the best / Apollo's first, and then the true God's Priest," and sought to give weight to her argument by basing it upon the work of a man noted for his stature in the Church of England. As she comments on the section of "The Extasie" which she reproduces, she describes Donne as her "Charming author," almost as if she wishes to take exception to the views Dryden expressed in "Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire," for charm

is the very quality that the late Poet Laureate finds lacking in his work. Her remarks on the poem, whose neoplatonism, contains "not a word in contradiction," but rather paints picture of love that is void of all that is "frightful" or "startling," indicate that her heart has been moved in ways that Dryden did not anticipate. Furthermore, her characterization of Donne's picture of love as "unforced" and "convincing" indicates that Emilia seems to recognize the complex experience that Donne describes as "natural," and sincere. Her further assertion that it reflects the poet's having felt "the Fire he paints" suggests that Emilia and her friends see in John Donne's poem the very "softness of love"—the quality found lacking by Dryden.

The commentary on the "The Extasie" is interesting for other reasons. In arguing for its conviction, Emilia asserts that "it could not have surpriz'd us thus," had it not been a reflection of the author's own experience. As she makes this assertion, which anticipates the romantic view that poetry grows out of deeply felt personal experience, Emilia provides herself with the basis for contrasting Donne as poet and as man with the dandies who abound in the society around her. While she notes that lovers in all countries and eras have felt the feelings which Donne describes, if only momentarily, she argues that they seldom care to be among "love's priests" who feed their passion with "constant Zeal." Mundane lovers rather are concerned with fame, self-interest and wealth, and, as a result, love, is no sooner begun than it is forgotten.

In her attempt to demonstrate the superior nature of the love which Donne [or his dramatis personae] describes in "The Extasie," Emilia turns her attention to "The Anniversarie," and prints a truncated version of Donne's text. Her decision to connect the poems is curious, for in Seventeenth Century editions of Donne's works, "The Anniversarie," always precedes "The Extasie." Their appearance in *The Female Tatler* marks the first occasion on which either poem has been published outside of these editions. Thus, it is likely that Emilia invented the chronological arrangement and the biography it supposes to suit her needs when she set out to write. It could, however, be that the author found the poems so paired in a manuscript or commonplace book that has not yet come to light, or connected them as a result of some anecdote

preserved orally but now forgotten. If Emilia, whomever she (or he) may have been, was aware of the depth of the affection the poet felt for his wife, and sought to find in his poems a way to demonstrate the point made by Isaac Walton who noted that Donne might have "repented" his marriage "if God had not blest them with so mutuall and cordiall and affection, as in the midst of their suffering made their bread of sorrow taste more pleasantly than the Banquet of Fools" (Garrod, p. xxiv), her presentation of the two poems in reverse order to that found in editions of Donne provided her with an ideal means of demonstrating Donne's depth of affection for his beloved wife. The chronology heightens her presentation of Donne as the perfect lover who owes "the brightness of his genius to the Fire of his Love," and wrote poems superior to those which others produced in his age because he was inspired by an elevated love.

The discussion of Donne in *The Female Tatler,* then, provides evidence indicating that Donne was not, as A. J. Smith asserts, "a dead issue" in the early Eighteenth Century (p. 13). While its discovery does not completely discredit the notion that the prevalent view of Donne in the early Eighteenth Century was negative, it does attest to the fact that an opposing view did exist. Its appearance in a newspaper designed for a female audience indicates that the popularity of Donne among women prevalent in the later Seventeenth Century continued to prevail. Perhaps additional study of works written for women will reveal additional instances where Dr. Donne is held up as a model poet and a model lover. For Emilia, he was both, and, she lavishes praise upon Donne the man and Donne the writer, she confirms the poets promise to the listener in "The Canonization," as she recognizes in the "pretty rooms" of "The Extasie"" and "The Anniversarie" a "pattern of love," which she, along with the members of her coterie, recognizes as superior to the models provided by writers and lovers in the world outside Emilia's drawing room.

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Notes

1. *The British Apollo,* a rival newspaper, reported that Baker "rambled[d] about with a woman's disguise on, / and live[d] upon scandal as toads do on poison," when it revealed that he had been beaten up by a City Deputy and his two daughters who took umbrage with their being the objects of mocker in the issue of *The Female Tatler* appearing on August 30, 1709. Paul Bunyan Anderson challenged this ascription and suggested that the early issues of the newspaper were the work of Mrs. Manley on the basis of similarities between allusions to an impoverished sister and an abusive brother-in-law in the newspaper and *The New Atlantis* and the inclusion of a poem from *The New Atlantis* in the newspaper. John Harrington Smith challenged this notion, citing verbal parallels between Baker's plays and arguing that the compilers of T*he British Apollo* would certainly known who was writing essays for the rival paper. Anderson also conjectured that Centlivre, writing as Emilia, wrote some of the later numbers. Her only modern biographer, John W. Bowyer, argues to the contrary, suggesting that Centlivre's printed denial of responsibility for the account of her troubles in *The Female Tatler* was sincere, and also suggesting that French plays provide probable sources for the passages in her plays which have analogues in the fiction in *The Female Tatler* (*The Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre,* pp. 117-33).

2. Some commentary on the texts of the two poems as they are reproduced in *The Female Tatler* seems in order. First, it should be noted that the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization practices observed in the poems are those of the Eighteenth Century. As result the texts can lay no claim to authority. They contain many substantive variants, but only one has a basis in a text which might have some claim to authority. We find that where the text of Donne's first edition reads "the violet's reclining head," line three of the version of "The Extasie" which is printed in *The Female Tatler* reads "the violet's *declining* head," [my italics] adopting a variant found in the edition of 1669. Similarly, in line nine, we find the text of *The Tatler* reads "to engraft," adopting a reading that appeared in 1635 edition of Donne's poems and in all later seventeenth-century texts. The appearance of these readings suggests that that the author worked with texts from the 1669 edition of Donne's poems or manuscripts associated with it or deriving from it. The other textual variants in the text of "The Extasie" are of a different sort. Where Donne's poem reads: "Our eye-beames twisted, and did thread / our eyes, upon one double string," the author, the compositor preparing the text for *The Tatler* or an editor, substitutes the improbable word "Hearts" in line 8, shattering the imagery of the poem and providing a sentimentalized text. In the next line, the substitution of "heads" for "hands," renders the description of the innocent union achieved through two tightly clasped hands into nonsense. The substitution of the word "longings" for "language" in l. 22, which has no basis in seventeenth-century texts, distorts the sense of the poem, for in those texts the lovers very posture in a deathlike trance is

the language that the imagined spectator can interpret as an expression of the unity the lovers have achieved, here it is their longing, their desire, which speaks out. The change of tense in line 24 where the word "meant" appears as "meane" is no doubt a compositorial error. The final variant, however, may have resulted from an attempt to clarify the poem. In line 27, the seventeenth-century editions of Donne declared that one witnessing the lovers in their exalted state "might thence a new concotion take." The word " digestion" appears in The Tatler in place of "concotion." This alteration is intriguing, for it suggests that, here at least, the emendation of the text was thoughtful. In authoritative text, the word "concotion" denotes a substance created by an alchemical experiment. This usage was current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The word "digestion," according to the O.E.D., carried this denotion in the eighteenth-century. The substitution reflects a correct grasp of Donne's sense and reflects an effort to insure that the sense is clear to the reader.

The truncation of the poem at line 36 reflects spatial restraints imposed on the authors who wrote for *The Tatler.* The paper devoted at most one and one-quarter page to its leading article, and reduction of Donne's text was necessary to meet this length requirement. No doubt the author chose to break off "The Extasie" at line 36 in order to make his/her point regarding the nature of perfect love without becoming involved in the grittier problems of interpreting the author's plea for sexual union which follows. The truncation of "The Anniversarie" seems to have been imposed on the text to meet restrictions on space. But, in addition to the deletion of crucial elements in the poem, we see the writer or her/his amanuensis making a considerable number of attempts to regularize Donne's meter. The first occurs in line 2 of the poem, where Donne's "All glory of honors, beauties, wits" is rendered "All glories, Honours, Beauties, Wits," and a sense of metrical regularity is achieved in place of the hypermetrical versification that gives the line its colloquial vigor. A similar aim seems to lie behind the alteration of line 10 in Stanza One, where Donne's "But truly keepes his first, last, everlasting day" becomes "But keeps his first, his everlasting day." While there is added fluency of motion in the revised text, the wit achieved through the close proximity of "first" "last" and "everlasting" is destroyed. Other changes similarly mar the effects of the original version. For example in line 9, the substitution of "flowing" for "running" shatters the sense of verbal play which is always a feature of Donne's verse. The elimination of the word "well" from Stanza Two, again makes the meter regular as does the altered phrasing line 19, where we find "This, or a love increased there above," rendered as "This, or a love increased above."

The concluding stanza of "The Anniversarie" is distorted in *The Tatler,* for it is reduced from ten lines to six. The phrase "There 'tis" which stands in place of "And then we shall be" evokes a slightly different meaning than the original, for it does not contain the same indication of delay that the original reading does. The author of "Emilia's Day" then supplies a completely new reading in place of Donne's original line 22, before eliminating four lines of text to conclude:

True and False Fears let us refrain,
And nobly love and Live and add again,.
Years and years till we at last attain,
To Write Threescore, this is the second of our Reign.

The substitution of the word "And" for the imperative phrase "Let us" at the beginning of line 28, reduces the sense of the exceptionality of the experience which Donne's narrator hopes to share with his listener. Similarly, the reduction of Donne's "Yeares and yeares unto yeares" in line 29 to "Years and years" reduces the argument by eliminating the hyperbolic element in the original. All in all, the author of "Emilia's Day" does not improve Donne's poem by tinkering with the author's prosody.

For a discussion of the variants in the two poems, see Grierson, pp. 24-25 and 51-52.

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N.B.—Curiously, in her 1988 edition of *The Female Tatler*, Morgan prints truncated texts of the three final numbers of the newspaper, and thus omits the essay dealt with here. For Donne scholars, it is probably the most significant essay in the periodical.

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