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# John Donne's Verse Letters to the Countess of Bedford: Mediators in a Poet-Patroness Relationship

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Donne's verse letters to patronesses have always been taken as a kind of homogeneous group, "less than legitimate poems" according to Cameron,[1] because of their common underlying mercenary purpose: to praise a great lady in order to secure financial aid or social and political advancement. Barbara Lewalski, in fact, lumps together the entire group of verse letters as a kind of "generic" epistolary exercise in which "the patrons and patronesses can be substituted one for another since the hyperbolic *topoi* do not belong to any individual as such: they are recognitions of what heaven can make of any piece of human clay. . . ."[2] As poetry, the verse letters have been judged to "deserve respectful attention but not as poetry which engages Donne's whole mind."[3] Yet while critics have discussed the verse letters to patronesses as poetry and as evidence of Donne's embarrassingly blatant attempts to win favor through hyperbolic compliment, few have discussed why Donne chose to offer his praise in letter form instead of in the more traditional lyric poem, and what the implications of this choice are with regard to content and correspondent.[4]

Donne's verse letters to patronesses are not static end products but instead are dynamic means to an end. An examination of Donne's verse letters to his most important patroness, Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, reveals that the more interactive, purposeful form of the verse letter allows the poet not only to praise a much-needed patroness, but also to create a relationship with her where none existed before. The verse letters to Bedford, then, can be seen as individualized, meaningful correspondences with a powerful, like-minded woman. Viewed in the light of Donne's relationship with Bedford, these verse letters become much more, not less, than "legitimate poems" that did indeed engage Donne's whole mind during a period of poverty and frustrated ambition at Mitcham.

As I have discussed previously, Donne shared a unique and reciprocal relationship with his most important patroness, Lucy Harrington Russell,

Countess of Bedford.[5] One of the most influential patronesses of the Jacobean court except for Queen Anne herself, she served as favorite lady-in-waiting to Anne from the queen's accession in 1603 to the queen's death in 1619.[6] She attracted much attention and some scandal as a prominent performer in the brilliant series of masques which Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones designed for court during the early years of James's reign. Twickenham, her country estate, became a meeting place for poets and wits.[7] Excluding royal ladies, she is matched only by the Countess of Pembroke in literary dedications and commendatory verses of the time.[8] Bedford not only directly influenced the queen's patronage, but also served as mediator for suits through the king's ministers and favorites, as source of much artistic patronage, and as inspiration for many of Donne's contemporaries, including Jonson, Daniel, Drayton, Holyband, Florio, Davies, Chapman, Dowland, and others.[9] It was in her capacity as court lady and go-between that Donne knew her and needed her during this period, when his personal fortune was unstable and when he sought connections with those who could help him financially and socially.

In addition to Donne's own prose correspondence concerning his feelings and need for Bedford, the best record remaining of their relationship is the group of verse letters Donne wrote to the Countess from 1608 to 1612, a time when Donne and his growing family suffered "the incommodity of a little thin house" at Mitcham.[10] Donne addressed seven complete verse letters to Bedford.[11] Of these, one of the verse letters is written in the form of an epitaph,[12] while another was written specifically in consolation for the death of Bedford's close friend.[13] These two more occasional verse letters do not allow Donne the freedom to explore and actually create a relationship with the Countess as do the other five; however, those remaining five verse letters evidence a growing personal and patronage relationship between two like-minded courtiers: "Reason is our Soules left hand," "You have refin'd mee," "T'Have written then," "To the Countesse of Bedford At New-yeares Tide," and "Honour is so sublime perfection."

Donne chose the verse letter form to initiate and sustain ties with this important patroness and friend because the flexibility of this rhetorical style allowed him to demonstrate his understanding of and ability to function within Bedford's courtly world. Using the verse letters as rhetorical extensions of himself, Donne makes the verse letters emissaries between Bedford and himself and therefore components of the very patronage system he wished to enter. Since the subject of these verse letters is not only the

growing relationship between Donne and Bedford, but also the general interdependence of patroness and client in the Jacobean patronage system, the letters serve as metacommunative links between Donne and the Countess. The verse letter is both poem and letter, and its intermediary form mirrors its subject, the necessity of intermediaries for court success.

Because it is both poem and letter, the verse letter allowed Donne to present his verse as a sincere embodiment of an essential "self" while using the lines to stylize a "rhetorical self," able to change with the situation at hand. The familiar letter, written in plain and straightforward style, has been associated traditionally with sincerity, as first-century rhetorician Demetrius commented: "It may be said that everybody reveals his own soul in his letters. In every other form of composition it is possible to discern the writer's character, but in none so clearly as in the epistolary."[14] Donne's own correspondence often protests the importance of letters as sincere portrayals of the author, conveyances of personal feelings, and essential nurturers of friendship. To "Sr. G. M.," he writes, "No other kinde of conveyance is better for knowledge, or love. . . . But it is in the other capacity which must make mine acceptable that they are also the best conveyors of love."[15] To the Countess of Bedford, Donne describes letters as the means "by which we deliver over our affections, and assurances of friendship, and the best faculties of our souls."[16] In a time when physical presence was often impossible, letters for Donne served as intermediaries, go-betweens, to keep relationships alive: letters "nourish bodies of friendship";[17] writing letters often "is a sacrifice, which though friends need not, friendship doth."[18] He thus presents his letters as truthful and unrhetorical representations and even embodiments of his essential self, perhaps most clearly stated in a correspondence to "G. G. Esquire": ". . . our letters are ourselves and in them absent friends meet."[19]

Yet during this period, the concept of an essential "self" was changing, as demonstrated by the popularity of Renaissance courtesy literature. The exclusive sense of aristocratic identity was being stolen, or at least encroached upon, by ambitious young men like Donne who were not born to this aristocratic class.[20] As movement across the gap between ruling and subject class was becoming increasingly possible, elite identity was becoming something to be achieved rather than ascribed, and courtesy literature offered ambitious people like Donne and Bedford what Pierre Bourdieu calls a "repertoire of rules," or what sociologists consider a "role" or predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular "stage-part."[21] An

exploration of the "role" best suited to an ambitious courtier is perhaps epitomized in Castiglione's *The Courtier*, in which the noble friends who inhabit the Court of Urbino occupy their abundant leisure time by envisioning the perfect courtier. Their discussion makes clear that the courtier they fashion does not possess an essential "self," but is instead what Lanham defines as a "rhetorical man," whose sense of identity, his "self," "depends on the reassurance of daily histrionic reenactment."[22] Thus the "self" becomes a contrived role played for best effect upon the present audience and circumstances.

More directly linking the concept of a rhetorical self with the sincerity of the letter form is Angel Day's popular *The English Secretorie* (1586, 8 editions by 1626). A more obvious handbook for those seeking preferment, it offers advice on effective epistolary composition in order to train court administrators. Day's categories of epistles anatomize the facets of court conduct: hortatory, suasory, concilatory, petitory, commendatory, and amatory modes. And Day suggests that epistolary skills that enable one to perform well as a secretary may also bring new employment. That is, one may speak well of a subject and of one's own expressive skills at the same time.[23] Donne himself had of course tried this route to success, accepting employment as chief secretary under Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper, in 1597.[24]

The result of this mixture of rhetoric and self-presentation in letter form is a kind of conflicting interpretation of the letter as a traditionally sincere portrayal of an essential self, but at the same time, as a possibly manipulated portrayal of a rhetorical self. The interpretation of letters as truthful presentations of an essential self was especially helpful during the Tudor and Stuart reigns because of the importance of a courtier's presence for maintaining and advancing his position in the centralized London court. The delicate checks and balances of the Renaissance patronage system necessitated constant monitoring by both client and patron alike in order to secure power and favor, while the absolutist emphasis on "royal presence" made court attendance seem an end in itself. Few courtiers and would-be courtiers could afford permanent residence in London; moreover, most had outlying estates and concerns that demanded their attention at least part of the year. Through use of letters, a client like Donne could cut through time, space, and the barriers of social hierarchy to form a relationship with another simply by locating his name and that of his addressee on the same sheet of paper.[25] Then, once in the rhetorical relationship of the letter, he could maintain important relationships through supposedly sincere depictions of the self he

would like to present, justifying his intrusion by relating the contents to mutual concerns that are perhaps only mutual because of the letter itself.

Many of Donne's comments in prose letters attest to his view of the epistle as a mutual exchange of like-minded feelings. They are not a digest of news or court gossip, but a means to an ultimate end: friendship, or at least a reciprocally advantageous client-patron relationship. Letters, writes Donne, have "for their principall office, to be seals and testimonies of mutuall affection, but the materialls and fuell of them should be a confident and mutuall communicating of those things which we know."[26] Marotti, in fact, calls Donne's encomiastic epistles "phatic utterances,"[27] for like prayers, they serve as means of keeping open a channel of communication and thus of maintaining favorable circumstances for continued transactions between speaker and addressee. Unlike Jonson, Drayton, Daniel, and others who praised Bedford and sought her patronage to advance their literary careers, Donne was not and did not wish to be a professional poet.[28] He wanted more than a poet-patroness relationship with Bedford. Therefore, instead of maintaining a more static and distant relationship with encomiastic or sentimental lyric poetry, he chose the more interactive verse-letter form. As letters, according to Donne's surviving correspondence, they would supposedly reveal the writer in his real person, but as verse, they afforded him the freedom to fashion himself and his relationship with the Countess in a manner both obsequious and playful. And this form of correspondence would appeal to the Countess of Bedford, who herself, as Barbara Lewalski clearly demonstrates, projected a variety of sometimes conflicting images: courtier, masquer, learned lady, poet, patroness, shrewd businesswoman, and devout Calvinist.[29] More than her other protegés, Donne shared Bedford's ability to view the self as a possibility, not a given, and, like the Countess, Donne dared to fashion the self to the situation at hand to gain the best effect, the most benefit.

In their very form, the verse letters represent Donne's position and purpose at the time of his writing. Like Donne, who lived as an outsider among those in court circles during these years, the verse letter occupied an ambiguous place on the periphery of literature: it was not considered *belles-lettres* like the pretty fictions of many courtly pastorals and sonnets, nor was it interpreted as factual communication. In fact, in its freedom of content and form, the verse letter is not a fixed genre but is better regarded as a style of writing, a rhetorical mode of address that is agreeably adaptable to such poetic types as satire or the funeral elegy, which are defined principally by

their subject matter and themes, or the sonnet, which is defined by its metrical and strophic form.[30] With its ostensible purpose of "correspondence," the verse letter openly declares its basis in actual experience, and supposedly reveals the writer in his own person. Its appearance as a literary form at the end of the sixteenth century coincides with the contemporary anti-rhetorical bias toward matter, not words, reflected in Montaigne's scorn for those who admired Cicero's letters only for their style: "Fie on that eloquence, which leaves us with a desire of it, and not of things."[31]

Thus, the presupposition of the verse letter's emphasis on correspondence and content over flashy rhetoric allowed Donne access to Bedford's courtly world as he contemplated truths pertaining to the spheres in which she moved. In fact, however, Donne used the anti-rhetorical stance of the verse letter to display his wit and his rhetorical ability to negotiate those spheres he very desperately wanted to enter. The verse letters not only help to initiate and define the relationship between Donne and his patroness, but are the means of expressing hope and faith in a closer relationship to come, and are actually the means by which that closer relationship can be achieved.

The main subject of the verse letters is the growing alliance between Donne and Bedford in the complex but necessary system of patronage that governed any hope of preferment in the Jacobean court. As intermediaries or go-betweens in a client-patroness relationship, the verse letters perform the same service that Donne hoped Bedford would perform as his patroness: to mediate successfully between her ambitious client and those who offer advancement in court. Thus, the form and function of the letters both reflect and reinforce their subject matter. Gregory Bateson defines this type of discourse as "metacommunication," or a form of communication in which the subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers.[32] In Donne's verse letters to Bedford, both author and intended reader have a client-patroness relationship apart from, and yet created by, the text that can be evoked as a context of composition for author, and of reception or interpretation for reader. And that context of composition is the intricate, interdependent system of political and artistic patronage in which Bedford thrived.

Patronage in early modern England, the "cynosure of all political and social relationships,"[33] was an outcome of earlier feudal relationships by which the Crown secured loyalty and service in exchange for position and privilege. But since these earlier civil servants had been in large part clerics holding benefices in the Church, there was no clear idea of a regular salary paid from public funds. In the early sixteenth century, when the state took

over functions of the church and guilds, more offices were available to the ambitious courtier, yet often the rewards of these offices were less tangible and more honorary, maintaining the lingering notion of personal service to the monarch in which service lay at the monarch's pleasure. In the Elizabethan court, most royal servants did enjoy a fixed annual fee, but in many cases it had been fixed in the previous century or earlier, and like other aspects of Elizabethan administration, took no account of economic changes.[34] Under James, the financial situation grew even worse for those seeking financial gains at court, for the king's lavishness to his favorites meant decreasing rewards for increasing numbers of courtiers. James tried to augment the court treasury by offering titles for sale, a significant change from the Tudor mix of payment for civil service with personal loyalty.

In fact, according to Linda Levy Peck, everything was for sale at the Jacobean court: titles, honors, offices, privileges, and monopolies. Such sales raised revenues for the Crown and its favorites at a time when other sources, including parliamentary subsidies, were drying up. Meanwhile, such sales allocated rewards in a system in which demand greatly exceeded supply.[35] However, this market corruption also produced an atmosphere of fierce competition and underhanded dealings that characterized the court of James I, an atmosphere in which Bedford thrived.

In approaching the Countess of Bedford through his verse letters, Donne followed the usual procedure for attaining court preferment: finding a court patron or patroness who had access to various political appointments and honors in order to enter into the patronage network. Suitors such as Donne employed any means to introduce themselves to and ingratiate themselves with the patron, including kinship and regional ties. Donne himself used mutual friends like Henry Goodyer to advance his relationship with the Countess, and even created family allegiances with his patroness by both naming his eldest daughter "Lucy" in her honor and asking Bedford to serve as the child's godmother.[36]

To show his understanding of the complexities of the patronage system, Donne frames his verse letters to Bedford to reflect the roles of the courtier-poet with his patroness in such a relationship, emphasizing the interdependence of this type of alliance in a rhetorical society. At the Jacobean court, where appearance was all-important, the true measure of a patron's position was not the actual powers he wielded, but the show of power evident in a swarm of followers whose pestering presence testified to the patron's august standing. The patron, then, is as dependent upon clients for social status as

they are upon the patron for royal bounty. In the Jacobean court, these relationships were not necessarily permanent or exclusive, for suitors often applied to more than one patron and changed allegiance when a patron lost influence.[37]

Also, as Whigham points out, these clients and patrons did not occupy permanent roles but relative positions on the patronage hierarchy. They were defined by their activities, not their ontological identities: "Courtiers of all ranks were by turns . . . suitors to their superiors and patrons to their inferiors."[38] In fact, within court society, the greatest amount of patronage was shown between people of adjacent ranks. Though all reward ultimately came from King James, only a select few favorites had access to the monarch, so that a prospective client was forced to go through many channels for advancement of his suit. Even the relationship between patron and client in James's court was not direct, but also included indirect and more amorphous relations of friends of friends and enemies of enemies. As head of a faction, the patron might find himself granting favors to those of whom he knew little. Thus, the patron was judged by his ability to deliver to his clients, and the constant scramble for decreasing rewards created anxiety on the part of the patron as to whether or not he could fulfill his part of the patronage contract. As often as not, the patron found himself as much acted upon as acting.[39] Donne demonstrates his understanding of the anxieties inherent in such a system in his verse letters to Bedford, which describe and explore the relativity and interdependence in the relationship between a client and his patroness.

"Reason is our Soules left hand"[40] is considered Donne's first verse letter to Bedford, since it has the tone of introductory address.[41] Positing the Countess as divinity itself, Donne emphasizes the distance between Bedford and her prospective client who, too lowly to enjoy the blessing of Bedford's sight, must love her through blind faith. Yet even in his linking of faith to the superior right hand and reason to the subordinate left, he admits the necessity of both: "we cannot want that [left] hand" (l. 6). The implication is, of course, that even subordinate things have use and purpose. Employing theological metaphors, Donne also praises the Countess for adding the active good of "learning and religion, / And vertue" (ll. 25-26) to her aristocratic but passively self-preserving "birth and beauty" (l. 24). This emphasis on active good over passive existence is very relevant in light of Bedford's success in a patronage system that judged the worth of a patroness not by who she was but by what she could do for her clients.

And Donne's positioning and repositioning of the Countess within the verse letter reinforces the idea of movement, activity, and mediation within

the patronage system. Though first presenting Bedford as a far-off "divinity" (l. 2), Donne draws his patroness ever closer to himself as the poem progresses, "reducing" her to "Angell" (l. 31) and finally God's "Factor for our loves" (l. 34), a very realistic description of a lady who served as intermediary for countless suits under a king who believed himself God's chosen representative on earth.

To conclude this verse letter, Donne capitalizes on that very political-religious theory of Divine Right to show solemn deference to his patroness while wittily asking for help:

> Since you are then Gods masterpeece, and so
> His factor for our loves; do as you doe,
> Make your returne home gracious; and bestow
> This life on that; so make one life of two.
> For so God helpe mee, 'I would not misse you there
> For all the good which you can do me here. (ll. 33-38)

In calling Bedford "Gods masterpeece" (l. 33), Donne suggests that, after all, Bedford herself is the creation of a higher "patron." But while praising her intrinsic worth, Donne links that theological praise to her relative position and activities as court manipulator by naming her mediator, or "Factor for our loves" (l. 34). Throughout the poem, Donne's religious language carries social and political significance, so that any mention of "God" recalls monarch James I, who, in the king's own words, sat "in the Throne of GOD"[42] and "quom he [God] callid goddis."[43] Donne's exhortation at the verse letters's conclusion, then, can be understood on two levels, depending on the metaphorical interpretation of "God," "home," "life," and "here" in the contexts of Bedford's life and of Donne's hopes for their relationship. In the obvious religious interpretation of the lines, "God" is the Supreme Being, "home" is Bedford's heavenly home, "life" is Bedford's own life, and "here" is existence on earth. In this interpretation, Donne unselfishly encourages Bedford, as angel in woman's shape, to link her earthly life to her life in heaven, and "so make one life of two," even though it means that Donne must do without her personal friendship and physical presence on earth.

But in the context of Bedford's life at court and of this letter as Donne's introductory request for patronage in that court, "God" is the supreme being of the Jacobean patronage system, King James, upon whom all advancement, at least indirectly, depended; "home" is Bedford's high place in court; "This life" is Donne's own present position as petitioner; "that [life]" is Bedford's

secure position in court; and "here" describes Donne's unsuccessful and frustrating life at Mitcham. In this light, Donne encourages Bedford, as prominent member of Queen Anne's bedchamber, a courtly "masterpeece" of James's making, and also, as political manipulator of royal suits, a "Factor for our loves," to continue her successful role as patroness. But he requests that she make her return home (to court) "gracious" or generous by taking Donne with her, bestowing "This life" (Donne the petitioner) on "that" (life at court), making "one life of two" (Donne the courtier). In this context, the last two lines of the verse letter emphasize Donne's desperate feelings of exclusion, for however the Countess may be able to dole out help to him outside of court at Mitcham, he would not want to miss sharing her physical presence in court. Donne's comment, "For so God helpe mee" (l. 37) takes on a richer, more ambiguous meaning beyond that of interjection, then, since Bedford began the letter as "divinity" (l. 2). The reader may well wonder which "God" Donne implores: the Supreme Being, King James, or the Countess herself.

Donne continues to stress to Bedford the relativity of worth in an interdependent patronage system in "You have refin'd mee."[44] The work suggests that Donne has achieved a closer relationship with the Countess, since in the verse letter he is at Twickenham, Bedford's country estate.[45] Because of his contact with the Countess, Donne claims he has been raised or alchemically refined so that now he can see the higher truth, "Rareness, or use, not nature value brings; / And such, as they are circumstanc'd, they bee" (ll. 3-4). In his very first words, then, Donne implies the interdependence of his relationship with his patroness. By referring to Bedford as an alchemist, whose success is defined by success in refining material, Donne implies that Bedford's success is likewise defined by her effectiveness in raising her present material, John Donne. To demonstrate the relativity of worth according to circumstance in context of the patronage system, Donne equates intrinsic "Vertue," artificial "Art," surface "Beauty," and uncertain "Fortune" all as "worthyest things" (ll. 1-2); that is, in the world of court patronage, attracting the attention of a prospective patron through appearance, crafted by artifice, is the true virtue of a successful courtier, and leads to fortune in court.

In this world of exterior appearance, virtue does not exist unless seen by others, and this, claims Donne, is why Bedford needs him. Bedford's virtue at the dissolute court is so rare and at such a "transcendent height" (l. 8) that it cannot be seen, so cannot exist. Donne, though too low to be seen at court, can serve Bedford by translating and explicating her virtue with his verse so

that her virtue can be seen and believed: "For, as darke texts need notes: there some must bee / To usher vertue, and say, *This is shee*" (ll. 11-12). In return for Donne's exegesis, Bedford, as court mediator, can make a "new world" (l. 21) for her client, who will be remade into one of her "new creatures" (l. 22). Though rather hyperbolic by modern standards, the concept of being "created" in the context of human underlings in power relations was common in Jacobean England, since a favorite of King James could be totally remade at the monarch's pleasure. George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, is a good example. James idolized this handsome young man and lavished gifts and titles upon him. In January, 1616, Buckingham became Master of the Horse; in April, member of the Order of the Garter; in August, Viscount Villiers; in January, 1617, Earl of Buckingham; and in February, 1617, member of the Privy Council, an honor that Prince Charles did not receive until 1622.[46] In May, 1623, James created Villiers Duke of Buckingham, the only duke in England at that time without a trace of royal blood.[47] Buckingham himself then became the most important mediator between petitioners and the crown, creating his own "creatures." Bald demonstrates Buckingham's power by quoting Donne's brother-in-law, Sir John Oglander, who explained why Sir George More, Donne's father-in-law, failed to receive promised offices: "... the King had sworn to Sir George that he should be Master of the Wards when he went out of Town, yet the Duke of Buckingham would have it for another of his creatures."[48]

Donne stresses the necessity and complexity of such mediation in the Jacobean patronage system in stanza five of "You have refin'd mee." He calls the sun Bedford's "Delegate" (l. 26) who does "offices" for the Countess, and names himself and Bedford's other clients as "sacrificers" (l. 28) and "Priests, or Organs" (l. 29), intermediaries and instruments for the patroness, who "sound [her] influence, and [her] dictates say" (l. 30). Thus Donne presents the possibility of his own position as intermediary on the patronage hierarchy. Once raised and "refin'd" by Bedford, he would then have the power to advance her own position through his praise and obedience.

In the Jacobean patronage system, all is given and nothing is earned; that is, no matter how the client reciprocates though praise, support, or artistic endeavors, any preferment he receives is given solely at the whim of the patron, not because of the client's own efforts. Donne discusses the impossibility of repayment or even adequate gratitude in such a system with "T'Have written then,"[49] a verse letter to Bedford that continues his exploration of the relativity of worth and interdependence between client and patron. Apologizing for not answering one of Bedford's letters, Donne

comments, "*nothings*, as I am, may / Pay all they have, and yet have all to pay" (ll. 7-8). This expression of total dependence echoes other courtiers of the extravagant Jacobean court, for as Goldberg explains, "excessive gifts create excessive obligations."[50] Since no courtier can truly earn his titles and gifts that are given at the whim of a patron, no courtier can ever truly repay those favors. Repeatedly, in letters to the king, favorite Buckingham recorded his inability to repay the king for his favors, or even to use them at the rate James offered them: "If I should give you dewe thankes for all you have done for me, I should spend my time in nothinge els."[51] In a letter dated March 24, 1623, Buckingham writes to James, "I would faine give thankes, but alas what can I doe or say or thinke, if I consider eyther the number of your favors or the paynefull time you tooke to doe them in, I may ese my hart in saying some thinge, but never satisfie the dett or detter in saying enough."[52] Similarly, in "T'Have written then," Donne protests that even the act of thanking is a privilege entailing more obligation, leaving him owing even more than before: "Such borrow in their payments, and owe more / By having leave to write so, then before" (ll. 9-10).

Never content to lie groveling, Donne immediately begins to justify his act of writing, balancing his dependence upon Bedford with his relative and potential worth to her as suitor. As seemingly "barren grounds" (l. 11) have the potential for worth, Donne, as Bedford's protege, has the potential to give back ("yeeld" l. 12) at least something of worth to her, if only to add to her status as patroness. By "admitting" or "chusing" (l. 15) Donne's emissary, the verse letter, and by tapping into her client's potential worth, Bedford has "denizend a stranger" (l. 17) and has helped outsider Donne enter into that hallowed ground of King James's court. In return, Donne will continue to proclaim Bedford's worth to the world, a worth so worthy that the Countess herself humbly refuses to believe it (l. 74).

Donne continually stresses, in both his letters to male friends and his verse letters to Bedford, his need to be a part of something, to belong to a group, in order to possess an identity. He writes, ". . . to be no part of any body, is to be nothing":

> At most, the greatest persons, are but great wens, and excrescences; men of wit and delightful conversation, but as moales for ornament, except they be so incorporated into the body of the world, that they contribute something to the sustentation of the whole.[53]

In his verse letters to Bedford, "creation" for Donne, then, means admission into the desired social group, the court of James I. As David Aers and Gunther Kress contend, "being" for Donne "is defined in terms of membership of the group to which he aspires: creation is therefore a social act, the act of admitting, drawing in the individual to the group."[54] His feeling of nonbeing and hopes of creation through the patronage system are most obvious in "To the Countesse of Bedford At New-yeares Tide,"[55] in which Donne presents himself to the Countess as a total nonentity, "of stuffe and forme perplext" (l. 3), ready to be created by his patroness through entrance into court.

He introduces the idea of transaction in such a relationship with the use of terms like "Debtor" and "Creditor" (l. 6), and immediately continues by explaining to Bedford what he can offer in return for her favors:

> In recompence I would show future times
> What you were, and teach them to'urge towards such.
> Verse embalmes vertue;'and Tombs, or Thrones of rimes,
> Preserve fraile transitory fame, as much
> As spice doth bodies from corrupt aires touch. (ll. 11-15)

Donne seems to be offering a conventional example of the *exegi monumentum* motif, claiming that his verse will immortalize his patroness. But in the reality of the Jacobean patronage system, as we have seen, there is no way to earn or repay adequately the favors of a court patron, and Donne acknowledges that fact by reversing the traditional claim of the immortalizing power of verse. Instead of the power of his verse preserving Bedford's name, the power of her name destroys his verse, which is obviously made of weaker stuff (ll. 16-20).

The alchemical metaphors in this stanza not only emphasize Donne's need for creation, but also imbue Bedford with the power to bring Donne's being out of nothingness and to raise her creation to something of higher worth. It is his lowly state, or lack of any state, Donne contends, that prevents him from adequately praising his patroness, since even if the poet could capture Bedford's worth in verse, no one would believe such a nonentity, "one corne of one low anthills dust, and lesse" (l. 28). Thus, Donne stresses the interdependence of the patronage system: the poet offers immortalizing verse in recompense for "creation" and advancement in court, yet he needs to be "created" by his patroness in order to praise her in verse that will be believed.

Realizing the impossibility of expressing thanks in a patronage system in which favors are granted solely by the whim of the patron, Donne does not attempt to show his gratitude to Bedford but employs a typical courtier's tactic: he says nothing, but leaves the poem "lest truth b'endanger'd by [his] praise" (l. 32). In "leaving" the poem, Donne protests his inadequacy in a manner similar to Buckingham quoted above, yet with greater effect, recalling Sir Thomas More's anecdote of a dinner party, fictionalized from a real gathering at Cardinal Wolsey's home, which More describes in *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*. At the dinner, a vainglorious prelate waited to hear his oration complimented by his guests. Each gave flattering acclaim, until it was the turn of the last guest, a "wily fox" of a priest who surpassed all in the craft of flattery. Knowing he could not exceed the others' compliments, this last speaker said nothing but "Oh."[56] Bedford herself employs the same tactic with her friend, Lady Cornwallis, to whom the Countess was often indebted. Thanking Cornwallis for a jewel on November 28, 1623, she protests, "Since I cannot thanke you enuffe, I will use no words to thanke you for at all."[57] Like More and Bedford, Donne knew that sometimes the best thing for a courtier to say is to say nothing at all, a strategy congruent with Castiglione's recommendation of hiding one's real skill for greater effect.[58] Puttenham, in fact, calls this strategy *Aposiopesis* or the Figure of Silence, "an *auricular* figure of defect" in which "we begin to speake a thing, and breake of in the middle way, as either it needed no further to be spoken of, or that we were ashamed, or afraid to speake it out"[59] Thus, the "nothing" spoken by a skillful courtier expresses much.

Yet Donne does not end his poem; instead, he turns to God, the ultimate patron, "to make it good" (l. 35). A mediator like Bedford would well appreciate this reminder of the relativity of her standing in the hierarchy of the patronage system. As previously discussed, a patron to one was a client to another in this complicated matrix. Though the Countess served as the source of many favors to writers and courtiers, she herself was at the beck and call of the king and queen, and as her letters to Lady Cornwallis reveal, her time was not her own. On September 9, 1614, Bedford was forced, at the last minute, to change her plans to visit Cornwallis because the King decided to prolong his stay at her house "against whos coming, and during his stay att my house, all my tyme and litle witt was so taken up about the busnes of house keepinge as itt made me lay all else aside."[60] In the same letter, the Countess explains that when she then attempted to visit her nephew Henry, Fifth Earl of Huntingdon, "there I met with a peremtory commandement

from the Queene to wayte upon her at Woodstocke, which I did, though with so ill health as I had much adoe to get heather to use the helpe of some phisicke . . . ."[61] In other letters, she recounts similar instances revealing her lack of liberty: her performing double-duty when one of the Ladies of the Bedchamber was ill in December, 1615,[62] and her constant attendance upon the ailing Queen Anne in October, 1618.[63] Thus, the Countess's presence in court was an indication not only of her high standing in court hierarchy, but also of her relatively subordinate status as servant to the king and queen.

Though Donne defers to the higher patron, God, in his advice to the Countess, he does not leave the poem permanently but concludes with an affirmation of his alliance with the patroness, joyfully celebrating with her the "private Ghospell" (l. 65) of her salvation. He rejoices at Bedford's advancement before God since he is allied with her as a fellow child of God and joins in her triumph. This interdependence of fortune likewise alludes to Donne's relationship to the Countess in the Jacobean patronage system, for any advancement Bedford enjoys means advancement for all her suitors, just as any disgrace likewise disgraces these clients. Castiglione, in fact, advises the courtier that, if his patron is proven corrupt, "he ought to forsake his service, lest he bear the blame of his lord's ill practices, or feel the heart grief that all good men have which serve the wicked."[64] But in Donne's verse letter, Bedford's enrollment in the Book of the Elect is welcome news for her client. Donne, the non-entity "of stuffe and forme perplext," caught between two years, has been created as the Countess's protege, and linked with her can celebrate "our New Yeare."

Perhaps Donne's most obvious statement of the reciprocity of dependence in the patronage system is his verse letter, "Honour is so sublime perfection."[65] Here Donne encapsulates the entire poet-patroness interdependence by explaining that honor can only come from lesser creatures to those above on the hierarchy. In this way, honor is like an alchemical process, in which lesser substances are used in sublimation:

> So from low persons doth all honour flow;
> Kings, whom they would have honour'd, to us show,
> And but *direct* our honour, not *bestow*. (7-9)

Therefore, the patron benefits from advancing his clients, since their social standing has a direct effect on the quality of honor the patron will receive from these clients.

Both Sir Thomas Elyot and Stephano Guazzo, authors of sixteenth-century courtesy books, concur with Donne's message here. In *The Book named the Governor*, 1531, Elyot observes that promoting good men benefits their betters, for it stimulates such men to "endeavor themselves with all their power to increase that opinion of goodness, whereby they were brought to that advancement which needs be to the honour and benefit of those by whom they were so promoted."[66] Guazzo rhetorically questions in *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo*, 1574, "Who ought not to bee glad to honour another, for so muche as (according to the saying of the Philosopher) hee whiche is honoured, for like unto the Sunne, the beames of honour by reflexion, as it were, doe shine backe againe upon him."[67] Clearly, the patron's own reputation derives from the character of his dependents, so that the patron's preferment of others will both reflect and honor that patron.

That same interdependence affects the client, also. An alliance with an unworthy or unsuccessful patron can destroy an ambitious courtier's career. Thus, the real "profession" of courtier is to guide the patron (or monarch) along right paths, not only for the patron's own betterment, but for the good of all his dependents. Castiglione explains that such guidance is the courtier's entire *raison d'etre*:

> The end, therefore, of a perfect Courtier (whereof hitherto nothing has been spoken) I believe is to purchase him, by the means of the qualities which these Lords have given him, in such wise the good will and favor of the prince he is in service withal, and that he may break his mind to him, and always inform him frankly of the truth of every matter meet for him to understand, without fear or peril to displease him . . . . And therefore, in mine opinion, as music, sports, pastimes, and other pleasant fashions are as a man would say, the flower of courtliness, even so is the training, and the helping forward of the prince to goodness and the fearing him from evil the fruit of it.[68]

Yet however well-intentioned, the courtier/client must not offend his patron with advice but must fashion it in a manner acceptable to the patron, even if it involves fiction or deceit:

> . . . as the wary physicians do, who many times, when they minister to young and tender children in their sickness a medicine of bitter taste, anoint the cup about the brim with some sweet liquor. The

> Courtier, therefore, applying to such a purpose this veil of pleasure in every time, in every place, and in every exercise, he shall attain to his end, and deserve much more praise and recompense than for any other good work he can do in the world, because there is no treasure that doeth so universal profit as doeth a good prince, nor any mischief so universally hurt as an ill prince.[69]

In this manner, Castiglione raises even the artful deceit of the courtier into an invaluable contribution to the well-being of the commonwealth.

By forming his verse letters into rhetorical extensions of a rhetorical self, Donne was able to frame both his epistles and himself to the interests and concerns of Lady Bedford, and to the intricacies of the Jacobean patronage system he hoped to enter through her help. Though his relationship with the Countess waned after 1614,[70] the close ties Donne enjoyed with his patroness during his years at Mitcham were created and maintained mainly through his rhetorical emissaries, the verse letters.

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Notes

[1] Allen Barry Cameron, "Donne's Deliberative Verse Epistles," *English Literary Renaissance* 6 (1976): 369.

[2] Barbara K. Lewalski, *Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise* (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 56.

[3] Richard E. Hughes, *The Progress of the Soul: The Interior Career of John Donne* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1968), p. 129.

[4] Most modern critics have disparaged Donne's verse epistles to noble ladies. Margaret Maurer thinks the hyperbolic premise of these verse letters pose a problem of decorum for Donne, so that he must "labor to make those compliments conform to the requirements of reason and discretion." See "John Donne's Verse Letters," *Modern Language Quarterly* 37 (1976): 257. Arthur Marotti also cites the problem of maintaining decorum in these verse epistles, which he calls an "awkward, sometimes inventive combination of flattery and condescension." The particular socioliterary situation of the letters, Marotti believes, prevented Donne from composing "the energetically and wittily intellectual verse found in the best passages of the epistles to male addressees." See *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 203. In *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 77, John Carey is more vehement in his condemnation of the verse letters to patronesses: "The

barrage of pseudo-religious encomium is patently mechanical—a grim, toneless exertion, like mental arithmetic." Other critics have attempted to justify, or at least explain, Donne's seemingly insincere, unbelievably extravagant praise by spiritualizing these verse letters and placing them within the meditative tradition. Barbara De Stephano thinks the verse epistles to noble ladies are "meditations on virtue wherein [Donne] audaciously fuses the classical epideictic tradition to Christian religiosity to create a new emphatic high style to praise man as the glory of God," and, like Stapleton and Lewalski, thinks the letters' emphasis on virtue prepares for the more profound *Anniversaries.* See "Evolution of Extravagant Praise in Donne's Verse Epistles," *Studies in Philology* (Winter, 1984): 76-77. Helen Gardner likens the epistles to riddles, affording mental amusement in working out Donne's subtle and involved trains of thought, and Leishman also stresses the playful quality of the letters, judging them as "a kind of elaborate game." See Helen Gardner, "Notes on Donne's Verse Letters, *Modern Language Review* 41 (1946): 318, and J.B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1965), p. 144. For other evaluative comments, see Allen Barry Cameron, "Donne's Deliberative Verse Epistles," *English Literary Renaissance* 6 (1976): 369-403; Judith Scherer Herz, "An Excellent Exercise of Wit," *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 3-14; D.J. Palmer, "The Verse Epistles," *Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 73-99; Patricia Thomson, "Donne and the Poetry of Patronage: The Verse Letters," *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A.J. Smith (London: Methuen and Company, 1972), p. 208-23; Leonard D. Tourney, "Donne, the Countess of Bedford, and the Petrarchan Manner," *New Essays on Donne*, ed. Gary Stringer, in *Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies*, ed. James Hog 57 (Salzburg: Institut fur Englische Sprache un Literatur, Universitat Salzburg, 1978), p. 45-59; and William Zunder, *The Poetry of John Donne: Literature and Culture in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Period* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982).

[5] "The Countess of Bedford and the Countess of Huntingdon: Unequal Players in Donne's Game of Courtly Compliment," presented to the Fifth Annual Conference of the John Donne Society in Gulfport, Mississippi, 23 February, 1991.

[6] Barbara K. Lewalski, "Lucy, Countess of Bedford: Images of a Jacobean Courtier and Patroness," *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univerity of California Press, 1987), p. 52.

[7] R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 172.

[8] Neville Williams, *All the Queen's Men, Elizabeth I and Her Courtiers* (London and New York, 1972), p. 366. Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, has

been treated variously by commentators from Donne's time to the present. She is described as "vain, generous, and bountiful to excess" by Reverend J. Granger, *Biographical History of England from Egbert the Great to the Revolution* (London: William Baynes and Son, 1824), p. 171; a woman whose "vanity and extravagance met with no check" by Thomas Pennant, *The Journey from Chester to London* (London: Printed for B. White, 1782), p. 353; yet a woman whose reputation also prompted sincere defense, as shown in comments by Lord Braybrooke, editor of *The Private Correspondence of Jane, Lady Cornwallis, 1613-1644* (London: Bentley, Wilson, and Fley, 1842), p. xix: "That her habits were profuse, no one would deny, but probably both her means and her expenditure have been exaggerated; at all events she was a munificent patron of the arts and an encourager of literary merit. . . ." Ben Jonson, one of those Bedford encouraged, called her "a learned and a manly soule" in *Epigram LXXVI*. For more recent commentaries on this fascinating woman, see John Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964); Margaret M. Byard, "The Trade of Courtiership: The Countess of Bedford and the Bedford Memorials; A Family History from 1585-1607," *History Today* (Jan., 1979), p. 20-28; Pearl Hogrefe, *Tudor Women: Commoners and Queens* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975); Margaret Maurer, "The Real Presence of Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, and the Terms of John Donne's 'Honour is so sublime perfection,'" *ELH* 47 (1980): 205-34; Bernard H. Newdigate, *Michael Drayton and His Circle* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1941); Palmer 73-99; Dick Taylor, Jr., "Drayton and the Countess of Bedford," *Studies in Philology* 49 (1952): 214-28; and J.H. Wiffen, *Historical Memoirs of the House of Russell* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1833).

[9] For Bedford's relationship with these writers, see above, and also Louisa Stuart Costello, *Memoires of Eminent Englishwomen* (1844); Oliver Elton, *Michael Drayton: A Critical Study* (London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1905); Diana Poulton, *John Dowland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972); and J. Saunders, "Donne and Daniel," *Essays in Criticism* 3 (1953): 109-14.

[10] Bald, p. 158.

[11] John Donne, *The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters*, ed. with introduction and commentary by W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 90-103.

[12] *Satires*, p. 103.

[13] The close friend is probably Lady Markham; see Milgate's comments in *Satires*, p. 259-60.

[14] Quoted in Palmer, p. 74.

[15] John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)* (New York and Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1974), p. 105-107.

[16] *Letters*, p. 23.

[17] "To Sir G. F.," *Letters*, p. 74.

[18] "To my most worthy friend Sir H. Goodere," *Letters*, p. 116.

[19] *Letters*, p. 240.

[20] Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 5.

[21] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 2.

[22] Richard Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 2.

[23] Frank Whigham, "The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters," *PMLA* 96 (1981): 866.

[24] Bald, pp. 93-127.

[25] Margaret Maurer, "The Poetical Familiarity of John Donne's Letters," *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Special Issue *Genre* 15, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer, 1982): 183-202.

[26] "To Sir H. Wootton," *Letters*, p. 120.

[27] Marotti, p. 228.

[28] See Marotti *passim*.

[29] See "Lucy, Countess of Bedford."

[30] Cameron, p. 370.

[31] Montaigne, *Essays XXIX*, i, 266; quoted in Palmer, p. 74.

[32] Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 178.

[33] Kevin Sharpe and Stephen N. Zwicker, "Politics of Discourse: Introduction," *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Sharpe and Zwicker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 13.

[34] Wallace T. MacCaffrey, "Place and Patronage in Elizabethan Politics," *Elizabethan Government and Society*, ed. S. T. Bindoff et al. (London: Athlone Press, 1961), p. 104.

[35] Linda Levy Peck, "Court Patronage and the Government Policy: The Jacobean Dilemma," *Patronage in the Renaissance*, ed. Guy Lytle and Steven Orgel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 41.

[36] Bald, pp. 170, 176.

[37] Peck, p. 30.

[38] Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, p. 12.

[39] Peck, p. 45.

[40] *Satires*, p. 90.

[41] *Satires*, p. 253.

[42] James I, *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles H. McIlwain (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), p. 366.

[43] Quoted in Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 27.

[44] *Satires*, p. 91.

[45] *Satires*, p. 256.

[46] David Bergeron, *Royal Family, Royal Lovers: King James of England and Scotland* (University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 176.

[47] Bergeron, p. 176.

[48] Bald, p. 130.

[49] *Satires*, p. 95.

[50] Goldberg, p. 137.

[51] Quoted in Goldberg, p. 137.

[52] Quoted in Bergeron, p. 176.

[53] *Letters*, p. 51.

[54] David Aers and Gunther Kress, "'Darke Texts Need Notes': Versions of Self in Donne's Verse Epistles," *Literature and History* 8 (Autumn, 1978): 31.

[55] *Satires*, p. 98.

[56] Quoted in Greenblatt, p. 11.

[57] Jane, Lady Cornwallis, *The Private Correspondence of Jane, Lady Cornwallis*, p. 86.

[58] Baldassare Castiglione, *The Courtier (Il Cortegiano)*, trans. Thomas Hoby (The National Alumni, 1907), pp. 117-18.

[59] George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, intro. by Baxter Hathaway, ed. Edward Arber, facsimile reproduction of 1906 reprint by A. Constable and Co., Ltd. (Kent State University Press, 1970), p. 178.

[60] Cornwallis, p. 24.

[61] Cornwallis, p. 25.

[62] Cornwallis, p. 30.

[63] Cornwallis, p. 57.

[64] Castiglione, p. 340.

[65] *Satires*, p. 100.

[66] Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, 1531, ed. S. E. Lemberg (New York: Dutton, Everyman, 1962), p. 192.

[67] Stephen Guazzo, *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo*, 1574, Books 1-2 trans. by George Petti, 1591; Book 4 trans. by Bartholomew Young, 1586; The Tudor Translations, 2 vols. (London: Constantinople, 1925) 1, p. 165.

[68] Castiglione, pp. 288-89.

[69] Castiglione, p. 294.

[70] For possible reasons for their estrangement, see Patricia Thomson, "John Donne and the Countess of Bedford," *Modern Language Review* 44 (1949): 329-40.