

Colloquium: “Valediction of the booke”

Introduction

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John Donne’s “Valediction of the booke,” first published in the posthumous 1633 *Poems, by J. D.*, has been neither the critical nor pedagogical favorite that some of Donne’s other *Songs and Sonnets* have been; indeed, of Donne’s four valedictions, “Valediction of the booke” may be the least studied. As the panel assembled at the 2008 John Donne Society Conference shows, however, this is a serious oversight, for “Valediction of the booke” both shares many of the tropes of Donne’s other poems and sheds fresh light on them. Moreover, as several of this colloquium’s contributors argue, “Valediction of the book” presents the poem’s female interlocutor as a woman with potentially greater agency than the women to be found elsewhere in Donne’s verse—or in most love poetry of the period.

D. Audell Shelburne’s contribution is based on his collation of thirty-five different versions of “Valediction of the booke,” from both manuscript and print sources; although his essay modestly declines to establish a definitive text, it details many of the important variants among those versions, including the poem’s several different titles. Raymond-Jean Frontain considers “Valediction of the booke” as both another example of Donne’s fondness for portraying the female beloved as herself a kind of text or instructional pattern for other lovers to follow, and also as one of several other poems of Donne’s in which the text of the poem functions as a performative utterance. Julie W. Yen meditates

upon “Valediction of the booke” from the perspective of the classroom, but, like Frontain, she is especially intrigued by the role of the silent female interlocutor whom the poem’s speaker nevertheless charges with the important task of writing the “Annals” of their love. To the fine inquiries of the original three panelists has been added that of Margaret Downs-Gamble, whose project dovetails nicely with theirs. Like Shelburne, Downs-Gamble is interested in the differences between some of the manuscript versions of the poem and the version in the 1633 *Poems*, which she suggests might reflect Donne’s deliberate revision, perhaps to give the poem’s female interlocutor more agency.

Although the four colloquium contributors differ in their readings of this and many other aspects of the poem, all testify to the richness of “Valediction of the booke” and the ample opportunities it affords for further study.

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