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Donne's "Valediction of the booke" as a Performative Action

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Although Camille Wells Slights does not discuss Donne's "Valediction of the booke," the poem might be included among those that she describes as "calling the world's attention to the lovers as a pattern, often in the form of a written text," and in the process enacting "within the poem's fiction its function as a speech act."[1] For the poem is a written text about two presumptive written texts. These include, most obviously, the "Annals" (12) that the speaker instructs his "deare Love" (1) to create from "our manuscripts, those Myriades / Of letters, which have past twixt thee and mee" (10–11).[2] When disseminated, these Annals will prove "as long-liv'd as the elements" (19), will preserve knowledge in the event of another invasion of "Vandals and Goths" (25), and will serve to instruct such apparently desperately needy groups as "Loves Divines" (stanza 4), lawyers (stanza 5), and statesmen—or, at least, those of the latter "which can reade" (stanza 6). These Annals will also prove useful to the speaker, providing

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[1]Slights, "A Pattern of Love: Representations of Anne Donne," in *John Donne's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Donald R. Dickson (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 373.

[2]Unless otherwise specified, lines from Donne's "Valediction of the booke" and his other poems are quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967) and will be cited parenthetically.

him with material to "study" during those periods when he is "Esloygne[d]" (3) from her.

But, more suggestively, in "vent[ing]" her "thoughts" (55), the woman herself becomes a text that the speaker scrutinizes for some indication of how their love will endure "absence" (58). By revealing her interior state, the woman also reveals the depth or, the speaker possibly worries, the shallowness of her love. The speaker looks forward to studying or reading what her thoughts will disclose even when the two lovers are physically separated—a subtle acknowledgment of his fear that while he is out of her sight, he will be out of her mind as well. This understanding of the woman *as* book is supported by the alternate title, "Valediction to his booke," in the early printed versions on which C. A. Patrides bases his edition of the text, the woman to whom the poem is addressed proving to be the "booke" to which, or to whom, the speaker voices his valediction.[3]

However, even while applying to "Valediction of the booke" Slights's observation about the way in which Donne's lovers serve as a pattern or a text available for others to read, I am struck by the implications of her ancillary insight as to how a Donne poem which privileges the written or printed text may paradoxically function simultaneously as a speech act. The speaker's conflation of speech, writing, and possibly even print in "Valediction of the booke" proves a deliberate maneuver to ensure that a powerful but silent interlocutor accords him a sign of his election. As such, "Valediction of the booke" deserves to be read as one of a number of poems in which the speaker's utterance is intended to be performative.[4]

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[3]Patrides, ed., *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (London: Dent/Everyman, 1985), pp. 75–77.

[4]J. L. Austin analyzes the nature of "Performative Utterances" but fails to take into account the cultural evolution of such speech acts (in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], chap. 10). On Donne's interest in the biblical concept of *dabar*, in which the word functions as an action, see Raymond-Jean Frontain, "'The Name of Shee': The Biblical Logocentrism of Donne's *Anniversaries*," *Publications of the Missouri Philological Association* 22 (1997): 28–39. And on Donne's delaying closure in poems like "Elegie: Going to Bed" and "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," specifically in order to elicit from a silent interlocutor a word or gesture indicating the speaker's redemption, see Frontain, "Donne, Spenser, and

The governing conceit of "Valediction of the booke" sustains Donne's emphasis elsewhere upon persons—most particularly women—as instructional patterns or texts to be read by the less fortunate in love or by the still-to-be-perfected in virtue.[5] Just as the lovers in "The Canonization" offer from their transcendent height "A patterne of . . . love" to those in the sublunary world who suffer still the "rage" of passion (45, 38), so the subjects of Donne's elegies and the recipients of his verse epistles prove to be "worthy bookes" authored by their virtuous actions ("To Sr. Edward Herbert. At Julyers," 47–50).[6] The Countess of Salisbury, for example, is praised for coming "to repaire / Gods booke of creatures, teaching what is faire" ("To the Countesse of Salisbury. August. 1614," 6–7); others "read this booke" by studying the example of virtue that she provides (68–71).[7] And in the *Second Anniversary*

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the Performative Mode of Renaissance Poetry," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 32 (2006): 76–102.

[5]More generally, Donne's poetic canon offers an ongoing commentary on the nature of—and, in particular, his fascination with—the written and/or printed book. For example, Donne satirizes Thomas Coryate's "love of greatnesse" that drives him to attempt to make of the Crudities "a Pandect . . . and Universall booke" ("Upon Mr. Thomas Coryate's Crudities," 2, 50), and in his Latin verse epistle "To a most learned and most friendly man of God, Dr. Andrews," wittily apologizes for "a printed book which, when it was borrowed, was torn to pieces by the children in the house, and was later returned in manuscript" ("*De Libro cum mutuaretur*"). The latter proves Donne's best extant comment upon the value of manuscript over print dissemination. Likewise, references to such things as "the booke / Of some great Conjurer which would enforce / Nature . . . from her course" ("Elegie: The Bracelet," 34–36), "the booke of destiny" ("A Funerall Elegie," 83–90; see also *Metempsychosis*, stanzas 4–5), and the "bookes of life" (*A Litanie*, stanza 13) suggest the symbolic aura that books possessed for Donne's imagination.

[6]Likewise, in "The Flea" the insect proves a text to be "marked" (1) or studied, and subsequently learned from (25), and in "The Relique" the poem itself will teach a later age "Where mis-devotion doth command" what a "miracle" the speaker's beloved and the love that he shared with her were (20, 12, 33). In "The Extasie" the body is the "booke" in which Love writes his "mysteries" so that the "soules language" may be understood (71–72, 22).

[7]Similarly, in "Elegie to the Lady Bedford" on the death of her cousin, Lady Markham, Donne insists that "Yet but of Judith no such booke [has ever existed] as shee"—that is, the dead woman (44). Elsewhere the Countess of

Elizabeth Drury is praised as "our best, and worthiest booke" (320), containing in "her owne thoughts" the collected knowledge of "all Libraries" (303–304), thus making her—in Roberta Albrecht's reading of the alchemical operation of the poem—"the Original Book, full of all knowledge. Read her and your Memory will be restored."[8]

Of all Donne's references to people as books, however, the most relevant to "Valediction of the booke" is the climactic description of women in "Elegie: Going to Bed."

> Like pictures or like books gay coverings made
> For lay-men, are all women thus array'd.
> Themselves are mystick books, which only wee
> (Whom their imputed grace will dignifie)
> Must see reveal'd.
>
> (39–43)

The conceit distinguishes between "lay-men" who are not privileged to salvation because their eyes will never be allowed to see past the book's ornately bejeweled cover to the soul-saving message contained in the pages within, and the lovers or "readers" whom a woman elects to salvation by imputing to them the grace needed to make them worthy of seeing her naked and, thus, allowing them to taste the "whole joyes" (35) reserved for the blessed in heaven.[9]

Like the silent interlocutor of "Elegie: Going to Bed," the woman addressed in "Valediction of the booke" is, provocatively, both author and text, both a revelation which others require for salvation and the guardian of that revelation in that she determines to whom it shall be imparted. At first glance, stanzas 2–6 seem intended primarily to assert

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Bedford is herself praised for being a "darke text" requiring "notes" if its meaning is to be understood ("To the Countesse of Bedford," 11–12; see also 51–54 and 56).

[8]Albrecht, *The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2005), p. 132.

[9]In the elegies the beloved woman proves a variation upon the Book of Life. "[W]rite my name in thy loving bookes," the speaker of "Elegie: Oh, let me not serve so" pleads (4), wittily extending the trope of love as salvation. Likewise, in "Elegie: The Expostulation" the speaker associates Truth with the words of the woman which he must learn how to "reade" (20).

the power of the text that she authors. Like Elizabeth Drury, the speaker's "deare Love" provides "Rule and example" (14) to a "schismatique" world (16), saving civilization and renewing the faith of love's divines.[10] Her book models perfection so effectively that "in this our Universe / Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musick, Angels Verse" from her (26–27).[11] The book that she authors, and the book that she herself presents to the speaker (who, apparently, imagines himself to be her best and, he hopes, only reader), aspire to the condition of "A last, and lastingst peece, a song" as it is presented in the *First Anniversary* (462). Here, alluding to the episode recorded in Deuteronomy 31:19–22, the speaker celebrates the power of poetry by recalling that it is the medium of divine choice. Concerned that the Israelites would forget his teaching, God purposefully consigned it to verse and then

> spake
> To Moses to deliver unto all,
> That song: because hee knew they would let fall
> The Law, the Prophets, and the History,
> But keepe the song still in their memory.
> (*First Anniversary*, 462–466)

In similar fashion, the woman of "Valediction of the booke" authors a text "as long-liv'd as the elements" (19), an "all-graved tome" that survives the homonymic grave and tomb (20). She is the maker of something that possesses the potential to outlast time, much less absence.

However, stanzas 2–6 hint as well at an anxiety that forces the speaker to attempt to coax the woman into writing the "Annals" of their love. The speaker provides the woman with a curious mix of reasons why she should undertake the task: to revenge herself on Destiny, which is responsible for her lover's forthcoming departure (1–2); to provide the

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[10]Donne's conflation of divinity, love and wonder in the mind of the speaker of "Valediction of the booke" (stanza 4) recalls Artegall's first seeing Britomart's face: "And he himselfe long gazing thereupon, / At last fell humbly downe vpon his knee, / And of his wonder made religion" (Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981], 4.6.22.1–3).

[11]The latter claim is boldly repeated in Donne's "Upon the translation of the Psalmes": "For, Angels learne by what the Church does here" (28).

speaker with a means of remaining united with her despite their immanent physical separation (3); to ensure that posterity learns of the success of their ploy (4); and, as a direct consequence of the latter, to win for herself a "glory" unrivaled since the days of classical antiquity (5–9). Each of his four reasons intimates the speaker's concern with the lovers' ability to maintain "this our Universe" (26) against the destructive forces of time and change, ensuring that their shared glory survives beyond death.[12] But in concluding stanza 1 by holding out to the woman the promise of future glory, the speaker seems to offer an inducement to ensure that she retains her lover in her thoughts even though he must soon part with her. Thus, more than wanting to ensure their being remembered by future generations, the speaker is concerned with securing from his partner an acknowledgment of her love.

As in so many of Donne's poems, there is a subtle ambivalence to the speaker's operation in "Valediction of the booke" that belies his rhetorical bravado. For example, the speaker's claims regarding the temporal power of his beloved's book are the more curious for his consciousness of the threat that he and his "deare Love" face at the present moment. "I'll tell thee *now*," the poem begins (1, emphasis mine), the "now" bespeaking a present urgency the nature of which the speaker does not overtly make clear. In his Lacanian reading of Donne's love poems, Ben Saunders emphasizes the speakers' desire to attain "the point of connection where two can become the One that contains the All in a climactic moment of

[12]Like the speaker of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Donne's speaker clearly hopes to ensure the preservation of something valuable that is capable of enlightening a world darkened by Time. On the triangulated relationship of love, poetry, and time in the Renaissance, see Anne Davidson Ferry, *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). Time is a critical element in "Valediction of the booke"; Achsah Guibbory, for example, reads the poem in terms of its consciousness of future readers ("A Sense of the Future: Projected Audiences of Donne and Jonson," *John Donne Journal* 2 [1983]: 11–21). The speaker's reference to "this our Universe" (26) recalls the "one little roome" which becomes "an every where" in "The good-morrow" (11), and the unequivocal assertion that "Shee'is all States, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is" in "The Sunne Rising" (21–22).

proto-Hegelian synthesis."[13] In such a scheme, absence, parting, and loss are figured, conversely, as "a kind of death":

> the hyperbolic reaction to separation is an inevitable consequence of an equally hyperbolic fantasy of unity. Thus, Donne's figuration of separation as death can be read as a necessary result of his attempts to achieve coherence, fixity, and unity through Imaginary identifications, even as it marks the failure of those identifications. . . . Donne's description of himself as a dying man [in a poem like "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day"], his reduction of "thou" and "I" to "nothing" in the face of separation, represents a kind of uncontrolled regression into a condition of incoherence and fragmentation—the inevitability of this regression being built into the very Imaginary identifications that were intended to ward it off.[14]

This is the power of the woman in "Valediction of the booke": to offer "coherence, fixity, and unity" in a world that can be again overrun by Vandals and Goths, that is populated by statesmen who cannot read, and that is governed by a cruel Fate or Destiny that separates the speaker from the source of his happiness. The "now" of the poem's opening line is the critical moment of separation when the speaker's world threatens to disintegrate, when an Othello-like darkness threatens to overcome

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[13]Saunders, *Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 162.

[14]Saunders, pp. 163–164. Elaine Scarry considers the materiality of the four valedictions ("Donne: 'but yet the body is his booke,'" in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry, Selected Papers from the English Institute 1986, n. s. 12 [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988], 70–105). Additionally, I have been influenced in my thinking about "Valediction of the booke" by James S. Baumlin's and Anne Barbeau Gardiner's essays on what might be termed Donne's theology of "incarnational absence" in the valedictions (see Baumlin, "Donne's Poetics of Absence," *John Donne Journal* 7 [1988]: 151–182, and Gardiner, "Donne and the Real Presence of the Absent Lover," *John Donne Journal* 9 [1990]: 113–124). Gardiner's essay, however, does not address "Valediction of the booke," and Scarry touches upon the poem only in passing.

him and Chaos reclaim creation.[15] That "now" signals that, as much as the poem is concerned overtly with a written or printed book, it is framed as a speech act designed to elicit from the woman a signal that their love will survive the "darke eclipse" (61) of absence. As James S. Baumlin notes, "On the surface, . . . 'A Valediction: of the Booke' expresses confidence in the lady's devotion and in the strength of their relationship; beneath the surface, however, and beneath the extravagant, Petrarchan praise lies a challenge to the lady, that she not slacken her love."[16]

I wonder, however, if one might not more appropriately say that, rather than merely offering a "challenge," the speaker makes a muted entreaty to a figure whose power Donne criticism has been slow to acknowledge. In stanzas 4–6, while proposing to the woman a list of those who would benefit from reading the "Annals" of their love, the speaker indirectly identifies the fault lines in their relationship. Some lovers consider platonic love to be mutually exclusive from love that is corporally expressed (stanza 4), a distinction which the speaker of Donne's "Aire and Angels," for example, denies. Presumably, love must be a matter of *both* minds and bodies for the speaker of "Valediction of the booke" as well. Likewise, the speaker alludes to how *other* women deprive men of satisfaction by arguing "honor, or conscience" (44), suggesting a different kind of absence from what a valediction presupposes. And the speaker hopes never to be like some lovers who, when confronted with an example of true love, are devastated to understand that their relationship is "nothing" (52–53).[17] The "Annals"

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[15]"Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee, and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again," Othello exclaims to Desdemona, voicing the metaphysical shudder of the Petrarchan movement (William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. [New York: Norton, 2008], 3.3.91–93).

[16]Baumlin, p. 179.

[17]Lines 53–54 prove for me the most difficult in the poem. Shawcross's gloss proves helpful, "Such people will see their hollowness" (*The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, p. 118 n. 53). Donald R. Dickson elaborates: "In this book, which deals with true love, some will see their own emptiness" (*John Donne's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*, p. 91 n. 5). In one of the most sophisticated readings of the poem, DeSa Wiggins argues that "Valediction of the booke" is "an example of *sprezzatura* unsurpassed in *The Songs and Sonnets* or anywhere else in

that he asks his mistress to write will be proof against the corrosive presence of such weaknesses in their relationship.

In this context, I find astute Baumlin's allusion to the concluding lines of "The good-morrow" ("What ever dyes, was not mixt equally; / If our two loves be one, or, thou and I / Love so alike, that none doe *slacken*, none can die," emphasis mine). Complaints that the woman's voice is rarely heard in the *Songs and Sonets*—like C. S. Lewis's objection to the peremptory commands for the woman to remove items of her clothing in "Elegie: Going to Bed"—are misguided.[18] The speaker's dramatic monologue is an act designed to elicit a response from the woman, a word or gesture *outside* the poem that her love is as steadfast as his, so he may be certain that it (and, consequently, they) will not die. As a reader I find it unsettling that, whatever the seeming emotional exhilaration of "The good-morrow," the mutuality of the lovers' love is never confirmed *within* the poem. Similarly, it is not clear within "Elegie: Going to Bed" that the woman drops her final piece of clothing, thereby imputing to the speaker the grace that he needs in order to taste whole joys—or that God scourges the back turned to him by the speaker at the conclusion of "Goodfriday, 1613." These poems constitute speech acts designed to elicit from the interlocutor some sign of the speaker's sexual or spiritual election.[19]

Renaissance poetry," yet concludes that the poem is "a travesty of the many Renaissance affirmations of literary power and longevity" (*Donne, Castiglione, and the Poetry of Courtliness* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000], p. 147). Wiggins reads stanzas 4–6 as evidence of the woman's scepticism regarding the value of the book that she is asked to write. He might just as effectively have argued, however, that the stanzas reveal the female interlocutor's scepticism regarding the nature of love—or the male speaker's anticipation of what she would argue, if she were given the chance.

[18]On Lewis's dismissal of "Elegie: Going to Bed" as soft-core pornography, and an alternate reading of the poem's operation, see Frontain, "Donne's Erotic Spirituality: Ovidian Sexuality and the Language of Christian Revelation," *Forum* 25 (Autumn 1984): 41–54.

[19]This is to say that the speaker of such a lyric requests *within* the poem a gesture that the otherwise silent interlocutor will make *outside* the poem. This gesture will confirm (or, possibly, contradict) the speaker's assertions regarding the nature of his relationship with the woman or God. Such poems, then, suspend closure in that the speaker is effectively knocking the rhetorical ball to

Thus, more than a strategy to negotiate departure or overcome separation anxiety, "Valediction of the booke" is intended to reaffirm the speaker's wavering faith in the longevity of his and the addressee's love. The helplessness of men accurately to assess the value of love is indicated by the speaker's acknowledgment that "Love himselfe" "transferr'd" his prerogatives "to womankinde" (39–40), investing the female with all of the power in every relationship. The female interlocutor of "Valediction of the booke" must be tactfully reminded that the fate of their relationship rests in her hands lest too aggressive a questioning by the speaker leave him being dismissed, Prufrock-like, with a cold "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all." Thus, even while hoping to receive from his mistress an emphatic reassurance of the longevity of their love, the speaker claims only to proffer a strategy by which he and his mistress may even the score with "Destiny," who "Esloygne[s]" him from his "deare Love," by creating a text that will ensure that their names are familiar to posterity. And he seems outwardly interested in guaranteeing that in the process his beloved's fame

> may out-endure
> Sybills glory, and obscure
> Her who from Pindar could allure,
> And her, through whose helpe Lucan is not lame,
> And her, whose booke (they say) Homer did finde, and name.
> (5–9)

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the interlocutor's court, leaving the reader to wait with him to learn whether or how the interlocutor will hit it back.

Margaret Downs-Gamble makes a related claim in "John Donne's 'Outward Creatures': Texts Built of 'Thought and Breath,'" an unpublished paper in which she argues that "Donne seemed genuinely wary, even skeptical of the printed text," valuing instead the act of speech "because of its proximity, both to its creator and to the listening audience, and its immediacy on the occasion of its delivery." "I know what dead carkasses things written are, in respect of things spoken," Donne acknowledges to the Countess of Montgomery when apologizing for writing a letter to her rather than waiting upon her in person (*Letters to Severall Persons of Honour [1651]*, ed. M. Thomas Hester [Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975], p. 25). I am grateful to Dr. Downs-Gamble for providing me with a copy of her paper while she was still revising it for publication.

Such an assertion has led readers to question why, like the woman herself, the models are not named whom the beloved is assured she will surpass in fame; the only names given in the poem and known to posterity are those of the men who have benefitted by each woman's assistance or who have appropriated outright her creation. The male in each case seems to eclipse the woman with whose glory he has been invested.

Readers, however, must acknowledge that in each case it is the woman who has created something that endures, not the male. Homer, for example, only "name[s]" the "booke" that a woman has created, much as Adam only named the creatures in the Book of Nature that were led before him by their maker (Genesis 2:19). Indeed, I wonder whether the female addressee in "Valediction of the booke" is not named for the same reason that in the Hebrew scriptures Yahweh cannot be named, nor his glory made available to mortal eyes: His name is too powerful and He can be witnessed only in terms of the action of His grace.[20] Like her literary forebears, the woman addressed in "Valediction of the booke" possesses the power both to preserve the speaker's name *and* to confirm the endurance of their love. The silent, unnamed She proves all-powerful, while—despite his bravura—the verbally compulsive speaker proves, finally, to be but a humble petitioner.[21]

Writing, as Donne repeatedly observes, preserves against the loss of memory. But in "Valediction of the booke" it is the immediate speech act

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[20]The religious coloring of Donne's language may include as well "vent" in line 55, which recalls Yahweh's bringing order out of chaos through a "spirit" or *ruah* (Hebrew, "breath") moving across the waters (Genesis 1:2), the speaker of "Valediction of the booke" being animated through the creating breath of the woman.

[21]Significantly, "Valediction of the booke" closes with a paradox similar to the ones that occur in the devotional poems. In the final stanza, references to longitude and latitude are used to suggest that just as distance is required to see how massive something actually is, absence is needed to make trial of how long the speaker's love shall endure. Similarly, in "Holy Sonnet: Batter my heart" the speaker asks to be made "chaste" by being raped, and in "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany," the speaker concludes that "To see God only, I goe out of sight: / And to scape stormy dayes, I chuse an Everlasting night" (27–28). As the speaker of "The Crosse" argues, "No Crosse is so extreme, as to have none" (14).

that proves more suggestively powerful than the written or printed word. The reader, like the speaker, waits at the poem's end to learn whether the female interlocutor will comply with his wishes and agree to out-anger Destiny by fashioning a tome of the letters that the lovers have exchanged and—dare he hope?—will continue to exchange while they are apart. Or will she forget him and consign his world to emotional darkness either by refusing him a sign that she values their relationship as highly as he himself does, or by failing to answer the new letters that he intends to write? The reader, like the speaker, waits to learn whether she will deign to deliver the word by which her will can be known and done.

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