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Reading Donne's "Valediction of the booke"

Julie W. Yen

Donne's "Valediction of the booke" has generally received less critical attention than his three other valediction poems,[1] so in the next class on seventeenth-century poetry that I teach, with world enough and time, we would read "Valediction of the booke" first, before moving to situate the poem in the context of the other three valedictions. The poem is an excellent example of what R. V. Young, in his 1998 Presidential Address at the John Donne Society, called "the inventive *copia* and wit of Donne's poetry."[2] In the poem, we find many of the features characteristic of Donne's other love poems, such as rhetorical hyperbole and the sacrilegious use of religious language to express profane love.[3]

In my class, we would begin by reading the poem aloud; then we would start discussion by talking about the ideas that we associate with

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[1]The other three valediction poems are "A Valediction forbidding mourning," "A Valediction of weeping," and "A Valediction of my name, in the window." My quotations from Donne's poetry are from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967).

[2]Young, "Love, Poetry, and John Donne in the Love Poetry of John Donne," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 52 (2000): 251–273; quotation from p. 251.

[3]Writing on biblical allusions in the valediction poems, Gary Stringer notes that the poem charges the lady to write the lovers' "Annals" (l2) and goes on to call those records a Bible ("Learning 'Hard and Deepe': Biblical Allusion in Donne's 'A Valediction: Of My Name, in the Window,'" *The South Central Bulletin* 33 [1973]: 227–231.)

the main words in the title, "Valediction" and "booke." I would ask students to imagine what they would say to someone they love very much when they know they must leave for a while. What would they feel? Great sadness, desire to stay, desire to console the beloved, fear about not being able to return, anxiety about the beloved's faithfulness? Then I would ask students to talk about the ideas that they associate with books and the related idea of knowledge. And finally, before discussing the poem I would show a few minutes of the film *Prospero's Books,* which is filled with copious images of books that illustrate various branches of humanist learning important to the people of the Renaissance.[4] In the scene when Miranda meets Ferdinand, for instance, she is holding *The Book of Love*; and right before the young lovers meet, we see Miranda turning the pages of a tome which her father calls "an herbal to end all herbals . . . an encyclopedia."[5]

"Valediction of the booke" is clearly addressed to a well-educated female reader. From the beginning of the poem, not only does the speaker assume that the woman will get its references and complex metaphors, but he instructs her to write a book. At this point, I would pause to consider the implications of this scene. In an essay on teaching Donne, Ann Baynes Coiro says that to prevent her students from assuming that "women in the seventeenth century had no talent or no desire to write," she makes a point of informing her class that the five main poets we teach in metaphysical poetry are all men because that is

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[4]*Prospero's Books*, written and directed by Peter Greenaway in 1991, is a free and innovative film adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. John Gielgud plays Prospero as well as provides narration and voices of the other characters. According to James Kearney, the film includes texts such as *The Book of Water*; *A Book of Mirrors*; *A Book of Mythologies*; *A Primer of the Small Stars*; *An Atlas Belonging to Orpheus*; *A Harsh Book of Geometry*; *The Book of Colours*; *An Anatomy of Birth*; *An Alphabetical Inventory of the Dead*; *A Book of Travellers' Tales*; *The Book of the Earth*; *A Book of Architecture and Other Music*; *The Ninety-Two Conceits of the Minotaur*; *The Book of Languages*; *End Plants*; *A Book of Love; A Bestiary of Past, Present, and Future Animals*; *The Book of Utopias*; *The Book of Universal Cosmography*; *Love of Ruins*; *The Autobiographies of Pasiphae and Semiramis*; *A Book of Motion*; *The Book of Games*; and *Thirty-Six Plays* ("The Book and the Fetish: The Materiality of Prospero's Text," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32 [2002]: 433–468; list of texts from p. 433.)

[5]*Prospero's Books*.

what tradition has established "under the critical rubric of metaphysical." She tells them that there were "powerful, intelligent, creative women" in the early modern period, but at most their primary contribution to the literature of the period was to serve as supportive patronesses, as Lucy the Countess of Bedford did.[6] I would also remind students that in traditional iconography women are generally depicted as reading a book, rather than writing one; and if they are writing, they are usually writing letters and diaries rather than books.[7] In fact, even the image of reading is a gendered one. In *Prospero's Books*, my class will have just seen Miranda reading, with her father at her side explaining the contents of the text. I would also remind students that when in act 3, scene 1 of *Hamlet* we see Ophelia reading a book, or pretending to, as instructed by her father, we assume that she is reading a devotional book. Hamlet begs her to remember his sins in her prayers. But when we see Hamlet reading a book in 2.2, we assume that he is reading a book of philosophy or some other intellectual matter. Given the fact that people in the early modern period did not expect women to be writing books, it is particularly astonishing that the speaker of "Valediction of the booke" not only tells his beloved to write but also expresses confidence that her book will preserve all the knowledge necessary to the world and be as important as the Bible. And finally, although the woman is given specific writing instructions by the male speaker, to satisfy *his* motive for writing—exacting personal revenge on destiny for trying to separate the lovers—I think we should pay attention to the fact that he has put the pen in the woman's hand. The speaker will have contributed some of the material on which the book will be based, but the woman gets to exercise ultimate editorial control and take responsibility for the success of the project.

Some readers may suspect that the speaker is not really serious about having the lady write the book. He does not actually tell her to write until the third line of the second stanza, in the directive "write our Annals" (12); and even then he calls them "*our* Annals" (emphasis mine), perhaps because it is hard for him to give up his control. The opening

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[6]Coiro, "'New-found-land': Teaching Metaphysical Poetry from the Other Side," in *Approaches to Teaching the Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (New York: MLA, 1990) 81–88; quotations from p. 82.

[7]See Bridget Gellert Lyons, "The Iconography of Ophelia," *ELH* 44 (1977): 60–74.

lines of the poem make clear the speaker's defiance and anger: "I'll tell thee now (deare Love) what thou shalt doe / To anger destiny, as she doth us" (1–2). In the command to the lady, the parenthetical endearment "deare Love" softens the tone of the order somewhat, perhaps in response to the lady's demeanor, but we have no idea what the woman is feeling, since in accordance with the convention of Petrarchan love poems, she is silent. And unlike the scenario in "The Flea," the speaker's subsequent lines give us no clues about the lady's reaction. But it seems that the desire to "anger destiny," to seek revenge for the unjust blow that fate has dealt him by enforcing his departure, is only his. The book project is the speaker's plan to foil fate's attempt to separate the lovers. By having the woman write a book composed from letters exchanged between them, he will continue to be present in his absence: "I shall stay" (3), he insists.

Another sign that the speaker may not be entirely serious is that although the speaker promises the lady the book will enable her to "out-endure / Sibylls glory" (5–6) and "obscure" (6) other women authors from antiquity, all of those women are nameless.[8] They are identified through the names of the men with whom they are associated, and we need notes to tell us who the female pronouns in Donne's text refer to. The women's stories only exist in various legends, accounts such as Pindar's being defeated in a poetic contest by a woman named Corinna and receiving instruction from her on how to use imagery, Lucan needing his wife Polla Argentaria's assistance to improve the meter of *Pharsalia*, and Homer stealing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from the mythical Egyptian poetess Phantasia and passing if off as his own.[9] These

[8]Not only are the women from antiquity nameless, but so is the woman addressed in the poem, to whom the speaker is giving such an important charge. If we accept Arthur Marotti's conjecture that "There is a possible autobiographical reference in the fifth stanza, in which the efforts of lawyers to discover 'by what title Mistresses are ours' (38) might refer to Donne's legal battle with his father-in-law to keep his marriage from being annulled" (*John Donne: Coterie Poet*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986, p. 327 n. 64), we can understand why the beloved herself, if she is indeed Ann, must remain unnamed.

[9]Speaking of the women from antiquity, John Shawcross notes in his edition that "Just as the four references had been inspirational, so the woman has also inspired the poet to write 'those Myriades of letters'" (p. 117, n. 9). But I would

are stories that a "more sophisticated" male coterie of readers, such as the one Arthur Marotti argues would better appreciate the poem's complex metaphors than women, might find absurd, although anxiety-provoking as well.[10] Such a skeptical response, it would appear, is encouraged by the parenthetical "they say" (9) in the last line of the first stanza, which casts doubt on the notion that women could indeed be better writers than men.

Also, a close look at the terms in which the book is described in the third stanza shows that they are so fantastic it is hard to think such a project could be accomplished:[11]

> When this booke is made thus,
> Should againe the ravenous
> Vandals and Goths inundate us,
> Learning were safe; in this our Universe
> Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musick, Angels Verse.
> (23–27)

The book, when it is completed, the speaker argues, would be the one book needed to ensure the preservation of civilization. Throughout the first six stanzas there is a playful tone in the hyperbole used to make outrageous claims for the power of the book. This facetious tone suggests a sense of intimacy in the lovers' relationship that allows the speaker to both give control to the woman and retain mastery at the same time, recalling to our minds the playful relationship enjoyed by the speaker and

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point out to my students that the speaker is not just asking the woman to play the traditional role of Muse to the Poet: she has written some of "those Myriades of letters," what he calls "*our* manuscripts . . . which have past 'twixt thee and me" (10–11) (emphasis mine). In other words, she is co-author of the original material as well as the sole author of her book.

[10]See Marotti, pp. 171–172.

[11]In an essay on the use of hyperboles in *The Songs and Sonnets*, Brian Vickers notes that the poem "achieves some outrageous hyperboles, even for Donne," p.159 ("The 'Songs and Sonnets' and the Rhetoric of Hyperbole," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, edited by A. J. Smith [London: Methuen, 1972], pp. 132–174.)

the cruel, flea-killing woman in "The Flea."[12] However, the speaker's tone becomes more provocative in stanza six when he mocks "Statesmen, (or of them, they which can reade)" (46) and compares them to those who "can finde out Alchimy" (54) in the Bible. And finally, when he dismisses women's "honour, or conscience" (44) as "Chimeraes, vaine as they" (45) if they use their honor as the "cause" (44) for rejecting men, the satirical targets appear to include not just politicians, alchemists, and Bible readers, but even the lady herself.[13]

But if the speaker is indeed being ironic, why does he not just write the book himself? Perhaps the speaker assigns the woman the task which entails the responsibility of preserving their love because he knows composing such a book is an impossibility. Such a book could only be an imaginary one. Donne created titles for a whole library of imaginary books in *The Catalogus Librorum*, and here the speaker gives to the woman the task of creating the "all-graved tome" (20) that should be written in "cypher" (21) and "new made Idiome" (21) because he knows it cannot be written; and even if it were, it would be impossible to understand.

In the last stanza of the poem the speaker drops his easy, mocking tone. When the speaker encourages the woman to "vent [her] thoughts" (55), he still sounds angry and seems to be projecting his angry feelings onto the woman, but in the second half of the line when he tells her "abroad I'll studie thee" (55), there is a tonal shift and he becomes more serious. Initially, before telling the woman to write, he had instructed her to "Study our manuscripts" (10); now he says he will study her. Does he mean he will attempt to get reports of her behavior? Reflect on their words and actions during their relationship? Or read the text that he has told her to write? The lines "How great love is, presence best tryall makes, / But absence tryes how long this love will bee" (57–58) betray his separation anxieties and make her responsible for passing the test of their love. The speaker in "A Valediction forbidding mourning" warns his lady

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[12]For a recent insightful discussion of Donne's mastery of rhetorical strategies, see Kenneth Gross, "John Donne's Lyric Skepticism: In Strange Way," *Modern Philology* 101 (2004): 371–399.

[13]In this passage, some readers may hear echoes from "The Flea": "Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee, / Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee" (26–27).

that he can only return home if she remains faithful; this speaker intimates to his lady that their love will only endure if the book that the lady is enjoined to write, the text that the speaker will "studie" (55) while he is "abroad" (55), succeeds in preserving the speaker's presence. The final image of "darke eclipses" (63) offers no consolation: it is the only instance in the poem when the speaker betrays grief about his imminent banishment, an emotion more easily expressed by the speakers of the other three valediction poems.

"Valediction of the booke" ultimately fails to provide reassurance, as the lady must know that the task set for her cannot be done. In his reading of the poem, James Baumlin initially ascribes great power to the book that will be written by the woman: "Her book would become the means by which the poet 'shall stay' with her, the means by which 'posterity' shall know their love, and the means by which the lady shall remain faithful."[14] Baumlin concludes, though, that in spite of the surface expression of confidence the speaker still fears their love will not survive their separation. In his interpretation Marotti posits an attractive reading, that "Beneath its learned foolishness, 'A Valediction of the booke' contains a serious definition of love,"[15] which is not incompatible with Baumlin's conclusion. But whether or not we believe the speaker has any confidence in the woman's abilities, we should take note that in instructing the lady to write, Donne has given us a unique image, and the image of a man putting a pen in a woman's hand and entrusting to her his fate should never be ignored.

At the end of the class I would ask my students to go home and compose a valediction of their own, keeping in mind that the privilege of authorship is not a right that everyone has always enjoyed. Although we live in an age when anyone can be a self-published author, and indeed, the *New York Times* notes that as the number of readers in America has declined in recent years, the number of writers has increased,[16] the

[14]Baumlin, *John Donne and the Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), pp. 185, 186.

[15]Marotti, p. 171.

[16]Rachel Donadio, "You're an Author? Me Too!," *The New York Times*, 27 April 2008.

potential power inherent in the act of writing should never be taken for granted.

California State University, Sacramento