

Book Reviews

Same Old Same Old

Dennis Flynn

Nicholas Robins, *John Donne, Poetic Lives*, London: Hesperus Press, 2011. 143 pp.

In this little book, Nicholas Robins, who works at Shakespeare's Globe and has authored *Walking Shakespeare's London* (2004) and articles in *London Magazine* and *TLS*, presents a brisk resume of hoary and questionable clichés, including throughout many scattered errors and misperceptions. In his concluding chapter he acknowledges that “the chief source for this book” is R. C. Bald's *John Donne: A Life*, which was published in 1970 (p. 139).

Outstanding amidst Robins's largely unthinking reliance on Bald is his crucial account of Donne's vocation to the ministry of the Church of England. This episode perhaps more than any other betrays the weakness of Bald's work, replicated uncritically by many others and now again by Robins, who repeats Bald's interpretation: that in 1613 Donne sought to gain secular employment through Robert Carr, Viscount Rochester. Robins disregards the fact that Donne wrote his first letter to Rochester requesting assistance with his recent resolution “to make my profession Divinitie.”¹

¹Donne, to Robert Carr, Viscount Rochester, n. d.; first published in *A Collection of Letters, Made by Sr Tobie Mathews, Kt.* (London, 1660), pp. 319–320.

Bald, in *Donne and the Drurys*, had alluded delicately to the “more corrupt side” of the Jacobean court, dating Donne’s first letter to Rochester “in the spring of 1613,” when Rochester was “desperately trying to find some means of getting rid” of his secretary, Sir Thomas Overbury, who opposed his employer’s developing political affinity with the Howard family and romantic relationship with Frances (Howard) Devereux, Countess of Essex.² Bald further conjectured that when Overbury was suddenly arrested and imprisoned in the Tower in April 1613, Donne nimbly sent his letter to Rochester and applied “for the vacant post.”³ Bald in part quoted but did not explicitly dismiss or even pause to comment on Donne’s emphatic request for preferment as a divine rather than as a secretary; Robins makes no mention of this at all.

Subsequently, Bald (in *John Donne: A Life*) embellished this narrative, stipulating (without citing any evidence) not only that Donne “had chosen his moment carefully” in response to Overbury’s fall but also that “shortly afterwards” Rochester, badly in need of “someone of similar ability on whom he could lean,” urged Donne “to put aside all thoughts of entering the Church.”⁴ Mentioning Donne’s request for church preferment, Bald thus acknowledged it but again made no further comment on it. Robins makes no mention of it at all.

The primary basis provided by Bald and others for reading Donne’s letter to Rochester as a response to the imprisonment of Overbury has been a mere assumption that Donne, although reporting first and consistently thereafter his inspiration and resolution “to make my profession Divinitie,” was really asking Rochester for Overbury’s secretarial post. Why Donne would have made such an incongruous request, asking for a job other than the one he really wanted, is a question never yet addressed; in fact, pursuing Overbury’s post in this way would seem so indirect as to be pointless.

No particular evidence has ever been brought to suggest that Donne wanted to work for Rochester; nor can any such evidence be found. As far as we know, Donne never at any time mentioned or alluded to the vacancy, neither in this first letter or in subsequent extant letters; neither,

²Bald, *Donne and the Drurys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 122–126.

³Bald, *Donne and the Drurys*, p. 126.

⁴Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 27.

as far as we know, did Rochester mention or allude to Overbury in his communications with Donne, although Donne does write that Rochester raised a series of other secular alternatives to a profession of divinity—"distractions or diversions" (as Donne explicitly called them) from his expressed intention.⁵

In his last of five extant letters to the royal favorite, written in September 1614, Donne pleaded for release from these, Rochester's diversions and distractions, in a letter worth quoting in full:

'Tis now somewhat more than a year, since I took the boldnesse, to make my purpose of professing Divinitie known to your Lordship, as to a person, whom God had made so great an instrument of his providence in this Kingdome, as that nothing in it should be done without your knowledge; your Lordship exercised upon me then many of your vertues, for besides, that by your bounty I have lived ever since, it hath been through your Lordships advice, and inspiration of new hopes into me, that I have lived cheerfullie. By this time, perchance, your Lordship may have discerned, that the malignity of my ill fortune, may infect your good, And that by some impressions in your Lordship, I may be incapable of the favours, which your Lordship had purposed to me. I had rather perish, then be such a rubbe in your fortune, or that through me, your History should have one example of having missed, what you desired; I humbly therefore beg of your Lordship, that after you shall have been pleased, to admit into your memorie, that I am now a year older, broken with some sicknesse, and in the same degrees of honestie as I was, your Lordship will afford me one commandement, and bid me either hope for this businesse in your Lordship's hand, or else pursue my first purpose, or abandon all, for as I cannot live without your favour, so I cannot die without your leave; because even by dying, I should steal from you one, who is by his own devotions and your purchase, your Lordships most humble and thankfull servant.⁶

⁵Donne, to Rochester, n. d.; *A Collection of Letters*, p. 291.

⁶Donne, to Carr, by then Earl of Somerset, n. d.; *A Collection of Letters*, pp. 314–315.

Especially in view of the consistent position expressed by Donne throughout their extant correspondence, that he would prefer pursuing “my first purpose,” it is not logical to regard Donne’s first letter to Rochester as a response to Overbury’s imprisonment on 21 April 1613. This dramatic occurrence was a game-changing disturbance in court politics, probably not a juncture at which or immediately after which Donne would have thought to implement what he himself characterized as a carefully meditated choice, in response to the inspiration of “the Spirit of God,” to enlist Rochester’s support for a Church of England ordination.⁷

The writing in Robins’s book is sometimes energetic, but for the most part he seems less than diligent; only eight pages deal with Donne’s biography after 1615. Robins also seems unacquainted with much critical work on Donne. His list of recommended “Further Reading” includes no mention of the *Variorum Edition* of the poetry, although clearly these volumes contain significant work a biographer cannot afford to ignore. Moreover, beginning on page 1 and throughout the book he repeats unsupported, traditional claims in Donne studies, some of them going as far back as Izaak Walton, although many of these have long since been debunked by such scholars as David Novarr, whose work too goes inexplicably unmentioned here.

Byfield, Massachusetts

⁷Donne, to Rochester, n. d.; *A Collection of Letters*, p. 319.