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"Here you see mee": Donne's Autographed Valediction

Julia M. Walker

As an avowed opponent of biographical readings of Donne's *Songs and Sonets*, I now find myself in the semi-awkward position of saying: "on the other hand. . . ." The poem which brings me to this critical two-step is "A Valediction of my name, in the window," a poem which actually excepts itself from the body of Donne's poetry and therefore from the context of an anti-biographical argument. For this is a poem to which Donne signs his name internally, in the text of the verse itself, a poem which requires no multiple choice matching of jig-saw bits from imagery and biography. In this poem no one need theorize an autobiographical speaking persona (thus constructing a poetic keyhole giving on Donne's life) because the poet himself has identified the personae by name and has thrown open the door—or the window, to be more accurate. The critical benefits of having a poem which is clearly "Donne on Donne"—not "oh, this was probably written while he was a great 'visitor of ladies'" or "this must be about his marriage because it's so serious"—are obvious. But before I present such a reading of the poem, let me first establish the existence of what I call Donne's internal signature.

In John Skelton's *A Garland of Laurel*, a poem with which Donne's hydroptique and immoderate desire for learning would surely have acquainted him, we find employed—and probably invented by Skelton[1]—a system of English gematria. Gematria, the identification of each letter of the alphabet with a different number, is a system of encoding and decoding meaning employed by the Cabalists and other mystics with the Hebrew alphabet and by some Latin poets who capitalized on the fact that Roman numbers *were* letters. In Skelton's system the vowels are numbered 1-5, and the consonants are numbered as though the vowels were in

place. Therefore B and E are both numbered 2, D and O are both 4, and so on. J and I are counted as the same letter, which is numbered 3.[2]

1	2	3	4	5
A	E	I	O	U

2	3	4	6	7	8	3	10	11	12	13	15	16	17	18
B	C	D	F	G	H	J	K	L	M	N	P	Q	R	S

19	21	22	23	24	25
T	V	W	X	Y	Z

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JOHN DONNE totals 64 by this system. John T. Shawcross, in his edition of Donne's poetry, also argues that Donne is playing with gematria in this poem, but believes that Donne would have used his signature, Jo. Donne, thus making the totals of 7 and 36.[3] I believe that Donne did not content himself with this ornamental esoteric flourish, but instead jumped into number play with both feet. The poem itself yields three types of evidence supporting the more extended use of gematria. First, in the third stanza, we find the lines "As no one point, nor dash, / Which are but accessaries to this name" and the words "this intireness." Here we are being told that the speaker has engraved his name with *no* point nor dash, but in its entirety. Furthermore, 7 and 36 must be arrived at by totaling the Jo. and the Donne separately, and this poem speaks of "my name," not "names," in the window.

Secondly, we have the significance of the total numbers themselves. Shawcross points out that both 7 and 36 are very important numbers in any of the systems of Renaissance number theory. This is certainly true, but the meanings attached to these numbers have no particular significance in the context of this poem. That is not true of the number 64. Sixty-four (64) is the square of 8, which is the number of regeneration, of resurrection (and therefore a good number for a promise of return), the first cube, and a marriage number. In the Renaissance sonnet sequences of Sidney, Drayton, and others, 63 is the climacteric number, being the product of 3 x 3 x 7, explained by Henry Constable as the order of a sequence in which the sonnets are "divided into 3 parts, each part containing 3 several arguments, and every argument 7 sonnets."[4] From the Renaissance to the present 64 has been the number which "overgoes" the perfection of 63. (Who could discount the Beatles' "will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?")

Seriously, however—or perhaps I should say *more* seriously—I do not believe that it was the significance of 64 or of any other number which initially attracted Donne, for I believe that his imagination would have progressed more naturally from letters to numbers, rather than the other way around. Who, when confronted with an intriguing puzzle such as Skelton's system, would not try to count out his own name? And then other names or words which are important to him? As he did this, Donne would have uncovered a coincidence which I believe would have proved impossible for him to ignore. And here lies the final third of my argument. JOHN DONNE equals 64. The numerical values of the letters in MY NAME also equal 64. JOHN DONNE and MY NAME thus become the same in a double sense. And the imaginative temptation to number play would have become absolutely irresistible for Donne when he added up the numbers for ANNE MORE. That's right: 64.

It seems more logical that this is the point at which Donne would have pondered the significance of 64 as a number and how he might play on and with that meaning in a poem. We therefore find the element of "overgoing" perfection which 64 embodies figured forth elsewhere in the poem. Ten (10) is another "perfect" number, and 11 is the number which "overgoes" perfection; there are 11 stanzas in the poem and 11 letters in the word "Valediction." Five (5) is the number of the perfectly united man and woman—from the feminine 2 and the masculine 3—but 6 overgoes it, being the sum of the monad and woman and man, 1+2+3; there are 6 lines in each stanza.

It also seems logical that, after finding three key 64s which could be worked into a poetic conceit, Donne might have gone hunting for other words which would yield the number. Less important than the original trio of JOHN DONNE, MY NAME, and ANNE MORE, but integral parts of the poem nevertheless, are the ever-present idea of OUR LOVE (l. 62) and the continual puns on the forms and meanings of the word ENGRAVE, both of which total 64 in Skelton's system.

While it is possible to follow with pleasure the phantoms of numerological nuances down endless garden paths or, as Donne himself said, for a mystical Rabbi to find that "the hairs on the tail of his Dog are numbered, and from their various backward twists and intertwinings letters are formed which yield wonderful words,"[5] I do not wish to make more of this than Donne himself did—a combination of intellectual/poetic fun-with-numbers and

what I spoke of earlier as an internal signature. The existence of this signature, of a speaking persona who says "my name equals John Donne," allows us to view the poem as a literary/biographical artifact, an artifact which, moreover, calls into question both assumptions about the dating of this poem and others like it and many of the general critical assumptions about the correspondences between Donne's poetic tone, style, and content and his relationship with Anne More. The number games which give us the signature are interesting; the signature itself is important.

The conceit of a name engraved in the glass of a window provides the imaginative field of action for the two major images of the poem. The first image pattern springs from the JOHN DONNE equals MY NAME equals ANNE MORE equation and depends upon the qualities of window glass: that which may be seen through, that which may be written upon, and that which will reflect back. When Anne looks at the window she sees through it to the world beyond, but she also sees John's name superimposed upon this world. At the same time she may perceive her own reflection in the glass, thus the line "Here you see mee, and I am you" (l. 12).

The second major image pattern is more extensively developed and has more influence upon the tone of the poem. In the first two lines Donne sets up a pun on "engrave" which he develops into the second major metaphor of the poem. "Engrav'd herein" is both "written" and "entombed"—written on the glass and entombed in that which the glass reflects, Anne. MY NAME, which *is* John Donne, thus contributes "firmness" to both the glass and to Anne. The "which" of line 3 is deliberately ambiguous. If it refers to the glass, we have "that which grav'd it" as the diamond used for writing. If it refers to "my firmness," we see a graphic image of a "hard" Donne "grav'd" in an Anne who had once resisted him. She looks in the glass, sees herself reflected in this mirror held up to nature, and also sees Donne's "ragged bony name" (l. 23) which *is* his "ruinious Anatomie" (l. 24); Anne and John are thus joined in this image just as they are joined in the sex act. (The Renaissance pun on "die," implicit here, and Donne's association of death and sex in this and other poems provide the context of wit for the second reading.) And what he has done once, he promises to do again: "So shall all times finde mee the same; / You this intireness better may fulfill, / Who have the pattern with you still" (ll. 16-18). Other lines and phrases which figure forth this punning image are: "if too hard and deepe, / This learning be" (ll. 19-20); all of stanza 5, especially "Emparadis'd in you" (l. 26) and "will come againe" (l. 30); "thy melted maid" (l. 49) and "this name flow / Into thy fancy, from the pane" (ll. 57-58).

These lines, which can apply themselves to Donne's name in the window or to Donne himself in Anne, establish a wittily bawdy tone which biographical critics have consistently classed as Donne-pre-Anne. But from the evidence of this poem we see that Donne could write witty evaporations to/about Anne with the same facility that he produced them about those anonymous "ladies" and in the same spirit as the more serious poems, such as "the Extasie"—although even that very serious poem can be read wittily.

The use of Anne MORE and the mention of rivals in stanza 8 combine to suggest an earlier date for the poem than it is usually assigned.[6] If this poem could be dated before Donne's marriage, we should also consider the re-dating (or the un-dating) of poems with similar themes and images, such as "A Valediction forbidding mourning" and "The Canonization."

But the dating of Donne's poems is a swamp better circumvented than explored, else we be sucked under by the quicksand of conjecture. And so I find myself returning to my usual theme of the dangers of positing an autobiographical speaking persona. This poem in which we *can* acknowledge an autobiographical Donne ironically calls into question the standard assumptions about the correlation between Donne's life and his art and thereby stresses how necessary it is that critics avoid building their arguments on blocks of biography.

I can only conclude that this case of a biographical poem which casts the shadow of doubt on biographical interpretation constitutes a paradox which would be worthy of and which would have delighted Donne himself.

State University of New York, College at Geneseo

Notes

1 Vincent F. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1938), p. 66.

2 John Skelton, *Poems*, edited by Richard Hughes (London: William Heinemann, 1924), p. 178n.

3 *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, edited by John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967), p. 401, n. 49. All quotations of the poem cite this edition.

4 Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 3.

5 John Donne, *Catalogus Librorum*, p. 14, cited by Charles Monroe Coffin in *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), p. 248.

6 Shawcross, p. 413.