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Colloquium: "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir *Philip Sydney*, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister"

Introduction

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This cluster of essays on the poem in which Donne pays tribute to the Sidneys' Psalter now takes its place in the series of Colloquia published in this journal over the past two decades. Like the preceding Colloquia, this one had its origins in a panel at the annual Conference of the John Donne Society. Julia Walker was the first to organize a session devoted to a particular work, for the conference at Gulfport, Mississippi, in 1988. It singled out "The Ecstasy" and involved sustained discussion about how the poem might profitably be taught. Although its fruits did not make their way into print, the session proved so successful that for the next conference M. Thomas Hester, as incoming President of the Society, planned something more elaborate about teaching "The Canonization." Some twenty works by Donne have now been the focus for panels and group discussions at the annual Conference, and it may be salutary to think about the ways in which some rather grandiose ambitions for exploring "The Canonization" gradually gave way to a more streamlined set of practices at the conference and also, eventually, to a more complex kind of colloquium that has often continued long after the conference is over. The panels

that have given rise to Colloquia in these pages have not proceeded according to a single formula. They have, however, had much in common; and the Colloquium printed here draws upon a good deal of collective experience.

Recalling the energy and enthusiasm with which the group discussion of "The Ecstasy" was met, the organizers of the 1989 Donne conference designed it to build climactically to a sustained consideration of "The Canonization," a poem that was under assault, it seemed, from virtually every reigning perspective—deconstruction, feminism, new historicism, and canon-busting. A substantial mechanism was created to pave the way for reconsidering the poem. In the session immediately prior to the panel there was a paper on the history of how the poem had been interpreted from the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth. This revealed that although "The Canonization" was one of the most widely taught of Donne's poems, it had never been accorded any particular prominence until it emerged in Cleanth Brooks's hands as the paradigmatic poem to illustrate a "theory of poetry" that by 1989 was being routinely dismissed as mere "close reading."[1] In addition to this "background" paper (as it was called), in preparation for the discussion, a lengthy "focus" paper written specially for the occasion by Thomas P. Roche was distributed to all the participants.[2] When the actual session on teaching "The Canonization" at last began, several panelists offered their reactions to this paper. The layered preparations produced overkill, however, and there was scarcely time for a roomful of persons who had years of experience teaching the poem to get productively involved themselves.

A year later, when "Aire and Angels" was chosen as the work for discussion, less scope was accorded to the background paper prepared by Al Labriola and to a focus paper by R. V. Young. The audience plunged in more readily, a host of disagreements emerged, and the upshot was a special issue of this journal (vol. 9.1) containing a dozen essays on the poem. Achsah Guibbory, in her preface to the collection, isolated the

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[1]See Dayton Haskin, "A History of Donne's 'Canonization' from Izaak Walton to Cleanth Brooks," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 92 (1993): 17–36. Cf. Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947; repr., London: Dennis Dobson, 1968).

[2]Roche, "'The Canonization': Building What?," presented at the Fourth Annual Conference of the John Donne Society, Gulfport, Mississippi, February 1989.

principal criteria that had begun to emerge for choosing the text for discussion: a work that is "particularly difficult or controversial in some way" and at the same time "crucial in assessing Donne's achievement."[3] In view of the success of this award-winning collection, she might have added, "one that continues to provoke passionately held responses."

The idea to publish papers out of this sort of session on a more regular basis came two years later, from Gary A. Stringer, who chaired the panel on *Satyre III*. Stringer defined three perspectival criteria that had emerged for choosing the text for discussion: that "its appeal" be recognizable "in pedagogical, historical, or theoretical terms—or for a combination of these."[4] While he went on to point out the genuine range of interpretations in the three essays he had gathered from the panelists, the real breakthrough that the Colloquium ushered in turned out to be something that had not been integral to the session at Gulfport: Stringer's proposal that textual variants in early copies of the satire give rise to considerations that are basic to any interpretation—and are also genuinely intriguing. Once Stringer's demonstration of the importance of the variants was published along with the essays, it became clear that in order to proceed with similar discussions at future Donne conferences, in addition to there being one panelist who could inform everyone about the history of interpreting the work, there would need to be another panelist who had worked up the textual and bibliographical data on which informed interpretative activity necessarily depends. Stringer also deserves credit, along with Achsah Guibbory, for prompting a growing realization that the conference sessions that focus on a particular work ought to promote new scholarship hand-in-hand with good pedagogy.

In subsequent years, besides the Colloquia that have arisen out of sessions on such old favorites as "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," "The Sun Rising," and "The Good Morrow," two modifications of the criteria for choosing a text have emerged: (1) the text need not be a poem (the seventeenth station in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* is the focus in the Colloquium printed in vol. 26); and (2) the work need not be one that has been widely taught, but might be one that seems newly ripe for pedagogical purposes. To some extent the Colloquium on "Farewell

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[3]Guibbory, "Editor's Preface," *John Donne Journal* 9.1 (1990): n. p.

[4]Stringer, "*Satyre III* Colloquium: Stringer, Sellin, Slights, Hester," *John Donne Journal* 10.1-2 (1991): 79.

to Love" (vol. 18) reflects this last possibility, although here (without there being much explicit concern about pedagogy) it elicited from its editor, Ann Hurley, an interpretative essay of her own. In another year the much longer "Litany" became the focus for the pedagogical session. Few persons in the audience had much experience teaching the poem, and the ninety or so minutes were given over chiefly to developing everyone's greater familiarity with it. The session culminated in a group performance in which each stanza was read aloud by a different person. After the conference Annabel Patterson and I, having worked collaboratively to introduce the poem for discussion, continued developing our ideas in complementary essays. These eventually appeared in vol. 21, not as brief "Colloquium" papers but as full-length essays that prod us to think about how and why what has seemed too long and difficult a poem for the classroom might nonetheless make its way onto an imaginative teacher's syllabus.

The present Colloquium grows out of the annual conference of 2007, held at Louisiana State University. It draws something from virtually every model for a Colloquium that has been operative in these pages over the years. The Donne Society's President for the year, Mary A. Papazian, recognized the timeliness for thinking about Donne's "Sidney" poem (hereafter *Sidney*) as a possible focus for classroom discussion. This recognition owed something to recent work on the translation of the Psalms in the Renaissance, above all to Hannibal Hamlin's book of 2004, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature*.[5] And it owed a great deal as well to Anne Lake Prescott's fine essay, "'Forms of Joy and Art': Donne, David, and the Power of Music,"[6] which promotes thinking about *Sidney* in the light of a rich array of materials—classical, biblical, medieval, Renaissance—that undergirds the confidence displayed by the poet in the affective power of the Psalms and in their capacity to produce pleasure. The Prescott essay explores the traditions in which David and

[5]Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). A new edition of *The Sidney Psalter* is currently in the works for the Oxford World's Classics series published by Oxford University Press. It is being edited by Hamlin and three others, Michael G. Brennan, Margaret P. Hannay, and Noel J. Kinnamon.

[6]Prescott, "'Forms of Joy and Art': Donne, David, and the Power of Music," *John Donne Journal* 25 (2006): 3–36.

Orpheus have been productively fused and distinguished, the ways in which music has been understood to produce interpenetrating material and spiritual effects, and the fascination provoked by the influential biblical episode from the First Book of Samuel in which David's music relieves Saul's melancholy. This essay won the Donne Society's award for distinguished publication. All the work gathered here takes it as read.

The gathered work begins, appropriately enough, with Prescott's reflections on teaching the poem to college students. As she explains, in anticipation of her participation on the panel, she entrusted the poem to a class and asked them to share in the process of identifying what students will want—and need—to know in order to appreciate it. Her report here suggests that, while her students may have suspected that they were in the presence of a person with unmatched knowledge of the subject, they were not in the least intimidated. It is evident that when she meets the openness in students that her affable nature invites, she meets it with a sense of humor worthy of her expert knowledge in another sphere altogether, the one in which she has written about—and in the spirit of—Rabelais.

One of the few teachers who has acknowledged placing the poem prominently on his syllabus is Raymond-Jean Frontain. (Both Prescott and Hamlin refer appreciatively to his important essay of 1996, "Translating Heavenwards: 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes' and John Donne's Poetics of Praise."[7]) At the Donne Conference, it was Frontain whom we asked to read the poem aloud for us; and he introduced his reading with the thought-provoking revelation that in his course on Renaissance literature he begins the study of Donne with this very poem. After the conference, we invited Frontain to build on his earlier work and to write a new essay for this Colloquium that would explain how and why he initiates his students' encounters with our poet by deploying *Sidney* as a general introduction.

On account of severe weather in the Midwest in February 2007, Hamlin was unable to fly to Baton Rouge and take his place on the panel. He had prepared, however, a helpful bibliography of writing about the poem that was distributed at the conference and which forms the

[7]Frontain, "Translating Heavenwards: 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes' and John Donne's Poetics of Praise," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 22 (1996): 103–125.

basis for his observations in the first half of the essay printed here. In the event Hamlin's conference paper (which was read to the group by another) did a good deal of the "background" work that has been assigned in previous panels to a person knowledgeable about the history of interpreting the focal text. From long before the conference took place, when I first invited him to participate, we had it in mind, however, that he would eventually compose a longer, more sustained treatment of *Sidney* than could be fitted into a brief presentation. The result is a paper that moves through its report on the critical issues that have occupied scholars into a contextual and ultimately an aesthetic consideration of the poem. He shows here that it belongs to a subgenre of early modern poems about the Psalms and Psalm-translation that includes works by Francis Davison, Mary Sidney Herbert herself, and John Milton. Even as he makes the case that Milton knew and worked with the precedent of *Sidney*, Hamlin shows that doubleness is an integral feature and theme of the genre. It is characteristic of Donne that he reads the Psalms of David with that double perspective endemic to imaginative Christian interpretations, such as Luther's notion that the Psalms are "literally" about Christ.

Prima facie, there would seem to be a kind of sense in placing the essay on the text of the poem first in our cluster. After all, in the sessions at the Donne Conference that have given rise to previous Colloquia the person responsible for reporting on the history of textual transmission and for pointing out significant textual variants ordinarily speaks first. In this case, however, because Stringer made a dramatic proposal that has far-reaching implications, I have accorded his essay the climactic position. As with his earlier intervention, when he edited the Colloquium on *Satyre III*, in this essay, by attending to bibliographical detail, Stringer grounds discussion of interpretative issues (e.g., what was Donne's purpose in writing the poem?) squarely in material data. His proposal about the history of transmitting *Sidney* troubles facile generalizations generated by theories that, prescinding from examining bibliographical data, attempt to explain too much too quickly and often rest tenuously on biographical assumptions that yield merely circular interpretative arguments. While none of the other participants in the Colloquium had access to Stringer's proposal before coming to the conference, their essays show that they have all entertained a justified skepticism in the face of the standard commentaries that in various ways

reduce the poem to just another sophisticated attempt to secure patronage. Ultimately, Stringer suggests a generic context and literary purpose for *Sidney*. Without canceling out Hamlin's discussion of how it belongs to a subgenre of poems connected with the Psalms, Stringer makes it possible for us to appreciate that, once it benefits from the cooperation of readers who recognize that it comes from the pen of a person eminently qualified to pronounce on the subject, Donne's poem performs a work of canon-making with the same sort of authority that we are accustomed to associating pre-eminently with his contemporary and the Sidneys' great admirer, Ben Jonson.

Finally, I should point out before you read the text prepared by Stringer that we should approach the freshly edited text with the knowledge that, where one encounters italic text this reflects the original printing, and where one encounters underlining this highlights textual variation that is worthy of assiduous consideration.

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Appendix

Colloquia Presented at the John Donne Society Conference, 1988–2008

Date	Text
1988	"The Ecstasy"
1989	"The Canonization"
1990	"Aire and Angels"
1991	"Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward"
1992	*Satyre III*
1993	"A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day"
1994	"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"
1995	"The Relique"
1996	"What if this present were the worlds last night?"
1997	"The Bracelet"
1998	"Farewell to Love"
1999	"The Sun Rising"
2000	"A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day"
2001	"A Lecture upon the Shadow"
2002	"A Litany"
2003	"The Good Morrow"
2004	"Break of Day"
2005	"Devotion 17" from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*
2006	Burley Letter, "Sir. I am no voyager in other men's works" (Simpson #9)
2007	"Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir *Philip Sydney*, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister"
2008	"A Valediction of the Book"