

Julia M. Walker
(January 10, 1951–February 25, 2018)

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The last time I saw Julia, in early January 2017 at the MLA convention in Philadelphia, she was weighed down by increasingly severe physical problems, but her spirit and wit were as fresh and buoyant as ever. She wanted to go to a tiny, cramped French bistro where she could order moules, a very dry, icy Hendricks gin martini—no vodka for her—and a good desert. Getting around was hard, even getting in and out of a cab, but she had made it to MLA to

give a Milton talk, even if she would need at the last moment a motorized wheelchair. Making, as Julia was wont, a vivid entrance, she gave a brilliant feminist talk on Milton, and said to me afterwards, “well, I’ve done it. Was I okay?” This year she wasn’t well enough to come to MLA in NYC and go to the French bistro she’d found for us online. Maybe we’d go to the basement of Bergdorf Goodman and try on make-up and elegant perfumes. And now she is gone. I so much miss the irrepressible, indomitable, brilliant woman Julia Walker.

Julia M. Walker made a unique impact on early modern literary and cultural studies, with publications that altered the landscape, as she cast her unwavering feminist eye on the field.

Julia grew up in Alcoa, Tennessee, a small town at the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, with a population well under ten thousand, the home of a large aluminum smelting plant. She earned her Bachelor’s degree from University of Tennessee, taught high school for a couple years in the early seventies, then did a Masters in Science at Tennessee, before moving on to graduate school at Purdue University, where she earned a Ph.D. in 1982. She taught briefly at Illinois State University in Bloomington, Illinois, then moved to SUNY Geneseo, where she inspired her many students from 1985 until her death. It was a stunned, heartbroken post on Facebook from one of her former male students that told me that Julia had just passed away.

Julia traveled far from her home in Tennessee, her curiosity taking her many places both intellectually and geographically. She had a passion for Italy, and we shared happy hours in 2010 in Venice for the RSA, attending some sessions but also playing hooky, sight-seeing and shopping. We bought beautiful, colorful Venetian glasses which she displayed in her window and I drink from every day. She was an adventurer, a traveler, a woman of the world. But she always remained connected to her roots as a southern woman, and was proud of them. I remember her performing from memory Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation,” capturing with her best southern drawl the smug Mrs. Turpin’s comic nastiness as she judges the supposed ugliness of the “white trash” around her in the doctor’s office only to be visited by a vision at the end of the story of all the inferior people welcomed into heaven while she is left behind, hosing down her pigs in the pig sty. Julia loved Flannery O’Connor, and she saw herself in a line of strong women ancestors, including her “cross-dressing woman warrior” great-

great-grandmother, who was briefly in the confederate army until she was unmasked and kicked out. Julia proudly posted her ancestor on her Geneseo faculty website.¹

In her too-short life, Julia Walker made a unique and powerful impact on early modern literary and cultural studies. Her publications and her conference presentations over the decades altered the landscape of the field, made us see things differently. She was a match for Spenser, Milton, and Donne, and also Queen Elizabeth. Her first book was the groundbreaking collection, *Milton and the Idea of Woman* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), in which she helped create a new Milton for the late twentieth century. Its influence is still felt in Milton Studies after thirty years. Ten years later came a major monograph, *Medusa's Mirrors: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Metamorphosis of the Female Self* (University of Delaware Press, 1998), on how these three major canonical writers constructed the male interior self and the female interior self in radically different ways. It was an entirely original piece of scholarship and thinking, deeply engaged with the literary texts but also the current academic battles. Like all her other work, it showed how much Julia loved these male writers even as she critiqued them, opening up their texts even as she called them to account. While writing *Medusa's Mirrors*, she had become increasingly interested in England's female monarch, Queen Elizabeth. Why just write about how men imagine women? Why not attend to the powerful woman herself, even while exposing how men represented and were troubled by her? And so the same year *Medusa's Mirrors* was published, Duke University Press brought out *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana*, which went through two printings. Six years later Julia published her monograph *The Elizabeth Icon 1603–2003* (Palgrave/Macmillan UK, 2004), surveying four hundred years of British history during which the icon of Queen Elizabeth has been used as a marker for Englishness. In addition to these four books, she published many articles on Milton, Spenser, and Elizabeth I in distinguished journals (*ELR*, *MP*, *Milton Studies*). Invitations to contribute to MLA's *Approaches to Teaching Milton's "Paradise Lost"* (2012) and *Teaching Spenser's "Faerie Queene"* were

¹<https://www.geneseo.edu/walker/sarah-malinda-lindy-sam-blalock-cross-dressing-woman-warrior>. Accessed 3/21/2018.

evidence of how her innovative scholarship could transform teaching, but also of how Julia was recognized as a star teacher.²

Julia Walker was also a Donne scholar, had been from the first, and she was a beloved member of the John Donne Society, attended its meetings, published in this journal. Miltonists admire her Milton work, but in the beginning was Donne. Her Ph.D. dissertation was on "John Donne's Poetry." Her earliest publications were on Donne: "John Donne's 'The Extasie' As An Alchemical Process," *English Language Notes*, 20 (1982), 1–8; "'Here you see mee': Donne's Autographed Valediction," *John Donne Journal*, 4.1 (1985), 29–33; "The Visual Paradigm of 'The Good-Morrow': Donne's cosmographical Glasse," *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language*, 37 (1985), 61–65; "Donne's Words Taught in Numbers," *Studies in Philology*, 84 (1987) 44–60. All of these articles were smart, original, close readings of Donne's poetry, and brought to bear on them her detailed understanding of the Renaissance fascination with alchemy and numerology. Her *SP* article focused on "Loves Growth" and the elegy "The Bracelet" (two poems that had not received significant critical attention before) to argue for "the distinctiveness of Donne's use of metaphor," whereby he "often strives for a unity of form and content by producing a poem that mirrors the process from which its imagery is taken"—in this case, "the process of Renaissance numerology." As she astutely observed, "it is the fluid rather than the static which draws his attention, and he, in turn, draws the reader's attention to this by constructing his poems as processes." Never static; always in process. One could say the same about Julia Walker's mind.

Later publications on Donne displayed an increasingly strong feminist critical perspective. The change can be seen in her self-revisionist essay published a decade later, "Anne More: A Name Not Written," published in Tom Hester's collection, *John Donne's "desire of more": The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry* (University of Delaware Press, 1996), pp. 89–105. Here she returned to the poem

²Walker, "From Allegory to Icon: Teaching Britomart with the Elizabeth Portraits," in David Lee Miller and A. Dunlop, ed., *Approaches to Teaching Spenser's "Faerie Queene"* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1994), pp. 106–16.

that had been the subject of one of her earliest publications, Donne's "Valediction: Of my Name in a Window." In both essays, she showed how Donne's witty poem engages in witty numerological play, inscribing JOHN DONNE and (implicitly) ANNE MORE in the poem, as both of their numbers in Renaissance gematria equal 64. But now, she directly tackled the question of whether Anne really was in Donne's poem, whether she really was a valued reader (or the "you") of Donne's poetry, or just wish fulfillment for Donne scholars now who want to find her presence in the poem, want to find that he was writing to and about her in the poems, that he valued her as her own person.

Critics who construct an Anne More Donne as a selective reader of John Donne's work are telling us more about their own idealization of a woman married to a poet than about Anne More Donne's education and intellect. Interestingly and unusually, this is an idealized vision generally shared by biographical critics of both genders: the women evincing a desire to absolve John Donne of what Dorothy L. Sayers calls the tendency of great men to marry women of no sort of greatness at all, and the men offering an intellectually acceptable excuse for all those ultimately fatal pregnancies . . . he couldn't resist her mind.³

Julia always called things as she saw them, in strong, sharp-witted prose. She concluded her essay, after a meticulous close reading of "A Valediction of my name, in the window," showing Julia's immense delight in Donne's wit, reminding us that, though "the poem acknowledges the existence of Anne More," we cannot generalize this Anne More to "other female pronouns within the lyrics. These are John Donne's poems, just as it is John Donne's name that is privileged in these lines. The name of Anne More remains a name not written, not even on glass."⁴

³Walker, "Anne More: A Name Not Written," in *John Donne's "desire of more": The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), p. 92.

⁴Ibid., p. 103.

It has now been twenty years since this last essay on Donne was published. But first loves are never forgotten. Not long before her unexpected death, Julia summed up her writing and looked to the future: “Immediately after my dissertation and early articles on John Donne, I got distracted, seriously distracted, by Milton, then absurdly diverted by Spenser, dutifully waylaid by Christine de Pizan, and accidentally fascinated by what happened to Queen Elizabeth’s body after she died in 1603. Now I’m [finally] at work on a Donne book—only there’s this whole digital humanities thing . . .”—a book which she had titled “Picturing Donne.”⁵ Would that book, like the Elizabeth ones, also have been about art, paintings, representations, and self-representation? It certainly would have been smart, witty, and an original contribution to Donne studies.

Even if she never got to finish that book, Julia was a presence in Donne studies, not only in her publications but at conferences. I remember her well from those early annual Donne meetings. In the beginning she came regularly. We met at Gulfport, Mississippi, the original location of the Donne Conference, as we also met at Dearborn for the Biennial Renaissance Conferences Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth organized for many years. With overlap between the two conferences, there was a rare opportunity for life-long friendships to blossom, for a close community to form.

I have so many memories and a few pictures from glorious times spent with Julia and our mutual friends over the years at conferences—standing on the cliffs at Anglesey, Wales, with Stella Revard (of blessed memory) and her husband Carter during an outing at the 1990 International Milton Symposium at Bangor; in London (before a conference at the University of Reading) with Julia and Jeanne Shami in 1992, where we saw the most god-awful play featuring John Malkovitch, and promised we’d never admit to anyone we’d seen it; at an MLA in San Francisco, after the Donne sessions, trying (unsuccessfully) to find Julia’s special Chinese restaurant with a bartender that made an exotic cocktail that she said you’d never forget if you’d had it; hanging out with her in Kalamazoo in the early nineties and meeting my now-colleague Anne Prescott at a party; and, of course, exploring Venice in 2010 in our first visit to our city of dreams.

⁵<https://www.geneseo.edu/english/walker>. Accessed 3/21/2018.

Julia Walker was a character, larger-than-life, as those who knew her could well attest. She had a sharp wit, a sharp sense of humor, and sometimes a sharp tongue. She didn't suffer fools, and she could make her annoyance impossible to ignore. At conference meals, a number of us would sit at what we called the "bad" table with Julia—Tom Hester, Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, Meg-Lota Brown—laughing and having great fun, as the conversation and wine flowed. She was a great dinner companion. What a wicked sense of humor she could have. At the Donne conference she composed limericks with Jeanne Shami, Jeff Johnson, and others, a tradition that has continued at our meetings. But as clever and loving a colleague and friend as Julia was, she could suddenly, momentarily turn against you, and you might never know what your offence was. At one Milton Society Dinner at MLA, she inexplicably came up behind me and unzipped the back of my green and black dress, then told the waiter not to share the wine with me that she'd ordered for our table. Then there was the afternoon in London, sitting on a bench in Chelsea after a conference had ended, when she announced she could no longer be friends with me because she was friends with a colleague of mine who didn't much like me. She had to choose (maybe I won out because we continued to become even closer friends over the years). Those of us who knew her well knew there could be the occasional cloudburst, but it would pass, with never a trace of what had happened, and then we'd be besties again. Julia was wonderful, but yes, she could behave badly and that added a certain spice. At the Dearborn Conferences, she made no attempt to hide her dislike of the after-dinner music. One year at Gulfport, as we stood around the fountain singing, Julia took dislike to a new person who seemed to her to be dominating (ruining?) our tradition of singing. Slowly, with a cackle, Julia poured her beer down the woman's back.

Most of my memories of Julia from the Donne meetings, however, are loving, precious, a tribute to what a scholarly community at its best can be. Year after year, for as long as we were at Gulfport and as long as Julia could still travel to "camp Donne," we would all stand around and sit on the branches of the wonderful "Friendship Oak," as it was called—a live oak as old as Columbus's "discovery" of America. It survived Katrina, even when the adjacent halls of the Gulfport campus we met in were destroyed. Several years ago Julia created a picture of

that oak, incorporating the faces of many of us at earlier moments—some now gone, some still here but no longer so young—and she posted it on her Facebook page (her comment on it: “here’s to friendship, oaks or not”).



This picture and the oak was—and is—a treasure. An image of the strength of friendships forged through our love, study, and teaching of Donne—of sharing those things over the years. An image, vivid in my mind, of something precious that one hopes survives, like that amazing, enduring oak, roots and branches spreading, creating new growth, even while the roots remain unseen, under the ground. Bless you, Julia.

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