

Introduction to Cluster on "A Valediction forbidding Mourning"

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Given what is known about the poet's personal life, and the history of his texts, the work of Donne scholars often involves reconstruction, recontextualization, or the expunction of errors canonized by time. The three essays below, papers given at the Ninth Donne Conference, consist of such work; they focus in one way or another on material belonging to "A Valediction forbidding mourning"—but material under erasure, as Judith Herz puts it.

In the case of a nonpublishing poet like Donne, consciously or unconsciously, we depend on the work of textual scholars. Beyond reading the texts these specialists provide, however, many of us ignore the information they offer unless there is an obvious crux. Janice Whittington suggests that we acknowledge the instability of Donne's texts. Supporting her argument for such critical sophistication with examples of alternate readings in "A Valediction forbidding Mourning," she proposes that we acknowledge the other such readings that exist, though under editorial erasure.

The other papers also attend to strong materials that are not, in a sense, in the poem. Judith Herz examines the potency of a compelling narrative and the uses to which it can be subordinated. Walton's romantic story of the events surrounding the composition of "Valediction" has proved to be a durable factoid. The power of image is such that even skeptical readers must acknowledge Walton's tale, if only to dismiss it. An equally ineradicable figure that seems integral to the poem is the compass with one leg immovable in the center while the other sketches a perfect circle. Urging us to surrender this persistent but inaccurate image, Graham Roebuck focusses on the intellectual movement toward "anti-imagery" in the poem. Fortunately, of course, the nature of language does not permit anything to be truly unsaid; Donne may have created these poetic images only to place them under philosophical erasure but, literally, we cannot surrender them. Even as we try to overpaint them, we discern their outlines and discover that the verbal pentimento accounts, in large part, for the depth we admire in the canvas.

“A Valediction forbidding Mourning” is probably the best-known of Donne’s poems, and the (wrong) compass his best-known image. But even a work so definitive (as it seems to us) of the author and his style reveals, in the hands of these excellent critics, the elusiveness and artificiality of both constructs: the story surrounding the poem’s creation is probably fiction; the poet such a context seems to imply is likewise questionable; the meaning typically ascribed to the poem’s most striking image has been in error; and the text itself is the product, to a certain extent, not of the author but of editorial choices. We have grown used to thinking of Donne as an assiduous and talented self-fashioner: the essays below remind us of the extent to which the author and text we read are the author and text we (and others like us) dispose or even create.

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