

## **The Text of Donne's "A Valediction forbidding mourning"**

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Although not the most copied Donne poem (Peter Beal lists fifty-four manuscript transcriptions—"The Anagram" has sixty-nine), "A Valediction forbidding mourning" exists in more copies than most other Donne poems. This study is limited to twelve manuscripts, three from Group I (as designated by Beal), five from Group II, and four from Group III; and a copy of each of the seven seventeenth-century editions of *Poems*. Using files transcribed from photocopies of the manuscripts and the Donne Variorum collation program, I attempt to determine the families of textual transmission for the poem in the selected artifacts.

Appendix Three, "Schema of Textual Relationships," identifies the families and the readings on the lines which help delineate the families. For "Valediction forbidding mourning," the distinctions between families are somewhat imprecise. Lines 8, 24, and 30 seem to want to reverse the groupings ordinarily given to *WN1* and *O21*, putting *WN1* in Group III and *O21* in Group II. In other lines, especially lines 4 and 20, *WN1* and *O21* stay with their respective groups, and Appendix Three shows only a few lines in schematic notation. The division into three groups (families) becomes significant when choosing a copy-text, and looking at the artifacts of the entire poem will demonstrate how complicated that process can be.

Appendix One shows how difficult choosing a copy-text can be when there are three families of textual transmissions. The accepted modern version (from John Shawcross, who chooses the 1633 edition as copy-text) is the base poem, with bracketed key readings from *O20* (family 1), *TT1* (family 2), and *H6* (family 3). By looking at the standard text and the manuscript alternatives together, one can see how different choices for copy-text can change, even though slightly, the reading of the poem. The first striking difference appears immediately in the form of different headings on the selected artifacts. The accepted modern version's heading—"A Valediction forbidding mourning," which appears on all seventeenth-century editions, appears in only three of the

twelve artifacts I transcribed. Group I manuscripts generally head the poem "Elegy." Group II manuscripts have the modern heading (minus the "A"), although two others in Group II (*B40* and *TT1*) head the poem "Elegy" also. Group III shows the variety of other headings, such as "Valediction agaynst mourning," "Upon The parting from his M.<sup>rs</sup>/Valediction 1," and "An Elegy," or no heading at all (as in *O17*).

Similarly, in these transcriptions, even the structure of the poem is inconsistent. Group I manuscripts set up the poem in nine 4-line stanzas, like the accepted modern version, but *TT1* from Group II and *H6* from Group III show the poem as 36 lines without stanza breaks.

The varying structures of the transcriptions are underscored by the significant verbal variants among families (as seen in Appendix 1). In line 4, *TT1* (a Group II manuscript) reads "sayes" where Groups I and III read "say." The copy-text choice would seem in this case to favor "say," which has the correct subject/verb agreement. Line 8 contains variants which bring up an interesting change in the metrics of the line in the *TT1* version. Furthermore, as shown by Appendix 2 (showing the original artifacts of *O20*, *TT1* and *H6*) both *TT1* and *H6* read "of our Loue," producing an apparent 9-syllable line, but *H6* gives the spelling of "Layty" as a two-syllable word, thus preserving the eight-syllable line, where *TT1* gives the spelling "Laiety," a spelling that seems to insist on an extra syllable. The variants change the metrics of the poem again in line 17, where *H6* drops the "a," leaving the line as "But wee by loue so much refind." In doing so, *H6* maintains the eight-syllable line, unlike *O20* and *TT1* with nine syllables. In the modern version, Shawcross has corrected 1633, which has the Group I reading of "a," keeping the syllables consistent by adding the apostrophe for an elided "by'a." Clearly then, editors must consider structure and metrics, along with meaning and grammar, in their choice of a copy-text.

One of the most significant variants that affects interpretation occurs in line 20, centering on the choice of "care lesse" or "careless." Whichever variant the line contains could change the reading of that line and the intent of the image. With the selection of a copy-text from Groups I or III, which have the two words, "care lesse," the reading emphasizes that the speaker and his lover are not bounded by the purely physical in their love. Instead, they "Care lesse eyes, lips and hands to misse," knowing their love has transcended those whose love is based solely on the sensual. If the copy-text chosen uses the single word "careless," as in Group II manuscripts, then in the lovers' response, their "eyes, lips and hands" are careless.

Another significant variant affecting interpretation occurs in line 30 with the readings “rome” and “come.” If the copy-text contains the wording of Groups I and III, the speaker’s lover remains behind as the “fixt foot,” and the speaker, like the other foot of the compass, “far doth rome.” The choice of “rome” allows for the interpretation that the foot is traveling away from the other “fixt foot,” thereby moving in the first part of the cycle. With the Group II choice, the variant reading “far doth come” fits better in an interpretation of the motion of the compass foot as it goes through the return or second part of the cycle. An added perplexity for the editors arises in the similarity of the “r” and “c” in many transcriptions. Most of the manuscripts in Group II read “come” except for *H6* (the O’Flahertie manuscript), which reads “rome.” Additionally, the copyist has written another “r” in script above the “r” in “rome.” This added note suggests and emphasizes the possibility of transcription error, a possibility the editors must take into consideration. In this example, we can see how a different choice for copy-text gives a different reading of the poem. Both readings are possible, but the editors can only chose one.

Other variants not relevant to distinguishing families and which may be unique to the individual manuscript offer interesting choices. In line 22, *H6* adds a variant that alters the reading of the poem by offering “Though I must part” instead of “Though I must goe.” Although the only artifact I found that gives this reading, *H6* shows in “part” a word choice that echoes the divided compass image. These artifacts can also offer some strange variants. For example, if an editor chooses *TT1* for copytext, reading line 32 “growes direct” instead of “grows erect,” the sexual implications of the image would be diminished. Perhaps more interesting is the *O17* reading of line 35 as “drawes my cicle iust” instead of “makes my circle just.” Although the variant expands the compass image, further study of *O17* uncovers readings that suggest it most likely is a memorial reconstruction. Each artifact, then, offers its own variants, whether in spelling, grammar, word choice, structure, metrics, or a combination, and those variants alter the reading of the poem.

Working with the different artifacts suggests that the decision about which manuscript should be the copy-text should be made after the collation and analysis of the other copies of the poem. Study of all fifty-four manuscripts may clarify transmission families and their relationships. Until then, and even after the Variorum editors have made their judgment, readers should recognize that the version of the poem they have chosen may differ significantly from other versions of the same poem; therefore, whether the

editors choose a first, second, or third family manuscript as copy-text, the scholar must examine the chosen text in the light of possible alternate reading through textual studies. Did Donne have his lovers “care lesse” or “careless”? Would a metrically consistent text better reflect the harmony of the lovers? Was the poem originally written with “come” instead of “rome,” with “part” instead of “goe,” and how do those change the reading of the poem? Certainly, any sophisticated interpretation of the poem ought to demonstrate an awareness of the textual evidence of Donne’s “A Valediction forbidding mourning.”

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## Appendix 1

*A Valediction forbidding mourning.*

[*A Valediction; Elegy; Upon the parting from his Mrs / Valediction 1* ]

As virtuous men passe mildly' away,  
 And whisper to their soules, to goe,  
 Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,  
 The breath goes now, and some **say**, no. [say; sayes; say]

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
 No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,  
 T'were prophanation of our joyes  
 To tell the layetic **our** love. [our; of our; of our]

Moving of th'earth **brings** harmes and feares, [brings; brings; cause]  
 Men reckon what it did and meant,  
 But trepidation of the spheares,  
 Though greater farre, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers love  
 (Whose soule is sense) cannot admit  
 Absence, because it doth remove  
 Those things which elemented it.

But we **by'a** love, so much refin'd, [by a; by a; by]  
 That our selves know not what it is,  
 Inter-assured of the mind,  
**Care lesse**, eyes, lips, and hands to misse. [care lesse; careles;  
 Care lesse]

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
 Though I must **goe**, endure not yet [goe; goe; part]  
 A breach, but an expansion,  
**Like** gold to avery thinnesse beate. [Like; Like; As]

If they be two, they are two so  
 As stiffe twin compasses are two,  
 Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show  
 To move, but doth, if the'other doe.

And though it in the center sit,  
 Yet when the other far doth **rome**, [rome; come; rome]

It leanes, and hearkens after it,  
 And growes **erect**, as that comes home. [erect; direct; erect]

Such wilt thou be to mee, who must  
 Like th'other foot, obliquely runne.  
 Thy firmnes **makes** my circle just, [\*interesting variant: drawes 017]  
 And makes me end, where I begunne.

Shawcross, John T. ed. *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1967. Bracketed readings are from artifacts as follows: Shawcross [020;TT1; H6]

## Appendix 2

020 Eng.poet.e.99,f.f. 1 02v-3. Dowden manuscript

### *A Valediction.*

As Vertuous men passe mildly away,  
 And whisper to theyre Soules to goe,  
 And some of theyre sad frindes doe say  
 The breath goes now, and some say noe.

So lett vs melt, and make no noyse  
 No teare floads, nor sigh tempests moue,  
 T'weare Prophanation of our loyes  
 To tell the Layetye our Loue;

Moving of th'Earth brings harmes and feares  
 Men reckon what it did, and ment,  
 But trepidations of the Spheares  
 Though greater farr is innocent.

Dull Sublunary Louers Loue  
 (whose Soule is Sense) cannot admitt  
 Absence, because it doth remoue  
 Those thinges w<sup>ch</sup>elemented yt.

But wee by a Loue so much refind,  
 That ourselues know not what it is,  
 Inter-assured of the mind,  
 Care lesse, Eyes, Lipps, and hands to misse.

Our two Soules, therefore w<sup>ch</sup> are One,  
 Though I must goe, endure not yett  
 A breach, but an Expansion  
 Like Gold to Ayerie thinnes beate.

Yf they bee two, they are two soe  
 As stiffe twin Compasses are two.  
 Thy Soule, the fixt foote, makes no showe,  
 To moue, but doth, if the other doe.

And though yt in the Center sitt,  
 Yett when the Other far doth rome  
 It leanes, and hearkens after yt  
 And growes erect, as it comes home.

Such wilt Thou bee to mee, who must  
 Like th'other foote obliquely runne,  
 Thy firmnes makes my Circle lust  
 And makes mee End. where I begunne.

TT1,f.48r-v. Dalhousie I manuscript

*Elegie*

As vertuous men passe mildlie away  
 and whisper to their soules to goe  
 And some of their sadd frendes doe say  
 the breath goes now and some sayes no  
 So lett vs melt and make no noyse  
 No teare floudes nor sigh tempestes mooue  
 T'were prophanation of our ioyes  
 to tell the *Laiety* of our Loue  
 Moouing of the earth bringh~brings harmes & feares  
 men reckon what itt did and ment  
 But tripidation of the spheres  
 though greater farr is Innocent  
 Dull sublunarye Louers Loue  
 (whose soule is sence) cannott admitt  
 Absence because it doth remooue  
 those things w<sup>ch</sup> elemented itte-

But wee by a loue so much refind  
 that our selues know not what itt is  
 Itter~Inter~In[<sup>o</sup>]t[h]er assured of the mind  
 careles eyes lippes and handes to misse  
 Our twoo soules therefore w<sup>ch</sup> are one  
 though I must goe endure not yett  
 A Breach but an expansion  
 Like gold to ayerie thinnes beat  
 If they be twoo they are twoo soe  
 as stiffe twin=compasses are two  
 Thy soule the fixed foot maketh no shoue  
 to move, but doth if thother doe  
 And though itt in the *Center* sitt  
 Yett when the other farre doth come  
 Itt leanes and harkens after itt  
 and growes direct as itt comes home  
 Such wilt thou bee to mee who must  
 Like thother foote obliquely runne  
 Thy firmnes makes my circle iust  
 and makes mee end where I begunn.

HO6 ms Eng. 966.5, f.124r.-v. O'Flahertie manuscript

*Upon The parting from his M.<sup>r</sup>*  
*Valediction 1*

As vertuous Men passe mildly away  
 And whisper to theyr soules to goe  
 While some of theyr sadd frinds doe say  
 The breath goes now, and some say No  
 So let vs melt and make no noyse  
 No Teare-floods nor Sigh-tempests moue  
 T'were prophanation to our loyes  
 To tell the Layty of our Loue.  
 Mouings of th' earth cause harmes and feares  
 Men reckon what it did and ment  
 But Trepidation of the Spheares  
 Though greater fur is innocent  
 Dull Sublunary Louers loue  
 Whose soule is sense, cannot admitt  
 Absence, because it doth remoue  
 Those things w<sup>ch</sup> elemented it  
 But wee by loue so much refind



As our selves knowe not what it is  
 Inter-assured of the mind  
 Care lesse eyes lipps and hands to misse  
 Our two soules, then, w<sup>ch</sup> ar but one  
 Though I must part, endure not yet  
 A breach, but an expansion  
 As Gold to ayry Thinnesse beate.  
 If they bee two, they ar two so  
 As stiffe Twinn-compasses are two  
 Thy Soule, the fixd foote, makes no showe  
 To move, yet doth if th' other doe.  
 And though it in the center sitt  
 Yet, whilst the other far doth rome  
 It leanes and harkens after it  
 And growes erect as that comes home  
 Such wilt thou bee to mee, who must  
 (Like th' other foot) obliquely runn  
 Thy firmnesse makes my Circle iust  
 And makes mee end where I begun

### Appendix 3: Schema of Textual Relationships

#### Group I: B30 B32 020

line 4 the breath goes now, and some **say** noe.  
 8 to tell the Layty our loue  
 20 **Care lesse**, Eyes, lippes, and handes to misse; (**Carelesse** B32)  
 24 **like** Gold to ayrye thinnes beate  
 30 yett when the other farr Doth **rome**  
 all use nine 4-line stanzas; all use "A Valediction" as heading

#### Group II: B40 H4 WN1 TTI (and B7)

line 4 the breath goes now and some **saies** noe. (**saie**  
 H4; **say** B7)  
 8 to tell the Layetie of **our** Loue (**our** WN1)  
 20 **carelesse** eyes, lippes, and handes to misse. (**Care lesse** H4)

24 **like** Gould to ayreerie thinnes beate. (As WN1)  
 30 yett when the other farr doth **come** (**rome** H4 WN1)

all but WN1 show 36 lines with no stanza break; WN1 shows nine 4-line stanzas; B7 H4 WN1 show heading as "Valediction forbidding mourning"; B40 TT1 show heading as "Elegy"

### Group III: B13 H6 017 021

line 4 The breath goes now, & some **say** noe. (Now his breath goes, & some **say** no; 017)

8 To tell the Layity **our** love. (**of our** Loue. H6 017 021)

20 **Care-less** eyes, lipps, and hands to meet. (**Care lesse** eyes lipps and hands **to misse** H6; **Careless** eyes, lippes & handes **do misse** 017; **Carelesse**; Eyes; Lips & handes **to misse** 021)

24 **As** Gold to aery thinnes beat. (**Like** 021)

30 yet when the other far doth **rome**, (**Come** 021)

B13 shows nine 4line stanzas; 017 has four stanzas of 12, 8, 12, 4 lines; H6 021 show no stanza breaks. Headings vary: B13 "Valediction agaynst mourning"; H6 "Upon The parting from his M.<sup>n</sup>/ Valediction 1"; 021 "An Elegy"; 017 no heading.