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Reading [out] Biography in "A Valediction forbidding Mourning"

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In the course of commenting on Walton's claim that Donne wrote "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" for Anne Donne on the occasion of his leaving for France with Sir Robert Drury in 1611, David Novarr made an observation that should give us pause: "Walton provides no evidence. . . [rather h]is own understanding of the poem persuaded him that he was right about addressee and date."[1] Walton was neither the first nor the last of Donne's readers to proceed in this fashion; our own understanding can persuade us of a great deal. But the details of Walton's claim, the uses he put it to in the final, 1675 version of Donne's Life (the only one in which it appears), the ways in which that claim has subsequently functioned even when it is disputed or rejected, together provide a useful exemplum of the perils of biographical criticism and, more particularly, of the perils of such an approach when applied to Donne's imagined relations with his wife. Quoth the sceptic, Never More.

The story is familiar—it was told him, Walton writes "(now long since) by a Person of Honour, and of such intimacy with him, that he knew more of the secrets of his soul, than any person then living: and I think they told me the truth; for, it was told with such circumstances, and such asseveration, that (to say nothing of my own thoughts) I verily believe he that told it me, did himself believe it to be true."[2] It is a story of a dreadful vision, of Donne seeing his wife twice before him, hair hanging to her shoulders, a dead child in her arms. Following the account of the vision, Walton prints the full text of "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" (from memory, it is assumed, given the number of unique and idiosyncratic readings), the poem serving as implicit evidence of the powerful bond between husband and wife, thus authenticating the anecdote of the vision.

The high degree of circumstantial detail also serves to authenticate the story, but as has been often noted, most of the details are inaccurate,

inconsistent and misleading. Donne was in Amiens, not in Paris, when this vision was supposed to have occurred; his child died two months, not two weeks after his departure. Months later, still in Amiens, he had yet to receive any news and worried about what might have happened. In the extant letters written in 1612 from France, there is no mention of visions, just concern that he has had no word of his wife since his coming out of England.[3]

As the only one of the *Songs and Sonnets* to be reproduced in full in *The Life of Dr. John Donne*, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" performs a biographical function despite itself. It becomes biographical evidence, a heuristic in the highly over determined life narrative that is the 1675 account. To a certain degree all readings of the poem have to position themselves in relation to this narrative. To be sure, many critics reject it, and when they don't—John Shawcross, for example in his essay, "Poetry, Personal and Impersonal," allows for its possibility— they discount its significance, for in Shawcross's words "such origins are not integral to a reading of the poem."[4] John Carey, on the other hand, implies that it may be just a story, but he then turns it into fact as it allows him to dismiss the seriousness of the poem—"he wrote her a farewell poem and left for the continent with Sir Robert and Lady Drury, their servants, a pack of hounds and several hawks." In a quite different register, Carey makes the story evidence for the portentous conjecture that "the life, which Donne's attendance on the great forced him to suppress, had, at this crisis, invaded his consciousness in visible form."[5] Still, rejected or accepted the story is cited. Donne's biography contains the anecdote, but under erasure. The very act of saying it is not true produces the ghostly effect that it is witness to. Like those 27½ lines that Marianne Moore claimed were no longer in her poem "Poetry", or like the stanza that Auden excised from "September 1939," before making the entire poem disappear from his corpus, the anecdote requires that we acknowledge it even as we say it is not there. Anne More inhabits the poem, "her divining soul bod[ing] her some ill in his absence" in Walton's appropriation of Donne's words, whether we like it or not.

Thus Anne More's presence in the poem is, paradoxically, guaranteed. But what acknowledging this usually produces is rarely a consideration that Walton might have made it up out of whole cloth, or even out of the rags of time, driven as he was by the telos of narrative. More often the attempt is made to revise the details of Walton's claim, accepting as given that he had known the story all along but had chosen not to use it in the earlier versions. The anecdote is adjusted in these readings. After all, it is assumed, there must be

something to it, for the person of honor who was his source is generally understood to be Wotton, Donne's very close friend and Walton's second biographical subject. More than a half century had elapsed since the trip in question, the argument goes, decades since he had heard the anecdote; Walton could easily have gotten his dates wrong. No doubt it was the 1605 trip that Donne took with Sir Walter Chute that provides the context for the poem. Anne was pregnant then too we might observe—their third child George was baptized May 9, 1605—and assuming with Bald that Donne left with Chute in mid-February, we can allow Donne ample time for terrifying visions, even if in this case they did not prove prophetic.

Arthur Marotti opts for the 1605 date and, like Walton, makes his understanding of the poem evidence of its date and subject. Since "Donne spirtualizes married love [in VFM] as he does in no other poem," Marotti argues, it and the other two valedictions must have been written in 1605 as "the emotionally more volatile occasion."[6] There is more inference than evidence here, as the speculation becomes the basis for a sequence of biographical deductions. We are given the distraught lover speaking to his beloved, the religious thinker diminishing the human relationship of the lovers while expanding that love religiously and philosophically, and the coterie poet spinning witty conceits for his friends while at the same time trying to persuade himself of the strength of his feelings (was the lover not really distraught?). The biographical crisis that the poem charts in this reading is one of disengagement: not only is the poet leaving home, but he is looking for a way out of his constraining, constricting life. "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" thus becomes a boundary poem; he is separating not only from his wife, but from the "poetry of mutual love" (178).

Oh that "Mutual love"! It's a phrase that has taken tenacious hold of recent Donne criticism, the check mate to accusations of misogyny. But what is striking is that for all the vaunted mutuality of Donne's so called serious love lyrics, there is a nearly complete absence of another. She, you, the silent presence in the we—these exist largely to make accessible the solipsism of the speaking I. "She" is our fiction; the poems' speakers never stop to look at her, listen to her, describe her least gesture (save for the occasional purpled nail). Of all the poets in this tradition from Petrarch onward, the one that probably comes closest to Donne in the extremity of his absorption in his own desires is Yeats. But Yeats's world is densely peopled in contrast to Donne's; those friends and wives and mistresses have agency, experience, flesh, their human particularity rendering the poet's self absorption the more painful for both

writer and reader. Even the "you," "he," "she" of Shakespeare's sonnets, to take a nearer example, offer a suggestive contrast. They never speak either, but they are intractable other presences, exerting pull and pressure on the speaker's words and desires.

To be sure, recent critics have been busy populating the world on the margins of Donne's texts, showing him in complex negotiations with friends and potential patrons, but the insides of the *Songs and Sonnets* still remain strangely empty. Janet Halley's feminist revision of Marotti's argument, for example, offers another version of this process of negotiation. Halley works to recover Anne More's presence, but she cannot make her silence speak. Rather she finds the "historical woman, excluded by her functional illiteracy, reappear[ing] as (fictionalized) text, the exchange of which generates male social control over signification."[7] The more we look for Anne in valedictions, canonizations and the like, she argues, the more her historical actuality is imperiled.

The premise of Anne Donne's illiteracy, however, is itself assumption and not fact, and one which raises complex biographical questions. Could Anne More/Anne Donne read those poems putatively addressed to her? What weight can one accord Walton's comment that she was "curiously and plentifully educated"? (13). She might well have been, despite the high rate of female illiteracy during this period. According to David Cressy, it was roughly 90%,[8] although this is a problematic estimate, which, as Margaret Spufford and others point out, blurs the distinction between reading and writing. Nonetheless, the issue remains open. There has been considerable debate, for example, concerning the degree of literacy of Barbara Gamage, despite her living in a household and among people of extraordinary literacy—Mary and Philip Sidney, Robert Sidney, Mary Wroth.[9] For Anne More, Walton's assertion remains the only evidence. Thus the issue of her literacy and its implications both for the study of Donne and for women's history requires considerably more investigation than they have received.[10]

The question—whom or what are we looking for in ceaselessly seeking Anne?—is itself complexly gendered. The feminist critic attempting to retrieve women's lived experience from a male authored text finds occlusion or, worse, obliteration. But that same textual evidence is often construed as idealism from the point of view of the male reader. He admires, and in admiring, like his author, idealizes, endowing "her" with spectacular/specular qualities, but "who is Sylvia and what is she" are questions to which Sylvia never replies. No more does Anne. Indeed, the search for Anne is more often

than not a search for John, a kinder, gentler John Donne. Attempting to discover, uncover, recover Anne, may or may not imperil her actuality, but it does serve to sanitize and to sentimentalize Donne. The more we can read Anne's presence into the poems, the more we can read out Donne's misogyny (and careerism too, for that matter, for what kind of committed careerist could he have been to give all for love? Quite a calculating one, it has been argued, although in the event he miscalculated quite badly). Thus "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" must be read as a real parting of real lovers; and not any lovers, but this husband, this wife.

However, the fact remains that we know nothing of the poem's circumstances. Why 1611? Why 1605? Why not 1597 before the Azores expedition? Why indeed assume a parting of great duration? Why not a week, or a night (for "lovers houres be full eternitie")? Why any parting at all? Why not imagine Donne exercising the valedictory mode as virtuoso piece? Is it because of the supposed real feeling and "emotional volatility?" Are these unimaginable without the experience? Cannot many experiences be distilled into a totally imagined moment? Cannot imagination create experience?

My argument is simply that biography, understood as when was the poem written, what does it reveal of John and Anne, where was Donne going, what was he doing, is not an approach that is likely in this instance to yield much gold, and beaten too thin will surely shatter. This is not to argue nostalgically for the autonomy of the object of art. Obviously the poem is to be read in multiple contexts beyond itself and biographers might well probe it for ways of talking about Donne as lover, husband, traveler, client, proto-divine. That is, in limning the portrait of Donne, the biographer may look to the poem for potential evidence of Donne's interest in a range of subjects, from theology to astronomy and alchemy, but this is quite different from making biography read the poem.

So did Donne have a vision? Well, while in Amiens during that period when Walton had him in Paris dreaming the horrific dream, Donne did speak of ecstacies and revelations. In what is surely a close contender for the silliest poem he ever wrote, "A Letter to the Lady Carey, and Mrs. Essex Riche," (they were the daughters of Astrophil's Stella and Donne's friend, Sir Robert Riche, who was then presumably passing through Amiens), Donne claims to know them through an "extasye/ and Revelation of you both." The concluding lines of this odd exercise in compliment, courtship, and word spinning, make my circle just and bring me back to Novarr's reminder that it was Walton's understanding of the poem that persuaded him that he was right about date

and addressee. "May therfore thys bee'inough to testify/ My true Devotion, free from flattery," Donne proclaims, for "He that beleevs himselfe, doth never ly."

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Notes

[1] David Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Cornell University Press, 1980), 43.

[2] "The Life of Dr. John Donne." *Walton's Lives*. ed. S. B. Carter (London: Falcon Educational Books, 1951), 24.

[3] See David Novarr, *The Making of Walton's Lives* (Cornell University Press, 1958,) 113-18.

[4] John Shawcross, "Poetry, Personal and Impersonal," *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*. eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted Larry Pebworth (University Of Missouri, 1986), 61.

[5] John Carey, *John Donne, Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 84-85.

[6] Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 177, 169.

[7] Janet Halley, "Textual Intercourse: Anne Donne, John Donne, and the Sexual Politics of Textual Exchange." *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism* (University of Tennessee, 1989), 22.

[8] David Cressey, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980), 119-21, 128, 144; Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth Century England* (University of Georgia, 1981), 19 44.

[9] See P. J. Croft, ed. *The Poems of Robert Sidney* (Oxford, 1984), and B. K. Lewalski, "The Lady of the Country House Poem," *The Fashioning and Functioning of the British Country House*, ed. Gervase Jackson Stops et al, (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 1989), 263, 274.

[10] There are, of course, the three letters in the Burley manuscript, (Simpson 16, 15, 13), which Ilona Bell has argued are from Donne to Anne More, "'Under Ye Rage of a Hott Sonn and Yr Eyes': John Donne's Love Letters to Anne More," *The Eagle and the Dove*, supra, 25-52. If the attribution is correct, then literacy is not an issue. However, Bell's reconstruction of the correspondence is entirely inferential and open to question on both stylistic and contextual grounds.