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A Problematic Text

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John Donne, *Paradoxes and Problems*, ed. Helen Peters (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 142 pp., $45.00.

During the past thirty years Dame Helen Gardner has presided over a splendid series of new editions designed to supplant Grierson and other standard texts of Donne's writings. From the start one weakness of these Oxford editions has been their not entirely conspicuous reliance on biographical assumptions, as if various points of Donne's biography were so settled as not to need mention when used as bases for editorial decisions. Oxford editors have not only used this sometimes unwarranted assurance about the facts of Donne's life; they have also seemed to be arguing key decisions on textual grounds, when in fact their real grounds have been biographical assumptions, and dubious ones at that.

The most recent example of such Oxford editing is the latest installment in the series, Helen Peters' edition of the *Paradoxes and Problems*, work based on her doctoral thesis under Gardner's direction. After her informative General Introduction on the traditions of paradox and problem, Peters' main success in this edition is her establishing the Westmoreland and Burley manuscripts as more authoritative than any seventeenth-century edition for setting the text of the ten early Paradoxes. On the other hand, her relatively unsuccessful setting of nineteen Problems is based on highly questionable biographical assumptions about Donne's successive revisions of these pieces. Questions about this matter have already been raised by other reviewers. In any case more detailed consideration is required than can here be given to the subject. Instead, this review will focus on what I take to be a more radical

defect of Peters' edition, though one that has been tacitly or admiringly accepted up to now.

Peters tells us in her preface (p. v) that "examination of the canon has led me to exclude as of doubtful authenticity" the six Overburian satires ascribed to Donne since the seventeenth century. Her reasons for excluding these six pieces vary from case to case but in general fall into two categories: textual reasons and stylistic ones (pp. xlvi-xlix). Textually, Peters' main reasons are that these six pieces either cannot be found in any manuscript or appear in manuscripts that are unsound in canon. Thus she points out that the paradox "That Virginity is a Vertue" has not been found in any manuscript. "A Defence of Womens Inconstancy" and "An Essay of Valour" may not be authentic because they appear only in the Stephens manuscript, which includes (but does not differentiate from accepted works by Donne) twenty spurious poems. Similarly the characters of "A Dunce" and "A Scot at the First Sight" appear in Stephens and in only four other manuscripts—Stowe 962, Bridgewater, Dobell, and O'Flahertie—none of which is "absolutely sound in canon" (p. xlviii). Finally, Peters excludes "Newes from the Very Countrey" without giving any textual reason at all.

The only other reasons Peters gives for excluding these six satires are stylistic ones, which consist in contrasting them with the earlier Paradoxes and Problems she acknowledges as authentic. Thus, in relation to the other Paradoxes, "A Defence of Womens Inconstancy" and "That Virginity is a Vertue" are much longer and (according to Peters) fail to exhibit common stylistic features such as a bright, witty opening; vigorous, unqualified sentiments; and an ending with freshness and wit. These same arguments are repeated in less emphatic form for each of the remaining four excluded satires. Compared to the earlier Paradoxes and Problems, they are in Peters' view simply too long and/or too dull to have been written by Donne.

These stylistic reasons for excluding the Overburian satires are an obvious product of what John R. Roberts has called "a synechdochical understanding" of Donne: a focus of attention on part of Donne's canon as if it were a whole, while another part is regarded without conscious irony as not "Donnean." In fact, Peters' reasons have little force, mainly because she does not seem to have appreciated the common focus of these six satiric pieces. Neither in her introduction nor in her commentary has she even mentioned any of their topical connections to the Overbury scandal. Her assertion that these pieces lack wit is hardly persuasive coming from someone

who evidently misses the point of the jokes. Peters does acknowledge that three of the six pieces were printed in various editions of Overbury's *A Wife*, and that a fourth was apparently "composed under its influence" (p. xlviii). But she is silent about the specific allusions of these and the other two pieces and says nothing to explain how any of them fitted into the scheme of the Overbury book. In discussing "A Defence of Womens Inconstancy" and "That Virginity is a Vertue" Peters seems not even to realize their relation to the Overbury affair. She reveals this when she actually cites the closing words of the latter to show its un-Donnean lack of wit (p. xlviii) but does not notice that the very words she cites are a palpable allusion to the main subject of Overbury's *A Wife*. As she has told us in her preface, speaking generally about Donne's prose trifles, "while the purpose of these works was to surprise or even shock the reader, the materials used were contemporary common knowledge, leaving one frustrated at being unable to track down what should be obvious" (p. vi). Unfortunately, Peters' frustration has led her to exclude six of Donne's pieces from the canon, an act of unjustified pique.

The textual reasons Peters gives for excluding these works are also unconvincing. For one thing it seems tendentious to exclude works from the canon because they appear in no manuscript, or in few and unsound manuscripts, while simply dismissing the fact that they were ascribed to Donne by his son and other early editors. On this reasoning Peters' Oxford colleagues Wesley Milgate and Helen Gardner should have excluded several poems—for example, "Translated out of *Gazaeus, Vota Amico facta*" (which appears in no manuscript though John Donne, Jr., printed it as his father's in 1650); "Upon the Translation of the Psalms" (which appears only in O'Flahertie, along with many spurious poems); and "To Mr. Tilman" (which appears in only a few manuscripts, none perfect in canon). More fundamentally, the weakness of Peters' line is plain if we take account of the historical context of the Overburian writings. These are the most dangerously scandalous writings ever attributed to Donne. He evidently discouraged copying of his writings as a general rule, but these pieces could never safely have been allowed to get out of hand. Reflecting rather cynically on the King's Court, and even on the King himself, copies could never have been entrusted to anyone except, perhaps, someone like Sir Robert Cotton, who was in the business of keeping his papers secret.

Apart from Peters' dubious assertions that manuscript evidence and style argue for excluding these six pieces from the canon, she presents no further reasons for re-classifying them as "Dubia." In particular, she does not explicitly address the problem of their having been attributed to Donne by his son and other seventeenth-century editors. Peters mentions, of course, that John Donne, Jr., published all six pieces as his father's, and speculates that he probably did so from a manuscript then in his possession (p. lxxxiii). But despite this acknowledgment she maintains generally that "there is no textual evidence" of Donne's authorship (p. xlvi). Thus she makes no effort to evaluate the editorial decisions of Donne's son (and others), instead simply ignoring them in her argument for inauthenticity.

As an editor John Donne, Jr., had many faults. He edited, in all, eight volumes of his father's writings, some of which show distinct evidence of editorial carelessness or even deliberate distortion, as in his altering the initials of addressees in editing Donne's letters. On the other hand, John Donne, Jr., was first to publish as his father's well over 300 of the individual items in Keynes' bibliography (even apart from the Latin epigrams "translated" by Jasper Mayne and thus clearly labeled as *not* the original words of Donne). To this day, all but one of John Donne, Jr.'s, more than 300 first attributions is still generally accepted, apart from the exclusions Peters has now made. This fact alone should underline the radical nature of Peters' decisions and should have required careful consideration in her introduction of the testimony of Donne's son.

Peters' puzzling terseness about this matter extends also to what can only be surmised is a biographical assumption on her part that (*pace* Oxford biographer R. C. Bald) Donne did *not* take part with his friends in the writing of prose trifles after the death of Sir Thomas Overbury and the marriage of his patron, the Earl of Somerset, to Frances Howard in 1613. While Peters nowhere makes any such revisionist assumption explicit, it is clearly the assumption on which her editorial decisions must be based. On the first page of her introduction she characterizes the authentic prose trifles as "early works of 'Jack Donne' written at different periods of his younger life" (p. xv). This "younger life" she conceives to have extended as late as 1610, when Donne was nearly forty and when, she accepts, some of the Problems were composed. But though she can accept these Problems despite their being "the somewhat bitter works of a disappointed man" around 1610 (p. xv), she for some

unstated reason does not believe Donne contributed to the Overbury series three or four years later. Had she accepted that Donne could write such things as "A Scot at the First Sight" within a few years of his ordination, she would be unlikely to have construed so tendentious a case for their exclusion or to have blamed John Donne, Jr., for so implausibly focused a mistake: over 300 correct attributions, but he was singularly wrong about six connected to the Overbury scandal. On the other hand, given Peters' assumption, she had to conclude that Donne's son was oddly mistaken, or else that he had purposely chosen these Overburian satires (and only these) in order to palm them off as his father's—which would be absurd.

Even before Peters re-classified them as "Dubia," Donne's Overburian writings were among the most neglected parts of his canon, impenetrable without biographical and historical explanation. Rather than ignore or exclude from the canon works like these, Donne scholars should avoid the tacit, "synechdochical" assumption that what actually happened in Donne's life either cannot be learned or is already adequately known. Inasmuch as any critical or editorial decision about Donne's writings has to be based on some set of biographical assumptions, even if these have not been made explicit, we should concentrate on articulating our assumptions, on correcting them, and on developing for Donne studies some commonly accepted basis in biographical fact.

Helen Peters' re-classification of Donne's Overburian satires as "Dubia" is a prime example of editorial decision based on questionable biographical assumption. Peters has tried to justify her decision in terms of manuscript collation. But in the last analysis no mechanical or abstract method can be used to rule in or out particular works or words. Such evidence as manuscript collation provides is not definitive but must take its place in an order determined by whatever overarching sense the editor has of the biographical and historical reality of an author's life and work. The weakness of this sense of history will be the weakness of an edition.

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