

But Is It Donne's? The Problem of Titles on His Poems

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Titles attached to poems are very important, first, because they direct the reader; second, because they add or delimit meaning; and third, because they suggest something about the writer, the context out of which she or he wrote or the intentionality of the writer. Yet as I read criticism involving the titles of Donne's poems, I am not convinced that the critic has really thought about the question of the title as signifier, a signifier into content, thesis, approach, generic form, or the like. "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany" places that poem biographically, chronologically, and generically, although none of these matters is explicitly indicated within the poem. We read its words and images in accordance with that title. Because we have the title we note that Donne accompanied Lord Doncaster on a conciliatory mission to the German princes for King James on 12 May 1619. This backdrop gives meaning to "In what torne ship soever I embarke, / That ship . . . What sea soever swallow mee, that flood / . . . I sacrifice this lland" and similar phrases. The poem suggests an author driven by psychological uncertainty, and lines such as the last ("And to scape stormy days, I chuse an Everlasting night") render a specific though unstated context out of which that title allows us to give meaning to that metaphor by recognizing that his expected "long absence, and far distance from hence" may be fraught with danger, even death (for the peril of war was very much in force). I have just used phrases from Donne's sermon at Lincoln's Inn a month before on 18 April 1619, a sermon making even clearer that psychological uncertainty in words like "if I never meet you again till we have all passed the gate of death" and explicating the poem's address to Christ in words like "and Christ Jesus remember us all in his Kingdome, to which, though we must sail through a sea, it is the sea of his blood, where no soul suffers shipwrack; though we must be blown with strange winds, with sighs and groans for

our sins, yet it is the Spirit of God that blows all this wind, and shall blow away all contrary winds of diffidence or distrust in Gods mercy; where we shall be all Souldiers of one Army, the Lord of Hostes."¹ What the title of the poem has done is make it possible for us, the readers, to connect it with this sermon and interpret it more fully thereby. It also through the poem allows us to interpret the sermon more personally and more psychologically.

It is called a hymn, a generic signifier making this a poem of praise, one, however, usually calling for group praise.² The "I" of the poem seems indeed to be an individual, not one person representing the many. And praise explicitly is missing from it: praise exists only in the faith expressed that Christ will insure that no soul suffers shipwreck. The poem is more correctly a prayer, a supplication. And of course the same thing may be said for Donne's two other so-called hymns, "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" and "A Hymne to God the Father." Further, the full title of "A Hymne to Christ" as we have it is most unlikely to have been Donne's when he wrote. How could he possibly have known that this was "the Authors last going into Germany," although "last" can be interpreted, I suppose, as "latest" with reference to a least his fomrer trip with Sir Robert Drury (1611-12)?³ (Reference to himself as "Author" is also odd.) He was not even fifty years old, and though there is a fatalism about the poem in the possibility of death, that does not adhere to the meaning of "last" here. If the meaning is truly "last" rather than "latest," one's conclusion can only be that the title we have was not written by Donne in 1619. Was its generic placement Donne's? If it was, it contradicts his other nontitular, correct uses of the word in poetry and prose.⁴ The conclusion that the title we have was not written by Donne in 1619 seems borne out by titling in the manuscripts: the Cambridge Balam MS has "Doctor Dunn's going into Bohemia" as the first part of the Title, indicating that the contextual relationships of the poem were known; the Dobell MS has the contextual "At his departure wth my L: of Doncaster"; and the O'Flahertie MS has the similar contextual "At the Sea-side going over wth the LdDoncaster." The copy of the poem in the Cambridge Balam MS is not part of the Group I collection, being added sometime later by a different hand; its title also adds "Himn to Christ," and the Trinity College, Dublin, MS, has only "A Hymne to Christ." It should be noted that 1633's word "last" does not appear in any manuscript, suggesting it to be a clarification by the editor, who knew that indeed this had been Donne's *last* going into Germany.

We are not sure of the specific dates of these manuscripts or their specific provenances, but it may be that the hymn rubric was not Donne's but some copyist's, whoever it was that penned the progenitor of the Group II MSS,⁵ manuscripts that evidence a kind of editorial concern with smooth, metrically regular, immediately verbally understandable texts, manuscripts that often present titles for poems which are missing or different in other manuscripts. For example on this last point, "The Indifferent" is the title of Group II MSS; it is "song" or omitted in other major groups. We may conclude that titles of poems in the 1633 first edition, like its texts, come in part from a Group I tradition and in part from a Group II tradition, as in the case of the title for "The Indifferent."

"A Hymn to Christ" by all accounts derives from a Group II MS tradition; "A Hymne to God my God, in my Sickness" comes from Sir Julius Caesar and/or from Izaak Walton, and appears in MS Stowe 962 where it was taken over from 1633; "A Hymne to God the Father" comes from 1633 and/or Walton, being "To Christ" in the Trinity College (Dublin) MS and the Dobell MS; "Christo Salvatori" in the O'Flahertie MS; and omitted in Stowe 962. On this last poem, Helen Gardner writes validly but circumspectly for the point at issue: "The titles of Donne's poems do not generally have much authority. The manuscript titles may have arisen here because the other Hymn which appears with this one is addressed to Christ. . . . [T]he memory of the promise to Abraham seems more natural in a prayer to the Father. . . . The title of 1633 is probably only editorial in origin, but titles are a convenience and this one is established. The best title would be no title at all."⁶ She does not seem to recognize the inappropriateness of the generic label "hymn" for any of these poems.

I suppose it is to be presumed that Donne gave a title to most of his poems, if not all. I suppose it can be presumed that some of the titles we have were his, or based on his, but it can also be presumed that some of the titles were made up because readers expect poems to have titles, even if only generic labels. The only poem we have in Donne's autograph has no actual title; "To the Honourable Lady, the Lady Carew" is given on an outside recto and the text is introduced simply by "Madame." It is thus a verse letter and part of the title given in Group I MSS is thus explainable: "A Letter to the Lady Carey and Mrs. Essex Riche, from Amyens." The Trinity College (Dublin) MS has "To the La. Co. of C.," indicating some kind of error, probably by the copyist, since she was Lady Carey (C.) of Cockington (Co.). (The Dolau Cothi MS has

"C. of C.") Dobell and other manuscripts have simply "To the Lady Carey" (closer to Donne's superscription); O'Flahertie gives "To the Lady Cary and her sist^r Mrs Essex Rich. From Amiens"; and others like the Phillipps MS have no title. What this example shows is that a title may derive in part from some kind of titling attachment given by Donne himself, but that it also is created by what the copyist (or editor) could infer, as with "A Letter" (it is called a letter in line 58 as well) and what he could add by having read the poem, or part of the poem, as with "and Mrs. Essex Riche" since "your noble worthie sister" is mentioned in line 52, although additional information on the part of the copyist (or editor) was necessary to know who the sister was. Further, as with the first poem we have looked at, the copyist (or editor) must have known something of the chronological context, for no mention of "Amiens" occurs in the holograph manuscript, although we know that its paper is the same as that used for a different personal letter from Donne from Amiens. Whoever supplied the text that the copyist of the Group I MSS prototype used probably provided such knowledge. That someone may have been Donne himself, particularly if Group I MSS reflect his gathering of his poems together in 1614 as Gardner argued, or it may have been anyone else.

What all this means is that we cannot be sure about titles on Donne poems. Just as the editor of the second edition of the poems in 1635 added the now unfortunately too well-known subtitle for some of them, "Songs and Sonets," in some kind of misguided effort to create comparison with Tottel's miscellany, so compilers or copyists seem to have created titles for some of the individual poems with no more knowledge than a superficial reading of a poem might produce or, in some cases, with some kind of contextual information, authentic or not.⁷ (The 1635 title possibly derives from O'Flahertie's "Sonnetts and Songes" or a cognate manuscript.) Generic titles like satire or elegy seem obvious and acceptable, whether Donne had attached such terms to the works or not, but it isn't really quite that simple. Should we accept "Elegie: The Perfume" which is 1635's attempt to distinguish the poem from others although 1633 has only "Elegie IV"? The manuscripts have titles similar to the first edition. The editor of 1635 has read the poem. What can we do with the elegy beginning "Oh, let mee not serve so, as those men serve," since it is given no title in the edition or manuscripts? Gardner supplies one in brackets, "[Recusancy]," because of "the striking final couplet." But interestingly she does not attach the actual word "elegy" to any of the poems printed under the inclusive group title "Elegies." What

do we do with the one beginning, "Come, madam, come, all rest my powers defie"? Again it is usually labelled only "Elegie," but the Bridgewater MS has "Going to Bed" (a justifiable though unnecessary title) and its first printing in 1669 has "Elegy. To his Mistress going to bed" (again a justifiable though unnecessary title). One might remark that in the miscellanies just about every poem in which a woman goes to bed or is being cajoled to go to bed with the poetic narrator is entitled something like "Dr. Donne to his mistress to come to bed." The title "Elegy" for all these poems would suffice, using the first line or part thereof for distinctions.⁸ (Perhaps I should note that the term elegy here relates to Ovidian elegies, which were given this label because they were written in a series of elegiac couplets; the elegiac couple comprises a line of dactylic hexameter and a line of dactylic pentameter. This elegiac couplet is consistently rendered in English as a rhymed iambic pentameter couplet; an elegy, or love elegy, is a series of such couplets. A funeral elegy may have the same form, as do verse satires of the period.)

The problem is acute when we come to two other so-called elegies, poems that are not elegies either in form and metric or in substance, and that should no longer be discussed as elegies. I refer first to the poem beginning "Image of her whom I love, more then she." No title is given in Group I or in the Luttrell MS or in many other manuscripts; Trinity College (Dublin) MS gives "Elegie" and therefore so does O'Flahertie (though generally cognate with Luttrell) and 1633. 1635 expands editorially to "Elegie X. The Dreame." It is clearly a lyric and thus not included among the elegies in Group I MSS. Again the culprit is the Group II MSS progenitor which labels it "Elegie" and places it with other elegies (although there are also other kinds in this section). Gardner, placing it among the so-called "Songs and Sonets," felt compelled to attach a title in brackets: "[Image and Dream]." The other poem, "The Autumnal," has had much rejectable discussion printed about it, all because the subject of the poem, an older woman whose wrinkles might be called graves, is identified with Magdalen Herbert. This total insensitivity and determination to make biographical connections can be found in the Bridgewater MS ("An autumanll face: on the Ladie Sr Ed Herbart mothers Ladie Danvers" [sic]) and the Luttrell and O'Flahertie MSS ("On the Lady Herbert afterwards Danvers"). This biographical penchant is seen in Stowe 962's title: "Elegie Autumnall on the Ladie Shandoys." Another frequent title—I suppose because the male world cannot conceive of an older woman who apparently has no husband as not having previously

been married—is “Widdow Her” (in MS Lansdowne 740) and “Wid-dowe” in the cognate Osborn and Phillipps MSS; the Stephens MS gives “A Paradox of an ould woman.” The most frequent title, or part title, is “The Autumnal,” which, if one has to have a title, is adequate enough since it arises from line 2. This appears in Group I MSS, Dobell, Stowe 962 and Bridgewater as noted, and 1633. The poem is not placed among elegies in Group I or most other manuscripts; again it is the Group II MSS and O’Flahertie following suit that position it out of its lyric category. It is a poem in quatrains although separations are not made in Group I or 1633; Gardner perversely prints it in a block setting and indecisively after the elegies but not among the songs and sonnets. The heading “Elegy,” however, complicates matters, for it appears in the Group I, Dobell, and O’Flahertie texts (with addition as noted above), and in Group II and some other texts without any addition. This title may arise from dealing with death in part, but the poem is clearly not the Ovidian type of love elegy that the others are.

Categorizing these poems by that word “elegy” should lead the reader to certain expectations and where the intentionality of the poem fits such expectations the subgeneric label is appropriate. But I would suggest that for these poems *only* the label is appropriate, and distinction can be made amongst them by quotation of the first line or part of the first line as a kind of subhead: “Elegy: Oh, let me not serve.”

It is, of course, with the songs and sonnets that titling is so very important, for the title will direct the reader to read in a certain way, to look for certain narrative or attitudinal elements, and, unfortunately at times, to miss certain implications which just don’t fit the title. Helen Gardner has an important article on “The Titles of Donne’s Poems,” in which she warns that “it is so uncertain whether any of the titles of Donne’s lyrics are his own that an attempt to use a title as a guide to interpreting a poem is unwarranted. We can be grateful to the editors of 1633 and 1635 for providing so many of the poems with brief and easily memorable titles. They are a great convenience. As aids to the exegete they must be regarded with suspicion. It may be that Donne himself did anticipate Herbert in realizing that a title could be more than an identifying device or description of a poem’s content, but perhaps this praise ought to go to the unknown compiler of the collection of his poems preserved in one group of manuscripts” (she refers to the Group I MSS).⁹ Yet that warning has so seldom been heeded in scholarship on these poems. Obvious titles, Donne’s or any reader’s, like “The Flea” or “The Canonization” or “The Primrose,” offer little difficulty for us, but others

like "Twicknam Garden" or "The Broken Heart" or "Lecture upon the Shadow" or "Loves Infiniteness" create a lot. "The Flea" is the only title found, or else a title is omitted. "The Canonization" is the only title found, although sometimes "The" is omitted. "The Primrose" is the only title found except for 1635's seemingly informed expansion "being at Mountgomery Castle upon the hill, on which it is situate." We have here another attempt to make biographical contexts, a misleading context, one that misses the play of the poem, demands a doubtful dating of it, and develops a personal dimension. "Twicknam Garden" is one of the most notorious titles, for it immediately makes a biographical connection with Lucy, Countess of Bedford, and leads to a reading that again misses the play of the poem, demands a doubtful dating of it, and develops "sincere" authorial intention. There is nothing in the poem, of course, that places its inspiration in any specific context. There is no title in many of the manuscripts including Group I MSS; again it is the Group II that has created a title, picked up by Group III.

Group I calls what we know as "The Broken Heart" simply "Songe," followed by other manuscripts, and Group II and O'Flahertie omit a title. The editor of 1633 apparently made up the title so that there was one, and having read the poem, he saw that it was about a heart, "shivered" to pieces like "broken glasses." Not bad, but not Donne. "Lecture Upon the Shadow" has no title in Group I, was omitted in 1633 (a problem we need not go into here), is called "Shaddow" in Dobell and "The Shadow" in O'Flahertie, and "Song" in 1635, its first printing. Somehow the edition of 1650 picked up "Lecture Upon the Shadow" from the Group II tradition; there is no "A" attached although most modern editors seem to think there should be. Certainly "lecture" is used in line 2 and "Shadowes" in line 4, but as title, again it clearly is not Donne's. "Loves Infiniteness" is Grierson's title, revised from "Lovers Infiniteness" from 1633, which was picked up by Dolau Cothi (with an "A"), the only Group II MS to include it; there is no title in Group I or III MSS. Grierson's makes sense; that of 1633 does not; but again Donne's presence is missing.

Three examples will suggest the misdirected reading or incomplete reading that a title may lead a reader to. "The Baite" is the 1635 editor's solution for a missing title in 1633, as it is also missing from Groups I and II, and "Song" in Group III. "Thou thy selfe are thine owne bait" (26) answers the "sleave-silke flies" (23) usually used to catch fish, but this title suggests that the woman is aware that she is the bait to catch this poor fish of a lover, which she isn't, and that the fisher, illogically, is using

the bait to catch himself. Full appreciation of the play of language is lost if we make the title work as much as it should. The 1635 editor may have picked up "Confined Love" from the Dobell MS, which has "A Songe. Confined Love," for it is omitted in most of the other manuscripts, although Phillipps has "To the worthiest of all my lov my virtuous Mrs P." and Carnaby, "To the worthiest of all my Lovers." None of these titles imply a reading of the poem, even when one plays up the irony. And "A Valediction" should be the title of the one to which we add "forbidding Mourning." Group I and other manuscripts have the simple title; Group III and others have "Upon the parting from his Mistress"; and the John Cave MS has "To his Love upon his departure from her." The longer title of 1633 comes from Group II—again—but with "A" added. I have never liked the implications of that word "forbidding" in this poem; and even though "mourning" could be employed for the context, I feel sure it is part of the title because Donne starts off with a simile of a person dying, hardly the situation being plumbed in the poem, which through its famous conceit is made clear: parting physically does not necessitate parting emotionally or mentally. I hope that Donne did not believe in the communication beyond the grave suggested by that non-Donnean title once the poem is read.¹⁰

My guideline for titling Donne's poems would be first to ascertain what might have been Donne's title (there may be few beyond the generic and the verse letter forms); second, to accept well-known titles if they do not conflict with the substance of the poem and are obvious possibilities (like "The Flea"); third, a kind of combination of the two others, to employ a well-known title that might have been Donne's but without whatever questionable additions might have accrued (like "A Valediction"); and fourth, to omit titles and give only a short form of the first line (definitely not to make up titles like "Recusancy"). I know this is disturbing for a poem like "The Undertaking," which would have no title; and sacrilegious for a poem like "The Sunne Rising," which would be either "Ad Solem" or its translation "To the Sunne,"¹¹ But I am concerned that we misread "Womans Constancy" or "The Prohibition" or "An hymne to the Saints, and to Marquesse Hamylton" because of the editorial work in the manuscripts of Group II.

I can only hope that future editions of Donne's poems, including the variorum edition, heed the problems of titles which these remarks indicate. A note on the title, given preliminarily before any footnotes, would inform the reader of the frequent, popular title of the poem but would go a long way to discourage continued use of a non-Donnean

title. Perhaps the reader will discover things in a poem otherwise obscured and will surely avoid readings which are otherwise extrinsic to that text.

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Notes

¹ George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), II, No. 11, 248.

² A typical definition is: "A song in praise of God or any holy creation, or of gods or heroes, usually to be sung by a chorus" (Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, William Burto, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1960], p. 49). "The word has occasionally been used for poems on lofty topics."

³ Comments on the original oral version of this paper by Diana Treviño Benet have been most helpful in its revision.

⁴ For example, "by these hymnes, all shall approve / *Us Canoniz'd for Love*" (*The Canonization*, 35-36) or "These are *Petitions*, and not *Hymnes*; they sue / But that I may surway the edifice" ("You have refin'd mee," 33-34).

⁵ For brevity I use these now somewhat out-of-date designations as reported in such editions of the poems as Gardner's, Milgate's, and my own.

⁶ Helen Gardner, ed., *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), pp. 109-10.

⁷ Tottel's Miscellany, of course, evidences repeatedly the editor's titling, based on a superficial reading of the poem and even more usually on a reading of the first few lines or images only. Milton's so-called "On His Blindness" sonnet is a later and more clearly false title: it was attached to the sonnet by Thomas Newton in his 1752 edition of the collected poems (less *Paradise Lost*) and arises from the image background of the first two lines.

⁸ The attachment of a number is understandable, but also a great source of possible misunderstanding when the canon or order is disrupted. We all call "Come, madam, come" No. 19 because of Grierson's edition, but dropping out the clearly non-Donnean "Julia" and "Tale of a Citizen" creates a numbering problem. I urge that numbering not be attached to any of these poems, including the satires (where there would be no difficulty) and the holy sonnets (where there is).

⁹ Helen Gardner, "The titles of Donne's poems," *Friendship's Garland* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1966), I, 207.

¹⁰ I have recently suggested in a review of Ernest W. Sullivan's edition of the Dalhousie MSS (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1988) that his evidence supports a redating of this poem. Izaak Walton connected it with Donne's continental trip with Sir Robert Drury in 1611-12. The poem appears in the Dalhousie MSS amidst Donne poems that are dated only up to 1609. I suggest that the poem may fit chronologically into those poems, having its impetus from Donne's trip to France and probably Italy with Sir Walter Chute in 1605-06. Walton, of course, gives no indication that he was aware of Chute and may have simply erred by connecting the poem's reputed context with the one trip he knew about.

¹¹ As Richard Todd reminds me, Constantin Huygens's manuscript title for this poem is "Ad Solem" and for "Valediction forbidding mourning," "Afscheit," that is, "departure" or "farewell." Huygens's work is dated before 1633.