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"Thou art the best of mee": A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and The Literary Possession of Donne

Maureen Sabine

Romance is the mystery which lies at the heart of A.S. Byatt's contemporary novel *Possession* and is the secret source of much of its literary activity.[1] Two contemporary literary critics, one a psychoanalytic feminist Maud Bailey (211) and the other a post-structuralist deconstructivist (9) Roland Michell, join forces to grasp one mystery which is the hidden romance between two fictitious nineteenth-century literary figures, Randolph Henry Ash, the éminence grise of Victorian verse, and Christabel LaMotte, a reclusive lady poet of Shalott. Ash and LaMotte are as an unlikely pair of lovers as their modern literary investigators, Bailey and Michell. Ash seems to embody the robust "masculine perswasive force" of English empire but without Donne's sex appeal or eye for the ladies. LaMotte has been rescued from the shadows of time by a sisterhood seeking past heroines of "self-sufficient female sexuality" (34). Not only will the passionate correspondence between Ash and LaMotte puncture these academic myths but it will require Bailey and Michell to ponder the meaning of love, "especially Romantic Love," which they have been taught to think of as a "suspect ideological construct." They admit that it will take "a real effort of imagination" (267) to know what it felt for Ash and LaMotte to be lovers and by tacit analogy to know what it is like to be in love or to believe that love makes a material difference to one's work and life. While they struggle to comprehend this other and greater mystery of romance, the seemingly staid and irreproachable poet Ash is freely

acknowledging to LaMotte that she makes him feel both "at home" and "unheimlich" and that his poetry is "a cry of unsatisfied love" (131-32).

Ash's revealing statement uncannily foreshadows Freud's claim that love can express our home-sickness for the mother's body, "the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning."[2] The theory that romance is a cry of longing for this real or fanciful lost home and that imaginary writing nostalgically seeks to recreate the original romance with the first beloved, especially the mother, is now being felt in Donne criticism. Scholars such as Anna Nardo, William Shullenberger and Camille Wells Slights have begun to explore the psychic importance of the intimate holding environment between mother and child for understanding Donne's metaphysical play of wit and his poetic daydreams of intersubjectivity and mutuality.[3] Nardo shows how Donne entertains "simultaneous fears of separation from and possession by a beloved object" (157) on the long, fraught human pilgrimage towards psychic maturity. Christopher Ricks upbraids Donne for recanting the deep and moving declarations of love that open poems such as "Love's Alchymie" and "Aire and Angels"[4] without drawing Nardo's humane conclusion that human beings are "caught between contradictory fears of separation and engulfment, between flesh and spirit" (161) throughout life, and between destructive and tender regard for the primary recipients of all their feelings.[5]

What this means for an understanding not simply of Donne's poetry or Byatt's *Possession* but of literary studies in general is that our writing expresses our neediness. As a poet Ash wrestles with the intractability of language. One of Ash's fictitious nineteenth-century critics cites Coleridge's epigrammatic description of Donne "wreath[ing] iron pokers into true-love knots" to explain the difficult nature of Ash's verse (23-4). The poet himself realizes that his difficulty arises from a profound human need to find, and if need be, fight his way back home to intimate knowledge of another. "Don't fight me," he will cry to Christabel LaMotte during intercourse; and in taking possession of her, he will affirm, "You see, I know you" (284). Byatt's novel suggests that clever, knowing scholars hear the hunger in the verse but, as Stanley Fish admits, cannot respond: "For a very

long time I was unable to teach Donne's poetry. I never had anything good to say about the poems." Instead he delivers an ingenious but repulsive diagnosis: "Donne is bulimic, someone who gorges himself to a point beyond satiety, and then sticks his finger down his throat and throws up. The object of his desire and of his abhorrence is not food, but words, and more specifically, the power words can exert."[6] While Fish hysterizes Donne's hunger, he is astute in his observation that much Donne criticism has dramatized Donne as "in possession of his poetry and therefore of himself." He concludes that this has generated "a series of critical romances of which Donne is the hero": the romance of the old new criticism, the romance of the original, inner self, the romance of postmodernism (250). Fish is critical of the speaker who dominates Donne's poetry, a speaker "who refuses to recognize himself in the indictment he makes of others" (239). However, he does not appear to see that his own poststructuralist narrative is also bound up with these other critical romances. Indeed, Byatt's *Possession* demonstrates that romance is the grand narrative or, in psychoanalytic terms, the holding environment which binds us all. Her postmodern academic couple may be quick to identify the various forms of romance that their nineteenth-century subjects practice. Christabel LaMotte, for instance, writes naive romance such as folk and fairy tales and eventually a fabulous romantic epic echoing Spenser and earlier medieval romances called *The Fairy Melusina*. Yet they are slow to concede that writing might be the cry and reading the answer of love. For as Byatt's omniscient narrator says in an outpouring of maternal love and pity, "they were children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, 'in love,' romantic love, romance *in toto*" (423). It is therefore hard for them to accept "all the things we-we grew up not believing in" (506), especially that in their search for the love-letters between Ash and LaMotte, they too could fall in love as Dante's Paolo and Francesca had, poring over the same narrative.[7] Only when the mystery quest inspired by Ash and LaMotte is near an end does Roland Michell see with sudden clairvoyance that "he was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously, a Romance was one of the

systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse" (425).

In granting Michell the insight that he is implicated in the system that new critical theories taught him only to doubt, Byatt redefines literary studies as one in which the exercise of interiority and inward reflection is vital. Increasingly, feminist critics have warned of the audacious temptation to power and prominence contained within theory when it becomes so intent on demonstrating its superiority to the world it surveys that it cannot hear the quiet, attentive voice of the inner life or see that the critique of the subject is never solely that of the "other" but also the critique of the self.[8] Byatt satirizes the academic politics of radical reading which prides itself on "counteracting an ideological system that uses aestheticism or spirituality to conceal politically oppressive tactics"[9] but which has itself been tempted to use theory as a tool of personal power dispossessing those who try to read literature in spirit, in beauty and in truth.[10]

Janel Mueller has observed that women critics this century have been some of Donne's most subtle and sympathetic readers because they appreciate that his poetic discourse springs from deep within the speaker's psyche.[11] This feminine response to psyche is envisaged as an act of love in Byatt's *Possession*, and one which accords with the paradigmatic narrative of romance—the union of eros and psyche. Just as ecstatic possession cults have articulated the interests of women who have no power and authority in culture, so in Byatt's *Possession* the possessor of the lost ecstatic mystery of a passionate love for literature is the downtrodden academic Beatrice Nest. She has literally been driven underground to the bowels of the British Museum which Byatt likens to "the Inferno"; and there she slaves away at the thankless task of editing the dreary journal of Ellen Ash. Like Psyche, Beatrice Nest holds on to the memory of her first love as she carries out her unending editorial labours. Byatt's understanding narrator introduces us to the "inner life" (112) that Beatrice hides within her large but generous bosom: "She took a First and fell in love with Randolph Henry Ash" and assures us "that such loves were once not uncommon." In her Finals paper, Nest cited Donne as a love poet whose verse

communicates a sense of "true conversation between men and women." She suggested a literary kinship existing between Ash and Donne as "love poets who expect reciprocity of intelligence" and who "convince the reader of the real thinking and feeling presence of her to whom they are addressed" (113).[12] Nest carries into middle age and academic mediocrity the poignant burden of sagging breasts, and with them her youthful hopes that literary studies would offer "some intimacy with the author of the poems, with that fine mind and passionate nature" (114). Instead she reads of intimacy second hand in Ellen's journal where "Randolph read aloud to me from Dante's sonnets in his *Vita Nuova*" and where his wife exclaimed at the "spiritual power of [Dante's] understanding of love" (114-15). Like Donne's nineteenth-century biographical collectors, Augustus Jessopp, James Russell Lowell, and Louise Imogen Guiney, who carried out "loving and painstaking archival research,"[13] Nest's editorial work is unfinished and underrated. Yet like her namesake, Dante's Beatrice, she is the keeper of knowledge through her possession of Ellen Ash's journal which is crucial to the discovery of the mystery that went to the grave with Ash and LaMotte as it did with Donne's lovers in "The Funerall" and "The Relique." As the possessor of interiority, Beatrice Nest is also a spiritual guide to the scholars who study in the Reading Room of the British Museum unaware that they faintly mirror "Dante's Paradiso, in which the saints and patriarchs and virgins sat in orderly ranks in a circular formation, a huge rose" (26). She guides them back to an older and more exalted vision of literature in which, as Anne Carson argues, there is a similarity between "what the reader wants from reading and what the lover wants from love." For both are "stirred to reach beyond perceptible edges—towards something else, something not yet grasped."[14] Accustomed as we now are to cynical or demystifying readings of the text, it is easy to join the other characters in *Possession* who disregard Beatrice Nest and, if privy to her secret thoughts, would have considered it grotesque that an ungainly spinster could have 'fallen in love' with the poets she studied. The rediscovery of romance in *Possession* restores readings which reach within and then out in search of another or other meaning not yet

known.[15] Far from it being simply absurd for the matronly Beatrice Nest to preserve the memory of her romance with a poet, it is represented as eros, a love become inner activating power, that "transfigures" Beatrice Nest "like some witch or prophetess" at the end of the novel (496). James Hillman suggests that such fateful encounters—whether with lovers, poets, critics or psychoanalysts—are versions of the Eros-Psyche romance where we experience "an event psychologically, we tend to feel a connection with it; in feeling and desire we tend to realize the importance of something for the soul. Desire is holy, as D.H. Lawrence, the Romantics, and the Neo-platonists insisted, because it touches and moves the soul."[16]

The premise that Donne's poetry stimulates "true conversation between men and women" is one of the most hotly debated issues in Donne criticism.[17] The claim that Byatt makes first through Beatrice Nest and subsequently through the letters and musings of the Victorian poet Randolph Ash is that Donne's verse fosters not only literary exchanges between men and women, but critical exchanges, and, what is more, that subtle spiritual exchange where "soule into the soule may flow" as in "The Extasie."[18] In making such expansive claims, Byatt drew on her own lifelong involvement with Donne and with the two poet-critics instrumental in his "canonization," Robert Browning and T.S. Eliot.

For Byatt, Browning is one of "the very greatest English poets, and his greatness has never been fully acknowledged or described." Through her portrait of the Victorian poet Randolph Ash, Byatt pays tribute to the greatness of Browning and suggests not only Ash's likeness to Browning but Browning's affinities with Donne. In a critical essay on Browning she called him "one of the three great English love poets (the other two are Donne and Robert Graves) because (like them) he shows a precise curiosity about the psychological dramas of love's shifts, visions and failures, and also because, again like them, he sees women as complex human beings, with their own minds and desires, and hopes for dialogue."[19] In his passionate correspondence with Christabel LaMotte, Ash demonstrates his "love and respect for [her], alike as woman and as intellectual being" (456).

Indeed, the complex rapport and dialogue that he has with her is not only one of lovers but of poets who consciously engage with influential literary voices from the past. "I speak to you as I might speak to all those who most possess my thoughts—to Shakespeare, to Thomas Browne, to John Donne, to John Keats" (177). In his own correspondence with the poet Elizabeth Barrett, Browning cited Donne's love poetry to intimate his secret attachment to her.[20] John Maynard reminds us that Barrett spoke of Donne as Browning's personal possession,[21] while LaMotte writes to Ash that "I read yr John Donne" (199).

Donne's influence on Browning's poetic development and, in turn, Browning's influence on Donne's critical reception in the nineteenth century and transmission into the twentieth century illustrate the collaborative exchange between past poet and present poet as his ideal future reader and communicator. Achsah Guibbory has shown that Donne too was concerned to establish "a potential relationship between [his] poems and readers of some future age, readers who may be affected, even transformed by the surviving poems, or who themselves may have a creative, regenerative effect on the poetry."[22] Just as Browning's dramatic monologue may have been shaped by Donne's colloquial verse,[23] so Randolph Ash is inspired by dramatic voices from the past and establishes a dialectic with them through critical reading and creative writing:

> I myself, with the aid of the imagination, have worked a little in that line, have ventriloquised, have lent my voice to, and mixt my life with, those past voices and lives whose resuscitation in our own lives as warnings, as examples, as the life of the past persisting in us, is the business of every thinking man and woman. (104)

Likewise, in the moment of enlightenment near the end of the novel when Roland Michell discovers his own voice, that he is not simply "an unemployed postgraduate" or "an old-fashioned textual critic" (50) but a poet like Ash, he will hear these past voices rising from the text he reads:

> He heard Ash's voice, certainly his voice, his own unmistakable voice, and he heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader." (472)

It is a reading which does not "snatch for personal meanings," yet is not "impersonal" (471). Rather, it is that reading somewhere *in between*—which "interinanimates" Donne's verse.[24] Not surprisingly, Byatt likens such readings to the erotic ecstasy of falling in love or the bliss of mystically beholding the original mystery when "the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen," and yet recognized for the first time as "always known" (471-72).

Byatt's struggle to find the words which convey Michell's direct, prelapsarian encounter with the poetic text reflects her own fascination with T.S. Eliot, especially when he contemplated Donne.

> Most seductive in Eliot, to me, was his admiration for the metaphysical poets, for their mixture of intellect and passion, sense and sensuousness. My lost paradise was Eliot's elegant fiction of the undissociated sensibility, in which Donne felt his thought as immediately as the odour of a rose.[25]

Eliot stands at the twentieth-century end of a revival of Donne that began with the biographical criticism of the late nineteenth century. Dayton Haskin has shown how Victorian fixation with the secrets of sexuality led to a fascination with Donne's *Songs and Sonets* as they revealed the dark truths of Dr. Donne's hidden love life. Haskin also charts the emergence of a more impersonal, anti-biographical school of critics who would anticipate Eliot in their distaste for this "vulgar curiosity" and concern to preserve "the sacredness of the privacy of life." These critics denied the reader the right or indeed the possibility of "privileged communication" with the author as Michell eventually does (473), but they did not discount his sense of the poet as an old familiar friend over years of study.[26]

Haskin has astutely noted the temptation of Victorian biographical critics to make Donne's life and art read like a racy nineteenth-century

novel.[27] Byatt's novel *Possession* cleverly plays with this temptation (which it regards as old as Adam and Eve) "to know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret" (238). If inquisitiveness is a powerful human motive which gives rise not only to literary criticism, detective fiction, and novels of adultery but to her own postmodern romance, Byatt also echoes Donne's foremost nineteenth-century American editor Charles Eliot Norton in her narrative respect for what Beatrice regards as the individual writer's "mystery of privacy" (115).[28] Her twentieth-century academic pair, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, do indeed "make natural detectives" (237) when they track down the hidden correspondence between Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Eventually, they unearth two secrets that will alter their understanding of Victorian poetry and of themselves: one that Ash and LaMotte were lovers, and the second that they produced a child who is the direct predecessor of Maud Bailey. Yet other truths elude them. If the mystery of the poet's privacy thus remains intact, it is simultaneously prised open as Byatt's narrative gives readers private access to the secrets of the Victorian boudoir. There we discover that Ash's marriage to his wife Ellen was never consummated; that LaMotte was possibly the only woman this middle-aged poet ever slept with; and that Ellen herself knew of the brief affair and recognized that Christabel "was in one sense his true wife. Mother, at least briefly, of his child" (460). Readers are thus allowed to harbour the illusion that they know more than the literary experts, that prize sexual secrets belong to them alone. Only in the postscript to the novel do we learn that the secret Ash took to his grave is not the one the academic characters disinter. The secret that Christabel withheld from Ash and that Ellen failed to deliver in LaMotte's confessional letter to him on his deathbed is a secret that Ash already knew—the existence of his daughter. The postscript reconsecrates "the mystery of privacy" as it depicts Ash's fleeting meeting with his daughter Maia pictured like Marvell's little T.C. in her prospect of flowers. Readers are now present at the miracle which concludes "The Relique" and mysteriously alters the focus and inflexion of Donne's poem from the first to a third person:

> All measure, and all language, I should passe,
> Should I tell what a miracle shee was.

But in order to appreciate this miracle, we do well to adopt the position of the future admirers who come to witness the exhumation of a lover's grave in "The Relique." Furthermore, we need not only to understand Byatt's appreciation for poets like Donne and Browning but to appreciate the importance of Donne's *Songs and Sonets*, particularly "The Relique," in the construction of her narrative.

Randolph Ash writes his decisive love letter to Christabel LaMotte with the verses of John Donne open on the desk before him. If he does not actually compose this letter on top of the open page of Donne's poetry, he certainly turns to it like a bible for guidance and inspiration as he pleads with LaMotte that he may be permitted further physical intimacy. "The words on the page in front of me [John Donne] with you, with you, with you" (193) express the desire he dare not ask or even fully contemplate, the desire to make love to her. Through Donne's lines, he feels they are joined. Yet as Ash's postmodern investigators observe, the metaphoric connections created by literature are "both endlessly exciting and then in some sense dangerously powerful" (253), no more so than in seventeenth-century verse, where lines were a pun on the loins they stirred.[29] Indeed, Donne's amorous speakers seem to lend their voices to the rising ardour of Ash's declaration: "I have called you my Muse . . . . I could call you, with even greater truth—my Love" (193). Ash is not quite ready here to voice the sentiments of "Aire and Angels" that "Love must not be, but take a body too" (l.10), and of a speaker who will frankly be satisfied with nothing less than sexual possession.[30] More becoming to this Victorian gentleman who is feeling his way to LaMotte along Donne's verse lines is the avowal of "Loves growth":

> Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use
> To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse,
> But as all else, being elemented too,
> Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do. (ll.11-14)

Ash assures LaMotte that his "unforgivable embrace was no sudden impulse . . . , but came from what is deepest in me, and I think also what is best" (192). His words echo the declaration of the speaker in the "Song: Sweetest love"—"Thou are the best of mee" (l.32). Ash's final, urgent and bold proposal, "can we not find a small space, for a limited time—in which to marvel that we have found each other" (193), vibrates with the intimate yearnings of "The Sunne Rising," "The Canonization," and "The good-morrow," poems where Donne created "a private sphere of a totalizing sexual love that the culture ha[d] not yet invented."[31]

LaMotte responds to Ash's poetic entreaty inter-referentially by reading another, more high-minded message in Donne's verse. She cites a stanza from "A Valediction forbidding mourning" which seems to depict a platonic union of lovers who are so "Inter-assured of the mind" as to be "Care less" of the body's demands (199). She could not have chosen a poem more calculated to tell against her. For ten years Ash has suffered a Josephite marriage with his wife Ellen. The frame of the "Valediction" with its implication that the lovers "melt" and "growe erect" also sends altogether different signals from those LaMotte intended. Eros the traditional "melter of limbs" is at work in Donne's lines investing symbolic intercourse with the heat of desire.[32] The poignant lamentation of Byatt's lovers when soon after they do have sexual intercourse is indeed romance's "cry of unsatisfied love" (132). "How can we bear it . . . For so short a time . . . pretend . . . that we have all the time in the world. . . . This is our night, and only the first, and therefore the nearest infinite" (284). Coleridge, that other and earlier nineteenth-century advocate of Donne, remarked upon the lines in "A Feaver" that give intertextual richness to this love scene ("For I had rather owner bee / Of thee one houre, then all else ever" [ll.27-28]) when he read the lover's possessive pledge as "the outburst of a transient feeling, itself the symbol of a deeper feeling, that would have made *one* hour, *known* to be *only* one hour . . . a perfect hell."[33] Coleridge understood the erotic power which Donne's verse has to enhance the sense of being alive, to awaken a dawning awareness of inner thresholds as with the lovers who exclaim, "And now good

morrow to our waking soules, / Which watch not one another out of feare" (ll.8-9); and to suggest that in love we are indeed blest to discover a centre within to which everything is related, as Ash does when he declares, "This is where I have always been coming to . . . And when I go away from here, this will be the mid-point, to which everything ran, before, and *from* which everything will run" (284).

T.S. Eliot believed that Donne's "peculiar gift to humanity" in his love poetry was "union, the fusion and identification of *souls* in sexual love."[34] All too soon Ash would be sadly dispossessed of Donne's romantic conviction in "A Valediction forbidding mourning" that "our two soules therefore, which are one, / Though I must goe, endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion" (ll.21-23). In an unfinished letter to LaMotte he would grieve, "I loved you entirely then; I will not say now, I love you, for that would indeed be romance, and a matter at best of hope—we are both psychologists of no mean order—love goes out . . . if not fed with air to breathe" (456). His love affair with LaMotte ended in the "confused alarms of struggle and flight" that Matthew Arnold warned would disrupt the Victorian transmission of inherited literary culture. Yet Ash would still turn to Donne; for this other poet "psychologist," as Eliot called him,[35] understood how much we can hate the people we once loved most, precisely because they give and then deprive us of "centrique happinesse." The poem which earns Ash the erroneous reputation of misogyny in *Possession*, "Mummy Possest," takes its title from Donne's savage swipe at women in "Loves Alchymie." Eliot read in Donne's final slur the "mental chaos," "the disappointed romanticism," the "literature of disillusionment"[36] which Byatt, in turn, would write into Ash's character as defeated lover. Like Donne, Ash would experience the personal pain of "a life raveld out into ends, a line discontinued."[37] However, Bloom's "anxiety of influence" never clouds his literary relationship to Donne.

Possession demonstrates how Donne provokes "true conversation between men and women" (113), engaging not only key characters like Beatrice Nest, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, but Byatt herself, who includes Browning and Eliot in the novel's ongoing dialogue between past authors and present

readers. Byatt's nineteenth-century lovers converse most earnestly with Donne, and through Donne to others, at those volatile moments when life possesses or loses profound psychic meaning—the high and low points of a career, the prelude and the aftermath of a love affair and, at last, the beginning of the end of mortal existence. As he fights his losing battle with death, Ash "had become obsessed by the poems of John Donne, had recited them to the ceiling, in a voice both resonant and beautiful.... When he couldn't find a line he called, 'Ellen, Ellen, quickly, I am lost,' and she had had to riffle and seek" (448). The lines which he recites as a mantra for his pain are not from the *Holy Sonnets* where Donne confronts the terror of death, but from the *Songs and Sonets* where he disputes the death of love. Although Ash had not communicated with LaMotte in thirty years, Ellen would hear him engaged in a "dialogue of one" ("The Extasie"); speaking aloud the stanza from the "Valediction forbidding mourning" which directly precedes the one LaMotte had quoted on the eve of their coupling;[38] reaching to her across the only lines open to him; perhaps saying that she "makes [him] end, where [he] begunne." Shortly before the end, Ash recalls that famous line from Donne's "The Relique" which the nineteenth-century poet and devotee of Donne, James Russell Lowell, described as "a verse that still shines in the darkness of the tomb, after two centuries, like one of those inextinguishable lamps whose secret is lost."[39] The line that Ash retrieves from the darkness of the approaching tomb is "a bracelet of bright hair—about the bone. When my grave is broken up again—ha, Ellen? Always—that poem—thought of that poem—as ours, yours and mine—yes" (452). It is a verse that consoles both Roland and Ellen for the past and imminent loss of life and happiness. "Do you think—in your heart of hearts—we continue—after?" "We are promised—men are so wonderful, so singular—we cannot be lost—for nothing" (451). Through the "bracelet of bright haire about the bone" Ash shares Donne's hope that his own poetry will survive.[40] But he is also expressing another secret hope which is "lost" to future readers until the postscript of *Possession*—that his line is not discontinued, that he will have not only literary but human posterity through his natural daughter Maia. It is Maia's,

not Christabel's, lock of bright hair that Ash keeps in the pocket watch ticking near his heart (387, 452) and that Ellen, faithful to her husband's last wishes and to the spirit of Donne's poem, buries with him along with a bracelet woven of her's and Ash's hair. As Victorians, Ash and his wife were fascinated by the mystery at the heart of "The Relique"—that growing hair "cut off at the deathbed" kept something of the departed "alive" (258).

To read *Possession* through "The Relique" is to read in one text the secrets of another. If we position ourselves intertexually between the poet's and Donne's poetic grave, we might behold the adulterous romance between Ash and LaMotte and the postmodern age of "mis-devotion" that would discover it.

> Thou shalt be'a Mary Magdalen, and I
> A something else thereby;
> All women shall adore us, and some men. (ll.17-19)

If LaMotte can be read here as the fallen woman who bears Ash's child out of wedlock and in the gravest secrecy, Ash appears as the risen Christ revealing his godlike power as a male poet to his female disciple.[41] Yet Donne's tricky verse plays with other gender meanings. The "something else" that is at work in these lines is also the minor resurrection or erection of the penis and with it, the speaker's coy hint that his sex life has been "divine" and possibly even an admission that in pursuing this sacred mission, he has been something of a prick to women. As for Mary Magdalen, both her sexual abandon and sensual prostration at the feet of Christ are important ways of comprehending the sacramental mystery of a "true maryage" ("Womans constancy," l.8): "with my body I thee worship." In this sense, both Ash and Ellen recognized that his relationship with Christabel LaMotte was a true marriage, while his legal marriage to Ellen parodied the relationship of Christ to Mary Magdalen after the resurrection. *Noli me tangere*: "Touch me not."[42] Donne's poem also suggests that Mary Magdalen and Christ generate the romance which begins Christian history, and if this history is now presumed to be at an end, "Jesus Christ Superstar"

and Scorsese's film "The Last Temptation of Christ" testify to the enduring power of this romance at least. Proverbially, as "The Relique" foresees, it is gullible women who "adore" romance, not men. Yet postmodernism has defended the eternal life women seek in romance, praising it for the very qualities that both damn and sanctify Mary Magdalen—its maudlin excess, its contradictions, its stretch of the imagination and its apprehension that women reach for "something else."[43] If the male speaker in Donne's "The Relique" finds it difficult to imagine not only this life, but the next, without thinking of sex, Ash's frigid wife Ellen cannot even bear to put sex into words (458). Ash's generous declaration that he nonetheless thinks of "The Relique" as their love poem is a way of including her in that magical circle of intimacy inside another that begins with the mother's body. He invites her to enter the internal life of the poem and to join the speaker in marvelling at their unconsummated union, one in which they knew no "Difference of sex" (l.25), and yet in the end could say to each other, "What would I do without you? . . . Here we are at the end, close together.... We have been happy" (448). For the body's "seales" that the lovers do not touch between their communion in "The Relique" (l.29) are in *Possession* not only the seals of Ellen's virginity but the sealed love-letters that go to the grave with Ash carrying a bridal photo he will never see, but a picture he has seen before—that of Maia wearing "a heavy crown of flowers" (499).

The envoi that concludes Donne's "The Relique" suggests that there is one further seal of love for mortals who yearn to believe that love is strong as death.[44] The sudden shift of pronoun at the close of this poem, as if the lovers are discussing a third party, makes me wonder whether the final miracle the lovers experience could be that of parents—the "miracle" of new life, of a daughter. In the postscript of *Possession*, the source of our wonder is Maia, the beautiful little girl the poet meets in a garden world. It is here that intertextual reading can make us aware of "the young vitality of the past" as Maud Bailey suddenly realizes in *Possession* (136). What I, for one, had not seen before was the beginning that may be present in the end of "The Relique." We have no idea when Donne actually wrote this poem.

While John Shawcross believes that most of the *Songs and Sonets* were written before 1601, he accepts that those in the Group I MSS could have been composed right up until the end of 1614.[45] Although it can only be conjecture, I suggest that there was a family crisis in Donne's life early in 1614 which lends greater poignancy to the final lines of his poem: "All measure, and all language, I should passe, / Should I tell what a miracle shee was." In March of that year, Donne and his wife fell gravely ill, but though they feared for their life, it was not they who died but their three-year-old daughter Mary. Although Donne felt he had been raised from the dead, he also mourned the fact that "I have paid death one of my children for my Ransome. Because I loved it well, I make account that I dignifie the memory of it."[46] That child was called Mary, the name by which Christ called the Magdalen to be the first witness of his Resurrection in the Gospel of St. John (20: 15-18). Mary Donne's life spanned that intense, creative period from 1611 to 1614 when her father was involved in his elegiac memorial for another daughter, Elizabeth Drury, and where he attempted to offer the consolation of the Risen Christ to her grief-stricken parents: "why weepest thou?" The Drury's poetic commission gave birth not only to the *Anniversary* poems but to Donne's mysterious preoccupation with the "Idea of a Woman." Like Alice in Wonderland, little T.C., Elizabeth Drury, or Mary Donne, Ash's daughter is a female elegy, reminding him, in the words of Ben Jonson, that his child may be "his best piece of poetrie."[47] But Maia also epitomizes Ash's poetic "Idea of a Woman"—the virgin princesses that he would picture in gardens, first Ellen in her Victorian Close (460) and then Christabel in the summer meadows of North Yorkshire (286). In his final delirium (452), Ash would wander in and out of these garden worlds just as both the contemporary characters and readers of *Possession* move between the worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ash makes his own heavy crown of posies for this last princess who also symbolizes for him the miracle of inner poetic renewal. "Tell your aunt . . . that you met a poet who was looking for the Belle Dame Sans Merci, and who met you instead, and who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new" (510).

Maia never delivers Ash's message to LaMotte, because "on the way home, she met her brothers, and there was a rough-and-tumble, and the lovely crown was broken" (511) and because little children are not only poems of remembrance but of forgetfulness. However, both Donne's "bracelet of bright haire about the bone" and Byatt's novel give us reason to hope that in some fashion "we continue," "we cannot be lost," as long, at least, as past authors are "alive" and not dead for us. However, if the undelivered messages of love and forgiveness are to be retrieved, then it requires us as readers to allow "the school of trust" a place alongside "the school of suspicion" in critical studies.[48] In the letter Randolph Ash never received but his modern scholars recover from his tomb and read aloud, Christabel LaMotte concedes, "we loved each other—for each other—only it was in the end for Maia" (502). But she also cherishes the memory of "our old letters, of poetry and . . . our trusting minds which recognised each the other" (501). This longing for a relationship of unbroken trust is the originating impulse of Byatt's romance *Possession* as it is the deep buried feeling in Donne's finest love poems.[49] As Donne's speaker says at the conclusion of "Song: Sweetest love," "they who one another keepe / Alive, n'er parted bee."

University of Hong Kong

Notes

[1] See A.S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991) which I shall subsequently cite by parenthetical page references in my essay.

[2] Freud, Sigmund, "The 'Uncanny'," *Art and Literature*, Vol. 14, in *The Penguin Freud Library*, trans. & gen. ed. James Strachey, reprint (London, 1990), p. 368.

[3] See Anna K. Nardo, "John Donne at Play in Between," in *The Eagle and The Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), pp.157-65, esp. 159-61; William Shullenberger, "Love as a Spectator Sport in John Donne's Poetry," in *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1993), pp.46-62, esp. 53-54; Camille Wells Slights, "A Pattern of Love: Representations of Anne Donne," in M. Thomas Hester (ed.), *John Donne's "desire of more": The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry* (Univ. of Delaware Press, 1996). Susannah B. Mintz spoke eloquently on this topic in a paper entitled "John Donne: A Poetics of Parting" which she gave at the eleventh John Donne Society Conference on February 16, 1996 at the University of Southern Mississippi. I gave a first version of this current essay in the same session and consider myself fortunate to have been partnered by so graceful a reader of Donne. See D.W. Winnicott's exhaustive study of this middle ground, a psychic *via media*, in *Playing and Reality*, reprint (London: Routledge, 1991); first published in 1971, this prophetic work saw that this intermediate area of trust and love between mother and child also figures in the theological debate over transubstantiation and "in the work characteristic of the . . . metaphysical poets (Donne, etc.)," p. xi.

[4] Christopher Ricks, "Donne After Love," in *Literature and the body: essays on populations and persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 33-69, esp. 36-39.

[5] See Naomi R. Goldenberg's discussion of how the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein has explored these contradictions in *Resurrecting the Body: Feminism, Religion and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp.159-63.

[6] Stanley Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power," in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 223.

[7] Michell has a sudden vision of Dante's lovers reading together when he begins joint research with Maude Bailey but dismisses it as "ridiculous and romantic" (129).

[8] See, for example, Susan Griffin's inspired and far-sighted warning on "The Way of All Ideology" in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, ed. Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, Barbara C. Gelpi (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 273-92.

[9] See Maus and Harvey's "Introduction" to *Soliciting Interpretation*, p. x.

[10] As I believe that Fish does, in particular to Anne Ferry, in "Donne and Verbal Power", pp. 239, 249-50.

[11] Janel Mueller, "Women among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Donne For," *MP* 87 (1989-90), 144. Janet E. Halley offers a counterview in "Textual Intercourse: Anne Donne, John Donne, and the Sexual Poetics of Textual Exchange," and in her introduction as co-editor with Sheila Fisher, "The Lady Vanishes: The Problem of Women's Absence in Late Medieval and Renaissance Texts," in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1989), pp. 187-206, 1-17, respectively.

[12] Ilona Bell made a very similar point in "The Role of the Lady in Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *SEL* 23 (1983), 113-29.

[13] See Dayton Haskin, "Reading Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* in the Nineteenth Century," *JDJ* 4 (1985), 243, and "New Historical Contexts for Appraising the Donne Revival from A.B. Grosart to Charles Eliot Norton", *ELH* 56 (1989), 883, 893, as well as Raoul Granqvist, "A 'Fashionable Poet' in New England in the 1890s: A Study of the Reception of John Donne," *JDJ* 4 (1985), 342-43.

[14] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), p. 109.

[15] Carson puts it beautifully and succinctly on 71: "Both mind and wooer reach out from what is known and actual to something different, possibly better, desired. Something else."

[16] James Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis: Three Essays in Archetypal Psychology* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1972), p. 106.

[17] J.E.V. Croft delivered the first salvo—that Donne cannot see the woman in his love poetry, "for it is not of her that he writes, but of his relation to her, not of love, but of himself loving"—in "John Donne: a Reconsideration," in *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Helen Gardner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 82. Bell retaliated in her *SEL* article of 1983. Mueller, Halley and Slights keep the fire of this debate going.

[18] I shall be quoting from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday-Anchor, 1967), here l. 59 of "The Extasie."

[19] A.S. Byatt, "Robert Browning: Fact, Fiction, Lies, Incarnation and Truth," in *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), pp. 29-30.

[20] *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 348.

[21] John Maynard, "Browning, Donne, and the Triangulation of the Dramatic Monologue," *JDJ* 4 (1985): 255.

[22] Achsah Guibbory, "A Sense of the Future: Projected Audiences of Donne

and Jonson," *JDJ* 2 (1983): 11.

[23] Maynard, p. 261.

[24] John T. Shawcross also argues that in reading Donne's poetry, "the personal . . . should be remarked, but the impersonal—that is, the craft of the poem as poem, must also be examined." In effect, biographical details "may add another dimension" to our purely literary understanding and appreciation of a poem. See "Poetry, Personal and Impersonal: The Case of Donne," in *The Eagle and The Dove*, pp. 53-66, esp. 61-62. Carson states that eros "insists upon the edges of human beings and of the spaces between them" (55), the space somewhere between the personal and impersonal, biographical and imaginary that Shawcross argues Donne creates in his verse.

[25] "Introduction," *Passions of the Mind*, p. 2.

[26] See Haskin, "Reading Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*," p. 226 and "The Donne Revival," pp. 876, 885-86, 890.

[27] "Reading Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*," p. 248.

[28] Norton's intellectual aspiration seems remarkably similar to Byatt's in *Possession*: to arouse "the sense of connection with the past and gratitude for the efforts and labours of other nations and former generations." See *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* edited by Byatt's sister Margaret Drabble (Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 704. Like Ash, Norton had not only a great respect for the author's privacy but a great love for both Donne and Dante, as Haskin has shown in "The Donne Revival," pp. 882-85.

[29] Ricks, p. 62.

[30] See Achsah Guibbory, "Donne, the Idea of Woman, and the Experience of Love," *JDJ* 9 (1990): 106.

[31] Shullenberger, "Love as a Spectator Sport," p. 49.

[32] See Carson, pp.108, 115.

[33] *Donne: The Critical Heritage*, p. 268.

[34] See The Clark Lectures, I, "Introduction: On the Definition of Metaphysical Poetry," in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. and intro. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 54.

[35] Clark Lecture II, "Donne and the Middle Ages," p. 80.

[36] Clark Lecture III, "Donne and the *Trecento*," p. 128.

[37] See Donne's letter of 1609 to Sir Henry Goodyer in *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), p. 61.

[38] LaMotte concluded the letter in which she quoted a stanza from "A Valediction forbidding mourning" with the questioning quote "And if" which echoes the close of "The Extasie" (and the close of *Possession* where the modern characters gather around Ash's grave):

> And if some lover, such as wee,
> Have heard this dialogue of one,

Let him still marke us, he shall see
Small change, when we'are to bodies gone. (ll.72-75)

[39] *Donne: The Critical Heritage*, p. 401.

[40] Guibbory, "A Sense of the Future," p. 12.

[41] In her final, undelivered letter to Ash, LaMotte still defers to him as a superior writer: "Should I have been a great poet—as you are?" (p. 502).

[42] See p. 183 and p. 196 of *Possession*.

[43] See Diane Elam's discussion of some of the recurrent features in *Romancing the Postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-25.

[44] I am indebted to Achsah Guibbory's beautiful insight that the *Song of Songs* feature importantly in "The Relique" developed in her Presidential address at the John Donne Society Conference, February 17, 1996: "Biblical Erotics: The *Song of Songs* and Donne's *Songs and Sonets*" (forthcoming in *JDJ*).

[45] See Shawcross's discussion of this poem and the dangers inherent in the dating of poems on the basis of biographical conjecture in "Poetry, Personal and Impersonal," pp. 56-59.

[46] See R.C. Bald's account in *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p.279 and the few meagre facts of Mary's Donne's short life on p.156 and p.556. It is interesting that Donne should use the word "ransome" with its implication that the child's death worked his redemption/recovery, especially if her death has any bearing on a poem about passion, death and resurrection. See Donne's letter to Goodyer of 14 March 1614 recounting his and Anne's deathly illness in *Letters*, pp. 167-71. It is possible that Mary was the first of Donne's children to die.

[47] Ben Jonson's elegy "On My First Son" commemorates the life of his eldest boy who died of the plague in 1603 at the age of seven. William Drummond of Hawthornden recorded Jonson's reputed views of Donne's poetry and Donne own defence of the *Anniversaries* that "he described the Idea of a Woman and not as she was." Donne's own comment is a reminder of the danger of overt biographical readings of his poetry. See *Donne: The Critical Heritage*, p. 69.

[48] See Murray M. Schwartz, "Introduction," *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), p. 22. I use the word "alongside" advisedly. *Possession* begins with purloined letters. Lacan believes the curious Anglo-French word "purloin" derives from *loigner*, a verb meaning *au long de* or alongside. Norman Holland disputes Lacan's etymology but argues that trust and suspicion should go hand-in-hand in critical reading as Holmes needs Watson and Dupin needs his friend the narrator of Poe's story (and vice-versa). See Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" and Norman N. Holland, "Re-Covering 'The Purloined Letter': Reading as a Personal Transaction," in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J.

Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 43, 308, 313-16, respectively.

[49] Shullenberger argues in "Love as a Spectator Sport," that "one of Donne's deepest longings in the poems is not for genital satisfaction but for the security of absorption in a self-completing relationship whose earliest pattern is set in the intimacy between mother and child" (p. 54).