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Poetry and Scandal: John Donne's "A Hymne to the Saynts and to the Marquesse Hamilton"

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John Donne's "A Hymne to the Saynts and to the Marquesse Hamilton," commemorating the death of a prominent courtier in 1625, is one of the last poems he wrote, and he wrote it to order.[1] The 1633 edition prints a letter to Sir Robert Ker after the poem (though in the 1633 edition the addressee is not specified); and in that letter Donne professes himself reluctant to have written the poem because of the difficulties that its subject presented. "A Hymne" is a curious poem, even by Donne's standards of commemorative verse, and in the letter Donne can be seen to be offering excuses for its strangeness. He asks Ker to recall that he "did best when [he] had least Truth for [his] subject" but "[i]n this present case there is so much Truth as it defeates all Poetry," he tells him he would "haue embraced . . . with more Alacrity" a command to preach a sermon than the one to write this poem, and he commissions

[1]James, second Marquis of Hamilton, died at the age of 36, survived by his wife (they married when he was 14) and five children. He was a close associate of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and took part in the failed negotiations for the Spanish match for Prince Charles. See David Stevenson's entry for "Hamilton, James, second Marquess of Hamilton" in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). More detailed on the connections between Hamilton and Donne is David Novarr in "Two Flamens: The Poems of Dr. Donne," in *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 192–205, especially pp. 196–198. Donne, Novarr says, "does not seem to have known Hamilton more than casually" (p. 196).

Ker to judge the poem and suppress it "if it bee not worthy of him [Hamilton], nor of you, nor of mee" (p. 219).[2]

Donne's occasional poetry has not, except perhaps in his day and in the opinion of other poets, been appreciated as much as his love elegies, satires, and lyrics; and we know that he wrote few poems after he took orders in 1615.[3] The letter to Ker, therefore, has seemed to many readers in the last century a convenient authorization of the judgment that "A Hymne" is a relatively inferior poem and that its inferiority is a function of its author's misgivings about writing it. This interpretation of the letter's value is reified in Wesley Milgate's Oxford edition of *The Epithalamions, Anniversaries, and Epicedes of John Donne* (1978), where the letter is separated from the poem and placed in the volume's section of commentary. In this arrangement, it is a biographical gloss—a confession to his friend of its author's hesitations about what he has done.

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[2]Texts of the poem and the letter that accompanies it are from *The Poetry of John Donne: The Anniversaries and the Epicedes and Obsequies*, vol. 6 of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 219–221.

[3]See Novarr, "Two Flamens," passim. No one is more qualified than the author of *The Making of Walton's "Lives"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958) to reflect on Izaak Walton's insinuation in his life of Donne that Donne wrote "in his declining age . . . many Divine Sonnets and other high, holy, and harmonious Composures" (*The Life of John Donne . . . The Second Impression*, London, 1658, p. 76). Novarr dates only thirteen poems certainly after 1615. He calls "A Hymne" Donne's "last poem" (p. 192), though he can establish no certain dates for several in the group. More recent work on a Latin poem Donne addressed to the physician Richard Andrews ("Doctissimo Amicissimoque viro Domino Doctori Andrews"), of which there are no known manuscript versions and which was first printed in the 1635 edition of *Poems*, would make it a part of this group of post-ordination poems, raising the number to fourteen. See Hilton Kelliher, "Donne, Jonson, Richard Andrews and the Newcastle Manuscript," *English Manuscript Studies, 1100–1700* (London: The British Library Board, 1993), 4:134–173, especially pp. 134–137.

I owe much in this essay to Novarr's work, particularly to "Two Flamens," though my argument here is predicated on the assumption that the letter accompanying "A Hymne" should not be read as straightforwardly as Novarr does.

Adjacent to each other, as they are in most of the manuscripts in which the poem appears and in most editions of Donne's poetry from 1633 on, the letter and poem can certainly be seen this way; but the side-by-side arrangement might also suggest that the letter and the poem are similar productions. In the 1633 edition and one manuscript, the letter and poem even appear, however accidentally, in an order that replicates, not the order in which Donne arranged them for Ker to read (letter first, then poem as an enclosure to it) but in the order in which Donne composed them (poem, then covering letter). This essay discusses them in that latter order to emphasize that Donne's apology for the poem is as artfully conceived as the poem itself.

While the letter purports to describe Donne's reluctance to write the poem it accompanies, an important effect of what it says is that it authorizes the inferences about the character of the poem's subject that a reader is induced to draw from the poem. This is an effect the collectors of Donne's writing who preserved it in combination with "A Hymne" would have appreciated. Consequently, we must be wary of applying what Donne says in the letter to our understanding of his attitude toward poetry in general, toward occasional poetry in particular, or toward writing poetry at a point in his life when his profession called on him to exercise his intellect and imagination chiefly in the writing of sermons. If we take Donne at his word in this letter, we must take him at his word in the same way we read his poetry—assuming that his statements are finely calibrated accommodations of a complex situation.

Particular details of the situation Donne addressed by writing the poem can be gathered from contemporary letters commenting on Hamilton's death. A letter from John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, reporting the event with some of the rumors that surrounded it, is routinely quoted or summarized in annotations of the poem. Others, from Thomas, first Earl of Kellie, to John, second Earl of Mar, are not so frequently cited in connection with Donne's poem, probably because they are not so readily accessible in published form. Also not ordinarily associated with the poem are two letters that Lucy, Countess of Bedford, wrote to her friend Jane Cornwallis about the loss she felt in the death of Hamilton. The letters of Chamberlain and Kellie contextualize the poem, though it is significant that they do not so much provide new information about the situation Donne is addressing as confirm what can be inferred about that situation from the poem itself. The Countess of

Bedford's letters have an additional value. When the insinuations of Donne's poem are acknowledged as its subject rather than as intractable elements of the occasion which a poet committed to truth could not ignore, the Countess's letters offer an opportunity to reflect on the poem's strategy. Recording the reaction of someone who loved the deceased, they help us imagine what might have been the impulse of Ker's act of commissioning the poem if not of Donne's decision to oblige.

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"A Hymne" stands out among Donne's epicedes and obsequies for its emphasis on the body as well as the soul of the deceased.[4] The item of truth that Donne most obviously includes in the poem is what happened to Hamilton's corpse. Exactly halfway through the forty-two lines of the poem, there is a six-line passage describing the change his body underwent when life left it and emphasizing the effect with a striking simile:

> Never made Body such hast to confesse
> What a Soule was. All former comelynesse
> Fledd in a minute when the Soule was gon
> And hauing lost that beauty would haue none
> So fell our Monasteryes in an instant growne
> Not to lesse houses, but to heapes of stone.
> (19–24)

The poem is in couplets, so the four-line rhyme on "gon . . . none . . . growne . . . stone" seems to mark the simile (23–24) as an intensifying afterthought, comparing what happened to Hamilton's body to the bare, ruined choirs of dispossessed monastic buildings.[5] The propriety of the

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[4]Readers familiar with the poem in editions of Donne's poetry published before the *Variorum*, volume 6, including the Oxford editions of H. J. C. Grierson (1912) and Milgate (1978), will note that my reading of the poem has been enabled by the *Variorum* text at line 27, where the editors determine that the word Donne wrote was "body," not "soul."

[5]Compare the image of "heapes of stone" to the reference in Donne's second *Satyre* to "winds [roaring] in our ruin'd Abbeyes" (60). Except where I note

simile to express the difference between the way faith would understand death and the way human affections experience it is conveyed by the equivocation in the poem's diction: "growne" contradicts the original impulse to express loss ("fell"); but "Not to lesse houses" concedes even as it contests a sense of diminution in the progress it asserts; then "heapes of stone" registers a sense of utter devastation. Incidentally perhaps, the pronoun in "our Monasteryes" comes startlingly close to inviting a reader who knows the author to recall the scandal of Donne's youthful attachment to "a Corrupt Religion."[6]

The boldness of Donne's reference to the rapid decay of Hamilton's body is compounded, then, by his comparing it to the iconoclastic implementation of Protestant reform in England. Arguably, in 1625 the destruction of the monasteries was as apt a vehicle as a poet could find to convey how one might feel about losing something one's religious convictions require be recognized as not ultimately of worth (the "comelynesse" of a friend's body) but that is the object of longing all the same. The image ventures even further into the helplessness of bereavement by seeming to express nostalgia for the palpably comforting rituals of Roman Catholicism. With the loss of the monasteries went the loss of the whole system of intercourse with the dead: masses, candles, and offerings to saints—to those dead persons certified as in heaven by the Roman Church, imploring them to intercede for the less certainly blessed dead in the hope that the punishment they would have to suffer before being admitted to heaven might be mitigated.

All of these elements of the old religion depended on the belief that, for all but the immediately sanctified or likewise immediately damned, entry to heaven was gained through further suffering in some intermediate place until, as the ghost in *Hamlet* puts it, "the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away" (*Hamlet*,

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otherwise, I will quote Donne's poetry from *Donne's Poetical Works*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (Oxford: University Press, 1912).

[6]In his letter to his father-in-law Sir George More of 13 February 1602, Donne refers to "that fault which was layd to me . . . of loving a Corrupt Religion." This and other Donne letters from the Loseley Manuscript at the Folger Shakespeare Library are now available in facsimile and transcription in *John Donne's Marriage Letters in The Folger Shakespeare Library*, ed. M. Thomas Hester, Robert Parker Sorlien, and Dennis Flynn (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). See pp. 40, 74–75.

1.5.12–13). Grim as the imagination of purgatory may seem, belief in its reality would be a comfort to grieving survivors preoccupied with the weaknesses of a dead person in life, particularly if these lapses manifested themselves in a person's final, tormented hours. Without purgatory and its associated rituals, mourners have only the comfort of their resolve to trust that the dead, however sinful they may have seemed in life, nonetheless enjoy God's miraculously saving grace, never having wavered, even at the last, in the belief that they had it.[7]

John Chamberlain's letter of 12 March to Dudley Carleton, ten days after Hamilton's death, confirms the impression that the image of lines 19–24 is the crux of the poem. Chamberlain tells Carleton that Hamilton's body rapidly putrified, an event that was, he says, a cause of wonder in those who observed it and that gave rise to suspicions of dangerous disease or foul play:

> The Marquis Hamilton died on Ashwensday morning of a pestilient feaver as is supposed, though some suspect poison, because he swelled unmeasurablie after he was dead in his body but specially in his head. Upon the opening of both the physicians saw no signes of any such suspicion, but ascribe the swelling to some maligne or venomous humor of the small pocks or such like that might lie hid.

Chamberlain's letter continues on to describe the disposal of the body[8] and a rumor that casts Donne's metaphor in an even bolder light:

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[7]See Eamon Duffy's description of late medieval Roman Catholic pieties associated with the dead in *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 301–376, and Stephen Greenblatt's discussion of purgatory in *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially where he explores the implications of the Protestant charge that "Purgatory was a vast piece of poetry" (p. 47).

[8]For a consideration of what might have motivated Hamilton's funeral in London being a private one, see Ralph Houlbrooke's study of *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), especially p. 272. Speed and economy were factors; private funerals took place at night and did not require conformity to the heralds' prescriptions that numbers of people, befitting the station of the deceased, be clothed in black. Houlbrooke also puts forward two other reasons, the first of which could not have been a

> Two nights afterwards his body was carried with much companie and torch-light to Fishers Folly his house without Bishops-gate thence to be convayed into Scotland. He is much lamented as a very noble gentleman and the flowre of that nation. The papists will needs have him one of theirs, which neither appeared in his life nor in his death that we can in any way learne, but yt is no new thing with them to raise such scandalls and slaunders. The counsaile table will have a misse of him and the Lord Belfast who went cherfully away and said he was never more willing to live then he was now to die as foreseeing a ruine not to be avoided but by miracle. This hath ben a dismall yeare to great men. . . .[9]

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factor in Hamilton's case (there having already been an autopsy): "Some historians think that one reason for the rise of the private funeral was the desire, particularly on the part of some ladies, to avoid the mutilation of the body which embalming necessitated. The private funeral (it has been argued) also allowed greater scope for the expression of personal grief and for the participation of those closest to the dead" (p. 272).

[9]*Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman Egbert McClure (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939), 2:604–605. Chamberlain's remark that "yt is no new thing with [papists] to raise such scandalls and slaunders" may be recalling such circumstances as surrounded the death of Bishop John King in 1621. Richard Broughton's *English Protestant Plea* of that year alleged not only that King Henry VIII "desired at his death, as protestant histories sufficiently insinuate, and diuers then liueing in his Court haue testified, to bee reconciled to the church of Rome" (p. 15), but that "The late Protestant Bishop thereof, Doctor *King*, in his life for externall carriage, a great persecutor of Priests and Catholikes, a little before his death did playnely denounce your Religion to be damnable . . . . [He] was penitent for hs [*sic*] protesting heresie, & humblie at the feet of a Priest, whom he formerly persecuted, confessed his sinnes, receued Sacramentall absolution at his handes, and was reconciled to the Catholike Romaine Church, of which he had in his life bene so vehement a persecutor. Zealously and openly protesting, there was no saluation to be had out of that holy Catholike Romane Church" (p. 19). King's son Henry was directed by King James to preach in reply. His sermon is printed in Mary Hobbs, *The Sermons of Henry King (1592–1669), Bishop of Chichester* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), pp. 63–82. Broughton's *English Protestant Plea* is available in facsimile in the series English Recusant Literature 1558–1640, vol. 26 (Ilkley: Scolar Press, 1970). I am indebted to Jeanne Shami for calling my attention to this scandal. The rumors surrounding Hamilton's death seem to have inspired precautions taken during the illness and death of King

If Donne knew what happened to Hamilton's body, he very likely also knew the rumor that Hamilton died a Roman Catholic.

Both details were elements of some reports of his death, and they traveled together; but they were not inextricably linked. Writing to John Erskine, Earl of Mar, on the day of Hamilton's death, his cousin, Thomas Erskine, Earl of Kellie, recounts only the suddenness of Hamilton's passing:

> I am sorye to wret theis novells to you that is fallin out this morning. . . . The Marquiss of Hammilton dyed between thre and fowre a cloke in the morning of a fevere. All his phisitienes did not lewke for it, onlye Doctoure Beatone saide ever to the rest of his fellowes that thaye had a greater stike of worke in hand then thaye did expekt, and did not spaire to saye to sume of my Lords friends that in his opinione he wold never recover it.
>
> (p. 222)

A week later, on 9 March, he has more details, including the rumor of Hamilton's papism:

> In my laste I did acquent your Lordshipe with the deathe of the umquhylle Marquiss [of Hamilton], whoe is but soe soe regraitted heir, yet sume their is that is sorye for him out of a opinione that a man of his knowledge and utterance wold have served to sume purposs. On Monondaye the 7 of this instant he was brocht from Whythall to Fishers Folye accompanyed with about fowre hundered cotches, wher the moste of the Consell, nobill men and gentrye was. Your Lordshipe may heir that he was poysened, but I assure you there was noe

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James, which occurred three weeks later. On 1 April 1625, Edward Tilman wrote to Paul D'Ewes: "The King, however naturallie impatient, yet before his death verie patient, hath left, they say, a Confession of his faith to be published, to stop the mouthes of Papists, that of late also have given out that Marquesse Hamilton died Roman catholique. 'Tis thought he was catholiquelie poisoned, and so now is his name: but this will be vindicated." Tilman's letter is printed in Henry Ellis, *Original Letters, Illustrative of English History*, 2nd series (London, 1827), 3:243–245, where it is noted that the original is Harley Ms. 383.

> sutche thing; and that he shuld have dyed a papiste, and that is als fals as the uther.
>
> (p. 223)

And two weeks after Hamilton's death, the rumor of his Catholicism is gathering such force that Kellie takes additional pains to deny it:

> Their is heir sutche a rumore rissen that my Lord Hammiltone dyed a papiste and that he had a priste with him and reconcealed himselfe to the Pope of Roome, but I assure your Lordshipe that I think he getts great wrong. If he had not bein more subjecte to his pleasours and the companye of wemen then to preests, I think he had bein questioned of this subject. It is thocht their was a preest with him sume two days before he dyed. Thoe he was papiste that was with him, yet I think his besines was more weemens besines then preests affairs. Yet you can not believe what is talked of it and how the tryell of it prosecute. His doctour Ekklingein hes bein the cawss that monye believes this matter, for he is thocht to be a great papiste.
>
> (p. 225)[10]

To deny the truth of the rumor, Kellie traces it to what he believes to have been its root, with no sense that any peculiarity of Hamilton's death caused it.

Lines 19–22 of Donne's poem leave no doubt that Donne knew the condition of Hamilton's body. The sense that the poem refers to gossip about Hamilton's death-bed profession of Roman Catholicism, on the

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[10]References to Hamilton occur in manuscripts catalogued in the *Manuscripts of the Earl of Mar and Kellie at Alloa House: Supplementary Report* (London: Historical Manuscript Commission, 1930). They make clear that he was an active courtier, with many of his doings drawing criticism. He was, at one point, at enmity with John, Earl of Mar, the addressee of the letter from Kellie quoted above. King James, who cherished Hamilton as a favorite, is said by Kellie in a letter to Mar to "[think] it verrye weill" that Mar sought a reconciliation (p. 164). The third passage I quote in my text is endorsed "March 16, Theobalds." The bracketed phrase in the second passage is an addition of the editor, Henry Paton.

other hand, is an inference drawn from the poem against the backdrop of the rumor reported by Kellie and Chamberlain. It is probably a safe inference, but that is all the more reason not to oversimplify the effect of its having to be drawn. That is, if Donne knew the rumor, his resort to an image that alludes to the old faith is pointedly indirect; but whether he did or not, the poem's terms present themselves as its author's habitual pattern of thought, a pattern that reverberates with characteristically Donnean boldness in the uneasy atmosphere created by speculations about priests and papists hovering over Hamilton in his last days. Donne's letter to Ker, imputing the commission of the poem to him and licensing him to suppress it if he judges it to be unworthy, thus creates the sense of a collaboration. A courtier who is alive to the rumors surrounding the deceased deploys in response to them the efforts of a poet whose conceited style seems unable to avoid alluding to the "scandalls and slaunders" of the event.

And indeed, Chamberlain's phrase, "scandalls and slaunders," goes to the heart of the situation to which Donne seems to be responding in the poem. To Hamilton's reformed friends, the rumor of his Roman Catholicism would be a slander (an assertion that defames him) with the potential to scandalize (be an occasion of sin for) those who hear it. The portentous change in Hamilton's body would only increase the danger for those so disposed. The impious inclination to interpret the body's quick corruption as a sign of God's judgment would be fed by the suspicion that Hamilton might have lost faith in God's mercy at the last and reverted to idolatrous practices.[11] The contrast of Kellie's comment

[11]Interpreting the manner of a person's death as evidence of the disposition of his or her soul made deathbeds a likely site of scandal and funeral sermons a medium for broadcasting it or qualifying its force. For an account of one such sermon with an analysis of its paradoxes, see Robert N. Watson's discussion of William Harrison's *Deaths Advantage Little Regarded* (London, 1605) about the death of Katherine Brettargh in *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 305–315. In the last sermon he preached before his own, according to Izaak Walton, mild passing, Donne condemns the impulse, emphasizing that "it *belongs* to *God*, and *not* to *man* to *passe a judgement* upon us at our death":

> Those *indications* which the *Physitians* receive, and those *presagitions* which they give for *death* or *recovery* in the *patient*,

on the situation as it unfolds—ignoring the grotesque account of Hamilton's body in death and resorting to genially gossipy speculation about how the papist rumor might have arisen—allows us to see the impact of scandal even on the skeptical Chamberlain. Chamberlain does not credit the rumors; but his simply dismissive scorn for the "papists" and the predictability of their mischief is an uncharitable presumption of malice and deliberate falsehood that is probably inaccurate to the reality of what occurred. Papist or secretly papist courtier-friends of Hamilton saying that he at last proved to be "one of theirs" might well have acted, not out of a sinister impulse, but from a desire to impose on things he did or said the comforting interpretation that he at last returned to what they would have considered the true faith.

In the second of two sermons he preached at Lincoln's Inn on the text of Matthew 18:7, "Wo unto the world, because of offences," Donne considers the phenomenon of scandal in terms of the danger it poses to the pious individual and, what is probably his chief concern in preaching on this text, the health of the state.[12] It is offensive, he says, when, to avoid giving what he calls active scandal,

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> they receive and give out of grounds and the *rules of their art*: But we have no such rule or art to give a *presagition* of *spirituall death* and damnation upon any such *indication* as wee see in any *dying man*; wee see often enough to be sory, but not to despaire; for the *mercies* of *God* worke *momentarily* in minutes, and many times *insensibly* to *bystanders* or any other then the party departing, and wee may bee deceived both wayes.
>
> (10:240)

In particular, he instructs his auditors, "never make *ill conclusions*" when the manner of a man's death is "*violent*," "*diffident*," or "*distemperd*" (10:241). The obverse of just such a judgment, however, stands behind the opening image of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." I quote from the edition of the sermons edited by Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

[12] *The Sermons*, 3, sermons numbered 6 and 7. Potter and Simpson date them in the late fall of 1620 and relate Donne's concerns in them to the "dismay and bewilderment" he felt as news of the defeat of the Elector Palatine on 24 November 1620 was reaching London (3:10–13).

> we wrangle uncharitably about Collateral impertinencies, when wee will refuse to doe such things as conduce to the exaltation of Devotion, or to the order, and peace of the Church, not for any harme in the things, but onely therefore because the Papists doe them, when, because they kneel in the *worship* of the bread in the Sacrament, wee will not kneel in *Thanksgiving* to God for the Sacrament; when because they pray to Saints, we will reproach the Saints, or not *name* the Saints. . . .
>
> (3:175)

Even more emphasis in this sermon falls on the woeful effects of what he calls passive scandal, that is, on being scandalized:

> All scandals cannot be removed in this life; but a great many more might be then are, if men were not so apt to suspect, and mis-constru, and imprint the name of scandall upon every action, of which they see not the end, nor the way. . . . Those hearts which we see not, let us charitably beleeve to bee disposed to Gods service.
>
> (3:183, 184)[13]

He concludes that "the best preservative and antidote against the *woe* of this Text," against the destructive force of scandal, is "an abundant and overflowing charity" (3:186).

"A Hymne" is composed in the same charitable mood Donne urges on his listeners in this sermon and seems designed to induce it in anyone who reads the poem. Donne shapes the poem's argument out of "Collateral impertinencies": the poem addresses the blessed in heaven though it does not pray to them; and its conceit is that Hamilton's reputation is in a kind of purgatory, undergoing a *post mortem* interval for acknowledging and resolving what his detractors could say about him. The scandals the poem is working to dissipate are thus not only those that adhere to Hamilton's reputation but that will arise, by the poem's

[13]Compare this passage from the sermon to statements Donne was making a dozen or so years earlier in letters to his friend Sir Henry Goodere, printed in *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651), pp. 28 and 160. This collection is available in facsimile, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977).

design, in the course of the poem about the poet himself, until we grasp the "end" and the "way" of the poem's argument. Appreciating the poem, in other words, makes it a case in point, an illustration of how misapprehensions about a person's beliefs might arise from the mistaken interpretation of something done or said. Ways of speaking and acting that employ the tropes of old devotions do not inevitably indicate a relapse into the old faith.[14]

The poem's method, courting scandal in order to disarm it, is signaled at once in its title's employment of the contentious word *saints*. In its reformed use, the word refers to devout persons living and dead.[15] Donne cannot be using the word in that sense here, though rejecting that reading (realizing that the "and" of Donne's title is not meant to suggest that Hamilton is not among the saints) is the first point at which a reader might be induced to recall the elements of Hamilton's life that could feed such a doubt. Understanding the sense in which Donne intends the word—realizing, that is, that Donne means by *saints* the company of the blessed deceased—only replaces the possibility that the poem might breech the etiquette of elegiac poetry and call into question Hamilton's salvation with another concern, that Donne's poem will be an

[14]Among his circle of friends and patrons, Donne must have had a reputation for being able to "reform" Catholic pieties. See Annabel Patterson's essays on "A Litanie" and *La Corona*: "A Man is to Himself a Dioclesian: Donne's Rectified Litany," *John Donne Journal* 21 (2002): 35–49, and "Donne's Re-formed *La Corona*," *John Donne Journal* 23 (2004): 69–93.

[15]According to the *OED*, by the late sixteenth century, puritanical sects within the English Church, following the use of the word in Wycliff's and Tyndale's translations of the New Testament, were appropriating the word *saints*—applied in the Roman Church to persons whom the process of canonization warranted to be in heaven and available as objects of devotion and sometimes to even the images of those persons—to refer to living Christians. Donne exploits the controversial potential of the word in his poetry. See, for example, the early verse letter "To Mr. C. B." where Donne accuses his correspondent of having abandoned himself along with "the Saint of his affection" (3), that is, a living mistress but also a woman who is worshipped; and the verse letter "Reason is our Soules left hand," in which Donne professes to have studied the "divinity" that is the lady, "first in your Saints, / Those friends, whom your election glorifies" (2, 9–10). In the latter case, Donne is using the word entirely in the Reformed sense, though his premise that the countess is the "divinity" who elects these saints contaminates the orthodoxy of his usage.

unorthodox reversion to the devotional practice of invoking Hamilton as a particular saint.[16] In effect, one must consider and dismiss two differently scandalous interpretations of Donne's title—one focused on Hamilton and the other on the poet—to grasp how its "and" signals its commitment to decorous obsequy in the tradition of reformed Christianity.

It requires the license of poetry to conceive the sense in which this is so and the progress of the poem itself to justify that license: the poem's argument is that Hamilton is destined to join the blessed in heaven but cannot be addressed with them at first because his soul has somehow still not taken its place in one of their various orders. In effect, the poem protracts the instant of glorification, imagining Hamilton's soul as having left his body but not yet arrived at its heavenly home. This premise of the poem's argument is made clear it its opening lines, describing its project as a consideration of a nice speculation:

> Whether the soule that now comes vp to you [the saints]
> Fill any former ranke, or make a new
> Whether it take a name namd there before
> Or bee a name it selfe, and Order more
> Then was in Heauen till now . . . .
>
> (1–5)

This gambit is a variation on one of Donne's signature conceits. Facetiously, in "The Dissolution," for example, and more elaborately in his *Second Anniuersarie*, Donne conceives of the progress of a soul to heaven as at once an instantaneous event and as a journey through space

[16]In the sermon quoted above, Donne is more tolerant of the practice of invoking saints than he implies he is in his *Second Anniuersarie*, where he describes the impulse to "inuoke [the] name" of any saint whom "The ancient church knew not" as "mis-deuotion" (516, 513, 511). I am quoting the text of the poem from volume 6 of the *Variorum*. His own "A Litanie" is even more strict, naming only the Virgin Mary. The other "blessed Triumphers in heaven" (a phrase from a letter to Goodere in which he describes his own achievement in that poem [*Letters to Severall Persons*, p. 34]) he addresses in that poem are referred to categorically—patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs.

that takes time, in this case, the time it takes for Donne to write (or the reader to read) the first thirty verses of the poem.[17]

As the opening lines resolve the suspicions of improprieties aroused by the poem's title, they at once renew them in a different key. "A Hymne" begins not with a prayer to the saints but a question, which, while it leaves no doubt that heaven is the soul's destination, intimates that Hamilton's status in heaven might differ from any of those saints already there. The poem inquires what rank Hamilton's soul will occupy in heaven, fastidiously professing to silence the disquieting implication of its own question—that is, that Hamilton might not resemble any of those already blessed:

> (for may not hee
> Bee so if every severall Angel bee
> A kind alone) . . . .
> (5–7)

The question, however it poses as the consideration of an abstract problem, is another invitation to the reader to reflect on Hamilton's life, licensing his detractors and forcing his friends to recall his imperfections. As outsiders to the courtly circle that was Hamilton's milieu, we must speculate about what these might have been, but Hamilton's reputation for beauty accords with the poem's dallying—subtly, but persistently and conclusively—with the obvious surmise. As we have seen, part of Kellie's certainty that the rumor of Hamilton's death-bed reversion to Roman Catholicism was false was his observation that the marquis was "more subjecte to his pleasors and the companye of wemen then to preests" and that the "papiste" who was with him two days before he died was involved with something that "was more to weemens business then preests affaires."

The awkwardness of the consideration of Hamilton's rank in heaven seems acknowledged by the abrupt way the poem abandons it, converting it, by analogy, to a conventional topic in elegiac poetry, a description of the grieving survivors of the deceased:

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[17]Donne's reputation in his lifetime as the poet of the *Anniversary* Poems should not be underestimated. By spring 1625, they had, as a pair, been through at least two, possibly three editions (1612, 1621, 1625), in addition to the publication of the *First Anniuersary* with "A Funerall Elegy" in 1611.

> What ever Order growe
> Greater by him in Heauen, wee do not so.
> One of your Orders growes by his Accesse
> But by his losse growe all our Orders lesse.
> (7–10)

As the poem enumerates the categories of Hamilton's friends and acquaintances, particular facets of Hamilton's life are recalled, and the poem becomes gently sympathetic in its imagination of those left behind. In contrast to his "Meditation XVII" of *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* published the previous year, where Donne reflects that "Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*" (p. 87) because the devout response to another's death is to consider it a reminder of one's own mortality,[18] "A Hymne," seems focused on ordinary human grief:

> The name of Father, Master, frind, the name
> Of Subiect and of prince in one is lame
> Fayre Mirth is dampd, and conversation black
> The Houshold widdowd, and the Garter slack.
> The Chappell wants an Eare, Counsell a tongue
> Story a theame, and Musick wants a song.
> (11–16)

Like the heavenly saints, these mourners are imagined categorically. Various roles in life are dampened, blackened, widowed, and slack; but because it is only the "name[s]" of these functions that are affected, not particular fathers, masters, friends, and princes, the poem's effect is playful in its indulgence in witty variations on words for loss. By this device, the anonymity to the point of invisibility of the deceased's wife, though it might raise eyebrows upon reflection, is scarcely remarkable in the reading of the poem. As the lines proceed, the mourners seem affected to differing degrees, associated as they are with abstractions like "Mirth," "conversation," "The Houshold," and "the Garter." The effect is courteously oblique, allowing a reader to place himself as he will in the crowd—more or less bereaved, lamenting a relative or lover or friend or

[18]I am quoting from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975.

passing on the rumors or simply distracted from customary business by the melancholy news.

Scarcely noticeable within the casualness of these lines is the intrusion of references to a body. In the twelfth line, the word *lame* is used figuratively; in the fifteenth line, "The Chappell wants an Eare, Counsell a tongue," suggests deformity as an incidental effect of the poem's strategy of naming no names among the bereft. So the reference to the amputation of a limb might be likewise disinterestedly figurative:

> Blest Order that hath him, the losse of him
> Gangreend all Orders heere, all loose a Lymb.
> (17–18)

But the word "Gangreend" takes the reader suddenly very far from that. While those who knew what Chamberlain reports of the physical details of Hamilton's death would be brought up short by the grim propriety of the image, its effect is only slightly less jarring without knowing what inspired it. This is the bell tolling for everyone. The literal meaning of these lines is that the death of Hamilton is an early sign of the mortification of the various orders with which he was associated; gangrene, in effect, contaminates all who knew him. His death, an amputation, is then conceived of as an effort (usually, in actual practice when limbs became gangrened, a vain effort) to forestall the hideous death of the whole body. Those who grieve for Hamilton are suddenly implicated in the poem no longer as those left behind but as bodies that are disfigured by his death, awaiting their own demise.

With this image, introducing death as an experience in store for everyone, the poem seems very far from the issue with which it began, the question of where, in heaven, the deceased's soul will conclude its progress. The progress of the soul to heaven has, in fact, like the poem's progress to resolve the question with which it begins, been delayed by a consideration of the body's curiously rapid decay. Though the soul seemed to have begun its journey swiftly—"Never made Body such hast to confesse / What a Soule was. All former comelynesse / Fledd in a minute when the Soule was gon"—all the "hast" is actually attributed, not to the soul, but to the beauty of the body imparted to it by its soul:

> So sent his body that fayre forme it wore
> Vnto the Spheare of formes, and doth (before
> His body fill vp his Sepulchrall stone)
> Anticipate a Resurrection.
>
> (25–28)

The swift journey of the body's "forme" to "the Spheare of formes" contrasts both to the slow progress of the putrified, autopsied corpse and to the progress of Hamilton's soul to join the saints:

> For as, in his fame, now, his Soule is heere:
> So in the forme thereof his bodye's there.
>
> (29–30)

"[H]eere" and "there" indicate respectively and perversely the location of Hamilton's soul and the "fayre form" of his body, an idiosyncratic conception of what happens when a man dies that returns the poem to the issue of slander. Hamilton's "Soule" being like his "fame," and both being "heere" in the interim between his death and his body's being finally laid to rest, concede how the rumors surrounding his life and death continue to circulate.[19]

Having established an analogy between Hamilton's soul and his fame, the poem concludes by addressing the former in the context of its association with the latter. The connection makes the poem's apostrophe to the deceased a deftly administered admonition to his detractors. It begins by counseling Hamilton on how to behave in heaven:

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[19]The reading of "body" in this line is that of the version of the poem in a manuscript in the Harvard University Library, Norton ms. 4504, also known as the O'Flahertie ms., H6 in the *Variorum*'s designation. All other manuscript versions of the poem and the 1633 edition read "soul" at this point. The *Variorum* editors are doubtless right in following H6 here: the soul is an illogical tenant for a "sepulchral stone." But it is not difficult to conceive how someone who was not following Donne's unusual conceit (who did not grasp his "way") would assume the soul, not the body, needed a place to go, the "fayre forme" of the body being like a soul in having set out for an otherworldly habitation, "the spheare of formes."

> And if (fayre Soule) not with first Innocents
> Thy Station bee, but with the Penitents . . . .
> (31–32)

The poem is coming to answer the question it raised in its opening lines; and just as the question admitted some acknowledgment of Hamilton's faults, so the answer ("with the Penitents") offers to revive them. Again the poem covers the awkward implications of this intimation with a sudden shift in focus to the living. This time, however, attention is directed to the poet himself, in a four-line parenthetical passage acknowledging the poet's own sins:

> (And who shall dare to aske then when I am
> Dy'd Scarlet in the bloud of that pure Lamb
> Whether that colour which is Scarlet then
> Were black or white before in th'eyes of men). . . .
> (33–36)

The statement, expressing defensiveness personally, is an indirect reproof to any speculators about the condition of Hamilton's soul: "who shall dare."

Donne signals Hamilton's detractors to follow his example in acknowledging that the only hope of heaven for anyone is in forgiveness. It does so through the poem's request to Hamilton, formulated to function in an exemplary way—enjoining him to replace the human inclination to be scandalized by others with the attitude that follows from the realization that heaven is filled with sinners of all kinds who have been saved:

> When thou remembrest what Sinns thou didst find
> Amongst those many frinds now left behind
> And seest such Sinners as they are, with thee,
> (Got thither by repentance) let it bee
> Thy wish to wish all there, to wish them cleane
> Wish Him a David, Her a Magdalene.
> (37–42)

This address to Hamilton is and is not a prayer for his intercession. Wishing for others the grace of repentance is the office of a reformed

saint, in this world as well as the next. That said, the poem comes closest to reflecting specifically on Hamilton's reputation as it suggests the "Sinns" of his "frinds." The saints Donne names in the last line notoriously repented sins of the flesh.[20]

* * * *

The intricacy of "A Hymne" proceeds from the complexity of the situation it addresses: to condemn the scandals being taken from the circumstances of Hamilton's death, it must perforce refer to them. That intricacy might, on its own, suggest that it was a specifically commissioned effort; but Ker's preservation of the letter Donne sent him with the poem leaves no doubt. It is also conceivable that Ker preserved and disseminated the letter because he admired it for its own sake, as an example of Donne's ability to transform his assertion that he accomplished what he was asked to do into an elegant compliment.

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[20]The poem's final couplet acknowledges Hamilton's imperfections with an explicitness the poem has been hinting at throughout its argument. Donne is relying here on the commonplace association of both David and Mary Magdalen with, respectively, adultery and prostitution, though, in his sermons, he is often careful to acknowledge the interpretive complexities associated with these figures. See, for example, a sermon he preached on John 16:8, 9, 10, 11, in which Mary Magdalen is described as "I know not what sinner; and *David* that had been all" (*Sermons*, 6:327). Two years before the death of Hamilton, the audience of a Donne sermon heard their priest speak as a reader if not a writer of verses:

> And therefore it is easie to observe, that in all Metricall compositions, of which kinde the booke of Psalmes is, the force of the whole piece, is for the most part left to the shutting up; the whole frame of the Poem is a beating out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is as the impression of the stamp, and that is it that makes it currant.
>
> (*Sermons*, 6:41)

It is hard not to think of Donne recalling here the end of some of his own verses, e.g., "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and the verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, "Honour is so sublime perfection."

The letter is in Donne's most opaque epistolary style. Deprecating his abilities and professing that he had no choice but to acknowledge the less-than-perfect appearances of Hamilton's life and death, Donne then imposes on Ker the duty of deciding on the poem's worthiness. It is an ingenious argument that turns promoting his own effort back onto the one who inspired it. Donne implicates Ker in the poem's production—in the first place, by recording that he wrote at Ker's request, further by assuming that Ker concedes that Donne could not escape alluding to unflattering elements of Hamilton's life and death, and finally by making him the one to judge the poem's success and decide if and how to disseminate it:

> Sir,
> I presume you rather trye what you can doe in mee then what I can doe in verse. You knewe my vttermost when it was at best. And even then I did best when I had least Truth for my subiect. In this present case there is so much Truth as it defeates all Poetry. Call, therefore this Paper by what name you will, and if it bee not worthy of him, nor of you, nor of mee, smother it, and bee that the Sacrifice. If you had commaunded mee to haue wayted vpon his body to Scotland, and preached there, I should haue embraced the Obligacion with more Alacrity. But I thanke you that you would commaund that which I was loth to doe. For even that hath giuen a Tincture of merit to the obedience of
>
> Your poore frind and servant
> Io: Donne

Like the poem, the letter's entire argument is arranged to lead up to the witty understatement of its concluding assertion. The letter begins where it begins, acknowledging Ker's commission, because it means to end there, with such thanks for the opportunity to oblige as will impose on Ker the obligation of accepting the poem. In the hands of its commissioner, the poem's "Tincture of merit" is unassailable.

Six weeks after his letter to Carleton telling him of Hamilton's death, Chamberlain was in possession of the poem and sent it to Carleton:[21]

[21]Chamberlain probably first saw the poem in the second week of April; he was writing biweekly letters to Carleton at this point, and his previous letter to Carleton was dispatched on 9 April.

> I send you here certain verses of our Deane of Paules upon the death of the Marquis Hamilton, which though they be reasonable wittie and well don yet I could wish a man of his yeares and place to geve over versifieng. (2:613)[22]

Chamberlain's acknowledgment of the poem's witty "reasonable[ness]" suggests that he grasped the poem's argument.[23] In an echo of a literal reading of Donne's statement in the letter to Ker, however, he finds the production of the poem inappropriate to Donne's position.[24] Ker had no such hesitation about Donne's effort (if he did, Chamberlain would never have seen "A Hymne"); and it is the closer connection of Ker to the "Orders" (10) Donne imagines mourning Hamilton's death that should encourage us to privilege Ker's judgment over Chamberlain's.

It is impossible to know from Donne's letter how he himself felt about his decision to write the poem. The statements in it that seem to convey his reflections on the undertaking suggest that he had misgivings, but they are too bound up in the letter's conceit, firmly tied to his double-edged insistence that Ker's commission is the grounds of its worth, to permit Ker, or us, to take them simply straightforwardly. The

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[22]The date of Chamberlain's letter, 23 April, is the certain *terminus ad quem* for Donne's poem; but, I agree with Novarr (p. 194, n. 210) that it is the death of King James on 25 March, only three weeks, that is, after Hamilton's death, that probably sets the outer limit for Donne's completion of it. The King's death was an event that would have affected the tone of both the poem and the letter, making it unlikely that Donne wrote the poem more than a week or two after the event that inspired it.

[23]The *OED* allows Chamberlain's "reasonable" to convey a slightly dismissive sense of limitation or moderation in the wit of the poem, as the word *reasonably* functions with adjectives in modern English; but Chamberlain may also be emphasizing the conspicuous reasoning in the poem. What the *OED* confirms the word cannot be doing here, however, is suggesting that Chamberlain finds Donne exercising his wit to plead for moderation. That is, Chamberlain does not say that that is what Donne is doing, although I think that that is what he is doing.

[24]Chamberlain may well have seen the poem in combination with the letter to Ker, in which case his comment might have been inspired by a literal reading of the letter itself. He would thus have been the first to adopt the view this essay is challenging. If he saw the letter with the poem, he seems, from what he says, to have disjoined them, sending Carleton only the "verses."

sentence in the letter that seems in doubt of the poem's propriety as an utterance of a man of his age and occupation—

> If you had commaunded mee to haue wayted vpon his body to Scotland, and preached there, I should haue embraced the Obligacion with more Alacrity.

—plainly says only that he would rather have preached in Scotland than have written the poem. In the context of a letter professing the difficulty of the task, this sentence takes a measure of the effort the poem cost him by comparing it to a project that would have involved him in writing a much longer piece than these forty-two verses and making a substantial journey to present the results of his efforts.[25] Also, of course, by comparing what Ker did request to what he did not, this sentence also directs Ker to appreciate the ways in which the expressions of the poem both differ from and resemble the more straightforwardly doctrinal observations and admonitions of a sermon.

A second sentence in the letter that might indicate Donne's uneasiness with writing this kind of poem at this point in his life is the one in which Donne bids Ker "smother" the poem if, in his judgment, "it bee not worthy of him, nor of you, nor of mee." But this sentence, too, is qualified by its context. "Mee" here is not simply the John Donne who is a priest but the John Donne of his previous poetical efforts. This Donne, Donne asks Ker to remember, has achieved some poetical success:

> You knewe my vttermost when it was at best. And even then I did best when I had least Truth for my subiect. In this present case there is so much Truth as it defeates all Poetry. Call, therefore this Paper by what name you will. . . .

[25]From a remove of several centuries, the grotesqueness of offering to have "wayted upon" the body is heightened almost to comedy by what any reader of the poem would know of the body's condition: Donne, to a modern sensibility, is undermining the very dignity he is anxious to observe by saying he would have preferred the company of a decayed and mangled corpse to the challenge of attending to Hamilton's fame in a poetical obsequy. Ker would probably not have registered this implication, and Donne probably did not intend it.

Donne might be asking Ker to recall here his satires or his elegies, perhaps his holy sonnets or the love lyrics for which he is most known in our day, or maybe the poems he wrote commemorating the death of Elizabeth Drury, a young woman he never saw—all cases in which the verses he wrote were less involved with the details of someone's actual life. These are all poems that Ker very likely knew and admired, but the poem Ker certainly knew and must have admired was one Donne wrote for an occasion that presented the poet with truths every bit as apparently intractable as the details of the event that prompted "A Hymne."

A decade or so before Hamilton's death, Donne had written, also at Ker's request, an epithalamion celebrating the marriage of another Robert Ker, Earl of Somerset, to Frances Howard. The Somerset epithalamion is introduced by an eclogue that figures the Ker that is Donne's friend as Allophanes, urging, as in this case Ker seems to have done, the poet Idios to write the poem. The scandal that surrounded the annulment of Frances Howard's first marriage so that the marriage to Somerset could take place certainly supplied, in Donne's terms, plenty of truth to defeat poetry if poetry could really be disarmed that way. In the Somerset epithalamion, poetry is not defeated by scandal because, beyond alluding to it very obliquely in the eclogue that figures him as disinclined to write the poem and doing so at Ker's insistence, the epithalamion takes the license of poetry and ignores it.[26]

Recalling this other instance of Donne's writing poetry at Ker's behest makes Donne's assertion to Ker that "In this present case there is so much Truth as it defeates all Poetry" an ironic statement confirming that Donne is making scandal itself the occasion of the poem. Donne's letter imputes to Ker's commission the requirement that his poem confront scandal by dealing in its terms, either because that was in fact Ker's explicit commission or because Donne expected that Ker would understand, as he did, what the condition of Hamilton's bereaved friends warranted. It is not hard to imagine either circumstance. Among his first,

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[26]See Novarr's fine discussion of the Somerset epithalamion in relation to "A Hymne," pp. 201–204. His point, however, is opposite to the point of this essay: that the later poem and letter to Ker "indicate a change in Donne's attitude toward poetry and a diminution in the quality of his verse when he was not fully involved in the occasion of a poem" (p. 201).

best readers, Ker is certainly the paragon.[27] He would have known what people were saying or would be likely to say; and he would have expected, either at the point of his commissioning the poem with that emphasis or when he received the poem with the covering letter, that if any one could formulate language to ease the pain for Hamilton's friends of the loss of him compounded by scandal, Donne could.

* * * *

As it happens, there are letters from one of Hamilton's friends describing the reasons for her distress over Hamilton's death that allow us to imagine Ker suggesting or Donne deciding that they be addressed poetically. Lucy Russell's letters are no part of the Donne-Ker transaction, but they are useful nonetheless to our consideration of "A Hymne." They are remarkable expressions of her feelings about Hamilton's death, offering some insight into the anger and fear that the curious maneuvers of Donne's poem can be seen to be working to resolve.

In the spring of 1625, Lucy, Countess of Bedford, was at More Lodge in Hertfordshire, and her good friend Jane Cornwallis was at the estate of her second husband in Suffolk. From Lady Bedford's letter to her of 23 March, it appears that Lady Cornwallis heard the news of Hamilton's death and anticipated its effect on her friend. The Countess's response to his death at this point registers loss and gratitude for her friend's sympathy:

> Dear Madam,
> I acknowledge that I feele so to the quicke this last affliction God hath pleased to lay upon me as no worldy comfort will ever be able to prevaile against itt, for I have lost the best and worthiest friend that ever breathed, whom I could not love enoffe for what he was to me, nor sufficiently admire for what he was in himselfe and to all the world; nor can I ever by any

[27]It was to Ker that Donne sent a copy of *Biathanatos* along with a covering letter forbidding it "the Presse, and the Fire" (*Letters to Severall Persons*, p. 22); and he bequeathed the Lothian portrait to him. See R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 567. See also Novarr's account of him and his relationship to Donne in "Two Flamens," pp. 192–195.

sorrow satisfie my owne hart that itt is such as I ought to have for such a heavie crosse, which yett I trust will be a means to fitt me the sooner for heaven, because I am sure nothing on earth will ever be able to recover much hold on me; not that God hath not yett in mercie leaft me freinds I love better then ever I did myselfe, but this hath made me see that I must have the best freinds in the world but to loose them I know not how soone, for he that was so sodainly taken from me, both for his years, strength, health and temper, was like to have lived to much greater adge than any I have left, and so I think would, had not his noble hart binne too great for thes tymes and his fortunes in them. But he is, I doubt not, now wheare nothing of felicity is grudged him, and hath left behind him more trewly sorowfull harts of both nacions then any man's death now living can make againe, and many of us yett know not how to indure one another's sight, being depreived of his; for myselfe I must trewly say I am a maimed body and worse, and so is my Lo. Chamberlain [William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke], the last person left of power that I can relie on for the worth of his affection and friendship to me; and to speake freely to you, the only honest harted man imployed that I know now left to God and his countrie, in which I believe you will hear of a great change before this letter comme to your hands; for I heard this morning from Tibauls [Theobalds] that the King was this morning in so weake estate, as there was no hope of his lyfe, though till his 3 last fitts there was no [more—ed.] doubt of his safety then of every man's that hath an ordinarie tercian ague, so fatal a yeare is this to great persons as well as meaner. The Lo. therefore give us all grace not to delay preparing to be ready whensoever He shall please to call us, and then the sooner He takes us out of this miserable world the more cause we shall have to magnifie his compacion. Deare Madam, retorn my thankes and affectionat salutacions to your husband, and believe that, though itt will be with a sadder hart, I shall ever continue to love you as your kindnes hath from tyme to tyme given me cause, which is all so unfortunat a woman as I am can deserve itt by; but of that you shall never want any real proofe can be given by

Yo[r] most affectionat and thankefull freind,

L. Bedford.

> I know I need not tell you that I take your kinde sending as kindly as is possible, and that I thanke you more for itt then I can sett downe.[28]

This letter echoes some of the points in Chamberlain's letter to Carleton. The Countess confirms that Hamilton was "much lamented as a very noble gentleman and the flowre of that nation," Scotland, adding her perspective and those of her friends, that he "hath left behind him more trewly sorowfull harts of both nacions." Chamberlain notes that "The counsaile table will have a misse of him and the Lord Belfast who went cheerfully away and said he was never more willing to live then he was now to die as foreseeing a ruine not to be avoided but by miracle." The Countess reports the same response, saying "many of us yett know not how to indure one another's sight" and focusing on the Earl of Pembroke's sense of loss. Chamberlain's statement that "This hath ben a dismall yeare to great men. . . ," written on the tenth of March, registers no more than faint dread that there is yet to come the death of the King himself, since, as the Countess reports thirteen days later, the King's death came suddenly: "till his 3 last fitts there was no [more—ed.] doubt of his safety then of every man's that hath an ordinarie tercian ague, so fatal a yeare is this to great persons as well as meaner."

Two elements of the Lady Bedford's letter contrast to Chamberlain's. One is her surprise at the suddenness of Hamilton's death; Chamberlain conveys its unexpectedness in describing its cause as a "pestilent feaver"; but the Countess, with, at this point, apparently no sense of the cause of his death, describes how it came as a complete shock to her. The other is that the Countess does not, in this first letter, mention the scandals that Chamberlain describes.

Further details seemed to have reached the Countess some time in the next three weeks. Her letter of 12 April to Jane Cornwallis is a very much longer one, interesting for its information, over the first half of its length, about the changes in the new king's household. In fact, it opens with an assurance that its writer has, as asked, interceded on her friend's behalf

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[28] *The Private Correspondence of Lady Jane Cornwallis, 1613–1644* [ed. Richard Griffin Neville] (London, 1842), pp. 118–120. A modernized and amplified edition of this correspondence, edited by Joanna Moody (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), appeared in 2003.

with the Earl of Pembroke, still the Lord Chamberlain but not likely to be so for long. Almost the whole of the second half of the letter, however, returns to the subject of Hamilton's death and allows us to mark the effect on her of the scandal about how he died:

> The lying Papists cannot be content to want [lack] my Lord Stuartt [Hamilton] in the beadrole of those they wold have thought for their glorie; but whosoever knew him living, I hope, will reseave no such false opinion now he is dead, who, eaven after he was speechless, gave evident demonstracion (being asked by his chaplain) that he believed to be saved by the meritts of Christ: yett, by the follie or villeinie of a ficisian wayted on him (who was Popish), have they got some colour to invent this slander, which I trust will be cleared to all the world, as it is clear in itselfe to those friends from whom he had not a reserved thought, and that knew how far both in sound judgment as well as practise he was from approving any point of their doctrine disagreeing with the creed we profess.

When this rumor reached the Countess, it obviously came accompanied by a description of the deathbed that is more detailed than Chamberlain's account, including circumstances reported also in Kellie's letter. Chamberlain is sure that the accusation is a false one—evidence of his papism, he says, "neither appeared in his life nor in his death that we can in any way learne." The Countess gives more particulars, either because she had them as Chamberlain did not or because, as her more vigorous denunciation of "the lying Papists" suggests, they were of special concern to her and she inquired after them, seeking assurance that the rumors were false. She notes that "eaven after he was speechless, [he] gave evident demonstracion (being asked by his chaplain) that he believed to be saved by the meritts of Christ"; and, like Kellie, she assumes that the "follie or villeinie" of his "Popish" doctor was the origin of "this slander."[29]

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[29]A letter from Kellie to Mar (*Supplementary Report*, p. 227) suggests circumstances under which the Countess might have made such inquiries. Dated 7 April 1625 from Denmark House, it describes, disapprovingly, "one great absurdetye theis two lords [William Douglas, seventh Earl of Morton, and Robert Ker, Lord Roxburgh] did comite that nycht when the Kings bodye did cume from Tyballes, where all the nobillmen and gentrye bothe of Ingland and

By 12 April, she has also heard of the condition of the body. Her first impulse is to connect it with the slander, using it to account for the suddenness of Hamilton's death:

> I pray God they knew him not so well to be the boldest opposer of their ends as they used means for the shortening of his noble dayes, which that they wear unnaturally cutte off ther are strong suspicions in the most; because being att first, by the testimonie of all the surgeons phisicians and his owne servants, as fayer a corse as ever their eyes beheld, in the space of three owres his hoole body, head, and every part swelled so strangely and gangrened so generally as it astonished them all.

This is a rationalization of the surprising event of Hamilton's death which she is reluctant to give up, though she acknowledges that there could be other explanations:

> though the phisicians affirme to have seene the like in pestilential fevers, when the spots break not out afore death, and impute part of the cause to the expedient of chafing his body, att least for the space of an hour before he departed, with hotte cloths, and keeping itt to close in the bed after. God only knows the truth, who, if he had any wrong, I trust will in his justice declare it. It is true that, when he was opened in his stomack and head, there appeared nothing to confirm this jealosie, which makes the phicisians confident it could be no poison they are in these parts acquainted with; yett both myselfe and many other of his friends rest not clear of doubt, though, but upon some farder evidence, it is not to be stirred in; but if ever the least light can be gotten, the feare

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Scotland that was heir did ather cume from Theballs with the corps or then mete them before we did cume into the toun. That efternone thaye went to Moore Parke to my Ladye Beddfoords to pass the tyme and be mirrye their. It is an observatione is mutch remarked heir" (p. 227). This Robert Ker was perhaps two years senior to Donne's friend, whose father he had murdered. The two feuded until their differences were resolved in 1606. See entries for "Ker, Robert, first Earl of Roxburghe," by Alan MacDonald and "Ker, Robert, first Earl of Ancrum," by David Stevenson in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Donne's friend was created Earl of Ancrum as part of the coronation honors of Charles I on 24 June 1625.

> of all mortal men should not hinder our just prosecucion of so abominable a fact.

In the course of her letter, the more she dwells on her grief, the more his dying comes to seem not so unexpected:

> which yett, if it wear so, hastened our losse but a little; for all his vital parts were so decayed, as, by the judgment of the doctors, he could hardly have lived out a year, which nobody that looked on him could have suspected; yett he himselfe told me this last winter that he found such an inward decaye in himselfe as he knew he should live but awhile; but, God knows, I conceived it to be but a melancholy apprehension, seeing his health better to my thinking than it had beene a year or two before, for his spleene seemed to trouble him lesse. But now I have many reasons to assure myself he expected not to live out this year, though he was sparingest to utter that to those he knew loved him best for grieving them; yett now I call to mind many speeches of his I heeded not when they wear spoken, might have made me take more hold what his opinion was of his short continuance on earth, where he hath not left such another; nor any creature so great a loser as I in the death of a friend, whom, if it had pleased God to have longer spared us, would at this tyme both to the publick and his private friends have binne that wee must not look to see any other. But God saw us not worthy of such a blessing, whose will, as itt is ever best, whatsoever itt appear to oure sense, so must wee submitt ourselves to itt in all things, though it is the hardliest practiced lesson of all we learne in religion.

She seems to end reluctantly, conscious of her repetitiveness, her unwillingness to leave talking of Hamilton, as if her words might be some antidote to what is being said about him:

> My thoughts are, and ever will be, full of his memorie, which makes me tedious when any thing draws me into discourse of him; yett will I not excuse this temper, because it is a duty I owe him in this detracting tyme, when those that durst not have breathed amis on his leaste action while he lived will now ventur as much as in them lies to slubber his fame, when they

> shall thinke themselves out of the hearing of those would make them keepe in their venom, or make them smart for uttering it at the least. And now I have donne this, it is tyme I ende. . . .
>
> (125–131)

It was eleven days after the date of this letter, on 23 April, that Chamberlain sent Donne's poem to Carleton, so by then we know that "A Hymne" was in circulation about the court.

What comfort, if any, the Countess might have taken in it, we cannot, of course, know. She and Donne had apparently not been closely in touch for the decade since he took orders. There is no reason to suppose that he had some anticipation of what would dominate her grief particularly in mind when he composed the poem, nor is it certain that she saw the poem. The points of contact between it and the sentiments that the Countess expresses to her friend are therefore the more striking for their being, in all probability, coincidental. One minor one is the way the Countess's earlier letter, with its description of how "many of us yett know not how to indure one another's sight, being depreived of his," suggests the aptness of the way Donne's poem conveys, playfully at first, the sense of categories of mourners separate from one another. Another minor one is the Countess's expression in her later letter of the claim the "lying Papists" make to Hamilton's soul: they "cannot be content to want [lack] him in the beadrole of those they wold have thought for their glorie." The premise of Donne's poem, too, would have Hamilton on no such bead-roll but among the blessed themselves, though Donne, wittily imagining how scandal delays his installation, creates an interval for his friends ("this detracting tyme") to attend to the condition, not of his soul, but of his reputation.

The Countess's description of herself in the first letter, of 23 March, as "a maimed body and worse," is a figure of speech that has an uncanny resemblance to Donne's image of Hamilton's friends being gangrened by his death. In the 12 April letter, she dwells on the rumors about Hamilton's body. These seem, as we know from Chamberlain's letter, to have been an element of any report of Hamilton's death; but the Countess includes not only the account of the way "every part swelled so strangely and gangrened so generally" but also the assurance that "att first" the body was "as fayer a corse as ever their eyes beheld," as attested

by "all the surgeons phisicians and his owne servants." These comments are a return to the emphasis on Hamilton's physical beauty expressed in the 23 March letter: the man who "was so sodainly taken from me" was one who "both for his years, strength, health and temper, was like to have lived to much greater adge than any I had left." Donne's poem assumes that Hamilton's friends would be preoccupied with this element of his loss, and he fashions the consolation of sending the "fayre forme" of his body "Vnto the Spheare of formes" to "Anticipate a Resurrection" (25–28).

Her wish to link the monstrous swelling that so quickly destroyed Hamilton's beauty to the rumor-mongering papists is a conjunction Donne puts at the heart of his poem. The Countess seems to want to make it a literal connection, though she knows there is no evidence for that. Donne construes the connection poetically, making it figurative and, in a way, restorative: Hamilton's utter loss of comeliness is compared to England's being rid suddenly and irrevocably of papist excess. In the poetical expression of this connection, however, the sense of loss appropriate to the tenor of the metaphor carries over into its vehicle. In other words, Donne's figure can admit, as the Countess's more literal speculation cannot, sympathetic acknowledgment of the appeal of erroneous belief.

The end of the Countess's letter is particularly touching as her anger over the papist slander gives way to her anticipation of the trivial rumors that she knows, because she knew Hamilton as a dear friend with all his faults, will "slubber his fame." She would like to silence them, to make his detractors "keepe in their venom, or make them smart for uttering it at the least." Donne's poem would show her another, surer way to defend its subject against the like of Kellie's insinuations, echoing Jesus's defense of the woman taken in adultery of John 8:7.

* * * *

When Ker appealed to Donne to address Hamilton's death in a poem, he might have expected, if he did not prescribe, that Donne would find the conceit of his poem in the most apparently intractable elements of the situation. "A Hymne" leads the reader to an important truth through the operations of an argument that is inspired by the rumors and speculations arising from details of its subject's life—that it is impious to

think humans can divine how God is disposed to anyone from outward indications of a life or death. The poem indirectly instructs the living not to engage in scandalous reflections on the condition of Hamilton's soul. Glancing at the imperfections of the person it celebrates, it registers his admission to the company of saints by urging him to repay such reflections in obverse kind, with charity—construing the vices of his friends and even those of the poet himself, as the opportunity to wish them penitent in the anticipation of good fellowship, "to wish them cleane / Wish Him a David, Her a Magdalene" (37–42).

The overt thrust of the poem's argument, its consoling vision of a celestial reunion of all who loved the deceased, is the more striking because of the path that the poem takes to that vision. It involves accepting that, in the Countess of Bedford's words, "sorrow . . . will be a means to fitt [us] the sooner for heaven, because . . . nothing on earth will ever be able to recover much hold on [us]." Like the Countess in her letter, the poet seems led to that realization by giving way to sorrow over the utter destruction of Hamilton's beauty; but his poem strays, as the Countess's letter does not, into sympathy for those for whom the death of Hamilton seems to have provoked an analogous grief—the reaction of those of his friends and acquaintances who cannot take comfort in faith alone, who lament the loss of more palpable connections to the grace of God as a sublunary lover might remember with longing the "eyes, lips, and hands" of the beloved. I will borrow Ben Jonson's hyperbole here to say that John Donne is the first poet in the world when he allows the elements of his poetry to qualify the arguments they allegedly serve—as here, in making a sure-handed expression of hope the occasion to sympathize with an abiding sense of loss.[30]

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[30]This essay originated as part of a paper I delivered at the annual meeting of the John Donne Society in Gulfport, Mississippi, in February 2003. Since then, members of the Society, particularly Dennis Flynn, M. Thomas Hester, and Jeanne Shami, have made many helpful comments on its argument. I am also grateful to Robert N. Watson for his careful reading of it at two stages of its composition.