1976

John Donne and the Countess of Bedford

Marcia Mascolini Brown
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1976 Marcia Mascolini Brown
JOHN DONNE AND THE COUNTESS OF BEDFORD

by

Marcia Mascolini Brown

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

February
1976
VITA

Marcia Mascolini Brown is the daughter of the late Virgil G. Mascolini and Gertrude Garbus Mascolini. She was born January 15, 1944, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

Her elementary and secondary education was obtained in the public and parochial schools of Dallas, Edwardsville, and Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

In September, 1961, she entered College Misericordia, Dallas, Pennsylvania, and in May, 1965, received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with a major in English.

She was granted an N.D.E.A. doctoral fellowship and entered Loyola University of Chicago in September, 1965. She received an Arthur J. Schmitt doctoral scholarship in 1968 and a teaching assistantship in 1969. She was awarded the Master of Arts degree by Loyola University in February, 1971.

She was a member of the English Department of Central State University, Wilberforce, Ohio, from September, 1970, to June, 1973. In September, 1975, she became an Instructor of English in the Department of Business Education and Administrative Services, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIFE</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>JOHN DONNE AND THE COUNTESS OF BEDFORD:</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>CRITICS AND SCHOLARS OF THE VERSE LETTER</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>TYPES AND PURPOSES OF THE VERSE LETTER</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>STYLISTIC QUALITIES OF THE VERSE LETTER</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>PETITION AND PRAISE IN &quot;REASON IS OUR SOULES LEFT HAND, FAITH HER RIGHT&quot;</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>VIRTUE AND BEAUTY IN &quot;YOU HAVE REFIN'D MEE, AND TO WORTHYEST THINGS&quot;</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>CONSOOLATION IN &quot;YOU THAT ARE SHE AND YOU, THAT'S DOUBLE SHEE&quot;</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>EXHORTATION IN &quot;HONOUR IS SO SUBLIME PERFECTION&quot;</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>SUMMARY</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

JOHN DONNE AND THE COUNTESS OF BEDFORD: BIOGRAPHICAL
AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

John Donne's relationship with noble and gentle ladies during the early years of the reign of King James I is a subject largely neglected in studies of the poet and his work. Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, is the most important and illustrious of these ladies, the one who extended most liberally her friendship and bounty to Donne during the difficult years before his ordination. The poet showed his thanks to Lady Bedford by addressing eight verse letters to her.

No major study has elucidated the relationship between poet and patroness either through use of historical and biographical data or through close analysis of the verse letters. The first chapter of this dissertation will examine relevant historical and biographical information concerning Donne and Lady Bedford and will use passages from the verse letters to illuminate the factual material. Later chapters will contain explications of the verse letters.

In the late 1590's, Donne was hopefully beginning what he thought would be his lifework as statesman and courtier. In 1596 he took part in the expedition under Essex and Raleigh which led to the destruction of much of the Spanish fleet and to the sack of Cadiz. In the following year he again sailed with Essex, this time on the abortive Islands
Voyage.¹ His military service over, Donne served as secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper, until 1602 when Egerton dismissed him because of his secret marriage to Ann More, the niece of Lady Egerton.²

The middle years of John Donne's life, from about 1602, when he married Ann More, to 1615, when he took Holy Orders,³ were financially the most difficult and frustrating of the poet's career. After his discharge by Egerton, Donne failed in all his attempts to find lasting employment. From 1605 to 1607 he served as secretary to Dr. Thomas Morton, then Dean of Gloucester,⁴ whom he helped in the preparation of the Apologia Catholica and other books which Morton published between 1605 and 1609.⁵ In a letter of June 13, 1607, Donne asked his friend Sir Henry Goodyere to speak to Mr. Fowler about recommending Donne to succeed Fowler as secretary to the Queen.⁶ In another letter written to Goodyere sometime between October 1608 and February 2, 1609, Donne revealed that he tried to obtain the office vacated by the death of Sir Geoffrey Fenton, one of the royal secretaries in Ireland.⁷ From another letter, written by John Chamberlain, in February 14, 1609, to Dudley


²Ibid., p. 103.


⁴Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne, 1:149.


⁷Ibid., p. 125.
Carleton, we learn that "Newes here is none at all but that John Dun seekes to be preferred to be secretarie of Virginia."\(^8\) Failing in all his attempts to obtain an appointment, Donne joined his fortunes to those of another unsuccessful suitor, Sir Robert Drury, with whom he traveled on the continent from 1611 to 1612.\(^9\) Neither, however, improved his situation. Upon returning to England, each in 1614 petitioned for the ambassadorship to Venice and for that to The Hague.\(^10\) Both men were again disappointed. Thus, almost to the eve of his ordination, Donne's hopes for a secular career were one after another snuffed out.

Donne's literary reputation was likewise little advanced by the work he did between 1602 and 1615. During these years, most of which he spent in retirement in the country, Donne wrote many of his least popular works. The prose of this period includes _Biathanatos_ (1608), _Pseudo-Martyr_ (1609), _Ignatius his Conclave_ (1610), and _Essays in Divinity_ (1614-1615).\(^11\) Much of the poetry written between 1601 and 1615, such as the "Epithalamions," "Satyres," "Letters to Severall Personages," and "Funerall Elegies," is likewise less popular than the earlier "Songs and Sonets" and the later "Divine Poems."

In contrast to Donne, Lady Bedford was most active between 1601 and 1615. Indeed, almost from birth, she seemed destined for a position...
at court which John Donne, for all his industry and ingenuity, could not hope to attain. Baptized at St. Dunstan's Church, Stepney, on January 26, 1581, Lucy was the daughter of Sir John Harington (first Lord Harington of Exton), "illustrious for his munificence and piety," and Anne Harington, the only daughter and heiress of Robert Kelway, Esq., surveyor of the court of wards and liveries.1

Besides the prospect of a bright future at court, Lucy Harington received almost as a birthright a love of learning and of religion. She was related to the famous Sidney family through her paternal grandmother, Lucy Sidney Harington, the aunt of Sir Philip Sidney and of his sister Mary, Countess of Pembroke. 15 Both of her parents were devout Protestants and, soon after the accession of James I to the English throne, were entrusted with the instruction of Princess Elizabeth, daughter of James and Anne.16


15Ibid., pp. 524-525.

The union of piety and learning in the Haringtons, which many poets would later celebrate in their daughter Lucy, was early noted by Claudius Holyband, a Huguenot refugee who went to England in about 1565 to escape the religious persecution of Charles IX and Catherine di Medici. Besides providing his adopted land with excellent French textbooks, he became the most popular teacher of French in London in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Holyband had been Anne Harington's tutor and dedicated to her The Treasurie of the French tong: Teaching the waye to varie all sortes of Verbes (London: Henrie Bynneman, 1580).

Holyband's connection with the Harington family was based as much upon their common religion as upon their mutual interest in learning.

17In 1603, Lady Bedford recommended Samuel Daniel's masque, "The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses," to the Queen for presentation during the festivities of the first Stuart Christmas in England. Daniel dedicated the masque to Lady Bedford who took the part of the goddess Vesta in it. In the dedication, Daniel noted that Vesta, "in a white mantel embroidered with gold-flames, with a dressing like a nun, presented a burning lamp in one hand, and a book in the other," and symbolized religion. Vesta's lines in the masque are:

Next holy Vesta with her flames of zeal
Presents herself clad in white purity:
Whose book the soul's sweet comfort doth reveal
By the ever-burning lamp of piety. (ll. 304-307)


19Ibid., p. xiii.

In his dedicatory epistle to *The Treasurie of the French tong*, he calls Sir John Harington

cel Gonfanon & paragon de toute gentillesse, vostre vray espoux & fidelle consort: lequel selon sa piété envers les bons, sincériété de moeurs & intégrité de vie, zele très-ardent envers la vraye religion, a vrayement choisi parti digne de soy: dont il se peut bien vanter d'avoir trouvé ce thresor duquel parle ce sage Hebreu.21

In 1583, Holyband dedicated his *Campo di fior* or else the Flovrie Field of Fovre Langvages to Lucy Harington who was only about three years old at the time.22 Little is known of Lucy Harington's education, but it is possible that Claudius Holyband was her tutor.23 In his dedication of *Campo di fior* to Lucy, Holyband mentions not only the religious zeal of the Haringtons but also "the good will they beare to learning and the earnest inclination they have to bring you up in such vertuous exercise as is most meete for your tender yeares."24

Holyband's was only the first of numerous books (on subjects as diverse as theology and chess) that hopeful authors dedicated to Lucy Harington throughout her life. Indeed, as she rose in society through her marriage on December 12, 1594 to Edward Russell, third Earl of

21Ibid., sig. qiii.


23Bernard H. Newdigate, *Michael Drayton and His Circle* (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1941), p. 56. Newdigate also conjectures that Drayton himself may have been her tutor.

Bedford,\textsuperscript{25} she began to receive the dedications of the works of literature which would make for her the reputation of one of the most famous literary patronesses of the reign of James I. As Bernard H. Newdigate has remarked: "At the close of Elizabeth's reign and in the early years of James I no other woman save the Virgin Queen herself received such extravagant praise from the poets of the day."\textsuperscript{26}

During the years in which Donne's hopes were alternately raised and dashed, Lady Bedford began accepting the literary offerings which would gain for her the reputation of favorite of the muses. Michael Drayton, whose \textit{Matilda}, printed in 1594, was dedicated to "Mistress Lucie Harrington," was one of the first poets to seek and receive her patronage. In the prefatory sonnet to \textit{Endimion and Phoebe} (1595), also dedicated to Lady Bedford, Drayton mentions the "sweet golden showers" that she bestowed upon him.\textsuperscript{27}

Encouraged by the reception of the earlier works, Drayton hastened to present his \textit{Mortimeriad}os (1596), \textit{Robert of Normandy} (1596), and \textit{Englands Heroicall Epistles} (1597), his most popular work, to Lady Bedford.\textsuperscript{28} He dedicated individual epistles of the last work to Lady Anne Harington; Edward, Earl of Bedford; Sir Henry Goodyere; Francis Goodyere, and others.\textsuperscript{29} In the prose epistle to the Earl of

\vspace{0.5cm}

\textsuperscript{25}Thomas Colyer-Ferguson, ed., \textit{The Marriage Registers of St. Dunstan's, Stepney, in the County of Middlesex}, 3 vols. (Canterbury: Cross & Jackson, 1898), 1:33.

\textsuperscript{26}"The Phoenix and Turtle: Was Lady Bedford the Phoenix?" \textit{Times Literary Supplement} (London), 24 October 1936, p. 862.


\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., 5:xx-xxi. \hfill \textsuperscript{29}Ibid., p. xxi.
Bedford, prefatory to "The Epistle of Queen Isabel to Richard the Second and the King's answer," Drayton writes:

Thrice noble and my gracious Lord, the love I have ever borne to the illustrious house of Bedford, and to the honourable familie of the Harringtons, to the which by marriage your Lordship is happily united, hath long since devoted by true and zealous affection to your honourable service, and my Poems to the protection of my noble Lady, your Countesse: to whose service I was first bequeathed, by that learned and accomplished Gentleman, Sir Henry Goodere (not long since deceased,) whose I was whilst he was: whose patience, pleased to beare with the imperfections of my heedlesse and unstaid youth. That excellent and matchlesse Gentleman, was the first cherisher of my Muse, which had been by his death left a poore Orphane to the worlde, had hee not before bequeathed it to that Lady whom he so deerly loved. Vouchsafe then my deere Lord to accept this Epistle, which I dedicate as zealously, as (I hope) you will patronize willingly, untill some more acceptable service may be witnes to my love towards your honour.30

Englands Heroicall Epistles was the last work which Drayton presented to Lady Bedford. For, having rewritten Mortimeriados in a different meter and having removed all references to Lady Bedford from the body of the work, he renamed it the Barons Warres and dedicated it to his new patron, Sir Walter Aston, in 1603. Nor was this the only indication that the poet-patron relationship between Drayton and Lady Bedford was over. The "Eighth Eglogue" of the Pastorals, rewritten with additions in 1606, contains a bitter attack on Selena (the Countess of Bedford), Cerberon (Cecil?), and Olcon (King James).31

Of the five writers (Daniel, Chapman, Donne, Jonson, and Florio) competing for Lady Bedford's favors, John Florio is perhaps the most likely to have diverted some of her attention from Drayton.32 In 1598, Florio dedicated A Worlde of Wordes, or Most Copious and Exact

30 Ibid., p. 112.  
31 Ibid., p. xxiv. 
32 Newdigate, Michael Drayton and His Circle, pp. 66-67.
Dictionarie in Italian and English[^33] to Roger, Earl of Rutland; Henry, Earl of Southampton; and Lucy, Countess of Bedford. His translation of Montaigne's *Essays* was entered in the Stationer's Register in 1600 and published in 1603.[^34] In the dedicatory epistle to the first book, addressed to the Countess of Bedford and Lady Anne Harington, Florio paints a vivid little portrait of Lady Bedford's urging him to complete the translation: "I must needs say while this was in doing, to put and keepe mee in hart like a captived Canniball fattend against my death, you often cryed Coraggio, and called ça ça, and applauded as I passt."[^35]

Of all the poets who helped "eternize" the name of the Countess of Bedford, perhaps John Donne was the least likely to arouse the envy of the others. Until 1602 Donne had every hope of maintaining and ameliorating his position in government through his own initiative and ability. Even after his marriage to Ann More had proved disastrous to his career, he had no thought for many years either of seeking the patronage of Lady Bedford or of publishing his verse and thus competing as a professional with Drayton, Daniel, Jonson, and the rest.

Donne probably became acquainted with the Countess of Bedford during the years in which he was Egerton's secretary and she was lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth. In addition, she was the first cousin

[^33]: London: Printed by Arnold Hatfield for Edward Blount, 1598.


Lady Elizabeth Stanley (later Countess of Huntingdon), whose widowed mother Alice, Countess of Derby, married Egerton in 1600. In 1602, in a letter to Sir Henry Goodyere, Donne mentioned the death of "young Bedford," the only son of the Countess. Sometime in this early period also, Jonson presented a copy of Donne's Satires to the Countess of Bedford. If they had not met before, it was Goodyere who probably introduced Donne to the Countess. As the nephew and son-in-law of the elder Sir Henry Goodyere of Polesworth, who had "willed" Drayton to Lady Bedford, and as an employee of Lady Bedford from about 1608, Donne's friend Goodyere had personal knowledge of Lady Bedford's generosity to literary men. Thus it would be natural for Goodyere to wish to establish a relationship between Lady Bedford and Donne.

In 1607-1608, Donne reached the lowest point of his fortunes: his employment with Morton had ended, his family was ill, and he himself was physically unwell and mentally depressed. At about the same time, Lady Bedford set up her minor court at Twickenham Park, "a spot long consecrated as the favourite retreat of the scholar, the

---

38 Newdigate, Michael Drayton and His Circle, p. 66.
Probably encouraged by Goodyere, Donne wrote the verse letter "Reason is our Soules left hand" to welcome Lady Bedford to Twickenham. The two early verse letters "Reason is" and "You have refin'd mee" must have pleased Lady Bedford, for, on August 6, 1608, Donne wrote concerning her visit to Mitcham:

I am at London onely to provide for Monday, when I shall use that favour which my Lady Bedford hath afforded me, of giving her name to my daughter; which I mention to you, . . . to shew that I covet any occasion of a gratefull speaking of her favours.

Between 1608 and 1614, Donne wrote six more verse letters to Lady Bedford. In addition to their interest as a literary form about which little has been written, the verse letters also reveal some of the traits which made the Countess of Bedford one of the luminaries of the court of James I.

Almost from the time that Lady Bedford (in company with other nobles) went north to attend Queen Anne on her journey from Scotland to England, her position as favorite was fixed; for the Queen seems to have befriended her (to the exclusion of the other ladies) almost immediately. A letter from Sir Thomas Edmonds to the Earl of Shrewsbury records this particularity in the Queen's appointments: "It is said that she hath hitherto refused to admit my lady of Kildare and the

---


44Letters to Severall Persons of Honour, p. 103.

45Grierson, 2:152.
lady Walsingham to be of her privy chamber, and hath only as yet sworn
my lady of Bedford to that place." 46

Getting and holding a position of honor as an attendant to the
Queen was not easy. The Earl of Worcester outlines the hierarchical
structure of the Queen's household in a letter to the Earl of Shrews-
bury:

Now, having doon wth matters of State, I must a littell towche
the feminine comon welthe; that agaynst youer coming youe bee
not altogether like an ignorant countrey fellow. First, youe
must knowe we have Ladyes of divers degrees of favor; some for
the privat chamber, some for the drawing chamber, some for the
bed chamber, and some for neyther certayn, and of this nomber
is onely my La. Arbella and my wife. My Lady of Bedford howldethe
fast to the bed chamber; my Lady Harford would fayn, but her hus­
band hathe cawled her home. My Lady of Darbee, the yonger, the
Lady Suffolke, Ritchie, Nottingham, Susan Walsingham, and, of
late, the Lady Sothwell, for the drawing chamber; all the rest
for the private chamber, when they are not shut owt, for many
tymes the dores ar lokt; but the plotting and mallice amongst
them is sutche, that I thinke Envy hathe teyd an invisible snake
abowt most of ther neks to sting on another to deathe. 47

Lady Bedford did not maintain her place without difficulty. Lady
Anne Clifford noted Lady Rich's ascendancy at court shortly after the
coronation: "Now was my Lady Rich grown great with the Queen, in so
much as my Lady of Bedford was something out with her, and when she
came to Hampton Court was entertained, but even indifferently, and yet
continued to be of the bedchamber." 48 After overcoming this brief

---

46 Quoted in Lucy Aikin, Memoirs of the Court of King James the

47 Quoted in John Nichols, The Progresses, Processions, and
Magnificent Festivities of King James the First, 4 vols. (London: By
the Author, 1828), 1:318.

48 Anne Clifford, Diary, ed. V. Sackville-West (London: William
challenge, the Countess of Bedford rose to pre-eminence and served at court until the death of Queen Anne in 1619. Especially in the earlier verse letters, those written between 1608 and 1610, the years in which she was most active, Donne notes the salvific effect which she had upon the court. In "You have refin'd mee" he says:

Therefore at Court, which is not vertues clime,
(Where a transcendent height, (as, lownesse mee)
Makes her not be, or not show) all my rime
Your vertues challenge, which there rarest bee;
For, as darke texts need notes: there some must bee
To usher vertue, and say, This is shee.
(ll. 7-12, Milgate, p. 92)

Later in the same poem, he mentions that while the Countess is in the country she has "made the Court th'Antipodes" (line 25). In "T'have written then," Donne notes: "Your (or you) vertue two vast uses serves, / It ransomes one sex, and one Court preserves" (ll. 25-26, Milgate, p. 96). W. H. Wiffen, the chronicler of the house of Russell, substantiates Donne's allusions to Lady Bedford's life at court; she passed "with unblemished reputation and celebrity, through all the phases of a reigning favourite and beauty, in a court by no means the most guarded and discreet."

From her high position at court, the Countess had great influence upon those who received her patronage. By extracting significant lines

---


50 Milgate (pp. 253-273) dates Donne's verse letters to the Countess of Bedford as follows: "Reason is," 1608; "You have refin'd mee," later 1608; "You that are she," 1609; "T'have written then," later 1609; "This twilight of two yeares," March 25, 1610; "Honour is so sublime perfection," (?); "Epitaph on Himselse," 1611; "Though I be dead," 1612.

from the poems for closer examination, we may determine the relevance and appropriateness of the poems to the Countess of Bedford. For if the poems confirm the traits of character commonly attributed to Lady Bedford, they fulfill Donne's promise in the lines of "This twilight of two yeares":

I would show future times  
What you were, and teach them to urge towards such.  
Verse embalmes vertue;'and Tombs, or Thrones of rimes,  
Preserve fraile transitory fame, as much  
As spice doth bodies from corrupt aires touch.  
(11. 11-15, Milgate, p. 99)

Lady Bedford's contemporaries called her "'the crowning rose' in . . . [the] garland of English beauty."52 John Donne verifies their judgment by praising her beauty in several verse letters. In "Reason is," Donne calls her "birth and beauty" a "Balme" (line 24, Milgate, p. 91) which naturally preserves her. Donne's second verse letter to Lady Bedford, "You have refin'd mee," is his greatest celebration of her physical beauty. As virtue is rare at court, he says,

So in the country'is beauty; to this place  
You are the season (Madame) you the day,  
'Tis but a grave of spices, till your face  
Exhale them, and a thick close bud display.  
(11. 13-16, Milgate, p. 92)

He next compares her external appearance to that of a church and sues to "survay the edifice" (line 34); for "In all Religions as much care hath bin / Of Temples frames, and beauty,'as Rites within" (11. 35-36, Milgate, p. 92). Thus dwelling on her physical beauty in the metaphor of the structure of the temple, he says:

52Ibid.
So in this pilgrimage I would behold
You as you'are vertues temple, not as shee,
What walls of tender christall her enfold,
What eyes, hands, bosome, her pure Altars bee;
And after this survay, oppose to all
Bablers of Chappels, you th'Escuriall.
(11. 43-47, Milgate, p. 93)

Besides being both "good and lovely," Lady Bedford was a suitable intellectual companion for Donne and other learned friends. Skill in languages was one of her many accomplishments. In the epistle dedicating Montaigne's *Essays* to Lady Bedford and Lady Harington, John Florio says of his translation: "Yet hath it this above your other servants: it may onely serve you two, to repeate in true English what you reade in fine French." In a letter from Amiens dated February, 1612, Donne tells Wotton that he is sending Lady Bedford some "French verses accompanied with a great deal of reputation here."

But knowledge of French was a necessity at the court of James I. It appears that the young Lucy Harington seriously considered Claude Holyband's advice that "Sweete be the frutes which do spring out of the knowledge of tongues." Florio thought her able "in Italian as in French, in French as in Spanish, in all as in English, [to] understand what you reade, write as you reade, and speake as you write."

56 Holyband, quoted in the Introduction to *The French Littleton*, p. xiii.
57 *A World of Wordes*, sig. a3v.
Lady Bedford, then, might well appreciate the French verses that Donne sent her as much as the numerous poems in English addressed to her by Donne, Jonson, Drayton, and others. For her retreat at Twickenham was a "little court of literature--as near an approach to the French salon as the English seventeenth century ever achieved." 58 Lady Bedford was not merely the titular head of this poetic court. Like many of the noble and gentle of the time she herself wrote poetry. 59 Early in their relationship, Donne tells her in the verse letter "Reason is" that his "studies" of her consist in "what you reade, and what yourselfe devize" (line 12, Milgate, p. 90). This line indicates that Lady Bedford was a contributing member of the literary coterie at Twickenham. The "Elegie" which begins "Death be not proud, thy hand gave not this blow," has been attributed to her because of the inscription, "By L. C. of B.," 60 in two manuscripts. In a letter to the Countess, Donne says:

I have yet adventured so near as to make a petition for verse, it is for those your Ladiship did me the honour to see in Twicknam garden, except you repent your making; and having mended your judgement by thinking worse, that is, better, because juster, of their subject. They must needs be an excellent exercise of your wit, which speaks so well of so ill: I humbly beg them of your Ladiship, with two such promises, as to any other of your compositions were threatenings: that I will not shew them, and that I will not beleve them; and nothing should be so used that comes from your brain and heart. 61

Thus, far from being a rather crass means of soliciting money or favors, Donne's relationship with Lady Bedford possesses some of the warmer

59 Grierson, 2:153. 60 Ibid., 1:422-423.
61 Letters to Severall Persons of Honour, p. 58.
qualities shown in his friendships with Sir Henry Goodyere and Sir Edward Herbert with whom he also traded verse.

Donne must also have considered the Countess of Bedford a worthy critic of his poetry, for he says of her in the verse letter "T'have written then":

So whether my humnes you admit or chuse,
In me you'have hallowed a Pagan Muse,
And denizend a stranger... (ll. 15-17, Milgate, p. 96)

"Hallowed" means "to consecrate, set apart (a person or thing) as sacred to God; to dedicate to some religious use or office" (OED, 5:43) and signals the end of Donne's secular verse. Lady Bedford must have encouraged him to write poetry, however, because, as Donne says in a letter to Goodyere, Lady Bedford "only hath the power to cast the fetters of verse upon my free meditations."62

Besides attributing to Lady Bedford the ability to transform his thoughts into poetry, he also accorded her the honor of receiving the last secular verse he intended to write before taking Holy Orders.63 Lady Bedford's brother John, second Lord Harington of Exton, died February 27, 1614.64 In his memory, Donne wrote the "Obsequies to the Lord Harington, brother to the Lady Lucy, Countesse of Bedford." In the last lines of the poem, as a "testimonie of love" (line 258), he makes a promise to eschew verse in Harington's honor:

Doe not, faire soule, this sacrifice refuse,
That in thy grave I doe interre my Muse,
Who, by my griefe, great as thy worth, being cast
Behind hand, yet hath spoke, and spoke her last.

(ll. 255-258, Grierson, 1:279)

63 Grierson, 2:204.
64 Ibid., 2:206.
Donne fully intended to keep the promise he made in the elegy to Lord Harington. In a letter to Goodyere in 1614, Donne mentions that he was "under an unescapable necessity" of printing his poems and asks Goodyere "whether you ever made any such use of the letter in verse, A nostre Countesse [Lady Bedford] chez vous, as that I may not put it in, amongst the rest to persons of that rank; for I desire very much, that something should bear her name in the book, and I would be just to my written words to my L Harrington, to write nothing after that."65

Besides the major virtues which may be summed up in Donne's words as "birth," "beauty," "learning," and "religion," Lady Bedford possessed exquisite taste. Best shown in her patronage of the greatest poets of her day, this quality is evidenced also in the lighter pursuits in which she engaged. She was skilled in music and dancing. Because of Queen Anne's love of masquing, adeptness in acting and singing was a pre-requisite at the Stuart court; and Lady Bedford, often paired with the Queen, performed in five court masques: Daniel's "Vision of the Twelve Goddesses," and Jonson's "Masque of Blackness," "Hymenaei," "Masque of Beauty," and "Masque of Queens."66 In May, 1617, long after Lady Bedford had performed in her last masque, Jonson's "Masque of Queens," in February, 1609,67 Robert White dedicated his "Cupid's Banishment" to her because, he said, she had inspired him to write it.68

67 Ibid.
68 Nichols, The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First, 3:283.
In 1600, John Dowland, "Batcheler of Musick, and Lutenist to the King of Denmark," saluted Lady Bedford's knowledge of music by dedicating to her his *Second Booke of Songs or Ayres*. He addresses her in a prefatory epistle:

Excellent Ladie: I send vnto your La: from the Court of a forreine Prince, this volume of my second labours: as to the worthiest Patronesse, of Musicke: which is the Noblest of all Sciences: for the whole frame of Nature, is nothing but Harmonie, as wel in soules, as bodies: And because I am now removed from your sight, I will speake boldly, that your La: shall be vnotinck-full to Nature hir selfe, if you doe not loue, & defend that Art, by which, she hath given you so well tuned a minde.\(^69\)

The Countess' interest in music was lifelong. In 1617, under her direction, Jonson's *Lovers Made Men*, which has been called the first English opera,\(^70\) was presented as an entertainment after a supper given by Lord Hay in honor of Charles Cauchon, Baron du Thour et de Maupas.\(^71\)

Some of Lady Bedford's other avocations, such as the collecting of ancient coins and medals, gardening, and the collecting of pictures, are better known. Early in the seventeenth century, Prince Henry revived the ancient pursuit of collecting coins and medals which were artistically and historically notable.\(^72\) After the Prince's introduction, coin-collecting became a popular interest from the seventeenth century onward.\(^73\) The Countess of Bedford, whose broad interests ranged

---

\(^{69}\) (London: Printed by Thomas Este, 1600), sig. Aij.

\(^{70}\) Herford, Simpson, and Simpson, Ben Jonson, 10:566.


\(^{73}\) Ibid., p. 11.
over most of the cultural phenomena of her day, and whose brother John, second Lord Harington, was a close friend of Prince Henry, also had a numismatic cabinet of some merit. Although no catalogue of her collection remains, it must have exhibited that good taste for which she was famous. Sir Thomas Roe praised Lady Bedford's knowledge of ancient medals. Roe's testimony carries considerable weight for two reasons: first, as a world traveller, Roe was in an excellent position to judge the relative value of various currencies; second, Roe had a collection of 242 coins which his widow left to the Bodleian at his request.

We have much more definite knowledge concerning Lady Bedford's activities as a horticulturist. Donne immortalized her garden at Twickenham Park in the title of his poem "Twicknam garden." He says "that this place may thoroughly be thought / True Paradise" (ll. 8-9, Grierson, 1:28-29). Donne mentions this garden again in the verse letter "You have refin'd mee," in which he pays the graceful compliment: "The story'of beauty,' in Twicknam is" (line 70, Milgate, p. 94).

Lady Bedford established an even more famous garden at Moore Park, an estate in Hertford which King James granted to the Earl of Bedford

74 Wiffen, Historical Memoirs of the House of Russell, 2:117.
75 "Lucy Russell," DNB, 17:467.
76 Hazlitt, The Coin Collector, p. 20.
in January, 1614. In a letter to Lady Cornwallis, written from Moore Lodge in October, 1618, the Countess says:

This monthe putts me in minde to intreate the performance of your promisse for some of the little white single rose rootes I saw att Brome, & to chalenge Mr Bacon's promis for som flowers, if about you ther be an extraordinary ones; for I am very busy furnishing my gardens.

Her efforts apparently were quite successful; for, almost seventy years later, in "Upon the Gardens of Epicurus, on, Of Gardening, In the Year 1685," Sir William Temple gives a detailed and very favorable description of the gardens at Moore Park. Temple calls them "the sweetest place, I think, that I have seen in my life, either before or since, at home or abroad." He adds that "the remembrance of what it was is too pleasant ever to forget, and therefore I do not believe to have mistaken the figure of it, which may serve for a pattern to the best gardens of our manner, and that are most proper for our country and climate."

In addition to his initiating interest in coin-collecting, Prince Henry likewise had a small collection of pictures which his brother

---


Prince Charles, who later developed his own interest in art, inherited from him. But Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, who had received part of the collection, including some Holbeins, from Lord Lumley, his great-uncle, first set the fashion of collecting objects of art. The Earl of Buckingham and the Countess of Bedford also had large collections of paintings. In a letter of February 6, 1614, Nathaniel Bacon instructed his wife Lady Jane (Cornwallis) Bacon to "Speak yo' minde to the Lady of Bedford in my behalf, & tell her that the weather hath bin unfavorable to the proceedinges of her picture." Undaunted by the minor setback, Lady Bedford maintained a lively interest in painting and proudly told Lady Cornwallis that "though I be but a late beginner, I have prety store of choise peeses." Competition for "choise peeses" was keen, and in a letter to Lady Cornwallis, Lady Bedford mentioned her rivalry with Arundel:

I had almost forgotten an earnest request I am to make by you to M't Bacon, but that a tricke my Lo. of Arundell putt upon me yesterday to the cusning me of some pictures promissed me, putt me in mind of itt. I was told the last night that your father in law was like to die, and that he had som peeses of painting of Holben's; which I am shewr as soon as Arundell hears, he will trye all means to gett: but I beseech you entreate M't Bacon, if they will be parted with to any, to lay hold of them afore hand for me, who better than any other I am shewr may prevale with his brother, to whos share I conseave they will falle; for I am a

83Akrigg, Jacobean Pageant, p. 276: After Somerset's fall in 1616, King James gave Somerset's collection to Buckingham.
84Braybrooke, p. 20.
85Ibid., p. 51.
very diligent gatherer of all I can get of Holben's or any other
excellent master's hand; I do not care at what rate I have them
for price, but shall thinke itt an extraordinary favor if Mr. Bacon
can procure me those, or any others, if he know any such ther-
abouts, upon any conditions . . . and be not curious to thinke
I pay too much, for I had rather have them then juels. 86

The Countess of Bedford never participated mindlessly in the fads
of the court. Perhaps, nearly as much as her taste, her periodic
insolvency made her as discriminating in her judgment of painters as
she had been years before in her judgment of poets. In a letter of
November 5, 1621, Lady Bedford promises to send her correspondent a
picture of the Earl of Pembroke by Mytens. This letter is particularly
interesting because Lady Bedford offers a critical estimate of a
picture in it. She says of the painting by Mytens that

if to much desier to do well make him not falle short of his
late workes, I dare say may boldly apear amongst the better
sorte of Michel Johnston's. But sertainly then you shall not
see somthing of his hand for the credit of my iudgement in
painting, if he faile in what is destined to you, I will send
you som other good pееce of his, wheather you care for the
person or noe. 87

The last clause is significant because, at a time when many still
collected primarily portraits of their families, of friends, or of
the illustrious, 88 it shows that Lady Bedford judged a painting for
its artistic merit rather than for its subject.

86 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
87Quoted in Patricia Thomson, "Lucy, Countess of Bedford as a
Collector of Paintings," Notes and Queries 193 (February 21, 1948):
70-71.
88 Buxton, Elizabethan Taste, p. 98.
At least five portraits of the Countess of Bedford herself are extant. The best of these is a half-length of Lucy done by Gerard Honthorst, the favorite painter of James's daughter, Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia. This portrait shows the Countess seated, with her head leaning on her hand. Her bright, clear eyes, often admired by poets, candidly appraise the viewer and betoken the lively wit and discernment for which she is famous. Probably better than any outline of her talents or description of her personality, this portrait illustrates the nobility and elegance of character which inspired the warm regard of the foremost poets of her day.

Assured of the keen interest of a vivacious, intelligent, and influential woman, the poets to whom Lady Bedford extended her help often expected too much of her. Both the state of patronage in the early seventeenth century and the demands upon her time and energy necessitated by her attendance at court frustrated the ambitions of the poets. In addition to Donne, Jonson, Drayton, Daniel, Chapman, John Davies of Hereford, Sir John Harington, Florio, and Holyband, numerous other writers appealed to her for aid. Lady Bedford and

---

89 Wiffen, Historical Memoirs of the House of Russell, 2:122-123. Nicholas Hilliard drew a "curious and interesting half-length" of her which the Duke of Buckingham owns. Two other portraits, in the possession of the Dukes of Bedford and Portland, show her in dancing costumes. A fourth portrait, dated 1620 and attributed to Cornelius Jansen, is at Alloa Castle, Scotland. The fifth, mentioned above, is in the collection of the Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey and is reproduced in Milgate, opp. p. 90.

90 Parry, History and Description of Woburn and Its Abbey, p. 218.

her suppliants were in a sense caught between two worlds: the feudal world with its strong and abiding tie between patron and protégé, which was dying, and the modern literary world, with its increasing numbers of writers who could not support themselves independently, which was just being born.92

Considering her often precarious financial situation, it is amazing that Lady Bedford was able to help as many writers as she did. Although some were disappointed, few showed it in the manner of Drayton, who vented his anger in four verses of the "Eighth Eglogue" of the Pastorals. The last of the four verses contains the imprecation:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Let age sit soone and ugly on her brow,} \\
& \text{No sheepheards praises living let her have} \\
& \text{To her last end noe creature pay one vow} \\
& \text{Nor flower be strew'd on her forgotten grave,} \\
& \text{And to the last of all devouring tyme} \\
& \text{Nere be her name remembred more in rime.} 93
\end{align*}
\]

Chagrined that Lady Bedford had recommended Daniel's "Vision of the Twelve Goddesses" to Queen Anne for presentation during the Stuarts' first English Christmas,94 Jonson wrote in "The Forest" that Lady Bedford had a "better verser got / (Or Poet, in the court account) then I" (ll. 68-69).95 Donne's relationship with the Countess of Bedford also changed, but he did not lose his place to another poet. Rather, financial, religious, and political conditions disrupted their close relationship.


93 Drayton, Works, 5:189. 94 Rees, A Book of Masques, p. 22.

95 Ben Jonson, 8:115.
Naturally, one of John Donne's primary reasons for seeking Lady Bedford's patronage was, as he says in his first verse letter to her, "For all the good which you can do me here" ("Reason is," line 38, Milgate, p. 91). As "the Quenes only favorite" in 1611, Lady Bedford had great influence at court. Further, she owned stock in the Virginia Company, and presumably she could have helped Donne attain the post of secretary of Virginia that he desired. In "T'have written then," he celebrates the settling of the English colony there: "We'have added to the world Virginia" (line 67, Milgate, p. 97). One may assume that Lady Bedford was generous to Donne because he confesses in his last verse letter to her: "That thankfullnesse your favours have begot / In mee" ("Though I be dead," ll. 5-6, Milgate, p. 104).

In "This twilight of two yeares," he reminds her that it cannot be said of him that "My thankes I have forgot" (line 8, Milgate, p. 98). Yet Donne too was destined for disappointment. In March, 1615, he writes to Sir Henry Goodyere about the Countess' reception of his "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington":

I am almost sorry, than an elegy should have been able to move her to so much compassion heretofore, as to offer to pay my debts; and my greater wants now, and for so good purpose, as to come disengaged into that profession, being plainly laid open to her, should work no farther but that she sent me £30.99

96 Chamberlain, Letters, 1:306.
98 Chamberlain, Letters, 1:284.
Far from being ungrateful, Lady Bedford herself was in acute financial distress. In a letter dated October 27, 1614, Lady Bedford tells her friend Lady Cornwallis of her own difficulties. She mentions the Earl's recovery from an almost fatal illness:

His present state sets me at liberty to follow my terme businesses, which daylie are multiplied upon me, and make me heavile feel the burden of a broken estate; yett doe I not doubt but by the assistance of Almighty God I shall ear long overcum all those difficulties which at the present contest with me. Though yesterday Sir John Haryngton [nephew of John, first Lord Harington] hath begunne a course in the Chaunsery against my mother, but indeed most concerning me, wherby he will gett nothing but lost labor, nor will itt cost me more then som few lawyers' fees, and a little troble, which I am borne to, and therefore imbrace it as part of my portion.100

In the same letter in which he expresses his disappointment at Lady Bedford's acceptance of the elegy on her brother, Donne acknowledges "that her present debts were burdensome."101 John Chamberlain estimated the Countess' debts to be £50,000 and even after the sale of all the property she inherited from her father and brother her net gain amounted to hardly £20,000.102

Financial pressures were not the only ones to strain the warm relationship between Donne and Lady Bedford. Long before the letter of

100Braybrooke, pp. 28-29.
1615, the poet had apparently perceived that he could not depend solely upon the Countess' influence or bounty to secure his future for him. In 1611 he accepted Sir Robert Drury's invitation to go abroad in the hope "of increasing either his qualifications or his opportunities of forming new and useful connections."\(^{103}\)

Besides failing to improve Donne's prospects for employment, his association and eventual journey with Sir Robert Drury had other unfortunate results. Donne gained his introduction to Drury by writing in 1610 a "Funerall Elegie" at the death of Elizabeth Drury, Sir Robert's young daughter.\(^{104}\) Donne continued mourning the loss of Mistress Drury in verse and in 1611 and 1612 published "The Anatomie of the World" and the "Second Anniversarie."\(^{105}\) Donne was already in France when he learned that the two poems had greatly antagonized Lady Bedford and the other noble ladies whose help he had accepted. The poet defended his praise of Mistress Drury in a letter of 1612 to George Gerrard. After apologizing for having "descended to print any thing in verse," he says:

> But for the other part of the imputation of having said too much, my defece is, that my purpose was to say as well as I could: for since I never saw the Gentlewoman, I cannot be understood to have bound my self to have spoken just truths, but I would not be thought to have gone about to praise her, or any other in rime, except I took such a person, as might be capable of all that I could say. If any of those Ladies think that Mistris Drewry was not so, let that Lady make her self fit for all those praises in the book, and they shall be hers.\(^{106}\)

\(^{103}\)Bald, Donne and the Drurys, p. 87.

\(^{104}\)Ibid., p. 85.  \(^{105}\)Grierson, 2:178.

\(^{106}\)Letters to Severall Persons of Honour, p. 206.
In his last verse, "Though I be dead" (1612), he again apologizes to Lady Bedford for the slight caused by praising another in the "Anniversaries":

First I confesse I have to others lent
Your stock, and over prodigally spent
Your treasure, for since I had never knowne
Vertue or beautie, but as they are growne
In you, I should not thinke or say they shine,
(So as I have) in any other Mine. (11. 11-16, Milgate, p. 104)

He partially exonerates himself of the first fault, however, by noting that lesser men, not capable of "reading" Lady Bedford herself, "May in lesse lessons finde enough to doe, / By studying copies, not Originals" (11. 24-25, Milgate, p. 104). 107

Perhaps Donne could have regained the favor of the Countess had he been in England in 1612 when she suffered a nearly fatal illness. 108 John Burges, a Puritan minister and a physician, cured her not only of bodily infirmities but also of some of her more "frivolous" occupations at court. Although she returned to the court after her recovery, she forebore "painting" as well as appearing in masques. 109 Thus the vivacious and courtly Lady Bedford that Donne met in 1608 was substantially a different person in 1614. The religious side of her nature which had always been present and which Donne had often celebrated in his verse letters now became dominant. In addition, Donne feared that Dr. Burges was trying to win the Countess' attentions for himself. In a letter written in March, 1615, Donne complains to Goodyere that

---

107 Milgate, pp. 273-274.
she had more suspicion of my calling, a better memory of my past life, than I had thought her nobility could have admitted; of all which, though I humbly thank God, I can make good use, as one that needs as many remembrances in that kind, as not only friends but enemies can present, yet I am afraid they proceed in her rather from some ill impression taken from Dr. Burges, than that they grow in herself.110

Before Lady Bedford's illness of 1612, Donne had shown some irritation at her preoccupation with the entertainments of the court. In March, 1608, he asked Sir Thomas Roe to deliver a letter to Lady Bedford, "now, or when the rage of the Mask is past."111 On November 14, 1608, he wrote to Goodyere that Lady Bedford's stay at Twickenham was cut short because the King "hath left with the Queen a commandment to meditate upon a Masque for Christmas, so that they grow serious about that already."112

Frustrating as it must have been to wait until he could "finde that good Lady emptiest of businesse and pleasure" before he could present his services or make his needs known to her, the situation, ironically, was even worse for Donne after 1612.113 Richard E. Hughes suggests that Donne's dismay at his patroness' failure to resume full participation in the activities of the court may be reflected in his "later" verse letters to her.114 In "T'have written then," he urges her to avoid cultivating religion exclusively: "Too many vertues, or

110Quoted in Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne, 2:73.
111Letters to Severall Persons of Honour, p. 177.
112Ibid., p. 124.
113Ibid., p. 130.
too much of one / Begets in you unjust suspition" (11. 77-78, Milgate, p. 98). In "This twilight of two yeares," he counsels Lady Bedford to engage in the active life; for "good and bad have not / One latitude in cloysters, and in Court" (11. 41-42, Milgate, p. 100). Yet, according to Milgate, Donne wrote "T'have written then" in later 1609 and "This twilight of two yeares" on March 25, 1610,\textsuperscript{115} two to three years before Lady Bedford's illness of 1612. Hughes's theory that the admonitions in these verse letters refer directly to her renewed religious fervor therefore seems to be incorrect.

Better proof of John Donne's dissatisfaction with Lady Bedford's prosecution of his interests at court lies in his suit to the reigning favorite, Robert Ker, Earl of Somerset. Although Donne did not play the part in the divorce proceedings of Frances Howard from the Earl of Essex that Gosse attributes to him,\textsuperscript{116} the poet was nevertheless interested in the divorce and in Lady Howard's subsequent marriage to Somerset, for whom he wrote an epithalamion.\textsuperscript{117} In the spring of 1613, Donne was introduced to Somerset who employed him for a short time and to whom he applied unsuccessfully for some permanent position.\textsuperscript{118} Donne's appeal to Somerset was unfortunate not only because of the latter's subsequent fall but also because the Countess of Bedford staunchly opposed him.\textsuperscript{119} She had a prominent part in introducing at

\textsuperscript{115} Milgate, pp. 262, 266.
\textsuperscript{116} Grierson, 2:94.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 1:131-141.
\textsuperscript{118} Bald, Donne and the Drurys, pp. 125-126.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., pp. 122-123.
court George Villiers (later Duke of Buckingham), who succeeded
Somerset as James's favorite.\textsuperscript{120}

Thus for a variety of reasons, financial, religious, and polit-
ical, John Donne's close relationship with the Countess of Bedford came
to an end in 1614. After what he considered her lack of appreciation
for the elegy on her brother Lord Harington, the last poem he addressed
to her, Donne reasoned that "this diminution in her makes me see, that
I must use more friends, then I thought I should have needed."\textsuperscript{121} He
turned for aid to Somerset and the Countesses of Huntingdon and of
Salisbury. Of course, Donne did not entirely relinquish all acquaint-
tance with Lady Bedford. He often asked Sir Henry Goodyere to remember
him to her. On January 7, 1621, he preached a sermon to her at Haring-
ton House.\textsuperscript{122} Donne's and Lady Bedford's paths diverged after his
ordination in 1615. Donne's priestly duties consumed much of his time.
After 1619, Lady Bedford spent increasing amounts of time at Moore Park,
tending her gardens and augmenting her art collection. Yet there is no
evidence that he ever altered the estimation of her expressed in a
letter he sent to her. The letter, he says,

\begin{quote}
shall tell you truly (for from me itt suched no levin of flattery)
with what height or rather lownes of devotion I reverence you:
who besides the comandm$^t$ of a noble birth, and y$^z$ perswasiue
eloquence of beauty, haue the advantage of the furniture of arts
and languages, and such other vertues as might serve to iustify
a reprobate fortune and y$^e$ lowest condition: soe that if these
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{120}Murray, The Ideal of the Court Lady: 1561-1625, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{121}Letters to Severall Persons of Honour, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{122}Sermons, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols.
things whereby some few other are named are made worthy, are to you but ornaments such might be left without leaving you unperfect.123

Thus, Donne but verifies in prose what he has praised in the verse letters.

CHAPTER II

CRITICS AND SCHOLARS ON THE VERSE LETTERS

John Donne's verse letters to the Countess of Bedford comprise eight poems of the thirty-seven "Letters to Severall Personages," which he wrote over a period extending from 1592 to 1615.¹ H. J. C. Grierson and W. Milgate, the two most important editors of the verse letters in the twentieth century, divide the verse letters according to tone and theme. In the first group of twenty-four poems which Donne wrote to gentlemen at Cambridge and the Inns of Court, "the reflective, moralizing strain predominates."² Of those letters written to gentlemen before 1597, the predominant themes center in the writing of poetry and the launching of professional careers.³ Of those written to gentlemen

¹Milgate, pp. 55-110. Grierson's edition contains thirty-four verse letters. Three letters which Milgate includes are (1) "Epitaph on Himsel: To the Countesse of Bedford" (p. 103); (2) "That unripe side of earth," to the Countess of Huntingdon (pp. 81-85); and (3) "A Letter written by Sir H. G. and J. D. alternis vicibus" (pp. 76-78). Grierson puts the first poem in a separate category entitled "Epitaphs." He also includes a ten-line epitaph (not in Milgate) after the epistle to the Countess of Bedford and before the section entitled "Omnibus" (1:291). Grierson places the verse letter to the Countess of Huntingdon in Appendix B: "Poems Which Have Been Attributed to John Donne in the Old Editions and the Principal MS. Collections." As Milgate comments (p. 294), Grierson admits this poem to the canon in his edition of 1929. Grierson considers Donne and Goodyere to be the authors of the third poem but because it did not appear in any manuscript until after 1649 places it in Appendix C: "A Selection of Poems which Frequently Accompany Poems by John Donne in Manuscript Collections or Have Been Ascribed to Donne by Modern Editors" (2:clii).

²Grierson, 2:xiv. ³Milgate, p. xxxiv.
in and after 1597, some of the same themes are repeated and intensified by the moral framework in which they are recast. In 1594, for example, Donne counsels "Mr B. B." to hasten to begin his legal career--to leave Cambridge and "Here toughly chew, and sturdily digest / Th'immense vast volumes of our common law" ("To Mr B. B.", 11. 7-8, Milgate, pp. 67-68). In a poem to Rowland Woodward which begins "Like one who'in her third widowhood," written in 1597, Donne's thoughts have turned from advancement in the external world to cultivation of the self.⁴ He tells Woodward:

Wee are but farmers of our selves, yet may,
If we can stocke our selves, and thrive, uplay
Much, much deare treasure for the great rent day.

Manure thy selfe then, to thy selfe be'approv'd,
And with vaine outward things be no more mov'd,
But to know, that I love thee'and would be lov'd.

(ll. 31-36, Milgate, p. 70)

The growing seriousness of the late verse letters to gentlemen presages the tone and themes of the second major group of thirteen verse letters which Donne wrote between 1607 and 1614-1615 to Mrs. Magdalen Herbert; to Lady Carey and Mrs. Essex Riche; and to the Countesses of Bedford, of Huntingdon, and of Salisbury. This second group, the product of a maturing poet, embodies a "reflective, philosophic, somewhat melancholy strain."⁵ The letters to great ladies encourage them

---


⁵Grierson, 2:xx.
to cultivate and to practice the virtue of religion which encompasses all other virtues. In these letters, Donne links courtly compliment with philosophical disquisition on "beeing and seeming" and on the exercise of discretion.  

Yet, although the verse letters make up a discrete unit of Donne's poetry and foreshadow the ideas of his later poems, critics have devoted comparatively little attention to them. In comparison with the volumes of comment and explication on the "Songs and Sonets," the amount of criticism of the verse letters is negligible.

There are several reasons for this critical neglect. The first is the lack of a "poetics" of the verse letter. Neither Aristotle nor Horace codified the art of letter writing. Even during the greatest flowering of epistolary writing during the eighteenth century, critics who were busy formulating standards for the epic and elegy ignored the verse letter itself.

The second reason that critics have paid slight attention to Donne's verse letters lies in the obscurity shrouding their historical background and in the contemporary allusions. The identity of "Mr I. L." to whom Donne wrote two verse letters is still a mystery.

---

6 Milgate, p. xxxvi.


Correspondingly little is known of some of the other gentlemen who received Donne's poems. Neither have scholars elucidated Donne's relationship with the Countess of Bedford, many facts of whose biography remain unknown. Edmund Lodge noted:

Her great ambition, as it was said, was to establish a character so rare in her day that it had not yet acquired a distinct denomination; the character, as we should now call it, of a woman of taste; but ambition, whose natural aim is at general admiration and respect, seeks them in the rooted prejudices of mankind, and not in the practice of untried novelties. . . . She may be said to have invented her occupations and her amusements. It is perhaps therefore that historians and biographers have passed her by in silence, and that poets have delighted to celebrate her.¹⁰

The truth of Lodge's last statement is early borne out in Walton's biography of Donne, in which the author never mentions Lady Bedford despite her important role, extending over a number of years, in Donne's life. Walton's omission of data concerning Lady Bedford is rhetorically justifiable, for his purpose is to present an idealized portrait of Donne as "Anglican saint or potential saint."¹¹ Unfortunately, however, Walton's "Life" was almost the sole basis of later biographies of Donne. Both the biography of Donne in Tonson's edition of his poems in 1719 and the entry on Donne in Bayle's General Dictionary of 1736 are directly derived from Walton's work.¹²


in any phase of Donne's relationship with Lady Bedford has been so slight that, as Percy Simpson has pointed out, commentators have overlooked such an obvious primary source of biographical information as Lady Bedford's letters, preserved in the Correspondence of Jane Lady Cornwallis. Since the early biographies do not mention the relationship of Donne and Lady Bedford, they engendered no interest in the poems he wrote to her.

The third reason for the modern neglect of the verse letters arises from modern taste. Critics, following T. S. Eliot, perceived what they considered a cultural affinity between some modern poetry and Donne's "Songs and Sonets" and "Divine Poems." The interest of few of them extended to the verse letters. Further, not understanding the formal characteristics of the genre, many modern critics were


14In contrast to modern critics, Donne's elegists recognized his relationship to Lady Bedford as honorable to them both. In his poem "In memory of Doctor Donne," "Mr R. B." considers his fellow clergymen unfit to judge Donne's sermons. Rather, if Donne

... need to be judg'd or try'd,
A Jury I would summon on his side,
That had no sides, nor factions, past the touch
Of all exceptions, freed from Passion, such
As nor to feare nor flatter, e'r were bred,
These would I bring, though called from the dead:
Southampton, Hambleton, Pembroke, Dorsets Earles,
Huntingdon, Bedfords Countesses (the Pearles
Once of each sexe.)

(11. 65-73, Grierson, 1:387)

Neither did Dr. Corbet, Bishop of Oxford, consider the role of protege demeaning. While not mentioning Lady Bedford explicitly in his elegy "On Doctor Donne," Corbet understood the function of the patron. He maintained that the poet "must have friends the highest, able to do; / Such as Mecoenas, and Augustus too" (11. 13-14, Grierson, 1:374).
temperamentally unprepared to accept the commonplaces of complimentary verse and sometimes chided Donne for abasing himself for money or advancement. Such statements as "Donne's Verse Letters to the Countess of Bedford are to be read with this strong need for patronage and this knowledge of competition in mind" add little to the appreciation of the poems as distinct literary types.15

Never having enjoyed a vogue of their own as have the "Satyres" in the eighteenth century and the "Songs and Sonets" and "Divine Poems" in this century, the verse letters have not accumulated a large, distinct body of scholarship. Most of the work has dealt with Donne's letters to gentleman friends rather than with those to noble and gentle ladies.

Ben Jonson offers one of the earliest and most famous criticisms of Donne's verse letters in a conversation recorded by Drummond of Hawthorndon. According to Drummond, Jonson commented:

He esteemeth John Done the first poet jn the World jn some things / his verses of the Lost Chaine, he heth by Heart / & that passage of the calme, that dust and feathers doe not stirr, all was so quiet. affirmeth Done to have written all his best pieces err he was 25 years old.16

Jonson was not alone in his appreciation of "The Storme" and "The Calme," which Donne wrote in 1597 and addressed to Christopher Brooke, his friend and chief abettor of his marriage to Ann More. Beginning with their appearance, these two verse letters have received the widest

---
15Thomson, "John Donne and the Countess of Bedford," p. 332. This essay considers Lady Bedford's insolvency as a principal cause of the dissolution of Donne's relationship with Lady Bedford. It does not offer a critique of the verse letters as such.
acclaim of any of "The Letters to Severall Personages." Thomas Freeman mentions both poems, as well as the "Satyres," in an epigram "To Iohn Donne," in his Runne And a great Cast: The Second Book (1614):

The Storme describ'd hath set thy name afloat,  
The Calme a gale of famous winde hath got:  
Thy Satyres short, too soone we them o'relooke,  
I prethee Persius write a bigger booke.  

(Quoted in Grierson, 2:1xxvi)

The poems also appear, together with the "Satyres," in two of the earliest manuscript collections of Donne's poems: in a small quarto manuscript (MS. 216) in a volume with other manuscripts in the library of Queen's College, Oxford, and in the Dyce MS. in the South Kensington Museum.17

Because of the general decline in enthusiasm for Donne's poetry after his death, it is difficult to find specific comment about the verse letters. According to Spence, however, Alexander Pope "commended Donne's epistles, Metempsychosis, and satires as his best...."18 Further, of the 384 quotations of Donne in Johnson's Dictionary, eighty-eight of them are from the verse letters. Johnson's most numerous source is the "Songs and Sonets," which he cites eighty-nine times.19

17 Grierson, 2:1xxix-lxxx. B. F. Nellist maintains that the poems are not realistic nature descriptions as was formerly supposed but rather descriptions of psychic experiences induced by external phenomena. See "Donne's 'Storm' and 'Calm' and the Descriptive Tradition," Modern Language Review 59 (1964): 511-515.


Like Pope, Robert Browning also was influenced by Donne's work. In his letters to Elizabeth Barrett, he quotes from the epithalamium Donne wrote to celebrate the marriage of the Princess Elizabeth, daughter of James I, to Frederick, Count Palatine. To explain Carlyle's view of music, Browning also uses the line "as an Amber drop enwraps a Bee" from the verse letter "Honour is so sublime perfection" (line 25, Milgate, p. 101). 20

Despite these notable exceptions, there is little critical comment on the verse letters before the twentieth century. Proceeding chronologically, one does find an anonymous critic, writing in 1823, who gives a comparatively long, although general, commentary on the verse letters. In a paragraph which foreshadows the remarks of some modern critics, he says:

The Epistles of Donne we like less than any of his other poems, always excepting the religious ones. Not that they are without his usual proportion of subtle thinking, felicitous illustration, and skilful versification; but they are disfigured by more than his usual obscurity--by a harshness of style, that is to be found in few of his other poems, except the satires--by an extravagance of hyperbole in the way of compliment, that often amounts to the ridiculous--and by an evident want of sincerity, that is worse than all. To whomever they are addressed, all are couched in the same style of expression, and reach the same pitch of praise. Every one of his correspondents is, without exception, "wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best." It is as if his letters had been composed at leisure, and kept ready cut and dried till wanted. 21

Modern criticism of the verse letters dates from the work of Gosse and Grierson. In a review of Donne's poetry published in 1893,


Gosse judges the verse letters "far less extraordinary" than Donne's other poetry. He calls "The Storme" "crudely picturesque and licentious, essentially unpoetical." Although he likes "The Calme" better, he says that "it only partly deserves Ben Jonson's high commendation of it to Drummond." His general criticism of the verse letters, and especially those written to ladies, is rather disparaging. He writes:

Many of these epistles are stuffed hard with thoughts, but poetry is rarely to be found in them; the style is not lucid; the construction is desperately parenthetical. It is not often that the weary reader is rewarded by such a polished piece of versification as is presented by . . . [the] passage about love in the "Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon."

Most of these epistles are New Year's greetings, and many are addressed to the noble and devout ladies with whom he held spiritual converse in advancing years. The poet superbly aggrandises the moral qualities of these women, paying to their souls the court that younger and flightier cavaliers reserved for the physical beauty of their daughters.

By the time of the writing of his biography of Donne, Gosse had somewhat amended his opinion of the verse letters, or at least of those to the Countess of Bedford. In his Life and Letters of John Donne, he comments on the verse letters to Lady Bedford that "his adoration pauses at no hyperbole" and that "vast as are the terms of his celebration, the reader is induced to believe in their sincerity."

Gosse explains that awe of Lady Bedford inspires in Donne "an unwonted reticence," and causes him to express his adoration on bent knee.

---


23 Ibid., 238-239.

24 Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne, 1:211.
Grierson's edition of *The Poems of John Donne* contains the first full treatment of the poems in the twentieth century. In the Introduction, Grierson reconsiders some earlier, less favorable opinions expressed in the section on Donne that he had written for *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, where his remarks had been reminiscent of earlier nineteenth-century criticism. Concerning the letters to noble ladies, he had decided that "neither Donne's art nor taste--to say nothing of his character--is seen to best advantage in the abstract, extravagant and frigid conceits of these epistles and of such elegies as those on prince Henry and lord Harington."25

In his discussion of the verse letters in the edition of 1912, however, Grierson is more moderate. He maintains that the letters to ladies are less harsh than those to gentlemen and are characterized by "absurd and extravagant but fanciful and subtle compliment"--so subtle, in fact, that Grierson wonders whether the ladies would have understood it.26 Grierson seems to borrow a note from Gosse to the effect that Donne had found the perfect mode in which to address ladies above him in station. In the letters to Lady Bedford and Mrs. Herbert, which Grierson says "bespeak an even warmer admiration" than those to other ladies, the poet assumes the rhetorical stance of "the 'servant' of the Troubadour convention."27 Yet in his evaluation of the verse letters,

---


26 Grierson, 2:xx.

27 Ibid., 2:xxi.
Grierson places them higher than the epistles of Alexander Pope. He quotes li. 19-33 of "Honour is so sublime perfection," and comments that if they

. . . are not pure poetry, they haunt some quaint borderland of poetry to which the polished felicities of Pope's compliments are a stranger. If not pure fancy, they are not mere ingenuity, being too intellectual and argumentative for the one, too winged and ardent for the other. . . . 28

When speaking later about the possibility of Donne's having addressed "Twicknam Garden" and "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day" to the Countess of Bedford, Grierson nonetheless expresses doubts similar to those found in his earlier criticism. He asks two questions: "how far could a conventional passion inspire a strain so sincere, and what was Donne's feeling for Lady Bedford and hers for him?" 29

Excluding Milgate's edition of The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters in 1967, the editions of Donne's poems after 1912 add little information to the scholarship of the verse letters. A survey of the criticism of Donne's poetry from 1940 to the present shows a heightening of interest in the verse letters. J. B. Leishman devotes several

28 Ibid., 2:21.

29 Ibid., 2:xxiii. Helen Gardner comments that Donne may have written "Twicknam Garden" and "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day" for Lady Bedford. It would be "incredible" in the light of what we know of their relationship to think that he wrote the poems about her. See The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 250.
pages of *The Monarch of Wit* to the verse letters. 30 It is one of the few extended criticisms of the verse letters as a group. Leishman divides the letters into two groups. He calls the first group "discourses upon a broomstick, where the subject, whatever it be, is mainly an opportunity for the display of wit." 31 He places "The Storme," "The Calme," "Man to Gods image" (to the Countess of Huntingdon), and two poems, "Reason is our Soules left hand" and "Honour is so sublime perfection," both to the Countess of Bedford, in this group. The second group, "written in a more serious and Jonsonian manner," 32 includes "Here's no more newes, then vertue" (to Sir Henry Wotton), "Who makes the Past, a patterne for next yeare" (to Sir Henry Goodyere), "To Sir Edward Herbert at Julyers, 1610," and "A Letter to the Lady Carey, and Mrs Exxes Riche." 33 Leishman differentiates between the two

---

30 Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), pp. 118-140. K. W. Gransden also has a section on the verse letters in which he comments briefly on "The Storme," "The Calme," three letters to the Countess of Bedford, "This twilight of two yeares," "You have refin'd mee," and "I have written then," and one letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, "Man to Gods image." Of Donne's general method of composition of the verse letters to the Countess of Bedford, Gransden says: "they usually begin with a gracefully turned compliment, respectful yet witty: then Donne will go on to make the most and the best of necessity by enlarging the compliment in widening circles of imaginative wit which, while remaining 'concentrique unto' Lucy, also embrace topics of general interest. The compliment to one woman becomes an observation on human nature as a whole." *(John Donne* [London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954], p. 108.)


32 Ibid.

groups by explaining that the first is bad because the poems are marked by Donnian ingenuity, and that the second is good because the poems are written in the Jonsonian manner. 34

Leishman does not explicate any single poem. He paraphrases the first stanza of "Reason is our Soules left hand," calls it a prose analysis, and comments that Jonson who strongly disapproved of the adulation of Mistress Elizabeth Drury in the Anniversaries would certainly not approve of Donne's representation of noble ladies as divinities in the verse letters. As his conversations with Drummond show, Jonson was far from demure; yet there is no record of his disapproval of Donne's relationship with the Countess of Bedford or with any of the other ladies to whom Donne wrote verse letters. Indeed, Jonson himself benefited from his association with Lady Bedford, and his Epigrams lxxvi, lxxxiv, and xciv attest to the justness of Donne's praise of her. 35

Leishman also questions the suitability of Donne's "scholastically complimentary style" for celebrating the virtues of noble ladies:

These epistles were, indeed, all written during his theological but pre-clerical period, during the years when he was assisting Morton in his controversy with the Recusants, and they may perhaps

34 R. C. Bald had earlier expressed an opinion which seems to concur with the first part of this statement: "The 'wit' of Donne, so much admired by his contemporaries, expressed itself through the conceit. This means of expression was natural to him, and it is only in some of his complimentary verse-letters that one feels that it puts a strain upon his ingenuity" (Donne's Influence in English Literature [Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1932], p. 14.)

35 Herford, Simpson, and Simpson, eds., Ben Jonson, 8:52, 54, 60.
tempt us to ask that question, . . . namely, how much did even the things to which he apparently devoted himself most seriously really mean to Donne?³⁶

Helen Gardner's textual criticism of two verse letters is much less provocative than Leishman's interpretative study; yet Gardner's comments are relevant to this survey of scholarship because they offer a new reading of parts of "Reason is our Soules left hand" and "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," both to the Countess of Bedford. While calling the verse letters to noble ladies "some of the most obscure and extravagant of his works," Gardner credits them at least with containing "many lines and stanzas of grave beauty."³⁷

Emending the text of the verse letter, "Reason is our Soules left hand," she changes "This" to "Thy" in the lines "Make your returne home gracious; and bestow / This life on that; so make one life of two" (ll. 35-36, Milgate, p. 91). She maintains that revising "This," which is found in many manuscripts, the editions of 1635-1639, and in Grierson, to "Thy," which is printed in the edition of 1633, gives a clearer meaning to the passage. She concludes that Grierson's reading "suggests the Countess needs exhortation to virtue," an incongruous interpretation in the context of the stanza.³⁸

Although Milgate retains the "This" of the manuscripts in his edition, he does adopt Gardner's interpretation of the fourth stanza of "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things." The stanza, which

³⁶Leishman, The Monarch of Wit, p. 126.
³⁸Ibid., p. 318.
tells of Lady Bedford's arrival at Twickenham, reads:

Out from your chariot, morning breaks at night,
And falsifies both computations so;
Since a new world doth rise here from your light,
We your new creatures, by new reckonings goe.
This shows that you from nature lothly stray,
That suffer not an artificiall day.

(ll. 19-24, Milgate, p. 92)

Grierson suggests the lines mean that Lady Bedford adheres to nature because she admits of a day which does not begin "at a stated hour, but only one that begins with the actual appearance of light." 39 Gardner argues that the natural day is one of twenty-four hours; the "artificiall day" is one that begins with the morning light. Thus, according to Gardner, "the jest is that the 'artificial day' is the real day of ordinary speech, which begins at daybreak, and it is a witty absurdity that Donne claims that the Countess's behaviour in arriving at night is in accordance with 'nature.' " 40 Finally, Gardner comments that the verse letters to the Countess of Bedford are both more beautiful and more interesting than "Man to Gods image, Eve, to mans was made," addressed to the Countess of Huntingdon, because the former portray Lady Bedford as an exemplar of ideal virtue. In the latter, "The virtue of the Countess of Huntingdon remains merely a premiss in a piece of argument." 41

41 Ibid., pp. 320-321. Robert Harrison analyzes "Man to Gods image, Eve, to mans was made" according to its argumentative technique ("Donne's 'To the Countesse of Huntingdon' ['Man to Gods image . . .']," Explicator 25 [1966], Item 33).
The last major critical article devoted primarily to Donne's verse letters addressed to ladies is Laurence Stapleton's essay, "The Theme of Virtue in Donne's Verse Epistles." Stapleton maintains that the verse letters are unified as a type by the theme of virtue which runs through them. This "virtue" is a synthesis of the Platonic conception of virtue as indivisible and the Paracelsian idea of it as a life-force. According to Stapleton, Donne does not use the theme of virtue with its special Platonic-Paracelsian connotations in the early verse letters to gentlemen but rather in the later verse letters to noble ladies, in which it elevates what would otherwise be merely exaggerated and fanciful compliment and "gives a common focus to his later verse epistles and eventually results in the more animated structure of the Anniversaries." Stapleton offers several examples of Donne's use of the newly defined theme of virtue; for example, in two poems to the Countess of Bedford, "Reason is our Soules left hand," 11. 21-32 (Milgate, p. 91) and "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," 11. 7-12 (Milgate, p. 92); in "Man to Gods image; Eve, to mans was made," 11. 21-28 (Milgate, p. 86), to the Countess of Huntingdon; and in "A Letter to the Lady Carey, and Mrs Essex Riche," 11. 16-33 (Milgate, pp. 105-106).

To date, Stapleton's essay is the last long piece of criticism having to do primarily with the verse letters to noble ladies. The weightier portion of the scholarship on the verse letters, much of which

---

43 Ibid., 189.
is historical, deals with Donne's letters to gentlemen friends. In "Donne's Early Verse Letters," R. C. Bald gives the most accurate dating of the early verse letters (written between 1592-1594 and 1597) through internal evidence. Bald also identifies "Mr B. B." to whom Donne wrote the verse letter "Is not thy sacred hunger of science / Yet satisfy'd" (Milgate, pp. 67-68) as Beaupré Bell, who left Cambridge for Lincoln's Inn in 1594.

Bald's article, which set the dates of the poems earlier than Grierson had in his edition, serves as the basis for the dating of the early verse letters in Milgate's edition. Alexander Sackton also follows Bald in his article, "Donne and the Privacy of Verse." Sackton examines the early verse letters to gentlemen to ascertain Donne's feelings toward poetry and friendship. He describes the many uses that Donne had for the verse letters: (1) a cure for grief: "Write then, that my griefes which thyne got may bee / Cur'd by thy charming soveraigne melodee ("To Mr R. W.," 11. 11-12, Milgate, p. 63); (2) a means of self-revelation: "My verse, the strict Map of my misery" ("To Mr T. W.," line 8, Milgate, p. 62); (3) a part of personal culture:

---


You doe not duties of societies,
If from the'embrace of a lov'd wife you rise,
View your fat Beasts, stretch'd Barnes, and labour'd fields,
Eats, play, ryde, take all joyes which all day yeelds,
And then againe to your embracements goe:
Some houre on us your frends, and some bestow
Upon your Muse..."To Mr I. L.," ll. 7-13, Milgate, p. 67

To summarize, Sackton explains:

The greatest number of poems in which Donne illustrates literary
attitudes and values are verse letters addressed to friends. They
are a personal development of certain conventions within which
Donne is able to express a sense of the privacy of poetry as a
method of self-exploration and of intimate communication.47

Although adding to our knowledge of as interesting a subject as
Donne's idea of the uses of poetry, Sackton's article does little to
explain the theory of the verse letter or to explicate a single verse
letter as a whole. Allen B. Cameron is one of the few critics who
attempts to analyze according to the conventions of the genre one of
Donne's verse letters, "Sir, more then kisses, letters mingle Soules,"
addressed to Sir Henry Wotton (Milgate, pp. 71-73).48 In order to point
out the stylistic possibilities of the verse letter, Cameron compares
Donne's poem to Wotton to Dryden's "To My Honour'd Friend, Dr. Charle-
ton." He also explains the formal characteristics of the genre by
which he judges the poems. Both poems, he states,

... can be considered disquisitions on an ethical or philosoph-
ical theme—that is, they discuss serious matters of individual,
social, or political conduct; both are written, broadly speaking,
in an intimate or familiar style; both attempt to persuade the

47 Ibid., p. 80.
48 Allen B. Cameron, "Donne and Dryden: Their Achievement in the
Verse Epistle," Discourse: A Review of the Liberal Arts 11 (Spring
1968), 252-256.
recipients of the poems and, through them, their public readers of the wisdom in a certain attitude or mode of action (in other words, what Levine calls the significant involvement of the addressee in the discussion and the address to a dual audience); and, finally, both attempt to secure the goodwill of their wider audiences by treating the addressees as exemplars of the arguments proposed.⁴⁹

After mentioning that the subject of the poem, "To Sir Henry Wotton," is the classical and Renaissance commonplace of whether life in the city or country is better, Cameron divides the poem into its rhetorical parts: the introduction (exordium), made up of salutation and sententia or aphorism (ll. 1-6); the partition (partitio) or exposition of the circumstances of the case (ll. 7-46); the proof (confirmatio) (ll. 47-62); and the conclusion (peroratio) (ll. 63-70).⁵⁰ Cameron then explains its movement: "Elaborating his argument discursively, the poet ultimately abandons all three possibilities after his partition and proof and concludes that virtue is indivisible and must be sought in self-knowledge, not at the court, in the country, nor in town. . . ."⁵¹ The poem ends with the disclaimer, "But, Sir, I'advise not you, I rather doe / Say o'er those lessons, which I learn'd of you" (ll. 63-64, Milgate, p. 73), the effect of which is to motivate Wotton to virtue through praise and to gain for the poet the approval

⁴⁹Ibid., 252-253.


of the general audience. Cameron ends with a comparison of Dryden's verse letter to Donne's. The former is distinguished from the latter by its political and public rather than personal character. Cameron's article is pertinent to the scholarship of Donne's verse letters, for it offers a reading of the letter to Sir Henry Wotton as a whole and elucidates the poem in the light of the formal characteristics of the genre.

The last relevant piece of criticism of the verse letters is that contained in Richard E. Hughes's *Progress of the Soul*. Hughes's reading of the verse letters is primarily biographical. The early verse letters, he says, illuminate the major poetry as well as Donne's conception of poetry. The first three poems to Lady Bedford ("Reason is our Soules left hand," "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," and "You that are she and you, that's double shee") he finds "positively embarrassing in the way they convert some of Donne's most important motifs to the demands of patronage." Yet it is "much more important that these epistles show the residual effects of Donne's recent spiritual experience than that in them he seeks necessary patronage." Thereupon, he quotes from Donne's prose letters, sermons, and the verse letters, "This twilight of two yeares, not past nor next" and "T'have written then, when you writ," to illustrate Donne's intention of keeping Lady Bedford's esteem and of warning her against

---

52 Ibid., p. 253. 53 Ibid., p. 255.
55 Ibid., p. 232.
a too enthusiastic embracing of Puritanism to the exclusion of all worldly concerns. Despite the general lack of interest in the verse letters, Hughes comments that "as representatives of a courtesy tradition, the verse letters of this middle period deserve respectful attention. . . ."\textsuperscript{56}

Without doubt, Milgate's edition of \textit{The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters} will give great impetus to the study of the verse letters. His introductory remarks deal mainly with the subjects of the letters and with Donne's attitudes toward their recipients. Concentrating on the good qualities of the letters, Milgate avoids derogatory suggestions and remarks about Donne's character and his reasons for writing the letters. His division of the letters in the text into those to gentlemen and those to ladies is useful to the reader, and his commentary illuminates many of the hitherto "darke texts."

In summary, after the contemporary interest in them waned, the verse letters fell into neglect until the twentieth century. With the exception of the editorial criticism of Grierson, Gardner, and Milgate, most of the work on them has chiefly biographical and historical significance. Now that this necessary work has been done, the ground is laid for a critical study of the verse letters.

\textsuperscript{56}Ibid.
CHAPTER III

TYPES AND PURPOSES OF THE VERSE LETTER

A review of the scholarship shows that very few analyses and explications of Donne's verse letters exist. Judging them by the same standards as Donne's lyrical poetry, critics unfamiliar with the commonplaces of complimentary verse have found the verse letters unmusical and overly profound. Few critics have attempted to discover the formal differences between the verse letter and other kinds of poetry. Although Donne's verse letters may never attain the popularity of the "Songs and Sonets," the critic who understands the formal characteristics of the genre may come to a fairer evaluation of them. To appreciate the verse letter as poets of the seventeenth century knew it, it may be helpful, first, to consider the history of epistolary writing in the schools and in the practice of Donne's contemporaries and, second, to examine a representative Renaissance writing manual, Angel Day's English Secretorie, and to relate Donne's verse letters to Lady Bedford to Day's book.

From ancient times, the art of epistolary writing has been intimately associated with rhetoric, the practical art of persuasion, rather than with the fine art of poetic. ¹ Because of the emphasis

¹Irving, The Providence of Wit in the English Letter Writers, p. 6.
placed upon the stylistic similarities of rhetoric and poetic during the Middle Ages, the clear distinction between the two was nearly lost. Nevertheless, medieval and Renaissance rhetoricians consistently applied the rules of oratory, from which rhetoric ultimately proceeded, to epistolary writing.

Basing their criticism on stylistic similarities between epistle and lyric, most modern critics of Donne's verse letters have failed to consider the differences between the two types of poetry. The distinction between rhetoric and poetic made by classical critics is still pertinent to the criticism of the verse letters:

Poetic they thought characterized by narrative or dramatic structure of movement, and by vividness of realization, and by passion. Rhetoric was characterized by a logical structure determined by the necessity of persuading an audience.

The rhetorical techniques used in writing epistles made them a convenient vehicle both for the teaching of rhetoric in the schools and for addressing friends in verse. John Donne and his contemporaries formally studied the epistle, which by the late sixteenth century was an important part of the curriculum.

Inductively culling their theories of rhetoric from the techniques of the foremost public speakers, the ancient Greeks and Romans taught their young men the methods of successfully persuading an audience.

---


3 Ibid.


During the Middle Ages letters assumed many of the functions of public oratory in influencing civic audiences. Thus publicly and pedagogically the art of rhetoric was applied to the composition of epistles and sermons as well as to the preparation of public documents rather than primarily to public oratory.  

The increasing importance of letter writing occasioned two developments: first, collections of the letters of Cicero, Seneca, Pliny, and the Italian humanists were made and copied, and, second, formularies, based on rhetorical rules rather than on the earlier letter collections, began to appear. Finally, as the theories of epistolary writing became more strictly fixed, Alberich of Monte Cassino’s formulation of the standard order of the letter (salutatio, captatio, narratio, petitio, conclusio) was adopted.

Alberich’s theories were influential in Italy as well as in England and France where the number of treatises and textbooks on epistolography steadily grew. Giovanni di Bologna compiled one of the earliest and perhaps the first treatise on letter writing in England for John Peckham, Archbishop of Canterbury. This work is possibly antedated by a formulary, now in the British Museum, which was prepared for the Bishop of Salisbury ca. 1207.  

Interest in epistolary writing

---

6 Ibid., p. 44.


8 Ibid.

continued throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: old formularies were copied and re-copied and new ones compiled. These older sets of rules formed the foundation of the treatises of the Renaissance scholars. Although Erasmus' *Modus Conscribendi Epistolas* (1522) was most influential, the works of other continental scholars such as Vives, Libanius, Macropedius, and Brandolinus were also published and distributed in England. The English edition of Brandolinus' *De Ratione Scribendi* contains also the treatises of Erasmus, Vives, Macropedius, Conradus Celtis, and Christopher Hegen-dorfer. John Hoskyns' *Directions for speech and style*, printed ca. 1600, includes a section on letter writing adapted from Justus Lipsius' *De Ratione Conscribendi Epistolas Utilissime Praeceptiones*, which was never printed in England.\(^{10}\)

The Latin formularies were used both in the system of formal education and often, in English adaptations, by the populace. Erasmus' plan for the education of boys in the upper school employed the epistle as the "first extended compositional form."\(^{11}\) The text Erasmus wrote to implement his plan took for granted a comprehensive knowledge of rhetoric which in the sixteenth century included mastery of the topics, for which Cicero's *Topica* was used, as well as of the schemes and tropes of *elocutio* (style), from the texts of Mosellanus and later of Susenbrotus.\(^{12}\) John Brinsley and Charles Hoole, both seventeenth-century schoolmasters, employed the epistle as a means of improving

\(^{10}\)Ibid., pp. 10-11.


\(^{12}\)Ibid.
the Latin composition of their students. After the students had received a thorough grounding in grammar through the methods of translation and re-translation and the "making of Latins," they began sustained Latin composition. Brinsley and Hoole both chose the epistles of classical authors as models for imitation by their students "partly, probably, because a good deal of the form was constant, e.g., in the beginning and ending of the epistle--certain phrases might occur frequently, and the general construction of a letter was fairly easily understood."\textsuperscript{13} Hoole recommended either Cicero's \textit{Letters} in Sturm's editions or, alternatively, the edition used by the Westminster School or John Ravisius Textor's \textit{Epistles}, as well as the works of Pliny, Seneca, Erasmus, Lipsius, Manutius, Ascham, and Politian for imitation by the students in the fourth form in which letter writing was required.\textsuperscript{14}

Besides flourishing as an integral part of the scholastic curriculum and as a minor art form among the educated, letter writing was assiduously cultivated by growing numbers in the emerging middle class. Thus, in addition to textbooks and scholarly books on the epistolary art, many popular manuals on letter writing also were published. William Fulwood's \textit{Enimie of Idlenesse} was the first letter writer in English. Published in 1568, it dispensed with the strict separation of letters into types and with the rigid rhetorical categories of the

\textsuperscript{13}Foster Watson, \textit{The English Grammar Schools in 1660} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), p. 413.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. 414-415.
Latin formularies. The nine editions that Fulwood's manual went through between 1568 and 1621 attest to the popular interest shown in letter writing.

The second English manual of letter writing, *A Panoplie of Epistles, Or, a looking Glasse for the unlearned, Gathered and translated out of the Latine into English* (1576), by Abraham Fleming, was neither as popular nor as original as Fulwood's work. Eschewing even the loose classification of letters made by Fulwood, Fleming directs the reader desiring information about the types of letters to Libanius Sophistica's *De Epistolariam Characteribus*. Fleming takes his rules for letter writing from Hegendorfer's *Methodus Conscribendi Epistolae* and many of his model letters from Brandolinus' *De Ratione Scribendi*.

Angel Day's *English Secretorie*, first published in 1586, has been described as "the most thorough going text-book on Letter-Writing"

---


16 Ibid.


in English, perhaps in any language of the time. "19 Day's letter writer will be useful for the study of Donne's verse letters to the Countess of Bedford not because Donne ever read it--indeed, its author intended it for those far less educated than John Donne--but because it surveys, in English, the most widely accepted precepts of the epistolary art. Further, the sources from which Day derived his letter writer are the same as those Donne and his contemporaries would have studied in the schools.

The English Secretorie is divided into two parts: the first part is a theoretical analysis of the letter; the second part is an examination of the rhetorical principles governing the letter. In the first edition, Day promised to add the second part, which appears as a separate section in the second and in all succeeding editions. 20 In the first part of his letter writer, Day closely follows Erasmus' Modus Conscribendi Epistolae, parts of which he gives in translation and paraphrase. 21 Day places himself squarely in the tradition of the

---

19 Watson, The English Grammar Schools in 1660, p. 416. Little is known of Angel Day's biography. He was born in London ca. 1550, apprenticed to Thomas Duxsell, a London stationer, in 1563, and completed his apprenticeship in 1575. Besides The English Secretorie, the first edition of which was published in 1586, Day translated Amyot's version of Daphnis and Chloe (1587). He also wrote a poem "Upon the Life and Death of the most worthy and thrice renowned Knight, Sir Phillip Sidney" (1586) and a pamphlet (ca. 1585) on the "Wonderfull Strange Sightes seene in the Element, ouer the Citie of London and Other Places." His last known work is the commendatory verses written for W. Jones's translation of "Nennio." See Angel Day, trans., Daphnis and Chloe: The Elizabethan Version from Amyot's Translation, ed. Joseph Jacobs (London: Published by David Nutt, 1890), p. xxvii.

20 Day, The English Secretorie, p. 3.

Latin formularies by accepting the division of the letter into deliberative, judicial, demonstrative, and familiar types made by Erasmus.22

Unlike Fleming, however, who translated Hegendorfer verbatim for the text of his Panoplie of Epistles, Day incorporated in his letter writer the rhetorical principles governing the epistle of many writers of various Latin formularies. Among the sources Day mentions who have "set downe the perfect instruction, use and meane, wherby men the rather may be induced to the skilfull perfection that in a matter of such excellency is to be required" are Cicero and Lucian, among the ancients, and Politian, Erasmus, Macropedius, Vives, and Hegendorfer, among the contemporaries.23 For the second part of his work, which deals with the schemes and tropes of elocutio, Day again has recourse to the best grammar school text available, the Epitome Troporum ac Schematum et Grammaticorum et Rhetoricorum of Ioannes Susenbrotus.24

Susenbrotus was widely used as such a textbook [of logic and rhetoric] because, basing his work on Melanchthon's scheme and wishing to improve on Mosellanus, Susenbrotus tried to collect, correct, explain, and illustrate in detail all tropes and schemes both of grammar and rhetoric. He closely followed the Copia of Erasmus, for Erasmus had written his first book to show the use of tropes and figures to secure variety.25


In the edition of 1595, Day supplemented the second section of *The English Secretorie* with paraphrases of some of George Puttenham's verse. The second section of *The English Secretorie* and the works of Henry Peacham and Richard Sherry present the only separate, extensive treatments, in English, of the schemes and tropes before 1600. In addition, Day's work recommends itself as a useful guide for the understanding of Donne's verse letters because, taken as a whole, it is the most "elaborate and erudite" letter writer in the English language.

Considering the political and social importance of the letter from the earliest times, its significant role in the educational system, and its popularity among the masses, it is not surprising to find that it was widely used by English poets. Yet relatively little criticism either of the prose or of the verse letter has been done. Two articles, by Clay Hunt and Jay A. Levine, however, trace the history of the verse letter in England. Hunt indicates that the history of familiar verse may be divided into three periods. Although Chaucer and some of his contemporaries wrote verse epistles, the first Elizabethan examples of this form are those of Grimald, Wyatt, and Surrey published in Tottel's Miscellany. Their epistles, like most of those of the early period, fail to conform to the precepts for familiar

---

26 Baldwin, William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greek, 2:40.
27 Ibid.
verse in that they are often stiff, formal, and didactic. Hunt considers Surrey's translation of the twenty-seventh epigram of Martial the best example of the informal style among the poems of the three earliest practitioners. Jasper Heywood's poem which begins "Who mindes to bring his shippes to happy shore / Must care to know the lawes of wysdomes lore" is, according to Hunt, the only other verse letter besides Surrey's "which seems to have any informality of style." This judgment is particularly interesting in that Heywood was Donne's uncle. As head of the Jesuit mission in England, in 1581, Heywood was probably sheltered for a time at the home of Donne's mother, where "the children must have seen and spoken to him, and no doubt he made a deep impression on them. . . ." Other English poets of the early Renaissance whose works in some way approximated the informal style of the verse letter are George Gascoigne, Barnabe Googe, George Turbervile, and Nicholas Breton.

Interest in the verse letter waned between 1580 and 1595. Other forms such as the sonnet and love lyric were better suited for expression of the peculiar gifts, "lyricism, magniloquent diction, farfetched conceits, and other stylistic ornament and elaboration" of the Elizabethans. Poets of the second period employed direct personal address almost exclusively in commendatory or dedicatory poems.

---

30 Ibid., pp. 275-276.
31 Ibid., p. 277.
34 Ibid., p. 279.
The third period, the period of greatest interest in epistolary writing, begins with Thomas Lodge's proclamation of himself as the first user of the form "wherein no Englishman of our time hath publiquely written." While successful in reviving a little used form, Lodge's epistles fail to approximate the urbanity of Horace, his model. Lodge's heavily didactic poems mechanically follow the precepts for the epistle set forth in the Latin formularies of his school days and fail to achieve either gracefulness or informality of tone. "All the poems are presented so rhetorically as to deny the epistolary mode of the form rather than to fulfill it."

Daniel, Drayton, Thomas Campion, Jonson, and Donne were more successful composers of verse letters than the poets who preceded Lodge. Drayton's poem, "To Henry Reynolds, of poets and poesy," and Daniel's "Epistle to Henry Wriothesley" and "Great Minister of Justice" (to Sir Thomas Egerton) are considered good examples of the verse letter of this period—the poems of Daniel especially because they achieve an important prerequisite of the verse letter, the address to the dual audience, the subject of the poem himself as well as the general audience. While Hunt and Levine both consider Jonson the most skillful Renaissance practitioner of the epistolary form, they agree that some of Donne's verse letters, particularly the letters to

---


38 Ibid., pp. 674-675.
Sir Henry Wotton ("Sir, more then kisses, letters mingle Soules; /
For, thus friends absent speake," Milgate, pp. 71-73) and to Sir
Henry Goodyere ("Who makes the Past, a patterne for next yeare, /
Turnes no new leafe, but still the same things reads," Milgate,
pp. 78-79), are conceived in the manner they have been tracing, i.e.,
informal and conversational in style, friendly in tone, and relevant
to recipient and general audience alike.

Levine and Hunt, whose purpose it is to trace the development of
the familiar epistle to the eighteenth century, describe Donne's verse
letters to the Countess of Bedford as panegyrics. The term panegyric
tells us only that the poems are written in the language of elevated
praise. Having labeled the poems panegyrics, the critics dismiss them
from further consideration. But the very classification of these poems
as a group indicates that there is something distinctive about them,
something which the critics have yet to make explicit. The Latin
formularies and English manuals on letter writing make it clear that
familiar epistles are only one of the four kinds of letters one could
write and that poets were careful to address the recipients of their
letters in a mode befitting their stations. Grierson early pointed out
an important difference in diction between Donne's letters to gentleman
friends of the same social class as the poet and those to ladies of
higher station or, to use the terminology of The English Secretorius,
between familiar epistles and special epistles such as deliberative,
demonstrative, and judicial epistles. The gentleman friends of the
early verse letters are addressed as thou; the noble and gentle ladies
are addressed as you. 39 Further, Grierson notes that the letter Donne sent "To Sir Henry Wotton, at his going Ambassador to Venice" (Milgate, pp. 75-76) is written "in a somewhat more elevated and respectful strain than that of his earlier letters, when ... Wotton set out on his embassy to Venice in 1604." 40

Donne's discriminatory use of the formal and familiar forms of the pronoun is minor proof of his respect for position and station. Yet such a small distinction demonstrates both the differences between the two kinds of epistles and the necessity of judging each kind separately. Donne obviously could not address Lady Bedford in the familiar style which was appropriate in his letters to Goodyere, the Woodwards, the Brookes, and other friends of long standing. He could not warn Lady Bedford that she was dissipating her fortune as he does Goodyere in the lines: "But aske your Garners if you have beeene / In harvests, too indulgent to your sports" (ll. 19-20, "Who makes the Past, a patterne for next yeare," Milgate, p. 78). Neither could he tell her that her involvement in court affairs threatened her reputation nor that her religious zeal might become excessive. Since Donne respected the difference in their stations, he chose in the verse letters to Lady Bedford to assume the role of counselor or adviser and to address her by means of the deliberative epistle rather than by means of the familiar. In most of the verse letters, Donne's strategy was to motivate the Countess to greater virtue through praise rather than to admonish her for her faults.

The deliberative epistle afforded Donne a vehicle of sufficient breadth to express his ideas to Lady Bedford. Day's description, in the fourth edition of *The English Secretorie*, indicates the scope of the deliberative epistle:

The *Deliberative* is so named, of the large comprehension it hath of sundry causes and matters, being not almost tied to any particular occasion or purpose: Its distinctions are Hortatorie, and Dehortatorie: Swasorie and Disswasorie, not much unlike together in their orders and properties: the natures of the first being to exhort, counsell, advise, or persuade to any thing, of the other, to withdraw, dissuade or reduce to another meaning. Conciliatorie, which serveth in acquiring of friendship or acquaintance. Reconciliatorie, in reconcilement of kindred, friends, or other persons. Petitorie, in suing for, or craving of anie thing. Commendatorie, in preferring the services, persons or good qualities, of anie one. Consolatorie, in comforting at times of troubles, sorowe, or mishaps. Monitorie, in forewarning, admonishing, or counselling from mischiefs. Reprehensorie, in reprehending or correcting of errors and behaviours. Amatorie, in matters of loving.\(^1\)

In order to reach a clearer understanding of Donne's verse letters to the Countess of Bedford, it is helpful to categorize each of the eight verse letters according to its purpose. The first and second poems that Donne wrote to Lady Bedford, "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" (Milgate, pp. 90-91) and "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things" (Milgate, pp. 91-94), may be classified as petitory epistles. From the quotation above, one might think they should be called conciliatory epistles ("which serveth in acquiring of friendship or acquaintance"). Day, however, discriminates between conciliatory and petitory epistles in *The English Secretorie*. Conciliatory epistles may be sent by "men of good accompt to such as

---

\(^{1}\) Day, *The English Secretorie* (1599), sig. D3\(^v\). The description of the deliberative epistle in the first edition is rather truncated. Thus, the one from the fourth edition is given instead.
are something their inferiours," as well as to those "who are accompted equals, but seldom or never is frequented to such as are our betters." Later, Day notes that conciliatory epistles

... seemeth not to retayne anie such force whereby an inferiour person may in the termes or order thereof, approche to require an inducement of loue or liking from one that is his better, for that it appeareth being handled in the same kind, it should rather be deemed Petitorie then otherwise, for somuche as it beehooueth in such a cause, wherein the case so standeth, the termes to be farre more submissiue and humble, then in this Conciliatorie by the matter thereof may in any wise be permitted.

"Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" (Milgate, pp. 90-91) and "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things" (Milgate, pp. 91-94) may therefore be classified as petitory epistles. They are the first two verse letters that Donne sent to Lady Bedford, and through them he endeavors to acquire her friendship. In the first verse letter, Donne tells Lady Bedford that his love for her grew not from reason, as that of those "who have the blessing of your sight" (line 3, Milgate, p. 90), but from "far faith" (line 4), referring possibly to the testimony of Goodyere who introduced Donne to the Countess. Then Donne explains his plan for reinforcing his faith with the proofs of reason:

... I study you first in your Saints,
Those friends, whom your election glorifies,
Then in your deeds, accesses, and restraints,
And what you reade, and what your selfe devize.
(11. 9-12, Milgate, p. 90)

\(^4^2\) Day, The English Secretorie, sig. L4v.

\(^4^3\) Ibid., sig. L7v.
Likewise, in the second verse letter, "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," Donne compares Lady Bedford to a religious shrine and maintains that the lines he writes to her "are Petitions, and not Hymnes; they sue / But that I may survay the edifice" (ll. 33-34, Milgate, p. 92). The poet reiterates his desire to make her acquaintance in the last lines of the poem:

The Mine, the Magazine, the Commonweale,
The story'of beauty,'in Twicknam is, and you.
Who hath seene one, would both; As, who had bin
In Paradise, would seeke the Cherubin.
(ll. 69-72, Milgate, p. 94)

The third verse letter that Donne addressed to the Countess of Bedford, "You that are she and you, that's double shee" (Milgate, pp. 94-95), is a consolatory epistle written to assuage Lady Bedford's grief at the death of her cousin and close friend, Lady Bridget Markham. Day outlines three methods of mitigating grief through the consolatory epistle. The first method concerns mutability, which the wise man accepts. The second, the one closest to Donne's approach, is employed when addressing "a personage of hie and statelie minde."

Such mourners

... are and must be enabled stoutly to bear, what others, as weakelinges doe lie groueling under, by reason wherof, we find greter cause to rejoyce in the worthines of so goodly a minde, then occasion and waies to go about to relicue their sorrowes.45

44 Some editors conjecture that the subject of the verse letter may have been Cecilia Bulstrode, another cousin of Lady Bedford, who died about the same time. However, the reference to Judith in the last line of the poem indicates that Donne was referring to Lady Markham, a widow (Milgate, p. 260). The close identification of Lady Bedford and the dead woman of the poem seems to rule out Mistress Bulstrode, a rather notorious person. See Bald, Donne, pp. 177-179.

The third method Day recommends is the writer's identification with the sorrow of the aggrieved. In his verse letter, Donne dwells upon the union of Lady Bedford and the dead woman. Lady Markham continues to exist although

Her flesh rests in the earth, as in a bed;  
Her vertues do, as to their proper sphære,  
Returne to dwell with you, of whom they were.  

(11. 28-30, Milgate, p. 95)

Both subject and recipient of the poem are honored: the former by comparison with her greater kinswoman, Lady Bedford; the latter by her ability to endure sorrow through subsuming the dead woman's virtues.

By late 1609-1610 when the next three verse letters, "T'have written then, when you writ" (Milgate, pp. 95-98), "This twilight of two yeares, not past nor next" (Milgate, pp. 98-100), and "Honour is so sublime perfection" (Milgate, pp. 100-102), were written, Donne had been a close friend of Lady Bedford for a few years. He apparently felt that their relationship had developed to a degree sufficient for him to engage in the delicate business of offering her advice. The three verse letters mentioned above all try to persuade Lady Bedford to the wisdom of some position and may be termed hortatory epistles.

Concerning hortatory and dehortatory epistles, Day explains:

These kind of epistles receiuing for the moste part a diuersitie of affections (which Nature hath ordained as it were certaine prickes or provocations within us, whereby to induce the ready & direct way to Virtue, or terrifie us by like degrees from pursue of vices) haue in them sundrye oppositions, correspondent vnto all their properties.\(^\text{47}\)

\(^{46}\)Ibid., sig. D2\(^v\). \(^{47}\)Ibid., F6-F6\(^v\).
In "T'have written then, when you writ," Donne counsels against "a fugitive and cloistered virtue" in reminding Lady Bedford that

Even in you, vertues best paradise,
Vertue hath some, but wise degrees of vice.
Too many vertues, or too much of one
Begets in you unjust suspition;
And ignorance of vice, makes vertue lesse,
Quenching compassion of our wretchednesse.

(ll. 75-80, Milgate, p. 98)

This passage refers possibly to Donne's fear that the Countess might become overzealous, causing her either to judge him too harshly or to remove herself from the affairs of the court in which she could be a powerful force for good. Bald comments that "despite her apparent worldliness there was a pietistical strain in Lady Bedford which, as she grew older, became more and more tinged with Puritanism."

In "This twilight of two yeares, not past nor next," Donne speaks about the skepticism with which human praise is often met and diffidently phrases his own recommendations for the conduct of Lady Bedford's life as if God, not he, were the only credible adviser. Nevertheless, Donne recognizes that one of the most useful functions of the verse letter is encouragement of the recipient to strive for perfection. Day comments:

The efficacie of praise is no doubt, of rare and singular force, to exhort and stirre vp to well doing. For what I pray you is it, that preferreth and encourageth the common actions and endeouurs of all men, but the generall allowance and regard that is euery where made of them? Is it not accompt alone that giueth encouragement to Virtue': Is Virtue so fullie advanced in anye thing, as in the honour and commendation that is attributed vnto the same':

---

48Bald, Donne, p. 174.
For so and in such maner hath Nature framed the mindes of mortall men, that there is no one of them liuing, that is of so base and contemptible a spirite, but by praise and commendation he may be drawn vp into a liking: which being so, the force therof in Exhortation must of necessity greatly preuaile.\(^{49}\)

The last hortatory epistle to Lady Bedford, "Honour is so sublime perfection," considers the need for uniting religion and discretion and for keeping them in balance. Milgate's remarks on the previous verse letter apply almost as well to "Honour is so sublime perfection": "Donne's friendship with the Countess is now close enough to allow him to offer some advice . . . with implied gentle criticism of her indulgence in Court frivolities (she took part in five Court Masques 1604-10).\(^{50}\) The emphasis on discretion may also intimate some concern on Donne's part over Lady Bedford's role in the political maneuvering of the court.

The last two verse letters to Lady Bedford, "Epitaph on Himselle: To the Countesse of Bedford" (Milgate, p. 103) and "Though I be dead, and buried" (Milgate, p. 104), are the most difficult to classify. Grierson places the first poem in a section entitled "Epitaphs" rather than with the verse letters. He also includes a ten-line epitaph, not in Milgate, before the part named the "Omnibus."\(^{51}\) Yet the poem in Milgate's edition is not an epitaph, or poem written to honor a dead person, in the strict sense. It is rather a petitory epistle requesting, as Day says, one of those "things . . . which fauourably and with great indifferencie, are oftentimes to be required, and bestowed as counsell,


\(^{50}\)Milgate, p. 266.  \(^{51}\)Grierson, 1:291.
aide, patronage, good speeches, naturall care and regard & such other like.\textsuperscript{52} Donne composed this verse letter apparently as "a valedictory gesture before leaving for France."\textsuperscript{53} If Milgate's conjecture is correct, the poem dates from 1611-1612 when Donne was preparing to go abroad with Sir Robert Drury in order to increase his opportunity for preferment.\textsuperscript{54} Donne must have realized his plan was of dubious expediency, for he risked alienating Lady Bedford by accepting Drury's invitation. Thus, by means of the verse letter, he hoped to assure his place in her beneficent regard. In the conceit of the poem, Donne is "dying" (by going away from her) and asks Lady Bedford to place the poem in her "Cabinet" to insure his fame. Paradoxically, he begs a "Legacie" of her:

Heare this, and mend thy selfe, and thou mendst me,
By making me being dead, doe good to thee,
And thinke me well compos'd, that I could now
A last-sickeoure to syllables allow.

(11. 21-24, Milgate, p. 103)

The last verse letter Donne addressed to the Countess of Bedford, the unfinished "Though I be dead, and buried," is a reconciliatory epistle, the purpose of which is to regain Lady Bedford's esteem after the slight to her implicit in his writing and publishing of "The Anatomie of the World" and the "Second Anniversarie" in 1611 and 1612.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52}Day, The English Secretorie, sig. M2\textsuperscript{V}.

\textsuperscript{53}Milgate, p. 272.

\textsuperscript{54}Bald, Donne and the Drurya, p. 87.

\textsuperscript{55}Grierson, 2:178.
arose because of his fulsome praise of Mistress Elizabeth Drury, the
dead daughter of Sir Robert Drury, in the "Anniversaries." He was
unable to regain his former status with Lady Bedford or to complete
"Though I be dead, and buried," his last verse letter to her.

The classification of the verse letters to the Countess of
Bedford shows that Donne had a specific rhetorical end in mind in each
of the poems. Because his purpose is to persuade Lady Bedford to
some action or condition, first friendship, then conduct appropriate
to her position, and finally renewal of her regard, Donne addresses
her by means of the deliberative epistle which necessitates a style
different from that either of the lyrics or of the familiar verse
letters. Donne's application of the precepts for the deliberative
epistle will be considered at greater length in the next chapter.
CHAPTER IV

STYLISTIC QUALITIES OF THE VERSE LETTER

The previous chapter has considered the historical development of the verse letter, its differentiation from other kinds of poetry, and ends or purposes that give rise to its four diverse forms. In order to classify Donne's letters to the Countess of Bedford, this chapter will examine the various traits of the verse letter, especially that of decorum.

Decorum, as Milton writes in his treatise "Of Education," "is the grand masterpiece to observe."¹ One need only check any dictionary of literary terminology to note the importance of decorum to all art, Eastern and Western, ancient and modern.² The critical essays of the Renaissance, including those of Puttenham, Hoskins, and Day, contain important treatments of decorum as well. In The Arte of English Poesie (1589), George Puttenham, who uses the "scholasticall term" decencie for decorum, observes that

by reason of the sundry circumstances that mans affaires are, as it were, wrapt in, this decencie comes to be very much alterable and subject to varietie, in so much as our speach asketh one maner of decencie in respect of the person who speaks, another


of him to whom it is spoken, another of whom we speake, another
of what we speake, and in what place and time and to what purpose. 3

Similarly, in Directions for Speech and Style, John Hoskins notes
that in composing epistles one must consider invention and fashion.
Fashion consists of four qualities of style: brevity, perspicuity,
life ("pithy sayings, similitudes, conceits, allusions to some history,
or other commonplaces"), and respect. Respect, synonymous with decorum,
is the ability to "discern what fits yourself, him to whom you write,
and that which you handle, which is a quality fit to include the
rest. . . ." 4

After briefly mentioning "comelines of deliuerance," along with
"aptnes of wordes & sentences," and "breuity," as one of the three
basic requirements of the letter, Angel Day devotes the fourth chapter
of The English Secretorie to the consideration of "comelines," which
is his translation of decorum. 5 It is "that which fitteth or best
besemeth how, or which way soeuer." Further,

this kind of comelinesse or beseeming (as well as in any other
behauiour) beeing herein of like principall and most choice
regard, extendeth to the consideration of the person to whom, and
of the cause whereof we meane at any time to write. 6

Decorum, respect, comeliness, whichever word the critics use,
the concept is central to the verse letter. Its form derives directly


4Hoskins, Directions for Speech and Style, ed. Hoyt H. Hudson


6Ibid., sig. B3.
from the rule of decorum: appropriateness to speaker, to subject, and to kind.  

Consideration of Donne's verse letters from the viewpoint of decorum may help to illuminate facets of the poems only hazily realized heretofore.

Donne's relationship with Lady Bedford has already been discussed in the first chapter. She was an extremely powerful woman, giving precedence in this regard only to her closest friend, Queen Anne herself. Drayton's pique at his loss of status with Lady Bedford indicates the desirability of holding a high place in her regard. Donne's position in her affairs, then, was an enviable one; for beyond the possibility of immediate financial reward, it also held the potential for preferment. But Lady Bedford was not only Donne's patroness but also his intellectual companion.

In 1608, the year in which he wrote the first verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, Donne, who was middle-aged, married, and father of five children, could hardly have addressed the Countess of Bedford in the guise of the Petrarchan or Donnian lover. He turned naturally to the verse letter, the form he had used often before to address gentlemen. His course had already been well plotted by Horace,

---

7 There is an important distinction between the verse letter and other types of poems such as dedicatory poems, which are merely addressed to a single individual. In distinguishing between Horace's satires and his epistles, Archibald Y. Campbell comments that "the satire, indeed, is apt to address itself to somebody, but it is liable to forget him for considerable passages; or he may be a mere 'man of straw.' The epistle never, perhaps, quite forgets its addressee, and some have all along an acute sense of his individuality...." See Horace: A New Interpretation (London: Methuen, 1927), p. 260.

8 Bald, Donne, p. 171.

9 Ibid., p. 538.
who forsook the writing of lyric poetry for epistolary writing when he entered middle age. As Horace wrote to Maecenas in Epistle I, Book I:

Some one there is who is always dinning in my well-rinsed ear: "Be wise in time, and turn loose the ageing horse, lest at last he stumble amid jeers and burst his wind."

So now I lay aside my verses and other toys. What is right and seemly is my study and pursuit, and to that am I wholly given.  

As early as 1597, Donne also was considering the abandonment of lyric poetry as this verse letter "To Mr Rowland Woodward" shows:

Like one who in her third widowhood doth professe
Her selfe a Nunne, ty'd to retirednesse,
So'affects my muse now, a chast fallownesse;

Since shee to few, yet to too many'hath shewn
How love-song weeds, and Satyrique thornes are growne
Where seeds of better Arts, were early sown.

(11. 1-6, Milgate, p. 69)

As perhaps befits one contemplating entrance into the ministry, Donne again takes up the theme of forsaking composition of profane verse, this time in "T'have written then, when you writ" (1609), a letter addressed to Lady Bedford herself:

So whether my hymnes you admit or chuse,
In me you'have hallowed a Pagan Muse,
And denizend a stranger, who mistaught
By blamers of the times they mard, hath sought
Vertues in corners. . . .

(11. 15-19, Milgate, p. 96)

Donne selected the epistolary form because of the serious subjects he was preparing to treat in addressing the Countess of Bedford. One fact often lost on Donne's critics is that the verse letters convey advice, condolence, and compliment as literally as do his numerous

---

letters in prose. R. C. Bald notes that "the verse letters addressed
to friends and patrons differ from normal correspondence mainly because
of the metrical form into which they were cast." Thus Donne's
testimony concerning his prose letters would apply as well to his
verse letters. On August 15, 1607, he wrote to Sir Henry Goodyere:

For mine, as I never authorized my servant to lie in my behalfe . . . so I allow my Letters much lesse that civill dishonest, both because they go from me more considerately, and because they are more permanent; for in them I may speak to you in your chamber for a year hence before I know not whom, and not hear my self. They shall therefore ever keep the sincerity and intemerateness of the fountain, whence they are derived.

The one purpose behind both the prose and the verse letters
negates the idea that Donne assumed a different voice when addressing
Lady Bedford in epistolary form. Given Donne's esteem for Lady Bedford,
one must assume that the poet is speaking in his own voice in addressing
her almost as if she were divine; for example, he calls her "The first

11 Bald, Donne, p. 5. Alexander Pope's reasons for writing the four epistles which constitute the "Essay on Man" in verse rather than in prose may help to illuminate Donne's choice of verse over prose also. Pope says of the "system of Ethics" which he proposes in "The Essay on Man": "This I might have done in prose; but I chose verse, and even rhyme, for two reasons. The one will appear obvious; that principles, maxims, or precepts so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards. The other may seem odd, but is true. I found I could express them more shortly this way than in prose itself; and nothing is more certain, than that much of force as well as grace of arguments or instructions depend on their conciseness. I was unable to treat this part of my subject more in detail without becoming dry and tedious; or more poetically, without sacrificing perspicuity to ornament, without wandering from the precision, or breaking the chain of reasoning. If any man can unite all these without diminution of any of them, I freely confess he will compass a thing above my capacity" (Works, ed. William Roscoe, 10 vols. [London: Printed for C. and J. Rivington et al., 1824], 5:23-24).

good Angell, since the worlds frame stood, / That ever did in womans shape appeare" ("Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," 11. 31-32, Milgate, p. 91). If the Countess is a near divinity in the poems, the speaker, Donne, must be a worshipper, a posture condemned by critics as blasphemous at one extreme and as servile at the other. Yet passages from Donne's sermons, written after his acute financial needs had been allayed, prove that the sentiments and attitudes expressed in the verse letters are not postures Donne expediently assumed to appeal to the vanity of noble ladies, but ideas he held consistently throughout his life. They further support the contention that Donne spoke in his own voice in the verse letters.

In his first sermon, Donne writes that "temporal blessing" imply spiritual favor. For God

... purges us by his sunshine, by his temporal blessings; for, as the greatest globes of gold lye nearest the face and top of the earth, where they have received the best concoction from the heat and sun; so certainly, in reason, they who have had Gods continual sun-shine upon them, in a prosperous fortune, should have received the best concoction, the best digestion of the testimonies of his love, and consequently be the purer, and the more refined metall.13

In another sermon, preached at Whitehall on November 2, 1617, Donne again testifies to the nobility's potential for spiritual achievement: "Though as Princes are Gods, so their well-govern'd Courts, are Copies, and representations of Heaven. . . ."14

Similarly, passages from the sermons may be applied directly to Lady Bedford. For example, Donne notes that

13 Sermons, 1:163.
14 Ibid., p. 223.
... as Beauty and Riches, and Honour are beames that issue from God, and glasses that represent God to us, and ideas that return us into him, in our glorifying of him, by these helps, so we may apply our selves to them; for, in this consideration as they assist us in our way to God, they are above us. . . .

In "This twilight of two yeares, not past nor next," a verse letter to Lady Bedford written ca. 1610, he tells her that God will teach her how she "should lay out / His stock of beauty, learning, favour, blood" (11. 36-37, Milgate, p. 99). In "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," Donne lists her excellences as "Vertue, Art, Beauty, Fortune" (line 2, Milgate, p. 91). Thus, Donne's praise of Lady Bedford in the verse letters is both faithful to his perception of her and consonant with his belief that the potential for holiness was inherently greater in the aristocracy than in the common people. He saw as his personal duty what Day recommended as the obligation of all epistolographers in addressing their superiors: to challenge them to virtue by presenting in letters the highest type of goodness for their emulation.

This idea pervaded society and was generally accepted by it.

In a letter to the Queen of Bohemia, King James's daughter, written "upon the occasion of the Prince, his Being in the first Parliament after his comming out of Spain," Lady Bedford tells the Queen how well her brother has conducted himself and continues:

And, Madam, give me leave to wish, that you would in one Letter, at least, take notice of what you hear of him, from them, who will neither flatter him, nor dissemble with you; since there is no bodie who doth well, but is glad to hear thereof. And it is both a part of their recompence, and encouragement to them, to persevere, and strive for more and more glory, that such notice is

15Ibid., 2:132.
taken of deserving praise, as may assure them, they are greater
gainers by what they Do, then they are, for how much soever,
Blood or Title may enrich them with, above other men.\textsuperscript{16}

An even more convincing argument for the sincerity of Donne's
verse letters to Lady Bedford lies in Donne's answer to Ben Jonson who
had criticized the \textit{Anniversaries} for attributing to Elizabeth Drury
the praise that belonged only to the Virgin Mary. Donne replied that
he had "described the Idea of a Woman and not as she was." In the
same way, one may argue that in the hyperbolical praise of Lady Bedford,
Donne was attempting to depict through the individual example the
universal idea of virtue.\textsuperscript{17} In the words of D. J. Palmer, "Donne's
use of the language of religious faith is not the inflated rhetoric of
a sycophant, but itself an image of that inspired leap of insight by
which wit moves."\textsuperscript{18}

The verse letter is an acceptable form, for it fulfills all the
rules of decorum, namely, a triple appropriateness: to the writer,
Donne, to the recipient, the Countess of Bedford, and to the message
of petition, advice, compliment, and condolence which the verse letters
convey. Decorum is the most important canon because it implicitly
provides for the others, but the verse letter also conforms to rules
regarding brevity and "aptness of wordes & sentences."\textsuperscript{19} These

\textsuperscript{16}Tobie Matthew, \textit{A Collection of Letters} (London: Riviere & Son, 1660), pp. 60-61.


\textsuperscript{19}Day, \textit{The English Secretorie}, sig. A3\textsuperscript{v}.
qualities differentiate the verse letter from other forms, especially the oration.

Brevity consists not in "fewnes of lines" but rather "brevities of matter," for, as Day says, "continuance of matter ought not be used in the Epistle, for that it thereby looseth the shew of an Epistle, and taketh upon it the habit of an Oration." Nonetheless, some epistles may "admit such scope" and contain "many Oratorie parts" without risk to their form.20

Hoskins' treatment of brevity is somewhat more descriptive than Day's. When writing to a superior, one must consider the nature of the relationship, the addressee's understanding, and his time. Hoskins recommends moderation to the letter writer:

For your interest and favor with him, you are to be the shorter or longer, more familiar or submiss, as he will afford you time. For his capacity, you are to be quicker or fuller of those reaches and glances of wit or learning as he is able to entertain them. For his leisure, you are commanded to the greater briefness as his place is of greater discharges and cares. With your better you are not to put riddles of your wit by being too scarce of words, nor to cause the trouble of making breviats by writing too plenteously and wastingly.21

Donne often expressed his concern about keeping the principles which Hoskins enumerates. In writing to George Gerrard about a translation (according to Merrill, probably of Gazaeus' Vota Amico Facta) Donne adds:

I spake of this to my L[ady] of Bedford, thinking then I had had a copy which I made long since, at Sea, but because I finde it not, I have done that again: when you find it not


21 Hoskins, Directions for Speech and Style, p. 6.
unseasonable, let her see it, and if you think it fit, that a
thing hath either wearied, or distasted you, should receive so
much favour, put it amongst her papers. . . . 22

Donne also took great care never to obtrude his presence, even in
written form, where it might be burdensome. He epitomizes his attitude
in the following metaphor: "It becomes my fortune to deale thus in
single money; and I may hit better with this hail-shot of little
Letters (because they may come thick) then with great bullets; and
trouble my friends lesse." 23 He often cautions Sir Henry Goodyere to
deliver his letters only when he found the "good Lady" to whom the
letter was addressed "emptiest of businesse and pleasure." 24

Donne consciously avoided trying the recipient's patience or
confounding him with letters whose significance was beyond his grasp.
The poet shows concern for his own reputation as well in answer to
Goodyere's suggestion to write to the Countess of Huntington whom he
had known years before when he had worked for Sir Thomas Egerton who
had married her mother: 25

Because I hope she will not disdain, that I should write
well of her Picture, I have obeyed you thus far, as to write:
but intreat you by your friendship, that by this occasion of
versifying, I be not traduced, nor esteemed light in that Tribe,
and that house where I have lived. If those reasons which moved
you to bid me write be not constant in you still, or if you meant
that I should write verses; or if these verses be too bad, or too
good, over or under her understanding, and not fit; I pray receive
them, as a companion and supplement to this Letter to you. . . . 26

23Ibid., p. 226. 24Ibid., p. 130.
25Bald, Donne, pp. 110-111.
26Letters to Severall Persons of Honour, p. 90.
In his two longest verse letters to the Countess of Bedford, "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things" (Milgate, pp. 91-94) and "T'have written then, when you writ" (Milgate, pp. 95-98), Donne respects the boundaries of "matter." In the first poem, after a long disquisition on Lady Bedford's virtue and beauty, Donne halts the discourse with:

But these (as nice thinne Schoole divinity
Serves heresie to furder or represse)
Tast of Poetique rage, or flattery,
And need not, where all hearts one truth professe.

(ll. 61-64, Milgate, p. 93)

He preserves credibility by "leaving ... busie praise" (line 67, Milgate, p. 94). In the second long verse letter, after seventy lines, he reminds himself and the reader, "But I must end this letter"; and after ten more lines in which he examines the idea that "Vertue hath some perversenesse" (line 73), he interjects, "But these are riddles" (line 81), to keep his argument from becoming too recondite.

If brevity prevents the turning of letters into orations, perspicuity forbids their composition in the style of an "English statute." Like most of the dicta governing the letter, perspicuity is a counsel of moderation. Perspicuity, Hoskins tells us,

... is oftentimes endangered by the former quality [brevity], oftentimes by affectation of some wit ill angled for, or ostentation of some hidden terms of art. Few words they darken the speech, and so do too many; as well too much light hurts the eyes as too little; and a long bill of chancry confounds the understanding as much as the shortest note.28

27Hoskins, Directions for Speech and Style, p. 7.

28Ibid., p. 6.
Plainness, a division of perspicuity, delves most specifically into the nature of the verse letter and is comparable to Day's principle of "aptness of wordes & sentences." Plainness forbids the letter writer . . . to be curious in the order, as to answer a letter as if you were to answer interrogatories: to the first, second, etc., but both in method and word to use, as ladies use in their attire, a kind of diligent negligence. As though with some men you are not to jest or practise tricks, yet the delivery of most weighty and important things may be carried with such a grace as that it may yield a pleasure to the conceit of the reader.29

"Diligent negligence" aptly describes the style of the verse letter. First, it is a personal letter which intentionally reveals the writer's personality as well as his apprehension of the recipient's personality as surely as does a letter in prose. Neither Donne nor any other epistolographer wished to sermonize or to pose problems of logic. In the verse letters to Lady Bedford, Donne takes up the idea of the "knowledge of virtue," the theme of the early verse letters to gentlemen.30 He pursues this theme in poetry almost in the way that one would pursue it in conversation, not according to strict logical rules, but following the course that the ideas plot for themselves.

29 Ibid. In a passage quoted by Palmer (Metaphysical Poetry, p. 73), James Howell, author of Epistolae Ho-Elianae (1645), uses also the clothing metaphor. Howell says: "It was a quaint difference the Ancients did put 'twixt a Letter and an Oration; that the one should be attir'd like a Woman, and the other like a Man: the latter of the two is allow'd large side Robes, as long Periods, Parentheses, Similies, Examples, and other parts of Rhetorical flourishes: But a Letter or Epistle should be short-coated, and closely couch'd; a Hungerlin becomes a Letter more handsomely than a Gown. Indeed we should write as we speak; and that's a true familiar Letter which expresseth one's Mind, as if he were discoursing with the Party to whom he writes, in succinct and short Terms."

30 Palmer, Metaphysical Poetry, p. 87.
Second, often beginning with the main idea rather than putting it last in the climactic position, the letter writer includes the recipient in the composing process by allowing the recipient to see the way in which the poet's mind molds and shapes the idea. Almost in the manner in which he would follow a conversation, the reader experiences the difficulties which the idea poses and the process by which the poet reaches his conclusions. If, as Donne says in his letter to Sir Henry Wotton, "letters mingle Soules" (Milgate, p. 71), they do so not only by delivering a mutually acceptable idea but also by giving the reader an insight into the idea as it grows and develops in the writer's mind. For example, the verse letter is usually filled with connectives, such as the following in "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" (Milgate, pp. 90-91): But as, yet, So, Therefore, But soone, Then, if ... yet, But, Yet, etc. (from 11. 5-30).

In his first verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, Donne explains the purpose of the letter in the second line: he desires to come to know her better. He proposes to augment his faith in her, whom he characterizes as "divinity," by the proofs of reason. Thus in the third stanza he will "study" her through her friends, her "deeds, accesses, and restraints" (line 11), as well as through her own reading and writing. But when reasonable testimony becomes "infinite" (line 14), he reverts to "implicite faith" (line 15) and accepts the universal teaching "That you are good: and not one Heretique / Denies it" (11. 17-18). Then in view of the last clause comes the most direct

---

31 Irving, Providence of Wit in the English Letter Writers, p. 7.
affirmation of friendship in the poem: "if he did [deny it], yet you are so" (line 18). Donne here lets personal feeling and experience contradict the possibility of logical proof in order to convince the reader of his unshakable faith in her "divinity."

In summation, the verse letter differs from other types of poetry in several ways. First, although it may have a message applicable to a large group, it is addressed to an individual whom the writer keeps firmly in mind. Second, in much the same way as the prose letter, it is more or less personal, the degree depending on the nature of the correspondents' relationship and their relative places in society. Third, as the critics have noted, the verse letter finds its level somewhere between the oration and the legal brief, lacking the ornamentation of the one and the strict logical precision of the other. Fourth, its end is to direct the reader to virtue, not by exposing folly and vice as in the satire, but by the encouragement of praise and by the challenge of example. Because the writer is attempting to convince the addressee of certain truths or beliefs, the form will be argumentative. The verse letter, therefore, is the poetic representation of a conversation, of a process rather than a finished product, of a "mind in action" relating personally to the reader.
CHAPTER V

PETITIOn AND PRAISE IN "REASON IS OUR SOULES LEFT HAND, FAITH HER RIGHT"

John Donne wrote "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" (Milgate, pp. 90-91), the first of eight verse letters to the Countess of Bedford, in 1608. The poet was living at the time at Mitcham, a country residence where he felt isolated from the affairs of the city and the court which were his chief interests. Lady Bedford had acquired Twickenham Park in 1607 and set up her "literary court" there.¹ Mitcham's proximity to Twickenham must have alleviated Donne's sense of oppression at living in the country and renewed his hope of re-establishing connections with the court. As Bald suggests, Donne's friendship with the Countess of Bedford was most natural:

She possessed, besides rank and wealth, youth and charm as well as wit and an unusual share of intellectual capacity, and all those qualities attracted Donne to her. She, on her side, found something intoxicating in the brilliance of his mind and in the quality of his flattery.²

Donne's friends Sir Henry Goodyere and Edward Woodward, who handled the reversion of Twickenham Park to Lady Bedford, and Ben Jonson, who had sent a copy of Donne's Satires to her, probably foresaw the amity of

¹Milgate, p. 253. Milgate's textual reading in the verse letters will be used in all of the analyses.

²Bald, Donne, p. 173.
which Bald speaks and undoubtedly encouraged Donne to address the Countess in verse. 3

Donne's intention in "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" is to establish a relationship with the Countess of Bedford in order to gain her friendship and patronage. He tells her whom he characterizes as divine (line 2, p. 90) that he, unlike her other friends, has known her only from afar by "faith" (line 4) and that he wishes "not to'encrease, but to expresse / My faith, as I beleve, so understand" (ll. 7-8). This aim helps to classify the verse letter as a "petitory" epistle, one of the four types of epistle in the category of deliberative rhetoric. 4 To accomplish his purpose, however, Donne uses the tactics of epideictic rhetoric within the larger framework of petition, for, "if epideictic rhetoric is only seldom employed by itself independently, still in judicial and deliberative causes extensive sections are often devoted to praise or censure." 5 Perhaps the section of the poem (ll. 17-32) devoted to direct praise of the Countess of Bedford is instrumental in determining this poem's initial place among the verse letters to Lady Bedford. The topics of epideictic rhetoric, "External Circumstances, Physical Attributes, and Qualities of Character," 6 would seem to make this verse

3Ibid.


6Ibid., pp. 173, 175.
letter "less intimate and occasional" than the other verse letters and
to give it "the tone of an introductory address."\(^7\)

Although as Jay A. Levine has noted, Donne is the least con-
ventional of the writers of verse letters, a division of the poem into
the four parts traditional to the verse letter may serve to illuminate
the method by which Donne conveys his message of petition and praise.\(^8\)
The exordium (ll. 1-8) constitutes the first section of the poem and
has two purposes: first, it introduces Donne's subject, the two ways,
faith and reason, by which "wee reach divinity" (line 2); second, it
disposes Lady Bedford favorably to receive his offering of the poem.
The second part (ll. 9-16) is the narratio or statement of fact. The
first quatrain of the second part (ll. 9-12) seems to fulfill the
traditional function of the partition, namely to outline the steps the
author will take to prove his case.\(^9\) Donne immediately abandons this
formal investigation in the next quatrain, however, and tells the
reader he will base his proof (the confirmatio), the third section of
the poem (ll. 17-32), "on what the Catholique voice doth teach" (line
16). The use of Paracelsian imagery in the words "Balsamum" (line 22)
and "methridate" (line 27) marks the third section of the poem. In
the fourth section, the peroratio or conclusion (ll. 33-38), Donne
re-emphasizes his purpose for writing the poem, to wit, to meet the
Countess personally. The final couplet ends with the altruistic idea

---

\(^7\)Milgate, p. 253.


\(^9\)Corbett, Classical Rhetoric, p. 25.
that if the choice were necessary Donne would forgo seeing Lady Bed-
ford at Twickenham for the greater happiness of meeting her in heaven.
This sentiment softens what otherwise might be construed as his rather
blatant plea for help in the last line, "for all the good which you can
do me here."

The main idea of the first verse letter to the Countess of
Bedford is that because of her virtue the Countess has a salvific
effect on Donne and others with whom she has contact. On the bio-
ographical level, salvation refers to Donne's hope of patronage and
possible preferment. On a higher, more spiritual plane, it means
sanctification. The two strands are entwined throughout the poem.
The first section expresses Donne's desire to increase his faith in
the Countess' virtue and to augment it with understanding. The second
section explains the means by which he hopes to accomplish his ends.
The third is a profession of faith in her goodness, and the fourth is
a plea to her to use her influence as God's "Factor for our loves"
(line 34) to elevate the lives of those around her.

Donne draws upon his knowledge of theology for the main source
of imagery in "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" as
well as in other verse letters to the Countess of Bedford. Milgate
notes that "the relative places of these two faculties [reason and
faith] in 'reaching divinity' constituted an important problem in
mediaeval and Renaissance philosophy."10 Religious imagery serves
two purposes. First, it fulfills the demand of decorum that the

10Milgate, p. 253.
message fit the audience. Second, since Lady Bedford was renowned for her devotion, religious imagery is a vehicle well suited for conveying the twin message of praise and petition which make up the verse letter. If the granting of petition is the natural duty of the nobility, praise is their necessary reward. Conversely, the acceptance of praise, signaled by the acceptance of the verse letter, implies the granting of petition.

The verse letter begins with the briefest of salutations, "Madame," and plunges into the first argument, as Rosamund Tuve points out, with the differentiating images of the left hand and the right hand to define the nature of the soul. Such images also serve to make concrete the abstract concepts of reason and soul. The right hand-left hand dichotomy has been well documented by Milgate, who traces its use in Donne's sermons. The significance of Donne's use of the opposed images to explain the difference between reason and faith lies not in any startling effect the dichotomy may have but in the exact opposite: the idea of the left hand's inferiority to the right is simple and commonplace. The first line owes its economy and precision to the "convenient fact that ideas can be carried by concretions if

---

11Bald, Donne, p. 174.

12Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery, p. 365. The first line of the poem contains an example of prozeugma, a figure in which "the verb is expressed in the first clause and understood in the others..." See Sister Miriam Joseph, C. S. C., Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1966), p. 296. This book has been often used for explanations of the figures cited in this paper.

13Milgate, p. 253.
those have significances either well known or easily indicated. The method of conveying abstract ideas by tying them to concrete images is employed throughout the poem.

The object of reason and faith is the same and is expressed in the second line, "divinity." Donne uses the figure termed emphasis in the phrase "divinity, that's you" in order to impress the reader at the beginning with what he considers Lady Bedford's most prominent trait, namely, virtue.

Unity of the first quatrain and clarity of interpretation depend on acceptance of Milgate's reading of lines 3 and 4. Milgate's text differs in these lines from Grierson's. Following the manuscripts, Milgate reads "sight" (line 3) and "far faith" (line 4) rather than "light" and "faire faith" of the editions. The word "sight" implies proximity: those who love Lady Bedford do so by reason of personal witnessing of her goodness. By contrast, Donne loves her from afar, by faith alone. Grierson notes that the source of "far faith" is probably the quotation, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off" (Heb. 11:13) and comments that "such a condensed elliptical construction is quite in Donne's manner." The phrase "faire faith," which Grierson calls "at first sight ... a rather otiose epithet," seems uncharacteristic of

---

14 Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery, p. 365.
15 Sister Miriam Joseph, Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language, p. 332.
16 Grierson, 2:154.
Donne. "Faire" also upsets the balance of elements Donne achieves with the oppositions: reason-faith, left hand-right hand, and near-far. By joining the concept "far" with faith and right hand, the poet is intimating that he is more worthy of the Countess' friendship than those who have had the good fortune to be near her.

Donne further emphasizes the difference in the growth of his love for the Countess from that of her other friends by the repetition of the word "grew" at the beginning and end of line 4. This constitutes the figure place, "the speedy iteration of one word at frequent intervals," as Puttenham defines it. The repetition of "reason" and "faith" in line 4 parallels the construction of the first line and carries forward the idea expressed in it.

The second quatrains presents an idea that differs somewhat from that of the first quatrains. While the first quatrains posit faith and reason almost as logical contraries in order to stress the superiority of faith, in the second, Donne concedes that although reason is not strictly necessary in reaching divinity, it is nevertheless helpful in human affairs to express faith. It should not be "wanting" or lacking as he says in line 6.

The phrase "squint lefthandednesse" (line 5), an epitheton, expresses more strongly the notion of the inferiority of reason to

---

17 Ibid. "Fair faith" is an epitheton, a figure described by Puttenham as "giving every person or thing besides his proper name a qualitie by way of addition whether it be of good or of bad . . ." (Arte of English Poesie, p. 176).

18 Arte of English Poesie, p. 201. The same definition may be applied to the phrase "do as you doe" (line 34).
faith. A. J. Smith explains it as "(a) a perverse awkwardness or contrariness; (b) a one-sided adherence to reason only."\textsuperscript{19} The construction is original; it is the source of the \textsc{OED}'s definition, "characterized by obliquity of action."\textsuperscript{20} "Squint" resonates with "sight" in line 3 and seems to have been a term Donne favored to express moral imperfection. In a sermon preached November 5, 1626, Donne enumerates the qualifications God suggests for the upright men he will glorify in heaven: "he proposes first a rectitude, a directness, an uprightness; declinations downward, deviations upon the wrong hand, squint-eyed men, splay-footed men, left-handed men, (in a spiritual sense) he meddles not withall."\textsuperscript{21}

The terms "lefthandednesse" (line 5) and "hand" (line 6) constitute a \textit{polyptoton}, a figure based on "the repetition of words which are derived from the same root, but have different endings or forms."\textsuperscript{22} They also continue and develop the left hand-right hand images of the first quatrains and help to unite the second quatrains to the first to form a single section.

The second section, the statement of fact, begins with the enumeration (ll. 9-11) of the adjuncts which will be the basis of the "reasonable" study of the subject, the Countess of Bedford. The order is important. First, Donne will consider her friends, who, because


\textsuperscript{20}\textsc{OED}, 10:745. \textsuperscript{21}\textit{Sermons}, 7:239.

\textsuperscript{22}Sister Miriam Joseph, \textit{Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language}, p. 306.
she is a "divinity," become "Saints." Milgate explains the word "election" as "those whom God 'chooses' to be saved" according to 2 Pet. 1:10-11. Yet the common association of the term with Puritanism cannot be ignored, especially since Lady Bedford herself had strong Puritanical leanings. Second, he will note her "deeds, accesses, and restraints" (line 11), which he mentions with no amplification. "Accesses" and "restraints" refer to those she will admit to her presence and, by extension, favor, and those whom she will not, respectively. Last, in the climactic position, he will study the Countess in what she herself reads and writes. Donne underscores the importance of line 10, "And what you reade, and what your selfe devise," by use of the anaphora. Since Donne did not know Lady Bedford well in 1608, basing their friendship initially upon a literary exchange is safe. It is also flattering to Lady Bedford for the poet to consider her as a peer in his own field of endeavor.

In the fourth quatrain, however, Donne acknowledges that the scheme proposed in the third for the study of Lady Bedford is impossible because there is too much evidence to be considered. He emphasizes this idea in lines 13-14 by repetition of "reasons" in two different contexts to form the figure called antanaclasis. Thus, in the next two lines, Donne returns "to implicite faith" founded upon universal belief to reaffirm his position stated in the first quatrain.

The first four quatrains in which the introduction and the statement of fact are set out form a whole based on argumentation by contrariety. The first four quatrains may be viewed almost as a disjunctive syllogism: a man reaches divinity either by faith or reason; but he cannot reach it by reason; therefore he reaches it by faith.

Unlike the first two sections, the third part, the proof, is argued from similitudes. At the beginning of the fifth quatrain, Donne states what he will prove inductively to the Countess of Bedford in lines 19-32: "That you are good" (line 17). He retains the religious terminology of the earlier parts of the poem in the fifth quatrain. Even if a hypothetical "Heretique" (line 17) denies the Countess' goodness, it is still true. On one hand the affirmation of her goodness may stem from the devotion of the speaker; on the other, in relation to the argumentative structure of the poem, it conforms to the figure *apodixis*:

> When the Orator rejecteth the objection or argument of his adversaries as things needless, absurde, false, or impertinent to the purpose, as proceeding from follie, or framed by malice, or invented by subtillie. . . 26

Donne amplifies the idea of Lady Bedford's imperviousness to slander with the metaphor: "rockes, which high top'd and deep rooted sticke, / Waves wash, not undermine, nor overthrow" (ll. 19-20). Reference to this bit of natural history is consonant with John Hoskins' directives concerning "life," one of the four qualities of style in the verse letter: "life" is depicted by use of "pithy sayings, similitudes, conceits, allusions to some history, or other commonplace." 27

---


27 Directions for Speech and Style, p. 4.
The *Ad Herennium* names three categories of topics for praise or censure: external circumstances, physical attributes, and qualities of character.\(^{28}\) In the sixth and seventh quatrains (ll. 21-28), Donne relates these topics to Paracelsian images to produce an amplified description of Lady Bedford. In the sixth quatrain, her birth, an external circumstance, and beauty, a physical attribute, are a "Balsamum," "a healing fluid which preserves the body and counteracts poisons."\(^{29}\) Her "learning and religion, / And vertue,'and such ingredients" (ll. 25-26), all qualities of character, are a "methridate," "a composite antidote against poisons supposed to have been used by King Mithridates VI of Pontus."\(^{30}\) Milgate points out the distinction between the natural qualities of birth and beauty and the acquired qualities of learning, religion, and virtue.\(^{31}\) Again Donne places the more important intellectual and moral qualities in the climactic position as he does in line 12. He emphasizes them by use of the polysyndeton which produces "a slow, deliberate, impressive effect."\(^{32}\) He distinguishes, moreover, between the effects of the two elements: balsam preserves natural gifts; the mithridate wards off external blows—"keepes off, or cures what can be done or said" (line 28). These lines recall the fifth quatrain which dwells upon Lady Bedford's immunity to slander, certainly an important quality in a courtier.

---

\(^{28}\) *Ad Herennium*, pp. 173, 175.

\(^{29}\) *Milgate*, p. 254.


Donne continues the imagery of the previous lines in the eighth quatrain by explaining that the mithridate is not a "physique" (line 29), that is, a medicine or purge, but the Countess' "food" (line 29), therefore a natural substance, intrinsically good, like the balsam in line 24. The distinction between "physique" and "food" seems fairly common. For example, in George Herbert's "Affliction (1)," the same process has a bad effect: the speaker complains to the addressee of the poem, "Turning my purge to food, thou throwest me / Into more sicknesses" (ll. 51-52).  

The proof adduced throughout ll. 17-30 results in the hyperbole:

for you are here
The first good Angell, since the worlds frame stood,
That ever did in womans shape appear. (ll. 30-32)

Since the term hyperbole is to the modern mind tantamount almost to mendacity, it must be remembered that both speaker and recipient of the poem recognized it as "an excessive similitude" rather than an attempt to deceive. Donne uses the exaggeration to convey rather "the unspeakableness than the untruth" of Lady Bedford's virtue. As he conceives her, the characterization is just: for she fulfills the angelic role of God's agent "by illuminating (as angels do) the minds and consciences of men." She leads them to heaven by teaching them

---

34 Sister Miriam Joseph, Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language, p. 331.
35 Hoskins, Directions for Speech and Style, p. 29.
36 Milgate, p. 255.
through the example of her own virtuous life. A passage from one of
Donne's sermons serves as a commentary on ll. 30-32:

To recompense that observation, that never good Angels appeared
in the likeness of women, here are good women made Angels, that
is, Messengers, publishers of the greatest mysteries of our
Religion.37

The conclusion of the poem (ll. 33-38) carries the petition. The
proof shows that Lady Bedford is unique, that is, "Gods masterpeece"
(line 33), and, by extension, "His Factor" (line 34) or agent.38 Donne
is reminding her of a dual role: first, to participate in the salvation
of her friends (the "Saints, / Those friends, whom your election
glorifies," ll. 9-10), who will go "home" (line 35) to heaven with her;
and second, by insinuation, to help her friends like Donne near her
earthly home, Twickenham. Although Shawcross interprets "home" (line
35) as "Twickenham,"39 it seems to refer rather to heaven because Donne
depicts Lady Bedford as angelic and heaven is the dwelling place of
angels. However, the composition of the letter would have been futile
if Donne completely believed the statement, "I would not misse you
there / For all the good which you can do me here" (ll. 37-38).

Because of the logical framework of the poem as well as the
language which is employed, the poem is intellective, rather than
emotive, in nature. First, the development of the introduction and the
statement of fact rests upon definition by differentiation. The argu-
mentative nature of these sections is emphasized by use of connectives,

37Sermons, 9:190. 38Milgate, p. 255.
39John T. Shawcross, ed., Complete Poetry of John Donne, Anchor
such as "but" (line 5) and "therefore" (line 9), common to syllogistic reasoning. Second, although the proof by similitudes lacks the force of metaphor, the use of Paracelsian imagery to define Lady Bedford's character and to make her virtues more concretely understood is strikingly original. Yet the Paracelsian imagery is not mere ingenious ornamentation because of the comparison drawn between virtue and balsam as "even, and continuall." Third, the most important and therefore the most praiseworthy of Lady Bedford's qualities from Donne's viewpoint are intellectual and moral virtues: her own reading, writing, learning, religion, and "vertue."

The emotional phase of the poem is more difficult to characterize, mainly because the poem does not operate on the level of feeling but moves the recipient through thought. Except for the metaphor of the rocks (ll. 19-20), pictorial imagery which we generally consider sensuous is lacking. The chief emotional note Donne strikes is respect, almost awe, of the woman he has raised to near divinity. Donne seeks by logical persuasion to make Lady Bedford realize and accept emotionally her position as God's agent for either spiritual or material good. The emotional tone of the first and second sections is restrained in keeping with the tight logical framework of those sections. It rises to its highest intensity in ll. 17-18 with the poet's unqualified profession of faith in the Countess' goodness. Then Donne returns to a quieter tone which he sustains throughout the rest of the proof, ll. 19-32. In praising the Countess' physical, intellectual, and moral qualities, he eschews the personal as perhaps indiscreet but rather

\[40\text{Milgate, pp. 254-255.}\]
objectifies these qualities by comparison of them with balsam and the
mithridate. His method of praise is individualistic yet universally
understandable because of his audience's knowledge of the elements of
Paracelsian medicine. The emotional tone shifts to one of hope in the
last six lines of the letter; for, having "proved" not only that Lady
Bedford is angelic but also that he is worthy of her friendship, he
naturally wishes to benefit spiritually by her tutelage and materially
by her help and influence.

The metrical pattern complements the intellectual and emotional
elements of the poem. Like other verse letters, "Reason is our Soules
left hand, Faith her right" follows no prescribed pattern of construc-
tion. Yet the fact that it is a verse letter addressed to a real
person by a poet who speaks in his own voice affects the metrical
pattern of the poem. Except for the last stanza, a sestet, it is
written in quatrains which follow an abab pattern. By manipulation
of caesura and enjambment, the metrical pattern reflects the pattern
of thought.

Iambic pentameter is the basic metrical unit of the poem. The
frequent use of caesura gives the poem the abrupt rhythms which reflect
the workings of the poet's mind. For example, in ll. 19-20, "For,
rockes, which high top'd and deep rooted sticke, / Waves wash, not
undermine, nor overthrow," the caesuras afford the poet the opportunity
to define the quality of the rocks ("high top'd and deep rooted") as
well as their ability to withstand the effects of the "waves." Thus,
Donne describes Lady Bedford's goodness by analogy with the properties
of the rocks. The caesuras which occur in enjamed lines give the poem
an ebb and flow that seem natural and spontaneous. Lines 33-36 best reflect the operation of the combination:

Since you are then Gods masterpeece, and so
His Factor for our loves; do as you doe,
Make your returne home gracious; and bestow
This life on that; so make one life of two.

Scansion of the first line--Reason / is our / Souls left / hand,
Faith / her right--reveals the accuracy of D. J. Palmer's statement concerning "a syntax cutting freely across the metrical pattern within each quatrain." Further, the elisions such as "Be'ungracious" (line 6), "to'encresce" (line 7), "to'implicite" (line 15), and so forth, in which the two elided syllables are counted as one, keep the line to five feet yet impart a sense of energy and vehemence. For example, in the seventh quatrain in which the poet lists the virtues of Lady Bedford which constitute a mithridate, line 26 with the elision of "vertue" and "and" impresses one as nearly bursting the confinement of form.

The diction befits the style and content of the poem. It is for the most part familiar, although not commonplace. The words "accesses" and "restraints" (line 11) refer tactfully to those whom Lady Bedford admits to her presence. Further, words derived from Anglo-Saxon roots impart sturdiness to the language. "Squint" (line 5) conveys concretely the idea of moral imperfection because of its association with physical defect. As used in the synthetic genitives "worlds frame" (line 31) and "womans shape" (line 32), the words "frame" and "shape" denote an easily visualized physical form to add specificity to the general terms.

"world" and "woman." The words "Factor" (line 34) and "gracious" (line 35) are redolent with meaning. Milgate describes "Factor" as "God's agent" and "gracious" as "happy, fortunate, prosperous." Since "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" is a petition, the commercial connotations in the two words cannot be ignored. Besides its meaning as "agent," "Factor" refers to one who is a "partisan," "adherent," and "approver," and, commercially, to one "who buys and sells for another person." Further, if Lady Bedford's "returne home" is truly "gracious," it will be characterized by kindness, indulgence, and beneficence to inferiors. Donne expects Lady Bedford as God's "Factor for our loves" (line 34) to intercede for him in heaven, her "home" (line 35), as well perhaps as at court.

The poem is enriched by words like "implicite" (line 15) and "extrinsique" (line 23) which add conciseness to the thought. "Catholicque" (line 16) refers not only to the Church of England and its teaching power but also to the universal acclaim accorded to Lady Bedford by all those who know her. The words drawn from Paracelsian lore, namely, "Balsamum" (line 22) and "methridate" (line 27), objectify and make concrete what otherwise could have become an ordinary recitation of virtues. They force the reader to compare birth and beauty with balsam and learning, religion, and "vertue" with the mithridate, and thereby they elevate the praised qualities above the level of mere flattery. Donne states explicitly that the balsam and mithridate are Lady Bedford's "food" (line 29), not a "physique" (line 29), or medicine. Milgate explains the qualification:

---

At the back of Donne's mind might have been the further story of Mithridates, that he tried to commit suicide by poisoning himself, but had so built up protection by taking mithridate in the past (almost as 'food') that the poison could not take effect. . . .\(^{45}\)

One may summarize the analysis in relation to Hoskins' four qualities of style (respect or decorum, brevity, perspicuity, and "life") in the verse letter. Donne wrote "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" to gain Lady Bedford's friendship and patronage. First, in regard to decorum, his method of petition is appropriate to their respective social positions. Through praise he recommends to the Countess an ideal of conduct in discharging her duties to those of lower estate. For Donne believes in the nobility's power for good as his letters also attest.

Second, Donne insures brevity by limiting the matter discussed to the reason-faith dichotomy, which he examines within the framework of the four parts of the letter. He arrives at brevity also by use of figures such as prozeugma, by avoidance of extended metaphors, and most of all by direct entry into the subject and by pursuit of the subject without digression.

Third, Donne shows perspicuity, which demand plainness, to avoid turgidity in his comparison of Lady Bedford's virtues to the elements of Paracelsian medicine. Further, he obeys the dictum that "there must be store, though not excess, of terms":\(^{46}\) he never uses his knowledge of scholastic theology to confound his audience in an attempt to impress.

\(^{45}\text{Milgate, p. 255.}\)

\(^{46}\text{Hoskins, Directions for Speech and Style, p. 7.}\)
Fourth, the quality of "life" is present in the use of the sententious statement to begin the poem, in the building of the argument on the well-known idea of the left hand's inferiority to the right hand, in the reference to natural history in the metaphor of the "rockes," and in the similitudes based on Paracelsian doctrine. All in all, within the form of the verse letter, Donne frames an acceptable tribute to the Countess of Bedford, who responded with the gift of her friendship.
John Donne's first verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," apparently had the effect the poet desired, to gain personal access to the Countess for him. Written sometime later in 1608 than the first verse letter, "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things" (Milgate, pp. 91-94) represents his meeting the Countess at Twickenham. Like the first verse letter to Lady Bedford, it is a "petitory" epistle in which Donne sues to "survay the edifice" (line 34), that is, to gain knowledge of her at first hand, to become one of those friends who have "the blessing of your sight" (line 2, "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," Milgate, p. 90).

Although "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things" has the same aim as the first verse letter to Lady Bedford, it is much richer in metaphor than "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right." Bald calls the second verse letter "the most beautiful of all his verses to her." It is also less abstract than the first verse letter, which is based on the reason-faith dichotomy. In the first part of the poem (ll. 1-30), Donne begins again with a differentiating figure,

---

1 Milgate, p. 256.
2 Bald, Donne, p. 175.
"Rareness, or use, not nature value brings" (line 3). He develops the idea concretely by stating that virtue is as rare at court as beauty is in the country. The first part of the poem is reminiscent of the Renaissance literary debate about the relative merits of life in the country, city, and court, which Donne considers in a verse letter, "Sir, more then kisses, letters mingle Soules" (Milgate, pp. 71-73), to Sir Henry Wotton, written ca. 1597-1598. However, to praise Lady Bedford, Donne maintains that she delivers the court by her virtue and redeems the country by her beauty.

The second part of the poem (ll. 31-60), the petition and proof, dwells upon the celebration of Lady Bedford's beauty by comparison of it to outstanding places of Christian worship in Rome, climaxing with the reference to the Escorial, the palace of King Philip II of Spain. In ll. 55-60, Donne unites the ideas of beauty and goodness, which he has considered separately in the beginning of the poem. The third part of the poem (ll. 61-72) modestly disclaims what may be considered the overzealous praise of the earlier sections (ll. 61-66) and reaffirms (ll. 67-72) Donne's estimate of the transcendent beauty of Lady Bedford.

The general survey of the plan of the poem indicates that Donne's purpose is principally to celebrate Lady Bedford's beauty, and, secondarily, to praise her goodness. As he states explicitly in ll. 31-34:

---

2 Bald, Donne, p. 175. 3 Milgate, p. 225.
4 Ibid., p. 258.
Yet to that Deity which dwells in you,
Your vertuous Soule, I now not sacrifice;
These are Petitions, and not Hymnes; they sue
But that I may survay the edifice.

He raises the idea of her beauty almost to a mystical level and endues it with the gift of prophecy: "Of past and future stories, which are rare, / I find you all record, all prophecie" (ll. 51-52). Donne's concentration primarily upon a single quality marks a departure from his method in "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" in which he praises an external circumstance, her birth, a physical attribute, her beauty, and intellectual and moral qualities, her "learning and religion, / and vertue" (ll. 25-26, Milgate, p. 91). The movement from the generalized acclaim of the first verse letter to the more specific praise of the second indicates the growth of the poet's confidence in and knowledge of the subject.

Either Lady Bedford's warm reception of Donne, perhaps because of the first verse letter, or his anticipation of a cordial meeting with her, prompted him to attribute to her a beneficial effect on him in ll. 1-2: "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things / (Vertue, Art, Beauty, Fortune,) . . . ." The key word in line 1, "refin'd," an "alchemical metaphor," refers to the transmutation of the poet and a sharpening of his understanding. As Grierson notes aptly:

What meaning is there in saying that a man is refined to "beauty and fortune"? Poor Donne was not likely to boast of either at this time. What he says is something quite different, and strikes the key-note of the poem. "You have refined and sharpened my judgement, and now I see that the worthiest things owe their value to rareness or use. Value is nothing intrinsic, but depends on circumstances."

5 Milgate, p. 256. 6 Poems, 2:156.
After the brief two-line introduction, Donne states immediately the proposition upon which he bases the structure of the poem: "Rarenesse, or use, not nature value brings" (line 3). Line 3 may also be a "witty variation" on the idea that "Nature, Reason, and Use," rather than "rarenesse, or use," are necessary to acquire virtue. The quotation from Grierson above explains line 4: that "Vertue, Art, Beauty, Fortune" depend on circumstances rather than intrinsic worth for their value. According to the OED, Donne's use of "circumstanc'd" as a participial adjective is rather novel. The first usage cited is from Randle Cotgrave's Dictionary (1611). The second is line 4 of "You have refin'd mee, and to wortbyest things" (1631). The couplet which ends the first stanza provides an explanation of line 4. In line 5, Donne follows Aquinas' teaching that God does not cause or will one to sin, an idea that the poet later voiced in a sermon:

God never puts his children to a perplexity; to a necessity of doing any sin, how little soever, though for the avoiding of a sin, as manifold as Adam's.

In a letter to Goodyere (1608), Donne considers the idea that one may choose the lesser of two evils to avoid a greater sin. In line 6, the closing line of the couplet, Donne presents the antithesis to line 5: "But of two good things, we may leave and chuse." He expands upon the "two good things," Lady Bedford's virtue and beauty, in the second and third stanzas, eventually to "leave," that is, "pass

---

7 Milgate, p. 257.  
8 OED, 2:435.  
9 Milgate, p. 257.  
10 Sermons, 1:197.  
11 Milgate, p. 257.
over,"\(^{12}\) virtue in order to dwell on beauty, before bringing them together again at the end of the proof.

The second stanza expands on the first term of the proposition, rareness, and, specifically, rareness of virtue at court. Donne uses the figure litotes, which intensifies by understatement,\(^ {13}\) to describe the court as "not vertues clime" (line 7), a rather discreet way of saying the court is morally corrupt. Lines 8-9 contain the double brackets--"(Where a transcendent height, (as, lownesse mee) / Makes her not be, or not show)" . . .--a parenthetical comment on the lack of virtue at court, which Grierson clarifies by addition of the bracket after "show" to correct the text of the 1633 edition.\(^ {14}\)

Although he says that such a construction, in which "distracting" thoughts are heaped together, is characteristic of Donne, Grierson mentions also that Donne's castigation of himself in "(as, lownesse mee)" is irrelevant.\(^ {15}\) However, two ideas may be presented to mitigate Donne's use of the phrase. First, a verse letter is a poem written to a particular person; thus such a phrase is admissible because it seems spontaneous and part of the object of the verse letter is to allow the recipient insight into the workings of the poet's mind. Second, the meiotic, or as Puttenham calls it, the "diminishing" figure,\(^ {16}\) "(as, lownesse mee)" balances the hyperbolic praise of Lady Bedford's

---


\(^ {14}\)Poems, 2:156-157.  

\(^ {15}\)Ibid., p. 157.

\(^ {16}\)Lanham, Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, p. 65.
virtue as beyond the perception of those at court, who unlike Donne, have not been "refin'd ... to worthyest things" (line 1). Further, he enhances the praise of Lady Bedford by diminishing himself.

Returning to the main thought after the parenthesis, Donne asserts, in the syntactically inverted construction of ll. 9-10,\textsuperscript{17} that "at Court her virtues test the full extent of his poetic powers to describe them, because they are rarest there, more truly transcendent."\textsuperscript{18} In the closing couplet he explains metaphorically the role he envisions for himself as her laureate. Because of the rarity of virtue at court, Lady Bedford is a "darke" text (line 11), that is, a difficult or obscure text which demands explanation. Thus, Donne will "usher vertue," and announce "This is shee" (line 12), a clause reminiscent of his emphatic pronouncement in line 2 of "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," in which he says that reason and faith are two means "By which wee reach divinity, that's you" (Milgate, p. 90).

E. R. Curtius traces Donne's use of the book simile (ll. 11-12) from its origins in pulpit oratory in which nature or the world was conceived as a "book," through "medieval mystico-philosophical speculation," into secular and common usage. Curtius follows book metaphors through the Renaissance and notes that for Montaigne "the book of the world is an epitome of the discernible truths of history and life."

Finally, Curtius mentions Donne's similes from the book in "A Valediction:

\textsuperscript{17}Milgate, p. 257.

\textsuperscript{18}Smith, ed., Complete English Poems, p. 552.
of the booke" (Grierson, Poems, 1:29-32) and in "The First Anniversary" (11. 147, 227, Grierson, Poems, 1:238). 19

The third stanza begins with a construction parallel to that which begins the second stanza: as virtue is rare "at Court" (line 7), "So in the country'is beauty" (line 13). Donne is at or near Twickenham, Lady Bedford's home, to which "this place" (line 13) refers. The allusion to Twickenham and the direct address to Lady Bedford in line 13 make the poem more personal than the first verse letter by keeping the recipient of the poem present in it. Line 14, "You are the season (Madame) you the day," represents the figure, parison, or "corresponding structure in a sequence of clauses," 20 combined with prozeugma, in which the verb "are" is expressed in the first clause and only understood in the second. 21 The effect of the repetition and compression is a build-up of emotion, which increases the surprise produced by the word "grave" in line 15. "Grave" obviously connotes death and silence and when joined with the phrase "of spices" forms the figure catechresis. It is a "diminishing figure," 22 which epitomizes all of Donne's feelings about spiritual barrenness in the midst of the fecundity of nature. By contrast, in ll. 15-16, the presence of Lady Bedford's beauty, her "face" (line 15), causes "the

---


22 Tuve, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery, p. 130.
buds to open (as the sun does), releasing the scent." As Milgate points out, in the context of ll. 15-16, "exhale" means "to draw up or drive off in the form of vapour; to evaporate"; or in a rarely used form, "to draw up (a vapour); to draw out the perfume of (e.g., a rose)." The couplet (ll. 17-18), a simile, clarifies and recapitulates the meaning of lines 13-16. Line 17, "Widow'd and reclus'd" connotes death, silence, and seclusion; "sweets" refers to "spices" (line 15); and "enshrines," "shuts up (like precious things in a shrine)," probably relates to an older definition of "grave": "formerly often applied loosely to a receptacle for the dead not formed by digging, as a mausoleum." The last line graphically illustrates the emptiness of the country which is like China, when the sun, a metonymy for all the people under the sun, "dines" at high noon in Brazil.

In ll. 19-24, Donne amplifies the sun metaphor of the previous stanza. Stanza four is an elaborate description of Lady Bedford's arrival at Twickenham, which conforms to the figure pragmatographia: "a vivid description of an action or event." Donne inserts this description, seemingly uncharacteristic of a relatively short poem such as a verse letter, to accentuate the importance he places on Lady Bedford's arrival. Because she is the sun, her coming reverses the natural sequence of light and darkness. She steps out of her "chariot" (line 19), a "poetic" word in keeping with the exaggeration of the

23Milgate, p. 257. 24OED, 3:405.
25Milgate, p. 257. 26OED, 4:373.
28Lanham, Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, p. 121.
stanza, and paradoxically "morning breaks at night" (line 19); she brings light to evening, after the sun has set. Thus, she "falsifies both computations" (line 20), of the "natural day," (twenty-four hours) and of the "artificial day," the daylight hours.\(^{29}\) Grierson interprets ll. 19-22 as follows:

When she emerges from her chariot it is the breaking of a new day, the beginning of a new year or new world. Both the Julian and the Gregorian computations are thus falsified (ll. 19-22). It shows her truth to nature that she will not suffer a day which begins with the actual appearance of the light (23-24: a momentary digression).\(^{30}\)

However, Gardner's simpler interpretation, adopted by Milgate, seems to be the correct one. With the repetition of "new" in ll. 21-22, to form the figure *place*, which according to Peacham serves "both to the pleasure of the eare and sense of the mind," Donne emphasizes his intention in the first two verse letters: if Lady Bedford, as the sun, creates a "new world" (line 21), she must populate it with "new creatures" (line 22), new friends like Donne. The couplet which concludes the fourth stanza appears to be a literal statement, but it is actually a witty comment on the power over nature that Donne attributes to Lady Bedford in ll. 19-22. Since she is the sun, she brings light with her wherever she goes. Hence she will not "suffer," or bear, the "artificiall day," the normal daylight hours between sunrise and sunset. Thus, her conduct is consonant with nature from which she "lothly," i.e., "reluctantly," or "unwillingly" strays.\(^{31}\)


\(^{30}\)Poems, 2:157.

\(^{31}\)OED, 6:374.
Line 25, "In this you have made the Court th'Antipodes," recalls line 18, in which the country is as desolate "as China, when the Sunne at Brasill dines." "Antipodes" refers to the opposite pole, which is deprived of the sun when the Countess is at Twickenham. Donne now invests the metaphor of the Countess as the sun with deific character. By contrast, the natural sun becomes common and ordinary--her "Delegate, the vulgar Sunne" (line 26). It does "profane autunnall offices" (line 27). Donne's selection of "autumnall" points up the allusiveness of his method. While "autumnall" may refer to the autumnal equinox, "the equal durations of light and night," it connotes also the death of nature. Thus, in Lady Bedford's absence the Court experiences autumn, but when she is at Twickenham it is spring, signalling the rebirth of nature in ll. 15-16. Since the second verse letter to Lady Bedford was written later in 1608 than the first, perhaps in autumn, the blossoming of nature at the Countess' arrival in the country, which "'tis but a grave of spices, till you face / Exhale them, and a thick close bud display" (ll. 15-16), is another "witty absurdity" in that buds appear usually in spring. Because she is the sun and has godlike powers, her friends, the "new creatures" of line 22 are also "sacrificers" (line 28) who come to greet her. In turn, these "sacrificers" are either "Priests, or Organs" (line 29), a distinction which foreshadows that of the sixth stanza between those who go to church to worship as opposed to those who regard it as an intellectual and aesthetic experience. Smith construes the distinction between "Priests"...

and "Organs" as between those who "serve her ends in the world or merely celebrate her." 33

Lines 29-30, "And whether Priests, or Organs, you see obey, / We sound your influence, and your Dictates say," represent the figure chiasmus, a scheme in which "the first element and the fourth, and the second and the third are conjoined giving a scissor formation in the sentence." 34 "Sound your influence" refers obviously to "Organs," as "your Dictates say" refers to "Priests," who read "the Countess's sacred words." 35 If Donne casts himself in the role of priest, the "sacred words" of the Countess may allude to her poetry. According to Bald, Donne enclosed the second verse letter to the Countess with a prose letter in which he asked to see some of her poetry. 36

In the first five stanzas, Donne has imputed godlike qualities, such as power over nature, to Lady Bedford. In the sixth stanza, he retreats from this position, and for the rest of the proof, to line 60, he will consider her extrinsic merits. As Grierson puts it: "Donne draws back from the religious strain into which he is launching. He will not sing Hymns as to a Deity, but offer petitions as to a King, that he may view the beauty of this Temple, and not as Temple, but as Edifice." 37 The key to Donne's shift in the manner of praise lies in another figure of difference in line 33: "These are Petitions, and not

35Milgate, p. 258.
36Donne, p. 175.
Hymnes." Again, the closing couplet (ll. 35-36) clarifies his position: "In all Religions as much care hath bin / Of Temples frames, and beauty,'as Rites within." By analogy with the externals of religion, namely, places of worship, he signals that he will study only her external beauty.

The seventh stanza develops the idea of the sixth by comparison: as Donne wishes to celebrate Lady Bedford's physical beauty so the traveller goes to Rome not as a religious pilgrim, committed to the profession of the Roman Catholic faith, who may "esteem religions, and hold fast the best" (line 38), but as a secularist interested only in the trappings of religion, "that which doth religion but invest" (line 40). "Invest" means "to clothe, robe, or envelop (a person) in or with a garment or article of clothing; to dress or adorn" and points to the aesthetic appreciation of the externals of religion. The stanza is interesting in that it conveys some of Donne's ambivalence towards religion. Donne may have made a trip to Rome during the period of his travels from 1589 to 1591 and may have travelled to Naples to visit his maternal uncle, Jasper Heywood, a Jesuit priest. Lady Bedford was of course staunchly Protestant. The comparison of her to the outward manifestations of religion is apt as long as Donne avoids "th'entangling laborinths of Schooles" (line 40). "Schooles" relates to "the Schoolmen, the scholastic philosophers and theologians collectively," a construction of the word Donne employs also in Biathanatos. To engage the Countess' attention through the verse letter, Donne avoids

---

38 **OED**, 5:456.  
39 Bald, **Donne**, p. 52.  
antagonizing or confounding her with theological disquisition. Yet, in
the figure polyptoton, the "employing of the same word in various
cases," in line 42, "And make it wit, to thinke the wiser fooles," he
gently reproves the completely secular viewpoint. The couplet which
ends the seventh stanza contains also the figure anaphora, by repeti-
tion of And at the beginning of lines 41 and 42. Donne repeats the
figure in lines 45 and 46 in which What begins each line. A figure of
repetition, anaphora contributes to and accentuates the mellifluous
flow of the lines.

In the two previous stanzas, Donne establishes his wish to praise
publicly Lady Bedford's physical beauty in the way one would admire the
external grandeur of a church. In the eighth stanza, which Donne links
to the seventh with the idea of a "pilgrimage" in line 43, he will
regard her as "vertues temple" (line 44) rather than virtue itself.
The "walls" or facade of this edifice which is Lady Bedford are "of
tender christall" (line 45), an example of condensed paradox called
synaesthesia. Connoting hardness, clarity, and transparency, crystal
was thought by ancient and medieval writers to have been formed by a
continuous natural process. It is characterized by "symmetrically
arranged plane faces." "Tender" adds delicacy to the description.
Milgate offers an interesting commentary on Donne's use of "tender
christall." First, it refers probably to "specular stone," which,
according to Guido Panciroli, Nero used to build a temple to fortune
(as opposed to virtue, in this verse letter). Second, Panciroli calls

---

41 Lanham, Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, p. 78.
42 Ibid., p. 70.
43 OED, 2:1230.
Nero's temple a chapel; hence he himself becomes one of the "Bablers of Chappels" of line 48. Third, the term "tender christall" itself may be taken from Pliny who notes that one variety of specular stone is soft. In line 46, Donne compares Lady Bedford's "eyes, hands, bosome" to the altars of the temple, which perhaps stretches the analogy a bit because Donne sues to "survay the edifice" and altars are obviously among the interior furnishings. Donne's method in the eighth stanza is to praise by "comparison from the less": he shows that "vertues temple," i.e., Lady Bedford, is superior to Nero's temple. He completes the stanza on the highest note of praise, by comparing Lady Bedford to the Escorial, the royal pantheon and monastery of the Spanish kings.

Stanzas nine and ten represent a retreat from the high praise of stanza eight. Because the poem primarily celebrates her beauty, he will view her "not as consecrate" (line 49), or sacred, because, as he states in the sixth stanza, he is not sacrificing to her indwelling "Deity" (line 31), her "vertuous Soule" (line 32). As beauty is rare in the country, he regards himself as a countryman, as opposed to courtier, and as a layman, rather than a priest. He says in 11. 51-54:

Of past and future stories, which are rare,
I finde you all record, all prophecie.
Purge but the booke of Fate, that it admit
No sad nor guilty legends, you are it.

Milgate interprets 11. 51-52 as possible references to "Donne's recollection of friezes on ancient altars depicting 'stories' (history or

44 Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters, p. 258.
45 Ibid.
legend)" or to the Escorial's being also a library and university. His mention of "the booke of Fate" specifies perhaps the "darke texts" of line 11. Further, the "booke of Fate" may be understood as the Book of Life, "the record of the names of those who shall inherit eternal life."

Until stanza ten Donne has dwelt upon Lady Bedford's beauty, rather than her virtue. Now he reunites the two qualities and emphasizes the complete integration of goodness and loveliness in Lady Bedford. In saying that she is "The Elements, the Parent, and the Growth" (line 57) of both her beauty and her goodness, he imputes that she is the material, the formal, and the final cause of them. They are of her essentially, as the body is of the soul. The last two lines (ll. 59-60) reflect the familiar Donnian idea of the wholeness of virtue. The words "So'intire are your deeds, and you" seem to foreshadow the thought of "Honour is so sublime perfection" in which he states that "Beeing and seeming is your equall care" (line 32, Milgate, p. 102). There can be no discrepancy between thought and action; thought dictates action. Thus, "you / Must do the same thing still: you cannot two." He insinuates that she cannot diverge from former behavior in regard to him.

Stanzas eleven and twelve, the conclusion of the poem, bring the relationship of writer and recipient into sharp focus. Decorum dictates that he fit the message to the reader; the poet must steer between the

---

\(^{46}\)Ibid., pp. 258-259.

\(^{47}\)Shawcross, ed., Complete Poetry, p. 227.

\(^{48}\)OED, 1:989.

\(^{49}\)Milgate, p. 184.
twin dangers of weak praising, which he calls "a kind of Accusing" and overpraising, which is "a kind of libelling." Clearly he fears overpraising when he comments that his lines may "Tast of Poetique rage, or flattery" (line 63). He amplifies that idea with the simile "as nice thinne Schoole divinity / Serves heresie to furder or repress" (ll. 61-62). "Nice thinne Schoole divinity" is insubstantial theological disputation which stimulates rather than alleviates controversy. Thus, since his own words may be misinterpreted, he says modestly that they are unnecessary "where all hearts one truth professe" (line 64). This line of thought is similar to that of the first verse letter in which the reasons for love of Lady Bedford become so numerous that he says "back againe to'implicite faith I fall, / And rest on what the Catholique voice doth teach" (ll. 15-16, Milgate, p. 90). The closing couplet is an example of commoratio, a repetition of the argument made in the first four lines but in different words. His use of "new" in succeeding phrases, "new proofes, and new phrase, new doubts" (line 65), is, like the repetition of "all" in "all records, all prophecie" (line 52), the figure diacope. He recapitulates with the simile that as new evidence or testimony may cause speculation, so friends may appear unfamiliar when seen in different clothes.

---


52 Lanham, Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, p. 125.

53 Ibid., p. 124.
Finally, in the last stanza, he eschews "busie praise" (line 67), praise which is "prying, inquisitive, meddlesome," or "officious,"54 as well as "appeale / To higher Courts" (ll. 67-68), the proofs of reason, for, in what Milgate calls a paradox,55 "senses decree" (line 68), what he can perceive especially by sight.

He piles up compliments in the figure auxesis: she is "The Mine, the Magazine, the Commonweale, / The story of beauty" (ll. 69-70). Donne's meditation upon the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt offers a commentary on the word "Mine":

Only to paraphrase the History of this Delivery, without amplifying, were furniture and food enough for a meditation of the best perseverance, and appetite, and digestion; yea, the least word in the History would serve a long rumination. If this be in the bark, what is in the tree? If in the superficial grass, the letter; what treasure is there in the hearty and inward Mine, the Mistic and retired sense.56

"Magazine" is a storehouse or repository.57 "Commonweale," "the common well-being; esp. the general good, public welfare, prosperity of the community,"58 signifies Donne's perception of Lady Bedford's role as deliverer of the Court by her goodness and redeemer of the country, namely Twickenham, by her beauty. The final couplet compares Twickenham to Paradise, Lady Bedford to the Cherubim. Grierson notes that the Seraphim are the highest order of angels but the comparison to the Cherubim is more felicitous in that they are traditionally the most

---

54OED, 1:1210.
56Essays in Divinity, p. 74.
57OED, 6:21. 58Ibid., 2:696.
beautiful angels. Thus the second verse letter ends similarly to the first in which Donne depicts Lady Bedford as "The first good Angell, since the worlds frame stood" (line 31, Milgate, p. 91).

"You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things" shows a better balance between intellect and emotion than does Donne's first verse letter to the Countess of Bedford. Like the first verse letter, it begins with a differentiating image: that "Rarenesse, or use, not nature value brings" (line 3). However, Donne personalizes this abstract idea by applying it immediately to Lady Bedford's life at court and at her country home. His concentration thereafter on her physical beauty rather than on her virtue intimates the growth of their personal relationship; for in the first verse letter he emphasizes her intellectual and moral virtues. While adhering to the traditional framework of introduction, proposition, proof, and conclusion, he imbues the verse letter with warmth, first, by his flattering and witty comparison of Lady Bedford to the sun and, second, to the magnificence of the Escorial, an all-encompassing image which connotes religion, as well as learning and architectural excellence.

His mention of the Escorial is only one example of his use of vivid imagery. He objectifies his thoughts about the power of Lady Bedford's presence by comparing the country to China when the sun is at the opposite pole, in Brazil. The mention of place names, China, Brazil, Rome, the Escorial, is itself evocative.

Besides the citation of place names, Donne draws his imagery chiefly from three other sources: first, nature; second, religion;
and, third, images of the book. Nature imagery, loosely so called, is not characteristic of Donne but apt for the description of Lady Bedford's home in the country. Among the natural images are the "grave of spices" (line 15), "the thick close bud" (line 16), and "sweets" (line 17). Related to the natural images are those he draws from his interest in geography: "China" and "Brazill" (line 18); "a new world" and "your light" (line 21); "new creatures" and "new reckonings" (line 22); "artificiall day" (line 24); "the'Antipodes" (line 25); "the vulgar Sunne" (line 26); and "profane autunnall offices" (line 27).

Second, to reiterate, Donne employs imagery associated with religion, first, because of Lady Bedford's renowned personal piety and, second, because praise couched in religious terminology would be acceptable within the boundaries of decorum. The major portion of this imagery relates to churches as physical entities, "Temples frames" (line 36). He begins by characterizing her "vertuous Soule" (line 32) as a "Deity" (line 31). He makes "Petitions" instead of singing "Hymnes" (line 33), obviously two kinds of "Rites" (line 36) or ceremonies which occur in churches. The functionaries in these churches are simply "Priests, or Organs" (line 29) rather than theologians, for he shuns actively "th'entangling Laborinths of Schooles" (line 41) and "nice thinne Schoole divinity" (line 61). He cites "Rome" (line 37) as a traditional seat of religion and speaks of making a "pilgrimage" (line 43) to see Lady Bedford as if she were a religious shrine. He compares her "eyes, hands, bosome" to "pure Altars" (line 46) and her, generally, to the "Escuriall" as opposed to
lesser "Chappels" (line 49).

Third, after duly noting through selection of images Lady Bedford's pleasure in her country home, and her interest in religion, he acknowledges her love of learning through book imagery. She is a "darke" text (line 11) which needs "notes" (line 11), or amplification, at court where virtue is not readily apprehended. She is "record" and "prophecie" (line 52) of "past and future stories" (line 51). In the ultimate image, she is the "booke of Fate" (line 53), if in a somewhat bowdlerized version, devoid of "sad" and "guilty legends" (line 54).

To balance the direct personal appeal of the imagery, Donne employs an interesting series of short, sturdy words which impart vehemence to the poem, especially when used as qualifiers. For example, "clime" (line 7), now chiefly a poetical usage, isolates the court as a region where virtue is unknown and contrasts with Lady Bedford as "the season" and "the day" (line 14). "Darke" in "darke texts" (line 11) connotes intellectual obscurity and lack of visual perception. It contrasts with the "light" (line 21) Lady Bedford brings to the country and to herself as "faire" (line 49). "Usher" (line 12) is contextually apt in the second stanza which deals with introducing virtue at court, and it suggests Donne's ability to fill that position. In line 16, "thick" and "close" suggest the hardiness of the "bud" that Lady Bedford's face brings forth—in contrast to the "Schoole divinity" which is "nice," that is, "minute, subtle; also of differences, slight, small," and "thinne" (line 61).

---

60DEd, 2:501-502. 61DEd, 7:126.
The words "clime" and "chariot" are specifically poetic and lend a whimsical aspect to the poem. "Computations" (line 20), "recknings" (line 22), and "Antipodes" (line 25) complement the geographical references in the third and fourth stanzas.

Finally, two other elements contribute to the beauty of the poem. The first is Donne's use of the couplet to close each stanza. The closing couplet functions often to amplify the quatrain to which it is affixed. For example, after explaining how rare virtue such as that of Lady Bedford is at court, he adds in the couplet: "For, as darke texts need notes: there some must bee / To usher vertue, and say, This is shee" (line 12). After explaining how Lady Bedford's coming produces light even at night, he says: "This shows that you from nature lothly stray, / That suffer not an artificiall day" (ll. 23-24).

Second, like the amplification provided by the closing couplets, figures of repetition like anaphora, ll. 41-42 and ll. 45-46, contribute to the sense of fullness and completeness that is manifest in the poem. His use of parison, "corresponding structure in a sequence of clauses," in line 14 and diacope, "the repetition of a word with one or a few words in between," such as "new," in line 65, and "all" in line 52, emphasizes his ideas and give the lines a sonorous quality.

One may follow the inception of Donne's friendship with Lady Bedford through his first two verse letters to her. He is tentative, afraid of offending, in "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right." Thus, he concentrates on her intellectual and moral virtues.

---


63Lanham, Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, p. 124.
Gaining confidence from her acceptance of the first verse letter, he adopts a warmer, more personal tone in "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things." He dwells on her beauty and its effect on all that it shines upon. Thus, Donne accomplishes his mission of petition and praise. The verse letters gain him the place he desired in Lady Bedford's esteem.
CHAPTER VII

CONSOLATION IN "YOU THAT ARE SHE
AND YOU, THAT'S DOUBLE SHEE"

John Donne wrote "You that are she and you, that's double shee" in 1609 to console the Countess of Bedford on the occasion of the death of one of her closest friends. Lady Bridget Markham, one of the Ladies of the Queen's Bedchamber, died at Twickenham, Lady Bedford's home, on May 4, 1609. Her death was followed closely, on August 4, 1609, by that of Cecilia Bulstrode, likewise a friend of Lady Bedford and a gentlewoman of the bedchamber of Queen Anne.¹ The closeness of the time of death of both ladies casts some doubt on which is the subject of the verse letter; however, the reference to the Book of Judith in the last line of the poem indicates that the lady mentioned in the poem was, like Judith, a widow. Cecilia Bulstrode never married; Lady Markham was the widow of Sir Anthony Markham, who died in December, 1604.² Further, the biblical description of Judith, "There is not such a woman from one end of the earth to the other, both for beauty of face and wisdom of words" (Jud. 11:21), fits Lady Markham, as it does not Cecilia Bulstrode. In a letter to Goodyere a few days before Mistress Bulstrode's death, Donne compared her voice to "her fashion,"

¹Bald, Donne, pp. 177-178.

²Milgate, p. 260.
which the poet said "was ever remisse." Indeed, Cecilia Bulstrode's life at court was jaded by scandal. Her conduct prompted Ben Jonson to satirize her in a poem called "The Court Pucell." Thus, it would have been incongruous to address this verse letter to Lady Bedford, if Mistress Bulstrode were the "she" of the first line because Lady Bedford subsumes the dead woman's virtues in the poem. The epitaph on Lady Markham's grave in Twickenham churchyard attests to her relationship with Lady Bedford: "Inclytae Luciae Comitissae de Bedford sanguine (quod satis) sed et amicitia propinquissima."

Donne attempts to mitigate Lady Bedford's grief at the loss of Lady Markham. For "You that are she and you, that's double shee" is a consolatory epistle. As has been mentioned before, Angel Day proposes three ways to console the bereaved: first, by reminding him of the mutability of all things; second, by counseling him to endure suffering; and third, by the writer's identifying with the recipient's sorrow. Donne chooses the second course. He encourages Lady Bedford to bear the suffering caused by the death of her friend in the knowledge that Lady Markham's virtues are not lost but reside now in Lady Bedford. He compliments them both: Lady Bedford, for her ability to bear misfortune; Lady Markham, for her life of rectitude which is worthy of Lady Bedford.

---

4Grierson, 2:213.
Donne effects his intention to console Lady Bedford principally by proof through similitudes. As Thomas O. Sloan notes:

One may go almost so far as to state that Donne believed a proposition was established if it could be proved by means of similitudes—that is, if its existence could be tested or experienced by drawing conclusions from demonstrable relationships. If one thing is true or exists, a similar thing could be true or could exist; the construction of the demonstration requires axioms which relate the two things—the known with the unknown, or the familiar with the unfamiliar.

The first part of the poem (ll. 1-4) is the statement of fact: first, that Lady Bedford is "she and you" (line 1) and second, that because of the death of Lady Markham, the ladies "become one of two."

The proof of these statements is divided into two parts: ll. 5-26, in which Donne states that Lady Bedford is "th'other halfe of clay" (line 14), the physical embodiment of Lady Markham, and ll. 27-40, in which all of Lady Markham's virtues dwell in Lady Bedford. The conclusion (ll. 41-44) indicates that Lady Markham is matchless and irreplaceable and ends with the comparison of her to the Book of Judith.

The first four lines of the poem follow the sub-topic genus, for Lady Bedford and the dead woman form a class unto themselves. Milgate explains the first four lines,

You that are she and you, that's double shee,
In her dead face, halfe of your selfe shall see;
Shee was the other part, for so they doe
Which build them friendships, become one of two

according to "the mystical mathematics of love and friendship [in which] two souls are one and each is two." These lines may be

interpreted in yet another way. In discussing Invention, Aristotle lists "Topics useful in arguments of all kinds (koinoi topoi)" of which the first is the Possible and Impossible. Of genus he says,

If the genus belongs to the number of possibilities, the species does; and vice versa; thus, if a sailing vessel can exist, a trireme can, and vice versa of two things naturally interdependent, one is possible, the other is so; as, if double is possible, half is so; and vice versa.10

If Lady Bedford and Lady Markham are "naturally interdependent" because of their friendship, then Lady Bedford can become "double shee" and see half of herself in the dead woman's face.

In the proof, Donne justifies the classification, first by fixing limits on it—"So two, that but themselves no third can fit" (line 5). Second, he maintains that their friendship was predestined before their birth. He draws out their unity through two comparisons, one from astronomy, "As divers starres one Constellation make" (line 8) and one from anatomy, "Pair'd like two eyes, have equall motion, so / Both but one meanes to see, one way to goe" (ll. 9-10). The emphasis on their unity intensifies throughout the comparisons in that the comparisons move from the macrocosmic, the Antipodes, to the microcosmic, the pair of eyes. Even though the two ladies may have been born at the Antipodes, "Cusco" and "Musco," i.e., Cuzco in Peru and Moscow, Russia,11 they are gathered into the same galaxy, and finally they together make up a pair of eyes, independent but

---

9 Lanham, Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, p. 107.  
11 Milgate, p. 260.
sympathetic organs. The movement of the pair of eyes mirrors that of
the larger spheres.

Third, in ll. 11-14, he stresses their equality, as well as
unity, by arguing from opposites. If Lady Bedford had died first,
Lady Markham would have been a "carcasse" (line 11) and "wee your
rich Tombe in her face had seene" (line 12). In actuality, represented
in line 2, "In her dead face, halfe of your selfe shall see." That
Lady Markham precedes Lady Bedford in death is thus irrelevant, for
one wholly represents the other. Donne emphasizes their unity by
considering them a single being, made up of body and soul. The "Soule"
(line 13), Lady Markham, departs, but Lady Bedford remains, "th'other
halfe of clay" (line 14). He amplifies the idea of their equality with
the allegory of the dead "Prince" (line 16), parts of whose body are
buried in different places, although each is revered at each burial
site as if it were the whole.12 Lines 19-20 represent a return to
the earlier idea that through friendship the two ladies have "become
one of two" (line 4). Thus, although Lady Markham is dead, she lives
in her double, Lady Bedford, because in Lady Bedford "all contracted
is" (line 22). He stresses the continuance of Lady Markham through
Lady Bedford by analogy with virtue in ll. 23-26:

As of this all, though many parts decay,
The pure which elemented them shall stay;
And though diffus'd, and spread in infinite,
Shall recollect, and in one All unite . . .

12Ibid. Milgate explains the reference to the dead prince by
citing the example of Richard I, whose heart was buried at Rouen,
while the rest of his body was at the Abbey of Fontevrault.
Here Donne invokes an elementary principle of physics that energy, "the pure" (line 24) cannot be destroyed but only dissipated. One may make a closer analogy to Paracelsian chemistry in which "the pure" is the elixir or tincture that makes the essences of metals quintessential. Lines 25-26 refer, as Milgate comments, to Lady Bedford's becoming a new third person by addition of Lady Markham's virtues as well as to the idea of the reunion of the body and the soul at the general resurrection. These lines echo ll. 15-16 in which the body of the dead prince, though scattered, is reverenced as a whole. Donne specifies the thought of ll. 23-26--"Her vertues do, as to their proper spheare, / Returne to dwell with you, of whom they were" (ll. 29-30). Here Donne identifies the Paracelsian idea of virtue as "balsam," "mummy," or life force with the Platonic idea of its indivisibility. He reinforces the idea of the indivisibility of virtue by use of one of his favorite symbols of perfection, the circle, in line 31. The circle is particularly apt in this context because it is a figure which only can be divided arbitrarily and thus represents well the unity of the two ladies. He emphasized their unity by comparison of Lady Bedford to the sea (line 32), the common receptacle of all "lesse streames" (line 32), to which all of Lady Markham's virtues naturally flow.

---


15 Milgate notes that in ll. 31-32, "the exigencies of rhyme and versification have defeated Donne here to some degree." Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters, p. 261.
Donne centers the description upon Lady Bedford most specifically in ll. 39-40, "Shee was all spices, you all metalls; so / In you two wee did both rich Indies know," Donne seems to indicate the "basically opposite (and complimentary) personalities"\(^\text{16}\) of the two ladies. As the "Indies" are opposites on the globe but are, nonetheless, united by the water which encircles it and "spices" and "metalls" connote different kinds of qualities—spices, the gentler and warmer virtues, metals, the more "manly," colder virtues—so the Indies are points along the continuum, the circle, which flow into each other. Thus, Donne suggests that Lady Bedford may enhance and complete her own virtuous nature by assuming the virtues of her dead friend. Lest that insinuation seem derogatory, however, the poet expatiates, in ll. 35-37, on the superior quality of the perfect metal, gold. He does not deal with the commercial aspects of gold because that too would be derogatory. Rather he considers the qualities which inhere in it as a metal as Lady Bedford's virtue is inherent in her. As Rugoff comments, Donne dwells not on sense impressions produced by gold but rather on its technical qualities, "on gold's basic formation, ductility, fusility, tensile strength, lustre or—most frequent of all—malleability, its extraordinary capacity to be beaten to any thinness."\(^\text{17}\) Thus, gold, the substance which best symbolizes Lady Bedford's virtue, endures without blemish the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, and, referring to its malleability, like virtue can be "expans'd in infinite" (line 38). Lines 39-40, "So, to your selfe you

\(^{16}\)Shawcross, ed., Complete Poetry, p. 249.

you may additions take, / But nothing can you lesse, or changed make,"

carry the comparison of gold to virtue further: as their friendship
like gold is perfect, it is impervious, like gold, to diminution in
strength, value or quality. 18

Donne concludes the poem with the reminder to Lady Bedford that
she cannot alleviate her grief over the loss of Lady Markham by trying
to duplicate her friendship with another person. Since Lady Markham's
virtues live on in Lady Bedford, there is no need to search further
for consolation. Instead, as a tangible remembrance of Lady Markham,
the poet instructs Lady Bedford to leave the Book of Judith (line 44)
in "her roome" (line 43), apparently the room in Lady Bedford's house
where Lady Markham died. Further, the Book of Judith is a token of
Lady Markham, for line 43, in "her roome," may also mean that the
book stands in place of the dead woman it represents. The Bible
describes Judith as "of a goodly contenance, and very beautiful to
behold . . . and there was none that gave her an ill word; for she
feared God greatly. . . . There is not such a woman from one end of
the earth to the other, both for beauty of face and wisdom of words"
(Jud. 8:7-8; 9:21, 23). The identification of Judith with Lady Markham,
and the placing of the Book of Judith in Lady Markham's room,
encourage Lady Bedford to put away her grief in "her roome" and yet
maintain the book as a token of the companion she has lost.

In summary, Donne achieves the consolation of the Countess of
Bedford by identifying her with her dead cousin. If the essential

18 Shawcross notes that gold was "the only metal considered not
subject to disintegration." Complete Poetry, p. 250.
goodness of Lady Markham, the pure which is eternal, resides now in Lady Bedford, Lady Markham is not lost but made "one of two." Hence there is no need of excessive grief. More specifically, he accomplishes his task primarily with sets of images almost binary in nature; i.e., consisting of two different parts which nevertheless form a whole. First, the ladies are two stars which make up a single constellation (ll. 7-8), although their births occur at "Cusco" and "Musco" or the antipodes of the known world. Second, they are each eyes, which when paired make a set. Third, they form a complete person, made up of body and soul. Donne stresses their interchangeability in that had Lady Bedford died first, her friend would be a "carcasse" (line 11). Since Lady Markham died first, Lady Bedford is "th'other halfe of clay" (line 14). Yet, Lady Markham's soul, hence her virtues, come to rest in Lady Bedford to form a new person by perfecting her. Fourth, the two friends represent the wealth of the universe, epitomized as the East and West Indies, the sources of perfumes and spices on the one hand, and of precious metals on the other.

The sets of dual images replicate the friendship of the two ladies as they are two individuals who through friendship find unity. So are the seemingly contrasting images united by the idea of circularity. For example, the ladies are "divers starres" (line 8); yet as they make one "Constellation" they must orbit about a common center. As they are a "pair of eyes" they have "equall motion" (line 9). And, granted a round world, "Cusco" and "Musco" (line 7) are points on a circular continuum. Donne himself emphasizes the idea of
continuity in the statement that "perfect motions are all circular" (line 31), followed by the figure of Lady Bedford as the sea (line 33), which is at once the common source and receptacle of "less streames" (line 33).

As circularity implies eternity, so non-essentials, such as the body, decay, but "the pure" (line 24) "shall recollect, and in one All unite" (line 26). Thus, while Lady Markham's body is buried, her soul goes to heaven, and her virtues to Lady Bedford, "of whom they were" (line 30). Finally, Donne exemplifies the indestructibility of virtue by comparing it to gold.
CHAPTER VIII

EXHORTATION IN "HONOUR IS SO SUBLIME PERFECTION"

John Donne's sixth verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, "Honour is so sublime perfection" (Milgate, pp. 100-102), is a hortatory epistle. The purpose of the hortatory epistle is similar to that of the satire: to lead to virtue. Its method is obviously different. The satire uncovers vice and folly and holds them up to ridicule to encourage the reader to espouse the opposite. The hortatory epistle exemplifies virtue and by imputing it almost a priori to the recipient of the verse letter challenges him to live up to it. While in the satire, the speaker might assume a lofty stance to expose the hypocrisy of religion, in "Honour is so sublime perfection," Donne celebrates Lady Bedford's virtue while recommending to her a course of life in which discretion balances religion.

Although the letter is undated, one may assume from Milgate's placement of it in the canon that it was written ca. 1612 or 1613. Coming after "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right" and "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," both petitory epistles in which Donne seeks patronage as well as friendship of Lady Bedford, the hortatory epistle reveals Donne's confidence, for he offers advice without fear of rebuke. At the time Donne wrote this letter, he was

---

1Milgate, p. 268.
cultivating a relationship with Lady Bedford's enemy, Sir Robert Ker, who as Viscount Rochester was the reigning favorite in 1611.\textsuperscript{2} Donne accepted Ker's patronage, dedicated an epithalamion to him in 1613, and hoped to gain a permanent position through Ker's intercession.\textsuperscript{3} In 1612 Donne and Sir Robert Drury went to France where both sought to better their situations.\textsuperscript{4}

In the meantime Lady Bedford, with the Earl of Pembroke, introduced George Villiers, later Duke of Buckingham, at court in the hope of his supplanting Ker as favorite.\textsuperscript{5} After Ker's unfortunate marriage and later imprisonment, Villiers fulfilled his sponsors' expectations. A more important event in Lady Bedford's life, with regard to her relationship with Donne, however, was her nearly fatal illness in 1612. In Donne's absence, she was administered to by Dr. John Burges, a physician and Puritan minister. The following, from a letter of August 1, 1613, from John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, indicates Dr. Burges' influence on Lady Bedford as well as the nature of his religious beliefs:

Dr. Burges (who is turned phisician) was much about her in her sickness, and did her more good with his spirituall counsaile, then with naturall phisike, and his manner of praying was so well liked by Monsieur Mayern Turquet, that thincking to do him a pleasure he commended him to the king who was so moved that he should dogmatise (as he called yt) in his court, that he commanded the archbishop to look to yt who sending for him used him somewhat roughly, and injoined him not to practise within ten miles of London.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{2}Bald, Donne, p. 272. \textsuperscript{3}Ibid., pp. 273-274.
\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., pp. 274-275.
\textsuperscript{5}Hughes, Progress of the Soul, p. 245.
\textsuperscript{6}Birch, The Court and Times of James I, 1:262.
As a result of her illness as well as of Burges' preachments, Lady Bedford apparently felt a need to reform her life and had recourse to the staunch Protestantism that was an essential part of her upbringing. The course she took is best exemplified in another passage from Chamberlain's letter:

Mary, she is somewhat reformed in her attire, and forbeares painting, which, they say, makes her looke somewhat straungely among so many visards, which together with theyre frisled, powdered haire, makes them looke all alike, so that you can scant know one from another at first view.7

Despite Donne's overtures to Ker and Lady Bedford's association with Burges, Donne continued to hope that the Countess might effect a material change in his life. Thus, in the hortatory epistle Donne reminds Lady Bedford of her duty as a noble toward him and counsels her to moderation in her actions at court. Mindful of his station as her social inferior, he does not rebuke her for excesses, although Burges' expulsion from court must have served powerfully to remind Donne of his own outcast state and of the risk run by Lady Bedford in behaving aberrantly.

In the first part of "Honour is so sublime perfection" (ll. 1-21), Donne discusses the nature of his relationship with Lady Bedford in the context of his disquisition on "Honour" (line 1). In the second part of the poem (ll. 22-54), he sets forth his advice on the proper conduct of life, attained by the correct balance of religion and discretion.

Donne begins the disquisition on honor with the paradoxical statement of the first tercet that God had no honor before he created man

7Ibid.
because honor flows naturally from lesser to greater being. This proportion keynotes the next six stanzas of the first part of the poem. It is from his use of relative measurements that Donne draws the metaphors which exemplify the idea that Lady Bedford's honor comes only from lesser mortals such as the poet himself.

In the second stanza (ll. 4-6),

But as of th'elements, these which wee tread,
Produce all things with which wee'are joy'd or fed,
And, those are barren both above our head.

Donne examines the relationship among the elements, lowly earth and water which nonetheless supply us with pleasure and sustenance, and air and fire, higher on the scale of being perhaps, but nevertheless "barren" (line 6).

In the third stanza, he states his conclusion, that "from low persons doth all honour flow" (line 7) and proves it by the example of kings who must present favorites to the court to honor them because honor comes from the people, not from the king. He extends his explanation in the fourth stanza with the example of "herbs" (line 10) from which the pure is distilled by "despis'd dung" (line 12) rather than "by the fire or Sunne" (line 12).

In the first four stanzas Donne creates an interlocking system. "God" is to "creatures" in the first stanza as "kings" are to their subjects in the third. Likewise, earth and water are to fire and air in the second stanza as "dung" is to "fire" and "Sunne" in the fourth. The fifth stanza extends the comparison of God to creatures and kings to subjects, but this time Donne applies it specifically to Lady Bedford, the "Madame" of line 13, and to her "praysers" (line 13),
no doubt including Donne himself. These lines may be an oblique apology to Lady Bedford for Donne's courting of Sir Robert Drury and of Sir Robert Ker as well.

The sixth stanza once again turns to the high-low comparison. Donne maintains that the volume and duration of the sound from cannon ("ordinance rais'd on Towers," line 16) is inferior to the underground rumbling of the volcano on Mt. Etna ("fires from th'earths low vaults in Sicil Isle," line 18). In the seventh stanza, the last stanza of the first part, Donne refers to himself specifically for the first time. He counters rumors about himself and speculations about his unfaithfulness in praising and seeking preferment through Drury and Ker in ll. 19-20:

Should I say I liv'd darker then were true,  
Your radiation can all clouds subdue. . . .

The seventh stanza serves also as a transition between the first and second parts of the poem in that the images turn from those expressing measurement and proportion to images of light and darkness. For example, Donne's life is fraught with "clouds" (line 20) and at least the suggestion of darkness, which can be dispelled by the "radiation" (line 20) emanating from Lady Bedford. Indeed, the last line of the stanza, "But one, 'tis best light to contemplate you" (line 21), culminates with the idea that the Countess stands next to God alone as the bearer of light to her followers.8

Having disposed of doubts about his own loyalty and trustworthiness in the first part of the poem, Donne sets forth in the second part

---

8Milgate, p. 269.
a program of life for Lady Bedford. His purpose is to chart a course in the middle way for her, far from the extremes of Burges' religious excesses as well as the dangerous intrigues of the court. He does not ridicule her behavior. Rather he exhorts her, through his disquisition on religion and discretion, to maintain a sense of proportion in her conduct.

In 11. 22-30, he expands upon the idea of her "radiation," that is, the way in which she reveals herself, therefore her virtue, to Donne and others around her. He maintains that her body itself is made of "better clay" (line 22) than that of other mortals. It is made either of the material of the soul, "Soules stuffe" (line 23) or of the perfected material of which all bodies will be made at the general resurrection.9 Thus, through the felicitous simile, "as an Amber drop emwraps a Bee" (line 25), he explains the paradoxical idea that her body reveals, rather than covers, her soul and, therefore, her "hearts thoughts" (line 27). Evelyn M. Simpson notes that "Donne was fond of the paradoxical depreciation of the soul as compared with the body."10 Line 20 of Essays in Divinity states that "Our soul . . . is a verryer upstart than our body."11 In "Honour is so sublime perfection," he tries to bring the body and the soul into conjunction with each other by elevating the body. Simpson explains "the relation of Heaven and Earth to one another is seen as a symbol of the relation between soul and body. In making Heaven God did not neglect Earth,

9Ibid.
11Ibid., p. 30.
but made them 'answerable and agreeable to one another'.

Donne expands the idea of Lady Bedford's transparency by asserting that she teaches "the use of specular stone, / Through which all things within without were shown" (11. 29-30). The purpose of 11. 22-30 is to emphasize the correspondence of body and soul not only in fact but also in attitude: "Seeing and seeming is your equal care" (line 32). Perhaps with the knowledge of Lady Bedford's somewhat injudicious appearance at court in almost Puritan attire perhaps inspired by Burges, Donne wants to remind her to be discreet. At any rate it is an old idea of his expressed earlier in Paradoxes and Problems:

And even at last how much of our faith and belief shall we be driven to bestow, to assure our selves that these verities are not counterfeit: for it is the same to be, and seeme virtuous, because that he that hath no virtue, can dissemble none, but he which hath a little, may gild and enamell, yea and transform much vice into virtue: For allow man to be discreet and flexible to complaints, which are virtuous gifts of the mind, this discretion will be to him the soul and Elixir of all virtues.

No doubt in his own interest as well as hers, Donne hoped to save Lady Bedford from the fate that met Burges at his first appearance at Court: banishment from London. Hence, he cautions her to behave reasonably, which means in this context to eschew the appearance of fanaticism. He conveys this bit of advice by recourse to another familiar idea: the "presidence" (line 36) of "reasons Soule" (line 35) to "our Soules of growth and Soules of sense" (line 34). In "Meditation XVIII" of the Devotions, Donne writes that

---

Man, before he hath his immortal soul, hath a soul of sense, and a soul of vegetation before that; this immortal soul did not forbid other souls to be in us before, but when this soul departs, it carries all with it; no more vegetation, no more sense.\textsuperscript{15}

In the following five stanzas (37-51), Donne emphasizes the unity of the qualities of religion and discretion. Discretion is the middle path, neither overweeningly zealous, nor cold; it is "a wisemans Soule" (line 40), as "religion is a Christians" (line 41). He separates the two for purposes of elucidation. In effect, he tells Lady Bedford that her newfound religious feelings must not impede her usefulness in the world, that she must not deny her station in life even though doing so would obviously free her from its obligations. Donne dwells upon the discharge of worldly duties in a prayer in Essays in Divinity:

\ldots as thou didst so make Heaven, as thou didst not neglect Earth, and madest them answerable and agreeable to one another, so let my Soul's Creatures have that temper and Harmony, that they be not by a misdevout consideration of the next life, stupidly and treacherously negligent of the offices and duties which thou enjoyest amongst us in this life; not so anxious in these, that the other (which is our better business, though this also must be attended) be the less endeavoured.\textsuperscript{16}

The fifteenth stanza (1l. 43-45) recapitulates the idea of the previous stanza that religion and discretion are one, for since they cannot be broken apart neither may "we hope to sodder still and knit / These two \ldots" (1l. 43-44). Discretion is the "mother of all vertues,"\textsuperscript{17} and like vertue itself it is "even and continuall, and the same, and can therefore break no where, nor admit ends, nor beginnings:


\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Essays in Divinity}, p. 37.

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Sermons}, 5:199.
it is not only not broken, but not tyed together."¹⁸ To emphasize the unity of discretion and religion, Donne uses one of his favorite symbols, "round circles" (line 46), types both of religion and of God. Milgate's explanation of ll. 47-48 is most concise and illuminating: "The centre of a circle is 'pieceless', an indivisible point; religion is similarly entire. As the centre 'flows' into each radius, so religion should flow into all the ways of our lives."¹⁹

Again in stanza 17 (ll. 49-50) Donne avers that if religion and discretion were divisible from one another in Lady Bedford, "then religion / Wrought your ends, and your ways discretion" (ll. 50-51). The distinction between ends and conduct is not a contradiction of the essential unity of religion and discretion. Rather its aim is clarity. Donne makes a similar distinction in the beginning of "Prayer I" of the Devotions: "O eternal and most gracious God, who, considered in thyself, art a circle, first and last, and altogether; but, considered in thy working upon us, art a direct line, and leadest us from our beginning, through all our ways, to our end..."²⁰

Donne concludes "Honour is so sublime perfection" with ll. 52-54:

Goe thither stil, goe the same way you went,
Who so would change, do covet or repent;
Neither can reach you, great and innocent.

These lines affirm the rectitude of Lady Bedford's life. Donne must end on this positive note, for to do otherwise would be an admission of disapproval, thus contravening the purpose of the hortatory epistle:

¹⁹Milgate, p. 270.
²⁰Devotions, p. 11.
to lead to virtue by setting forth the example of virtue and positing it of the recipient of the verse letter, rather than by castigating the behavior of the recipient.
CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY

From 1602, when he revealed publicly his secret marriage to Ann More, until 1615, when he was ordained into the ministry, John Donne sought employment unsuccessfully. For most of those years, until 1612, he lived in obscurity in the country and wrote his least popular works. He was virtually ostracized from public life. One of the few felicitous occurrences in Donne's life during this time was his friendship with Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, which may be dated from 1607, when she took up residence at Twickenham.

By 1602, the Countess of Bedford was renowned already for her beauty, her love of learning and of religion. From 1603 to 1620, the years of her pre-eminence at court, she cultivated many interests, ranging from poetry and portrait painting to coin collecting and gardening. Receiving the dedications of works by Holyband, Drayton, Daniel, Jonson, Chapman, and Florio, she was the greatest patroness of her time. Her influence reached its peak in 1611, for she was not only the queen's closest friend but was instrumental in introducing at court Sir George Villiers, later Duke of Buckingham, who became the favorite.

The friendship of the Countess of Bedford must have done much to give Donne hope for his future. He accepted her financial support gratefully. She was an intelligent companion and no doubt lent strength to his aspiration of re-entering the society of court and city. In
return, Donne addressed eight verse letters to her. The verse letters record and celebrate her virtues and memorialize her name.

Despite the importance of Donne's relationship with the Countess of Bedford, his verse letters to her have suffered the same fate as his other epistles. Although the thirty-seven verse letters addressed to various recipients comprise a significant part of his total work, little attention has been paid to them generally because we lack a poetics of the verse letter and because the biographical and historical references they contain are obscure. Izaac Walton's Life of John Donne, which became a standard biography, omits all reference to Lady Bedford. The little critical work that has been done focuses on the biographical and historical, rather than the formal, significance of Donne's verse letters. The investigation of the formal characteristics of the verse letter in this study leads, therefore, to a deeper appreciation of Donne's poems to the Countess of Bedford. Although this study does not contradict the financial and social motives ascribed to Donne by the modern critics, an analysis of the formal character demonstrates that the poems transcend mere sychophancy and exhibit concern for the Countess's spiritual welfare.

The origin of the verse letter is rhetorical rather than poetical; its end is to persuade by means of logical development. During the Middle Ages the importance of letter writing grew in three fields: pedagogy, sermon writing, and political life. As a result, formularies began to appear, and Alberich of Monte Cassino codified the forms for the letter. Interest in epistolography continued in the Renaissance with Erasmus' important work, Modus Conscribendi Epistolas (1522) as
well as with that of other scholars including Vives, Libanius, and Macropedius. The Latin formularies played an important part in the educational system and were translated for the use of the populace. Finally, in the middle of the sixteenth century, popular manuals for letter writing by William Fulwood, Abraham Fleming, and Angel Day were published to meet the needs of the emerging middle class. Angel Day's *English Secretorie* is the most thorough of these manuals printed in English. Since Day's sources were the same as those which Donne would have studied in school, the *English Secretorie* is a convenient tool for the understanding of Donne's verse letters to the Countess of Bedford.

An important initial distinction which must be made for the study of Donne's verse letters to Lady Bedford is one that contemporary criticism has all but ignored, namely, that Donne's verse letters to her and to other ladies are special, rather than familiar, epistles. Modern critics trace the development of the familiar epistle, thus excluding Donne's poems to great ladies, which fall into the category of special epistles. Specifically, Donne's verse letters to Lady Bedford are deliberative epistles in which he advises and counsels her concerning the conduct of her life. Each of the eight verse letters he wrote to her may be differentiated within the framework of the deliberative epistle. Thus, "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," and "Epitaph on Himselue; To the Countesse of Bedford," are petitionary epistles. "You that are she and you, that's double shee" is a consolatory epistle. "T'have written then, when you writ," "This twilight of
two yeares, not past nor next," and "Honour is so sublime perfection"
are hortatory epistles. And "Though I be dead, and buried" is a
reconciliatory epistle.

Having traced the origin of the epistle and having differentiated
Donne's verse letters to the Countess of Bedford from the more common
familiar epistles, one may examine the qualities of deliberative
epistles such as Donne wrote to Lady Bedford. An understanding of the
qualities of the deliberative epistle, especially of its decorum,
which in a sense implies the other qualities, brevity, perspicuity,
and "life," is essential to an appreciation of these poems. Decorum
dictates the epistolary form, appropriate for a middle-aged man to
address one of high station on a variety of subjects. First, it allows
him to speak in his own voice as one would in a prose letter but with
the added force, grace, and conciseness of poetry. Second, he can
discuss such matters as his relationship with Lady Bedford, the death
of Lady Markham, and the place of religion in one's life naturally
and without tediousness. The epistolary form admits of a looseness
not found in formal argumentation. It permits the writer to reveal
himself and to entertain and to enlighten the recipient.

John Donne's first verse letter to the Countess of Bedford,
"Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," is a petition to
gain the friendship and patronage of Lady Bedford. In this poem,
Donne adheres to the formal plan for the verse letter, and concentrates
on readily perceived physical and spiritual qualities of Lady Bedford,
which indicates the tentative, introductory nature of the poem.
Couched in the religious imagery suitable for addressing a noble lady
renowned for her virtue, the poem implies that it is her duty to protect and morally uplift those around her. Her reward is the praise such behavior merits. Donne's method in the first part of the poem is to identify the abstractions of reason and faith with the concrete images of left hand and right hand. In the second part of the poem he objectifies Lady Bedford's virtues through Paracelsian imagery.

In the first verse letter Donne accomplishes his purpose of gaining access to Lady Bedford. In the second verse letter, "You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things," he memorializes their meeting at Twickenham. The second verse letter shows Donne's growing confidence: first, it is less abstract and richer in metaphor than the first verse letter; second, it keeps the recipient of the letter more firmly in mind, thus making it more personal. The poem dwells on the idea that Lady Bedford's beauty redeems the country while her virtue redeems the court. But the poem emphasizes her beauty which the poem praises most highly by comparison of it to the Escorial.

Donne's third verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, "You that are she and you, that's double shee," is a consolatory epistle written to mitigate Lady Bedford's grief at the death of her cousin and close friend, Lady Bridget Markham. Donne counsels Lady Bedford to endure her grief in the knowledge that Lady Markham's virtues are not lost but reside now in the Countess herself because of her identification with the dead woman. The poem is complimentary because it attests to Lady Bedford's fortitude in the face of misfortune and because it elevates her dead friend to the high place in which Donne holds the countess herself.
The purpose of Donne's sixth verse letter to Lady Bedford, "Honour is so sublime perfection," is to advise Lady Bedford on her conduct at court. Her co-sponsorship of George Villiers to rival Robert Ker, the reigning favorite, was politically dangerous. Her subsequent appearance at court in severe attire after a nearly fatal illness showed a bias toward Puritanism which was surely imprudent. Thus, Donne enjoined her to alter her behavior by uniting religion with discretion, for a fall from favor for Lady Bedford meant a diminution of Donne's chances for employment. Further, Donne's presuming to advise her shows how sure of her regard he had become.

The formal study of the four verse letters to the Countess of Bedford shows the growth of Donne's relationship with her. In the first verse letter he concerns himself primarily with her moral virtues. Assured of her regard, he warms to a celebration of her physical attributes in the second verse letter. In the consolatory epistle he assumes the role of counselor as well as consoler, and finally in the last letter explicated he is confident enough to offer her advice without fear of rejection.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Primary Sources.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
<th>Publisher/Press</th>
<th>Publication Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poems on Several Occasions</td>
<td></td>
<td>London: Printed for J. Tonson</td>
<td>1719.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Worlde of Wordes, or Most Copious and Exact Dictionarie in Italian and English</td>
<td></td>
<td>London: Printed by Arnold Hatfield for Edw. Blount, 1598.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


II. Secondary Sources.

A. Rhetorics.


B. Criticism.


   Akkigg, George P. V. *Jacobean Pageant, or the Court of King James I.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.


2. Periodicals.


_______. "Lucy, Countess of Bedford as a Collector of Paintings." Notes & Queries 193 (Feb. 21, 1948): 70-71.


The dissertation submitted by Marcia Mascolini Brown has been read and approved by the following committee:

Dr. Anthony LaBranche, Director
Associate Professor, English, Loyola

Dr. George Engelhardt
Professor, English, Loyola

Dr. Catherine A. L. Jarrott
Associate Professor, English, Loyola

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date
1976
Director's Signature