ASSUMPTIONS AND READING SPENSER

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A problem that we have all encountered in our attempts to offer "new" readings of an author or literary work is assumption, assumption about that author or work which either colors our reading or which resists objective evaluation of our readings by others. There are numerous cases to illustrate my point. I think of the interpretation of some of John Donne's poems like "The good-morrow" or "The Autumnal," the first of which has frequently been considered a sincere avowal of Donne's love for his wife or soon-to-be-wife Ann More and the second of which has seen Magdalene Herbert as the woman addressed. Those are readings we are usually offered for those poems, and readings rejecting those biographical relationships have usually been greeted with disdain or just ignored. Not only does the biographical element dominate such readings where none may exist except in the most general area of human experience and thinking about such matters as the poems relate, but the poems have simply not been carefully read at all. The assumption can be variously seen as Donne's writing with "sincerity," or as writing out of explicit biographical occasion, or simply as something we've always been told and have read and therefore is. Is Donne really saying to his "true" love that he believes she has had a number of sexual experiences before the one that they have just engaged in, now waking up and recalling its superiority over others that he has had? Or is this rather a one-night-stand with someone of easy virtue whom he now wonders might become his "true" love if their two loves are really one as they seemed to be last night or if they do both so love alike that neither love will slacken? Am I being prudish in thinking that Donne would not have written to Ann the interpretably physical line, "that none doe slacken, none can die" (89; "The good-morrow," line 21), implying that neither will lose sexual firmness and thus that neither will "die" in a sexual sense of detumescence? And what of "suck'd on count rey pleasures" (89; line 3)? Not only does the rejection of the poem as a specific biographical event remove it from so-called evidence of Ann and John's relationship, it also points firmly to Donne as the coterie poet that Arthur Marotti has described for us, his male and maybe female friends chortling over the subtle dirty jokes and the amazing deftness with which he incorporates them. The scholarly concern of dating of texts is also perhaps altered in that now the poem need not necessarily have been written in 1600 or 1601, but possibly in the mid-1590s. Even more significant, however, is the different psychological picture of the poetic voice that arises from removing the assumption of personal, sincere experience behind the poem. This is a narrator who has not found real love in all his previous numerous sexual encounters but who has been merely a snorter, as
it were, in the seven sleepers’ cave; this is a narrator who plaintively is hoping he has found Miss Goodbar, finally. The tone and point of the poem are thus the opposite of what they are usually thought to be: we do not have a dramatic love poem apostrophizing the woman but an incisive view of a much-too common problem of alienation. (But I am sure there are those who reject such a reading because they accept the assumptions of sincerity, biographical significance, or just taste.)

“The Autumnal” is still looked at as epitomizing Donne’s connection with Mrs. Herbert because Izaak Walton said so (1670). Even Helen Gardner, in an appendix to her edition of the lyrics and elegies, after offering argument against such a reading, concludes that we should read the poem thus because Izaak Walton said so (Gardner 252-54). Has no one read the poem? Mrs. Herbert was only five or six years Donne’s senior, hardly an age difference that should cast her as an autumnal beauty to the clearly younger poetic voice, and to talk of her wrinkles as “graves” and to liken her to Xerxes’s strange Lydian love, the Plantane tree, are inappropriate to say the least. The poem asserts that “Age is a thing / Which we are fifty yeares in compassing” (114; lines 33-34), sounding as if the woman is at least that old and, if it were Mrs. Herbert, placing the composition after Donne had taken holy orders, an unlikely circumstance. Unfortunately the forthcoming Donne variorum is going to place this poem among the love elegies where it was placed in the second 1635 edition of the poems because it has so frequently been discussed with them; it does have the title “Elegie” in some manuscripts. That positioning continues the ignorance of difference between substance and form of the love elegies (Ovidian) and the lyric; the poem is in twelve stanzas rhyming abba. The continued association of the poem with Mrs. Herbert is even more ridiculous when it is seen as one of the Ovidian elegies. But assumption of addressee and poetic subgenre has prevailed against all arguments.

The nature of assumption can be even more disastrous for an author and for a literary work, as in the case of John Milton. The lack of acceptance of Dalila in Samson Agonistes as possibly sincere has caused many critics to reject out of hand John Ulreich’s argument which looks at the character in the dramatic poem as a character in a dramatic poem with its own integrity as person. The assumption that Milton was a misogynist—either because he had been deserted by his first wife Mary Powell and never forgave her or her sex, or because he was a divorcer who strangely enough argued for the modern-day concept of divorce because of incompatibility, or because Adam has a long diatribe against Woman after the Fall in Book 10 of Paradise Lost (10.867-908)—underlies that resistance to Dalila’s possible sincerity. There is a masculinist view in the divorce tracts because, as Milton writes, Paul ends the controversy by designating the husband as the head, since he is the image and glory of God and she is the glory of the man (Tetra-