"The Achievement of Print": Samuel Daniel and the Anxiety of Authorship

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In an article on editing Daniel's poetry, John Pitcher comments on Daniel's attitude toward publication:

He knows that books are an indelible record of his views, printed in the public mind . . . but still he hopes to be able to retract them . . . This will seem wildly impossible . . . until we recognize that Daniel is treading water between script and print. He is imagining . . . that he can treat his books, which are mass-produced printed sheets, as if they were manuscripts, which are scribal documents. (61)

As Pitcher notes, Daniel is remarkable for his constant revision of his work. Although other Renaissance poets also revised work they had published, Daniel's revisions are particularly frequent. He seems never to have thought of a poem as finished, and the ceaseless emendation (both changes to poems and, in the case of his sonnet sequence, addition of entire poems) that has made the textual notes to modern editions of his poetry a thicket of abbreviations seems to me to show a desire to resist the fetish of the finished product upon which the publishing industry is based. To publish a work is to authorize a certain version of that work, and Daniel was unwilling to grant such authority to the printers. As Pitcher remarks, Daniel seems always to have thought of his poems as manuscripts that he could alter. By having his poems printed, he was participating in the new era of publication; by continuing to revise them, however, he was attempting to continue the practices of a manuscript era.

Pitcher's specific concern in the passage I have quoted is with Daniel's preface to his Certain Small Workes, which he published in 1607, but Daniel's ambivalence toward publishing is clear even in his first book of poetry, Delia Contayning certayne Sonnets: with the complaint of Rosamond (1592). In the dedication to the Countess of Pembroke, Daniel begins by saying that he did not wish to publish his poems but explains why he did: "I was betraide by the indiscretion of a greedie Printer, and had some of my secrets bewraide to the world, uncorrected: doubting the like of the rest, I am forced to publish that which I neuer ment" (9). Daniel is telling the truth here, as some of the sonnets had been printed without his permission the year before; his situation was certainly a common one in the days before copyright. But his
anxieties about publication do not merely concern the process of submitting a manuscript to a printer and releasing it to booksellers. While the preface discusses the conditions under which Daniel had his poems printed, the poems themselves are concerned with the problems of publication both in the sense of having a book printed and in the more general sense of making something public, whether by the printing press or by other means. Then as now, publishing a book seemed like a suitable or even inevitable thing for a poet to do, but the problem is that once the book is published the poet cannot control it, and readers are free to make whatever use of the book they choose and to interpret both the poems and their author in any way they wish.

Daniel's statement that he has been forced to publish that which he never meant should be taken in more than one way. The most obvious interpretation is that he is declaring that he had not intended to make these poems public, that, as he says in the dedication, his publication is merely a response to a pirated edition of some of the poems, but I think he is also trying to disassociate himself from the speaker of the poems. As the speaker in sonnet sequences usually appears at a great disadvantage, it is entirely plausible that a poet might be reluctant to make his first appearance before the public in this role. As I shall demonstrate, Daniel expresses this reluctance at various points in Delia, but his clearest statement of unease at the thought of being identified with his poems is expressed his comments in his address "To the Reader," first published in 1607 in Certaine Small Workes.

I know no work from man yet euer came
But had his marke, and by some error shewed
That it was his, and yet what in the same
Was rare, an worthy, euermore allowd
Safe co[n]uoy for the rest. (lines 43–47)

Daniel's formulation of this idea is pessimistic: a poem's faults enable readers to identify its author; a poem's virtues can excuse the faults, but it appears that the virtues are not considered typical of the poet, or, at any rate, not to the same extent that the faults are. Finally, I think we can take Daniel's statement that he was forced to publish as a characterization of the career of the poet, and I am using the word "career" in its modern sense. While rich poets like Sir Philip Sidney or the Countess of Pembroke could control the distribution of their poetry by refusing to publish and by circulating their poetry among a select and sympathetic audience, a poet like Daniel, with no private money, did not have this luxury. For him, and for the many poets like him, publication was essential to survival.