Perhaps because of their extravagance of wit, the form and style of John Donne's verse epistles have seldom been studied in depth.\(^1\) The letters have often been criticized as overly "Stoical" or "ingenious" examples of concettismo or Marinismo, riddled with an even greater than customary abundance of "recondite and heterogeneous analogies" or "mundane and learned images." An anonymous nineteenth-century commentator may, indeed, be typical in finding them "disfigured by more than...[Donne's] usual obscruity—by a harshness of style that is found in few of his other poems. ..."\(^2\) Donne was, after all, condemned by Dryden for perplexing "the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he shou'd engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love."\(^3\)

But Lucy Harrington Russell, Countess of Bedford, for one, apparently appreciated Donne's scholastic wit. No less than seven of his verse letters were addressed to her; and she was, by his salutation, "happiest and Worthiest lady, who only hath the power to cast the fetters of verse upon my free meditations."\(^4\) Donne's prose correspondence shows the same reverence for the Countess of Bedford as his verse. In a 1608 reference he acknowledges the growth both of the friendship and of Lady Bedford's grace: "I would write apace to her, whilst it is possible to expresse that which I yet know of her, for by this growth I see how soon she will be ineffable."\(^5\) The Countess responded by serving as his patron, actively encouraging his art, and returning his friendship for a good many years. She also, apparently, answered some number of his letters, quite possibly in kind, and composed poetry of her own. "No friend of his lifetime perhaps," writes Gosse, "did so much for Donne as Lady Bedford did. He found in her delightful company everything which he required to stimulate and develop him. She
had a singular adroitness in making him express the noblest and brightest sides of his genius."  

R. C. Bald believes the epistle "To the Countesse of Bedford, You have refin'd mee" is "the most beautiful of all" Donne's verses to Lucy Harrington Russell. In it the poet describes Lady Bedford's arrival at her country estate from Court and petition to visit her there and pay his respects. This study will attempt to look closely at the form and style of Donne's verse letters, with particular reference to "You have refin'd mee," so as to arrive at an understanding of how Donne's scholastic *ars dictaminis* contributes to fulfilling his stated end, or "final cause," in writing verse epistles.

In spite of their difficult style and poetic form, Donne's letters obviously do fit the basic definition of the epistle given in the conventional formulaaries of his age. Angel Day, for example, in *The English Secretary or Methods of Writing Epistles and Letters* (1599) defines "An Epistle" as "that which usually we...do terme a letter, and for the respectes thereof is called the messenger, or familiar speach of the absent, for that therein is discovered whatsoever the mind wisheth in such cases to have discovered." Day then provides examples of the various kinds of letters, particularly "Epistles Laudatorie," "Epistles Petitorie," and "Epistles Reconciliation." Donne's letters may readily be placed in such categories. That he regarded the epistle, in keeping with such obvious but specific Renaissance definitions as Angel Day's, not chiefly as a self-enclosed, "contextual" artifact, but rather as a valuable means of human discourse is evident from his prose correspondence. "No other kinde of conveyance," he writes to Sir Henry Goodyere, "is better for knowledge or love." However, such formulaic definitions as Day's do not take us very far; they are simply not enough to explain what is going on in these intricate and sophisticated verse letters.

The "approved format" of the classical and medieval *ars dictaminis* may be more helpful in explaining the generic form and *dispositio* of Donne's epistles. We do, at least, find here a prescribed structure, or organizational pattern, for making formal requests or petitions, which constitutes the *ars* of letter-writing and of which Donne, as a practitioner of the art, seems aware. The "approved format" of the *ars dictaminis* called for an ordered adherence to a five part pattern of *salutatio, captatio benevolentiae, narratio, petito*, and *conclusio*. However, Allen Barry Cameron seems right in observing that the epistolary structure—the act or pretense of one person writing to another—becomes in Donne's hands a