Our Life in Poetry: John Donne
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The Philoctetes Center

Levy:	**Francis Levy**
Nersessian:	**Edward Nersessian**
Braziller:	**Michael Braziller**
Ponsot:	**Marie Ponsot**
A:	**Speaker from audience**

Levy: Good evening, I'm Francis Levy, Co-Director of the Philoctetes Center, and welcome to *Our Life in Poetry: John Donne*. I'm very pleased to introduce Michael Braziller. Michael Braziller is the president of Persea Books, which is a literary and educational press he founded in 1975, and he is also the director of the Philoctetes Poetry Series. I'm very pleased to present Mike, who will in turn introduce our distinguished guest tonight. Thank you.

Braziller: Thanks very much. Marie Ponsot is a native New Yorker who has enjoyed teaching at Queens College, Beijing United University, and Columbia University. Among her awards are an NEA Creative Writing grant, the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Prize, and the Shaughnessy Medal of the MLA Association. Ponsot's most recent collections are *The Bird Catcher*, which won the national Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 1998, and *Springing: New, and Selected Poems*. *Springing* is available for sale afterwards. She'll be reading at the end of the event, as we've done now sort of as a tradition. She'll be reading several poems of her own, and she'll be available to sign copies of her books at the end of the evening.

We have selected four wonderful poems by John Donne for tonight's discussion. Marie will open with a small introduction on Donne, and then we'll go through the four poems. It was her idea that one of them you were going to read. I hope you have your copies of "The Canonization," because each one of you will be reading one line from that poem. Sorry to spring that on you, but you can have a few minutes to brush up or rehearse.

Ponsot: Quickly counting to see which line you're going to get. Lots of luck. My theory, though, is that if we're going to talk about poetry, the most appropriate and civilizing thing to do is to put a little poetry in the air, warm up the air a little bit. And also to invest just a little bit of our own energy in the form of vocal tension, to hear how it sounds, to make those noises. One of the great puzzles that I've been thinking about a good deal for the last couple of years is that we make a distinction, a quite clear, strong distinction, between speaking and singing, even though the apparatus is the same for both. I don't think anyone knows—at least Google couldn't tell me—when that started. How did that happen? What's going on there?

Part of my interest in it was fueled by the fact that I am a birdwatcher of the armchair kind. I like to sit in a rocking chair on a porch in a fairly woodsy place and listen to the birds and look at them through my binoculars. I had the great good luck to have a Wood Thrush habitually sitting there singing away and saw that through the beginning of the summer and the mating and the

territorial and all those simple things that birds do with song I also was able to hear their domestic life. There's a lot of singing that goes on in a very small voice.

I will say 'she' speaking of a bird, and people will say, "Oh, but females don't sing." Yes, they do. That made me think the domestic speech of birds is apt to be more like twanging a rubber band than their developed song. And I wonder if maybe our speech is a little bit more like twanging a rubber band than Aretha Franklin, say, or someone who opens her face and sings. Poetry lies somewhere in between the two, because the interest of the poet in the tune of the poem is very important.

Braziller: I was interested to see that the last poem that we'll be looking at, "A Hymn to God the Father," apparently was sung a great deal in Donne's time.

Ponsot: Yes, as a matter of fact, all of his songs were sung. It's presumed by some people that he was one of the singers. By the time a century had gone by his songs were fairly well known as music as well as text. If only we had—

Braziller: We need an organ.

Ponsot: No, a lute. Most of them have lute accompaniments. The ones that I thought we would look at are the ones that I have loved for many years. I think the reading of John Donne was one of the things that made me want to be a person who wrote poems. Not that I thought I could write like Donne, any more than reading Shakespeare made me feel I could write like Shakespeare. But one of the ways that literature functions, I think, after you've taken in a certain amount of poetry—like some sponge, you're just taking it and taking it—eventually it feels like your turn in the conversation. You want to say something. And you want to say it in this way, at this pitch.

John Donne, I think, has one of the most attractive pitches of anybody. One of the features of all his poems, even the ones that are satires and long, is that they are intended as address. Sometimes he's talking to some general unknown group, but most of the time they have the force of drama. They're almost like a soliloquy in a play.

Braziller: I find it really interesting that he wrote not to be published.

Ponsot: That's true.

Braziller: I think he was afraid to be published.

Ponsot: No. Do you think so?

Braziller: He could have—

Ponsot: Well, he was eventually embarrassed by it.

Braziller: He was embarrassed. But whatever the reasons, most of these poems were read out loud to a small group of patrons or friends. I think you can detect that when you read it.

Ponsot: Oh yes, I agree.

Braziller: There's a slightly different quality, and it might be useful as we read these poems to keep in mind that they were spoken to a small group. It gives it something special, and it's different from reading a modern poem.

Ponsot: There's a really important fact about the poems in that period. There were people who were writing for money. They were people who—if there was a class distinction, and there always is, especially in Great Britain—were of a class that had to earn their living. They wrote for money. Then there's a level of patronage, which all poets expected, even the most aristocratic, like George Herbert—whose brother, by the way, was a good friend of John Donne. But it was quite common to not publish your poems. If you thought of yourself as a gentleman you probably didn't consider that an option. That was not the way a gentleman made his money. He made it because the king gave him land or something. God knows how they managed their finances.

I think only six or seven of Donne's poems ever appeared during his lifetime, and they were chiefly poems that were occasional. They were in praise of an important person or in praise of a fellow poet, or an elegy. Otherwise he mostly sent his poems around to his friends. They were collected by a pretty undiscriminating printer after his death and appeared then. I don't know why we've stuck to it, but that is the order in which the poems now appear, and it's the reason that people's view of Donne is not chronological at all. He had a childhood we don't know too much about, and the reason we don't know too much about it was that his mother—talk about illegal. His mother was a Catholic. That was one of the things for which you could have your head removed and stuck on a pike on London Bridge. She was overtly Catholic. She didn't try to hide it, although her harboring of priests was not on the domestic premises. She contributed to a cousin of hers who did that.

Donne's own travel through what people generally suspect was the Jesuit household of one of his cousins as a boy preceded his appearance at the university, where he never took a degree because you had to swear various things to do that meant a renunciation of the Catholic idea. It took him a while to figure out what religion he was supposed to belong to. He had a fairly sophisticated, worldly youth in London that accounts for all the wonderful erotic poems of a young man: "Go and Catch a Falling Star." "And swear, No where Lives a woman true and fair." All those poems.

Braziller: When you try to imagine the audience for some of those poems, I think they were sort of irreverent male, witty friends.

Ponsot: Absolutely.

Braziller: In the four we've selected, I think the audience is different. He's talking to somebody.

Ponsot: I think so, too.

Braziller: How about if I read "Good Morrow?"

Ponsot: Oh, do.

Braziller: Okay. And keeping in mind what she was saying about tone, really the music of this is quite amazing.

I wonder, by my truth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved; were we not weaned till then,
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room, an everywhere.
Let sea discoveries to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess our world; each hath one and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp North, without declining West?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one; or thou and I
Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.

Braziller: We were talking before how intermittently throughout our lives this poem has come back to us. And to think it was written 500 years ago, and that at every appropriate moment—

Ponsot: Some piece or other will come back.

Braziller: Yes.

Ponsot: I know that we were both saying that we read it in our mid-teens for the first time. The lines that stayed most poignantly with me at that time—and a thousand other times in the rest of my life—are when he says, “And now good morrow to our waking souls, / Which watch not one another out of fear.” As a 15-year old, I watched everybody out of fear. I watched everybody, and I watched them out of fear. One of the great blessings of getting to the age where you can have friends is that that dissipates, or begins to dissipate. Of course on other occasions it comes right back. But the poem itself turns and turns around that idea of everything that can happen if you are not terror-stricken, if you’re not scared stupid.

The reason he gives for the absence of fear is that love casteth it out, guess what. “Love, all love of other sights controls, / and makes one little room, an everywhere.” That certainly is an idea that is constant in Donne.

Braziller: Yeah, we will certainly see in all the poems this notion of a kind of explicit and implicit social criticism. He contrasts the completeness of his state of love, or their state of love, with the folly of, "Let sea discoveries to new worlds have gone." I think in almost all the poems we're looking at he takes on the world and asserts this world of complete love over the making and the spending and discovering and the exploring. But so intense is his feeling, so intense is what he's describing. What I think is going on in the first two stanzas is that he's in the process of dealing with something that's very new to him. There's a tone of wonder or surprise. I think he's kind of an old hand at love. He's had his share of experiences, but something new and very different—almost in the process of this poem—is sort of taking place.

Ponsot: Yes, I think that's true. He is a discoverer—he lives at the height of the age of discovery, as we know. Discovery of all kinds. Not only are people sailing the great oceans of the world and coming back with unheard of treasures, they are actually migrating. They're moving out and moving in. The sea discoverers are eminent persons at court, where he had access and spent a good deal of time.

Another thing that was happening at this very moment was a new sophistication in maps. This is the moment where if you go to an exhibit at the New York Public Library, for example, of the history of maps, there's a whole crowd of new maps right around this period. So the idea of mapping, the kind of abstraction that that calls for, the rectification of a point of view, is part of the construct of his motifs. He uses the motif of discovery a lot. I think he was discovering himself in discovering his passions and discovering the possibility of love.

Braziller: It's almost like a new category of experience for him. It's something akin to, say, discovering an island or a new land.

Ponsot: I'm happy that we start with this poem, because it is such a beginning to the trajectory of his ideas about love. I made a kind of a list—I'm not going to read you the whole thing, because that would take a long time. But these are about a third of the places that I marked in my text as being steps on the way to saying what he thinks about love. I haven't arranged them in order. I've taken them in the order in which they came in the book, but you will see, I think, the peculiar quality of them. I certainly wouldn't want to call him a feminist. I think he would be outraged. And yet, he is extremely interested in equality. He thinks that women are interesting. He thinks that they are just as interesting as he is.

The next poem that you and I are going to read together—in "The Canonization" he says, "So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit, / We die and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love." In "Lovers' Infiniteness" he says, "But we will have a way more liberal, / Than changing hearts, to join them; so we shall / Be one, and one another's all."

In the song, "Sweetest Love, I do not go, / For weariness of thee/ Nor in hope the world may show/ A fitter love for me." He says, "When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not wind, / But sigh'st my soul away; / When thou weep'st, unkindly kind, / My life's blood doth decay." "Destiny may take thy part, / And may thy fears fulfil; / But think that we / are but turn'd aside to sleep;"—even death is not the end of love—"Think that we / Are but turn'd aside to sleep; / They who one another keep / Alive, ne'er parted be."

And in "The Legacy" he says, "myself, that is you, not I," and does a whole paradoxical twist around talking about the way they exist in each other. And in "A Fever" he says, "O! Do not die, for I shall hate / All women so when thou art gone, / That thee I shall not celebrate / When I remember though wast one. / But yet thou canst not die, I know; / To leave this world behind, is death, / But when thou from this world wilt go / The whole world vapors with thy breath."

And in "The Anniversary," "Who is so safe as we, when none can do / Treason to us, but one of us two." And "The Valediction of My Name, in the Window," "Here you see me, and I am you." "All my souls be / Emparadised in you—in whom alone / I understand and grow and see."

It must have been exhausting to have him looking at you. "Thou art so truth, that thoughts of thee suffice / To make dreams truths and fables histories; / Enter these arms, for since thou thought it best / Not to dream all my dream, let's act the rest." That use of the imperative is another characteristic of Donne's. "Enter these arms." "Go, and catch a falling star." "Get with child a mandrake root." "Find where all past years are, or who cleft the devil's foot." He's giving orders all the time. The result of that is an increase of that thing of drama that I feel so substantial in his work.

I think one of the characteristics of all art, one of the causes of the excitement we feel when we encounter art, is mental action. Something happens inside our heads because of what we're looking at or hearing. That quality of mental action is vivified and given a kind of explosive turn when he does this commanding. I always tell my students this, because they, like me, will get out *The New Yorker* and look at the front and see what's going on in town: this is what's at the theater and this is what's at the movies. When John Donne and his friends wanted to go to the theater, honey, it was *Hamlet*. A new play. Drama was the hot ticket.

Braziller: Well, talk about openings. "The Canonization:" "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love—"

Ponsot: It's full of orders.

Braziller: Full of orders, yeah.

Ponsot: Shall we try reading it?

Braziller: One or two words I just would add about the title of "Good Morrow." One thing that occurred to me on the 200th reading is that I want to emphasize again this idea of what Marie was talking about—this notion of discovery, of really a rare experience. The title strikes me, because I think the poem is, in a way, an eye opening. It's an eye-opening love, and something within the poem itself conveys this very unusual and almost overwhelming experience of this kind of merging that you were talking about, where the two become one.

Ponsot: Yes.

Braziller: He almost depicts, in different places, in other poems, this sense of surrender, or the loss of himself—

Ponsot: Absolutely.

Braziller: —to this almost new personality that they form.

Ponsot: There's a wonderful book by Elaine Scarry that I've been talking about these days called *On Beauty and Being Just*. One of her ideas in that is that the great power of art, the liberating power of art, particularly of literature which is her main subject, is that it de-centers us while we attend to it. Instead of the usual grasp or grip of the self-conscious I, we are moved off that center into a radius of our circle, and we're looking out to what we can take in.

Braziller: One of the poems after "The Canonization," "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" talks about his verses. He equates their love, or he talks of how their love will be epitomized or conveyed or put within the song, and what part of his art will be read in future generations, so that this experience, this loss of control or this new merging—he's very conscious that at his best it was in his writing.

Okay, so how are we going to do "The Canonization?" David, are you going to get started?

A: What?

Braziller: Well you've got to read the first line.

Ponsot: Yes. Let me just make my biggest announcement on this subject. It's very simple: you can't do it wrong.

Braziller: Yes, we're going—we could do it like the wave, you know?

A: Just one line?

Braziller: Oh yeah, one line.

The Canonization

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five grey hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout,
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his Honour, or his Grace,
Or the King's real, or his stamped face
Contemplate, what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?
What merchant's ships have my sighs drown'd?
Who says my tears have overflow'd his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
When did the heats which my veins fill
Add one more to the plaguy bill?
Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We are tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find th' eagle and the dove.
The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us; we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns all shall approve
Us canoniz'd for love;

And thus invoke us: "You, whom reverend love
Made one another's hermitage;
You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes
(So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize)
Countries, towns, courts: beg from above
A pattern of your love!

Ponsot: It’s so wonderful. The human voice is still the best instrument. To hear the extreme fluidity of this poem come through all those channels is really such a pleasure. I think we should read to each other all the time. When you think of the boring conversations you’ve had—you could be sitting there doing this? Wow!

As a matter of fact, I have a lot of things I could say about this poem, and I bet most of you do, too. But in a way the best thing to do with it would be to read it eight or nine times aloud in various combinations. The thing about a poem, I think one of the reasons that we don't just pick up a book of poems and read them to each other all the time, is that a poem really improves the more of it you have in mind. The quickest way to get it in mind is to go very slowly. I read very fast. I read faster than anybody I've met so far. I learned to read when I was very small, and so what I do with a poem when I'm reading it for the first time is to zap it. I read it. I take it in a little bit, a little tiny bit. The suspense is over, I know where it's going. Then I read it again. I do the same thing with a novel, by the way, which is even more comical. But to do it with a poem sometimes takes me four readings, or five, before it begins to penetrate. The words open up, one into the other, and I begin to see why line seven has a relation to line one—a little relation. Some little thing. There'll be two words ending in 'ation,' for example, that make a kind of music that ties the parts together. The thing in a poem that you have every right to expect is that for every word in it there will be at least two or three good reasons for its being there instead of some other word. I know that doesn't agree with the school of poetry that says, "First breath, best breath," but then, I don't happen to belong to that school.

So you see how the crescendo of it comes. It's rhetorically designed: do this. Then the protest, "Alas, alas." Then, "Call us what you will, we are made such by love." I think in relation to this poem it's fair to adduce Donne's biography a little. You have to imagine him as a really charming guy, if you've seen any of the three probable paintings of his looks. He was employed at one point. He worked at court as a secretary, and he was employed by the person to whom he was secretary to be a tutor to his niece, his ward, really. Her parents had died and he was raising her and taking care of her finances and so forth, which were considerable. Donne was a successful tutor, but they fell madly in love, and in a kind of unheard of gesture for the time, they got married, secretly. They were married for a couple of months, and they finally told the man who was Donne's employer, who had Donne thrown in jail instantly. She was of age—she was not an infant. But he was jailed.

One of the great treasures of the Folger Library in Washington D.C. is that—if you're willing to have someone lead you through many corridors, secret places, open doors, another elevator with another key and another door to open, and finally into a room with flat cabinets—they will show you the letters that John Donne wrote from jail to his father-in-law. They didn't work, but somebody else got him out of jail. He had enough friends for that. Not enough friends to keep his job, however. The man he worked for had only one ward to lose, and had lost her and was furious. Not only did he not give John Donne any work, he didn't let anybody else on whom he had influence or over whom he had any power give him any work either. So he spent the next ten years doing very dangerous little jobs, dashing off to the lowlands on terrifying expeditions. There happened to be a war going on there, and he was going between the lines. It was a life of great tension during which he wrote many of the love poems that we're looking at.

Braziller: Yeah, "Good Morrow." "Let us possess our world, each hath one." He lived that, and he almost consciously chose, not just aesthetically within the poem, but in his life, to have a great love over his position in society and over whatever bright future he might have had.

Ponsot: That's right. I don't think he expected that his employer would be quite so nasty. But he had a pretty good idea. He wasn't surprised when they threw him in jail.

Braziller: I love "Good Morrow" so much because there's no bitterness. There's an awareness of—.

Ponsot: Right.

Braziller: In "The Canonization" it's a much more complex and somewhat angry—

Ponsot: Well, at least testy.

Braziller: At least testy.

Ponsot: Yes. He's complaining. It's a complaint.

A: Isn't he older at "The Canonization" than he is—

Ponsot: Yes, but not very much.

A: Really?

Ponsot: He was twenty-eight or something like that, I think, when he married.

A: He's talking about his hairs—

Ponsot: Five gray hairs—well, you know?

Braziller: Who is he talking to? Who is this demand to: "For God's sake hold your tongue?" Is this maybe a friend who might have been critical of—

Ponsot: All his friends who were saying to him—

Braziller: Don't do what you're doing.

Ponsot: Come on, or back off.

Braziller: Right, right. So he's making the argument.

Ponsot: He's saying, come on, here I am. Here we are.

A: It's not a soliloquy.

Ponsot: No longer a soliloquy, it's an address. The drama is on. That's exactly right. Although in fact, it's more of a dramatic monologue. He's got the last word. And by the time he gets to the

end he's setting himself up as the model to be imitated. He starts very reluctant, and then he says, "Countries, towns, courts: beg from above a pattern of your love!"

I just want to say, although I am devoted to the whole body of English literature, English-American, Anglo literature, there are very few writers about love that imply the kind of valuing of the partner in love that Donne does. I know only one other poem that fits in this slot, and some of you probably know it. It's a very short poem by William Blake. It's called "For the Sexes." "What is it men in women do require? / The lineaments of gratified desire. / What is it women do in men require? / The lineaments of gratified desire." So that's my only other entry in this contest. I think it's extraordinary that it should have happened at a time when—well, of course Elizabeth was on the throne, so women had that kind of stature, but that's not equality. Hardly any queen is engaged in practicing equality.

Braziller: The very diction in a lot of the poems we're looking at is so direct and intimate and so, respectful?

Ponsot: Well, it's not respectful, it's engaging.

Braziller: Yeah. But it's one person very much to another, not either holding someone up or talking down to someone. "I wonder by my truth what thou and I did till we loved." I mean that is a person talking to an equal.

Ponsot: Yes.

Braziller: Now in stanza three here, it shifts a little from the sort of defensive dueling with the critical friend back into this merging, this beautiful—

Ponsot: That's it. That's it.

Braziller: And—

Ponsot: He gives it up. "Call us what you will."

Braziller: Right.

Ponsot: I don't care.

Braziller: And then brings in the eagle and the dove.

Ponsot: Yes, that's extraordinary.

Braziller: Which has, certainly, a sexual connotation on one level, isn't it?

A: The flies do, too.

Ponsot: Well, I think with Donne's poems it's safe to assume that most remarks have a strong sexual underpinning. He's a little bit less likely than we might be to separate, to analyze out the parts of the experience one person has of another. Sometimes he's just putting ten pounds of the

best butter over the gap, you know, between the various parts of our lives. But he has a strong tendency to, I think, speak more of how body is mind is soul—the mind/body/soul thing. He keeps melting them somehow. "To one neutral thing both sexes fit. We die and rise the same," which is only partly sexual. No matter what kind of sex we're having or not having, we die a mortal death. I suppose if you are in the belief system that he was you expect to rise in that. "And we prove mysterious by this love."

That word mysterious has always stopped me. I never knew what it meant, and I guess what I like about it is that I still don't know.

Braziller: Well I don't think he fully knows what's going on in this experience.

Ponsot: Yeah. Oh, okay.

A: The dying has not only to do with mortality, but at this time, and with Shakespeare, it referred to sexual intercourse.

Ponsot: Well yes, sure. For a long time after and before. And the idea of rise and fall is always appropriate for male sexuality. Well, not always—

All the people who thought they had the love thing right: "You whom reverend love / Made one another's hermitage; / You to whom love was peace that now is rage, / Who did the whole world's soul contract and drove / Into the glasses of your eyes" now "beg from above / A pattern of your love." Pretty good.

A: So he's speaking to that other stanza there also, because the eagle and the dove are war and peace as much as they're sexual.

Ponsot: Right.

A: And he's mystified in that stanza, but willing to go for it.

Ponsot: That's it, yeah.

Braziller: Is there the idea, too—I can't quite pin it down—that this mysterious love has a religious kind of component?

Ponsot: Oh, yes!

Braziller: And that it is different or better than mere physical love?

Ponsot: It's different, but—yes, it may be better, but what he really wants you to think about is how the one becomes the other. The rise is that kind of a rise as well.

Braziller: That's right.

A: The opening stanza is so anti-romantic. Not just expressing the anger toward the friend, but this anti-Petrarchan movement—well, that's in stanza two, really. He says let me love. My sighs

haven't drowned any ships. He's overturning the whole Petrarchan tradition, but his love turns out to be more romantic in the end.

Ponsot: Yes. The great problem with Petrarch is one that I find with many other great poets who have written very movingly of their feelings: the girl isn't there.

Braziller: And with Donne, the world isn't there.

Ponsot: Yes, that's right. There's a wonderful book by Anne Carson called *Eros the Bittersweet*, which is a great pleasure. It has a very peculiar feature to it that I noticed, particularly because I had long taught a course that I called the "Poetry of Eros," and I divided that course, in my simple-minded way, into three parts: the 'I' part, the 'love' part and the 'you' part: I love you. Eros means a lot of things, but basically that's the message.

In Anne Carson's book she has 'I' and she has 'love,' and no 'you.' It's amazing. She gets away with just—. And, of course that is a great truth, that the important thing about love is to love, not to be loved. But that's not what she's saying. It's really curious. Though Petrarch has many followers.

Braziller: Well, the title of the poem, the next stanza, they'll be canonized for love. It furthers this idea of this new mysterious love.

Ponsot: That's right.

Braziller: And also furthers his criticism of chronicles and tunes and verses of the pitfalls or the follies of the wealthy and of the worldly. There's almost a martyr-like we can die for it. We can die by it, if not live by love.

Ponsot: I think that image—it's not simply the eagle and the dove. They are transcended by the phoenix. The legend of the phoenix is that death begets the new life, the resurrected life. I think that's the tendency in Donne.

A: Aren't you saying in effect that they canonize one another?

Ponsot: Yes! Yes, ma'am. "Thou art the best of me." That's his basic stance. I think one of the things that is not expressed directly in his poems is his interest in the idea that he has a soul, an immortal soul, a component that, if not holy, is sacred anyway, and is tending toward something divine. Would you say that?

Braziller: Yes.

Ponsot: Is that exaggerated?

Braziller: No, there's—

Ponsot: I think he's after that.

Braziller: Well, wasn't there just a standard religious idea that worldly pursuits was an evil, or that we should—. I mean he's picking up on, I think, a conventional religious idea—to turn one's back upon gaining and acquiring wealth, and—.

Ponsot: Give it to the poor. Yes. He didn't have much choice. He was living in an uncomfortable house that someone lent them in a damp suburb of a damp country with long winters. And lots of children, by the way. He had a friend who was his biographer, and I've always been very moved by one of the stories that his biographer tells that while Donne was away in the lowlands doing his dangerous mission he dreamed that he saw his wife come into the room carrying a dead child. And of course when he got home he found out that one of his children had died. That was Izaac Walton, who also wrote a famous book on fishing, who was his biographer.

A: What lowlands are you talking about?

Ponsot: Sorry?

A: Are you talking about Holland, or England?

Ponsot: Lowlands—England, yes. Holland. The Flemish.

Braziller: Okay, do you feel like reading "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning?"

Ponsot: I think so.

Braziller: That would be great.

Ponsot: This is probably the poem which most successfully characterizes Donne as a metaphysical. People are always talking about the metaphysical poem. What is really intended by that phrase in its original use of it was to say that the poem has lots of ideas in it. I think that the reason that Donne is so terrific to read and the reason that he understands that women and men are equal is that he's very smart. And more than that, along with that, he knows that one of the most exciting things in the world, certainly as exciting as sex, is to have an idea. Boing! You know, when you really have an idea, when you really are possessed by intellectual excitement it's completely engaging, just the way all good human acts are, a matter for great joy.

This is "The Valediction: Forbidding Mourning."

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls, to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
'The breath goes now,' and some say, 'No:'

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears;

Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refin'd,
That ourselves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begun.

Ponsot: It's really a doozy. Whenever you want to say, "Oh, well, metaphysicals put all these ideas in their poem,"—yes, they do. And this is what happens. This is the piling up of evidence. If someone is about to leave for the tenth time in two years, this is not a bad way to go. Leave behind some hope of improvement.

There are good feminists who object that, "Well, you know, she's just stuck there." Aha, yeah. You know, what she's really saying is, "She's just home minding the 11 children." Well, yeah. If you want to take them into war, that's fine. But most of us wouldn't want to. Because where she sits is the center and her firmness is what makes the circle just. I guess what they've got is a working partnership.

A: He assumes an equality of intellect. He assumes she can understand all these references to geometry and Platonism and what have you.

Ponsot: Yes, well he was her tutor. She better!

Braziller: That remarkable fifth stanza that we have discussed: "But we by a love so much refin'd that ourselves know not what it is." There is that mystery again, and then this new trust: "inter-assured of the mind"—

Ponsot: That's the phrase.

Ponsot: That's the killer.

Braziller: "Inter-assured of the mind, care less, eyes, lips and hands to miss." He's making the case that this love stays with them through separation and through the anxiety of separation, that they can retain this trust.

Ponsot: Absolutely. There's that quality of the mystery of it all again. We "ourselves know not what it is."

Braziller: That's right.

Ponsot: But then that phrase, "Inter-assured of the mind."

A: He made that word up, didn't he?

Ponsot: Yes, he did. He compounded it.

A: I think the imagery of the compass also adds to this notion of mysteriousness because it's a new thing, right? And what you're measuring traditionally are mathematical forms.

Ponsot: Right.

A: Yet all that does is open up the mystery of the universe really. I think it connects to the mystery of love he's talking about, the meta-physicality of it. It's like a metaphor.

Ponsot: Right. That's interesting. That's a further justification of that compass that I've never heard.

Braziller: And again, a little sexual imagery or suggestiveness in the final stanzas: "stiff twin compasses." "And grows erect as that comes home." He's always aware of sexuality in his dealings, in his feelings.

Ponsot: Right. He's talking about something metaphorical that stands for something physical, but the image that you get in your mind when you think, "It leans, and harkens after it" is one of yearning. You feel that as the kind of attention you give to someone who's going into danger and whom you want to have come home soon and safe. "Leans, and harkens after it." I remember World War II, when everybody, all the women I knew—that was my generation, those were the boys who taught me to dance, you know—had their heads glued to the radio trying to find out what was going on. Where is he? What's happening?

Braziller: This is something to come home to.

Ponsot: Oh yes!

A: He says twice he must go. There isn't the sense that the man 'gets' to go out. He 'must' go. He says it twice.

Ponsot: Must is very important, yes.

Levy: These conceits that we're talking about all have such alignment and symmetry. I wonder how they relate to the question of human physiology, and of our more modern conceptions, the radical view. Here we are modernly, in the 21st century, and in this course we've dealt with Thomas Hardy's love poems previously. We've dealt with other forms of this sensibility. Here we have a type of love that aspires towards a kind of respectability and excludes, in some senses, the conception of un-romantic love perhaps, the more physiological love that we have in the 21st century. And then it's mirrored in other poems that we've read in the course.

Ponsot: There is one great difference between the situation in which the Donnes found themselves and ours. They had 11 children. We don't have to do that. The transit from emotional and daily practical relationship that has its sexual moments is, I think, markedly different for that very reason. We're in a position where we can divide it up and say well, you know, my favorite form of exercise is… Other people go jogging, you know?

Levy: There's less of this kind of "two is one." There's more, individuation is the term that's most used.

Braziller: I would say we could use more of this. In fact, he wrote these 500 years ago, so we're still in need of them.

Levy: Yeah, the magic is that people relate to them still. They both are separate in sensibilities.

Braziller: That tone that Marie was talking about, the intimacy of tone, the openness to the experience and the character of the experience, he just remains unique in his ability to depict it.

Ponsot: The "inter-assured of the mind" is followed with just one more expression of the same kind if I can find it.

Braziller: In which poem is it?

Ponsot: In "The Ecstasy."

Braziller: Oh, yeah.

Ponsot: Interanimate is his other invention. Classy.

Ponsot: "As all several souls contain / Mixture of things they know not what / Love these mix'd souls doth mix again, / And makes both one, each this, and that. / A single violet transplant… / All which before was poor and scant— / Redoubles still, and multiplies. When love with one another so / Interanimates two souls, / That abler soul, which thence doth flow, / Defects of loneliness controls. / We then, who are this new soul, know, / Of what we are composed, and

made, / For th' anatomies of which we grow / Are souls, whom no change can invade." He makes the body the soul, and then he makes the soul the body. I think that's pretty good.

A: He moves inside—I mean many of his observations are internal. Relationships change people's insides. He sees that very, very well. It's amazing.

Ponsot: Exactly right.

A: Everyone's wandering all over the map, and he's just spilling his relationship and his insides.

Braziller: It's also a very radical idea to live by your own lights.

A: Always.

Braziller: Always, at all times. Right.

A: He's this incredible combination of a great Romantic and a Metaphysical, which doesn't really seem to go together, but it does.

Ponsot: I think it seems not to go to us because our idea of Romantic has been heavily influenced by Romanticism, and then by the consumer culture that we live in, so that we don't think that that's so hot. We say that's for the women's magazines, you know? It would be very hard, I think, to find in an ordinary group of New Yorkers, pretty much any age, the idea that the most spiritual thing you could do, the most elevating thing you could do, the most absorbing and interesting thing you could do, was to have a great love affair with your wife. What?

Braziller: And also to step back from the futile and absurd aggressions and aspirations and competitiveness of so much of social interaction. That's a very bold and radical idea too.

Ponsot: Exactly.

Braziller: And a very political idea, really.

A: There are Shakespeare sonnets that also talk about love in a very intense way. Donne wasn't alone.

A: But not married love.

Ponsot: Oh, I didn't mean to say that he was alone in writing love poems. But I would observe that the love poems that I'm familiar with are mostly about the speaker and the speaker's emotions.

A: Love isn't love that alters when it alternations finds.

Ponsot: Yes.

A: Yeah, Shakespeare does both sides.

Ponsot: That's *the* Shakespeare sonnet.

A: That's the only one.

Ponsot: That proves your point.

A: Exactly.

Ponsot: Well, no, there are more, but that's the one. But of course, in Shakespeare, it's a wish: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds…" Please, dear God, let me not admit impediment.

A: What about "Song of Songs?"

Ponsot: Yes, well that's a pretty mixed bag. I mean it's a strange work. It's one of the world's most glorious poems about love with enormous erotic content. Exactly what the hell is going on there, I'm not sure. But if you excerpt the lines that do that, they are incomparable.

A: If romantic love depends on obstacles, which is a very old theory, Donne had plenty of obstacles to overcome. His marriage with his wife, all these children, along with the daily grind, et cetera, et cetera.

Ponsot: That's right.

A: Interesting—so that marriage becomes something exotic.

Ponsot: Yeah, true.

I'm afraid that we're running over—are we?

Braziller: Yeah, well do you want me to read the last one, or would you like to read the last one?

Ponsot: Why don't you?

Braziller: I'd love to. It's so fabulous.

And don't forget, we're going to read two of hers.

Ponsot: I'll read something short.

Braziller: No, don't do that. Let me read this quickly, and you're going to read two poems, and they needn't be short.

Now speaking of music, I mentioned before "A Hymn to God the Father" was definitely—he heard it sung at various churches. As Marie was pointing out before, a lot of his poetry is put to music. But this has a particular—

Ponsot: This had a longer life I think than any of them.

Braziller: Yeah.

A Hymn to God the Father.

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two, but wallow'd in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I have no more.

Ponsot: One of the great puns of the world of poetry. “When thou hast done, thou hast not done.” I lived with that for many years, delectating in it. I love puns anyway, but I think anyone who loves language has a great affection for the way puns work and multiply the resonance of everything we say. But in this case, I came on something that knocked me out. I took it to a couple of scholars I knew. One of them had heard somebody say something about it before. I don’t know what John Donne intended when he wrote this; I don’t know that he meant—

Braziller: “For I have more?”

Ponsot: Right. Because his wife’s maiden name was Ann Moore.

Braziller: Yeah. “For I have more.”

Ponsot: A lot of people don’t think that he meant that. I do.

Braziller: I do, too.

Ponsot: Well, Howard Bloom is of two minds about it.

Braziller: The tones here are so remarkable. It’s like he can’t reconcile that this is life. He wants forgiveness, he believes in God, and yet he knows—

Ponsot: Here I am.

Braziller: Here I am, I can’t give it up. It’s futile, it’s a contradiction, my whole life. I can’t resolve it.

Ponsot: Once a fuck up always a fuck up.

Braziller: That's right. The humor. And the sorrow.

Ponsot: Yeah. It's all there. And it's all there because it takes in everything, the social relations—"Will thou forgive that sin which I have won / Others to sin, and made my sin their door?"

Braziller: He's not boasting here, but he's not repentant either.

Ponsot: Well, he wishes he were repentant, as Saint Augustine said.

Braziller: He would like to feel bad, but he has won Moore, you see?

Ponsot: "I have more."

A: The last line you read: "I have no more."

Ponsot: There are three versions of it. Some use 'have.' I think maybe that has the strongest evidence, but Donahue is a big textual scholar, and I noticed that he prefers 'fear.' And it goes with the shift in the third stanza. The big turn there.

Braziller: I find that very powerful, that third stanza. That he has a fear: "I have a sin of fear."

A: How do the three versions—how can there be three versions of the English language?

Ponsot: After the first printing in 1631 there was another one almost right away, and it was changed in that version. I don't know where the third one came from, but I know one of those is have and the other is fear.

A: Maybe the way he read them. He may have changed them when he read them.

Ponsot: Absolutely.

A: What's the third version?

Ponsot: I'm trying to remember it.

Braziller: That's right, this might not have been printed in his lifetime.

Ponsot: Oh no, it wasn't.

Braziller: So that manuscripts were handed around—

Ponsot: I think it was because it was music and it turned up in some versions.

A: But in the last stanza, doesn't he really show his belief in God, and his trust that, despite his sinning as a human being, in the end God will forgive him?

Ponsot: That's right. I think that's what he wants. "I fear no more." And the 'more' I think refers to Ann because he did make off with her. He didn't counsel her as a tutor, saying, "This is not a wise move on your part, my dear." He collaborated, you know? I think that he felt great guilt for that, especially after her death. She died in childbirth.

A: But it was number 12. That was a lot of kids. A lot of women didn't make it to that many. It's kind of like Rachel. Rachel died in childbirth on the twelfth child.

Ponsot: That's right.

A: Giving birth to her second child, but the twelfth child of Jacob.

Braziller: He's willing to give up sinning if he gets this reassurance from God, this very beautiful, selfless idea that even though he dies the "Son shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore"—

A: There's another pun, though.

Ponsot: You bet.

Braziller: The sun, yeah.

A: I like fear especially because it's the riddle of faith. When you get rid of your fear you have faith, but if you have faith you have no fear.

Ponsot: Right. But he's asking God to make a promise that he won't fall into despair at the end.

A: But he can only do that by having faith. By believing in God he'll do that. So that really becomes a riddle. It's almost that having doubt is the worst fear, that losing your faith and being in doubt is the deepest fear. Or the deepest sin, I guess.

Ponsot: Yes. Despair is the unforgivable sin they used to say.

A: Despair and doubt aren't the same.

A: I guess one leads to the other.

A: Should we be surprised that as the father of 11 children, many of whom died, that the doubt and fear—. As far as I know, in his poetry there's a great deal of that.

Ponsot: I've thought about that too. And I must tell you, although I know this sounds really weird, I have seven children. I don't write about them either. I adore them. They're my life. But it's a different place. I don't know.

Braziller: Actually, I don't know if this is helpful or not, but I remember reading that he did have a cold relationship with his oldest son. It just popped in my mind that I think his oldest son tried to involve himself in arranging a manuscript or helping with affairs, his financial affairs or something, and I think that some of Donne's friends commented that he was unreceptive to his son or didn't think his son was too bright or something like that.

A: Also, he really doesn't write domestic poetry.

Braziller: That's right. Nor were there many other domestic—

Ponsot: No, he didn't write about lunch.

A: Well, Anne Bradstreet was writing poetry at the same time, and of course—

Ponsot: Almost the same time.

A: But of course she wrote about children.

A: Now of course you have two poems about death in Ben Johnson.

Ponsot: Yes, two glorious poems.

A: It would be nice to hear one of your poems.

Braziller: Oh yeah, definitely. Now we're in no rush, so we're going to have two, okay? Then she'll be happy to sign, and her *Selected Poems* is for sale after.

(Ponsot reads two poems.)

Braziller: Great, thank you.