

A Miscalculated Risk

Review of

The Exquisite Risk of Love: The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance

By Robert Waldron

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Reviewed by **Deborah Kehoe**

We all know that you can't judge a book by its cover, but I confess that at first sight, Robert Waldron's *The Exquisite Risk of Love: The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance* gave me pause. Emblazoning the front of the book is Lucas Cranach the Elder's hauntingly seductive rendition of Eve wearing nothing but the inevitability of Adam's doom in her eyes. An academically justifiable choice – maybe – but it strikes me as sensationalism. On the back cover, the following blurb raised another red flag:

Waldron is unique amongst the many who have been influenced by Thomas Merton . . . Here is a mature text that would, one imagines, thrill the monk himself, as well as making a thrilling read for those neither enslaved by Merton-mania, nor too hooked up on matters of church authority.

So asserts "Professor Richard Whitfield, scientist, educator, human development specialist and poet." It's not the awkward syntax and curiously vague listing of credentials that bothers me about this advertisement; it's the tone. Is the reader being put on notice: find fault with Waldron's handling of this subject matter and the limitations are all in your head?

Perhaps the only promising element on the book's cover is the author's name. Robert Waldron is a recognizably prolific writer on Merton's works, several of whose books on Merton's poetry I have enjoyed. This unfortunate packaging seems incongruous with the author's reputation, an ominous sign – and one that is ultimately fulfilled by what lies within.

In the introduction, Waldron prefaces his vision for the book thus: "For too long, Merton scholars have shied away from addressing Merton's love for M." (2-3). If one blinks at the incipient presumption in that remark, the author's implicit impetus for the book is laudable. To approach the artistic fruit of this momentous chapter in Merton's life as literary artifacts for analysis, interpretation, evaluation and reflection more thoroughly than has heretofore been accomplished could indeed contribute something valuable to the body of Merton studies.

Additionally, the author lays out a sensible global plan: to examine one by one, in the order in which they appear, each of Merton's *Eighteen Poems*, written for M. during the months of their

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relationship in 1966 and published in a limited edition by New Directions in 1985, and to enhance his “exegesis” of each selection by “cross-referencing” *Learning to Love*, the sixth volume of Merton’s complete journals. In light of Merton’s belief that a poem can go where prose cannot reach, this plan seems apt. Approaching the poems in this fashion has the potential to graph the modulations of the poet’s voice recreating these intensely personal experiences as he lived through them, and citing related passages from journal entries of the same period could provide informative and enlightening context. This is a worthy concept, but it fails to launch.

Waldron’s work falls short of its good intentions in the form of questionable assertions. The following quotation is just one example: “[Merton’s] poetry prior to *Eighteen Poems* was romantic and traditional with a preference for rhymed poems. The major exception of his poetic opus is the nearly unreadable *The Geography of Lograire*” (3). Coming from the hand of an experienced author, this remark baffles on a few levels: first, it puts forth sweeping and errant generalizations about Merton’s complex “poetic opus”; second, it suddenly shifts to condemn a work that, as Merton’s last poetic composition, does not represent his writing “prior to *Eighteen Poems*,” which is Waldron’s announced subject here.

In his next paragraph, in an effort to advance the notion that Merton’s love poetry is “simple, spare and transparent,” Waldron arbitrarily (and in uselessly abstract terms) compares Merton’s *Eighteen Poems* to Hart Crane’s *Voyages* and states: “One will quickly perceive that Crane’s poems are opaque and require many readings to reach an understanding whereas one reading of Merton’s love poems may prove sufficient for a satisfying understanding” (3). Why would the author undercut his own project by introducing it with such an insupportably subjective statement?

Scattered throughout the book are occasional brief and shining moments of commentary about textual particulars in the poems. Waldron’s remarks on the multiple dimensions of the word “distance” in his discussion of “Evening: Long Distance Call” is one pleasantly memorable example (90). Another is his observation that the lack of punctuation in “Six Night Letters” suggests “a cascading, uninterrupted flow of heart-talk” (134). But these elements are too few to save this book from its fundamental lack of authorial control.

This is, overall, a troublingly undisciplined book, with distractions, irritations and fallacies aplenty. Some features are quaintly mystifying, such as the author’s frequent references to presumably only himself as “we.” More challenging is his tendency to state in absolute terms that which reason demands be qualified or supported by external evidence, particularly when speculating about what another person thinks, feels, is or does beyond the possible scope of the author. For example, Waldron writes: “As to the love poems: when Merton wrote them, he was surely thinking of John Donne’s love poems” (4). In discussing “Cancer Blues,” he tells us that Merton “longs to sound young, hip and vibrant” for M. (107). He refers to M. as “virginal” (58), and in discussing “Two Songs for M.,” he announces that she “surely wept many times over this description” (75). Even limited omniscience is not given to literary critics. The repetition of similar contentions eventually erodes the reader’s confidence and patience.

Most problematical is the free reign he gives himself to lead the reader through verbose musings, in paragraphs that often go on for multiple pages, with no apparent unifying point. And despite his protests to the contrary, Waldron regularly delivers himself of personal judgments – not of the literature, but of the key people involved in the Merton and M. story. To quote but a few examples:

“One cannot help empathising with [Merton]” (53); “Merton surely had a smile on his face while he was writing [“Never Call a Babysitter in a Thunderstorm”]. Yes, he is venting, but it is a good thing. Pent-up rage needs to be released” (67); and “No one forced him to become a monk. He cannot blame Abbot Fox for that decision” (67); and “I think it was wrong of [the abbot to read Merton’s conscience mail], but his intention may have been a good one” (83). Such instances of irrelevant editorializing pepper the discussion, the cumulative effect of which is simply wearying.

With my interest in Merton’s poetics, I eagerly awaited the arrival of this book. And in spite of its off-putting covering, I opened the book still optimistic that I would find engaging reading about the highly charged poetry that is its subject. Regrettably, I wanted to close the book permanently many times before reaching this last and (pace to Robert Waldron) utterly unnecessary statement:

But one last comment is necessary. Merton’s burning M.’s letters would certainly have pleased Abbot Fox, for in the ‘sacred game of love’ the winner is not M., not Merton, but Abbot James Fox, who was the true winner in what Merton, perhaps cynically, came to call the crap game of love. (146)

No doubt this book has some virtues that I have overlooked, but I also doubt that it is Merton idolatry or slavish obedience to Church authority that prevents me from being “thrilled” by reading it. Instead, something much less complicated drives me to pan this book – my preference for clear, precise and cogent analysis.