

Against the Grain

Manuscript 8213

Collecting to the Core – The Works of John Donne

Cecile M. Jagodzinski

Anne Doherty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Collecting to the Core — The Works of John Donne

by **Cecile M. Jagodzinski** (British Literature Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <cjagodzi@gmail.com>

Column Editor: **Anne Doherty** (*Resources for College Libraries* Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Sometimes a book review is just a book review — a 100- to 200-word piece of functional literature that helps librarians decide whether to spend scarce resources (whether the budget is \$100,000 or one million dollars) on a particular book. Most of us have read hundreds of book reviews, but rarely has a book review changed the course of an academic discipline like **T. S. Eliot's** review of **Herbert Grierson's** 1921 edition of the poetry of **John Donne** (1572-1631).^{1,2} Published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1921, **Eliot** (or his *TLS* editors) entitled the piece "The Metaphysical Poets." In the review itself—the lead article for that issue, **Eliot** pronounced **Grierson's** work, not just a collection of poetry, but "a piece of criticism." **Donne** had been all but ignored since English critic, poet, and lexicographer **Samuel Johnson** wrote this about metaphysical poetry:

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement is dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.³

But **Eliot** demurred; he insisted that "after the dissociation, they [the metaphysical poets] put the material together again in a new unity." After quoting **Donne's** line from "The Relic," "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone," and its "telescoping" of two contrasting images, **Eliot** remarks that "A thought to **Donne** was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience."⁴ Here was high praise for a poet whose work had been passed over for nearly two centuries. And it brought back into currency the term "metaphysical poetry," though even **Eliot** put the term in quotation marks.

Very few of **Donne's** poems were published during his lifetime; he was, as was frequently the custom during that era, a "coterie poet" who circulated his poems among friends and patrons and, some argue, shared them with his wife, Anne. After his death, his son published an edition of **Donne's** poetry in 1633 (with no

consideration for the order of composition or the author's intent). After **Donne's** conversion to Anglicanism and appointment as dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, only selected sermons were published before his death; a meditation, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, written while **Donne** thought he was about to die, was also published in 1624.⁵ For the remainder of the seventeenth century, the focus of any further publications was on the prose, and on the skill of **Dr. Donne**, a reputedly brilliant orator. The eighteenth century is a desert when it comes to new works by or about **Donne** — the result, no doubt, of **Johnson's** scorn for the metaphysicals. During the nineteenth century, four editions of **Donne's** poetry were published.

Following **Eliot's** *TLS* article on the metaphysical poets, research on **Donne** began a crescendo that continues into the twenty-first century. In the first half of the twentieth century alone, four scholarly editions of **Donne's** poetry were produced. In the past half-century, many more editions of the poetry intended for classroom use emerged, including annotated editions by **John T. Shawcross**, **A. J. Smith**, **Helen Gardner**, **C. A. Patrides**, **Ilona Bell**, **Robin Robbins**, and **Donald Dickson**.⁶⁻¹² Undergraduate libraries will want to own these latter editions, even though some have fallen out of print. Faculty have their preferences for use in the classroom, and the library should reflect those preferences. Also published between 1953 and 1962 was the ten-volume series, *The Sermons of John Donne*, edited by **George R. Potter** and **Evelyn M. S. Simpson**.¹³ This edition has not been superseded, though the new (i.e., in print) *Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne* (three volumes, to date) is worthy of consideration.¹⁴ While the **Potter** and **Simpson** edition is not an essential purchase for most undergraduate libraries, the aforementioned *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* and *Death's Duell* (1632) (the final sermon he preached before his death) are mandatory purchases and representative of **Donne's** prose style.

This essay has focused till now on the needs of undergraduate students. But, just to be contrary (as **Donne** was in his poetry), I must mention *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, edited by **Gary Stringer**.¹⁵ For those whose specialty is outside the field of literary criticism, "A variorum edition designates either (1) an edition of a work that lists all the textual variants in the author's manuscripts ... or (2) an edition of a text that includes a collection of the annotations and commentaries on the text by earlier editors."¹⁶ The **Donne** variorum is a work in progress; the first volumes were published in 1995, and it is still incomplete. Its

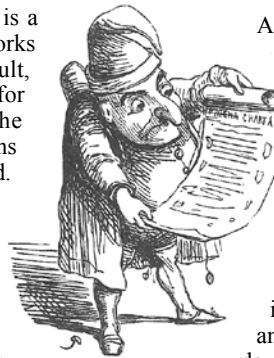
goals are "to recover and present exactly what **Donne** wrote" and "to facilitate the further understanding of **Donne's** poems."¹⁷ Purchase of these volumes will also undoubtedly please faculty and graduate students who study **Donne** and the other metaphysical poets. This monumental scholarly work is also partially available in electronic form as *Digital Donne*, a boon to those who wish to trace patterns in **Donne's** poetry and prose and follow the commentary on **Donne** from **Johnson** to the present.¹⁸

As for biography and criticism, one's literary cup overflows with monographs focused on **Donne's** life and work: between 1900 and 2018, *WorldCat* reports over 6,500 works by, or about, or influenced by **Donne**, in formats ranging from printed books to scores to periodicals. Though this number may be inflated due to duplication in the *WorldCat* database, it is still an astounding amount of scholarship devoted to one poet. This also does not

reflect the many reference works and surveys of the metaphysical poets, where **Donne** is not the sole focus, but nevertheless holds pride of place. A familiar example of the latter is the essay in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* series, where scholar **A. J. Smith** outlines **Donne's** life and works.¹⁹

Biographies of **Donne** appeared as early as 1670, with **Izaak Walton's** collective biography, which was followed nearly two centuries later by **Edmund Gosse's** edition of **Donne's** life and letters.²⁰⁻²¹ The definitive biography of **Donne** is **R. C. Bald's** *John Donne: A Life*.²² This was followed some years later by **John Carey's** *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, which viewed **Donne** as an ambitious young man struggling with the religious controversies of the time and his own personal beliefs.²³ **Carey's** work was met with some skepticism; **Edward W. Taylor's** review notes that "**Carey** pursues his demonstration comprehensively, exactly, incisively, relentlessly." Yet, despite his misgivings, **Taylor** admits that the "book cannot be ignored, nor should it be dismissed simply because it sometimes sounds like a mean-spirited hiss."²⁴ Nor has it been ignored: Google Books lists over 5,000 titles that mention or cite **Carey**. **John Stubbs's** *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* was also met with mixed reviews: **John Carey** himself faulted **Stubbs** for "combing the poems for biographical information," and being "an inaccurate reader of **Donne's** poems."²⁵⁻²⁶ However, **Stubbs's** biography was the recipient of the **Royal Society of Literature Jerwood Award** for a work-in-progress, and was shortlisted for the **Costa Award** in 2006; even *The New York Times Book Review*, not usually given to

continued on page 45



Collecting to the Core from page 44

reviewing literary criticism, devoted a full page to the book with a review by novelist **Thomas Mallon**.²⁷

Of the strictly critical, non-biographical works about **Donne**, *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* will be of great interest to undergraduates and their instructors.²⁸ **Robert Fraser**, in the *TLS*, found it hard to think of “a compilation of fifty essays containing more concentrated scholarship than these do.”²⁹ The *Contemporary Review* found the *Handbook* equally compelling.³⁰

To put **Donne** in the context of other metaphysical poets, one could delve into the opinionated **Harold Bloom** in *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets*, **George Williamson’s** *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader’s Guide*, or **Helen Gardner’s** *Metaphysical Poets*.³¹⁻³³ **Louis Martz** broke new ground with his *The Poetry of Meditation*, in which, in revelatory style, he traced the influence of religion and **St. Ignatius of Loyola’s** *Spiritual Exercises* on the poetry of **Donne** and other poets.³⁴ Still cited frequently, it was a groundbreaking work at the time, and serves as an interesting counterpoint to **Carey’s** later work. **Arthur Marotti’s** *John Donne, Coterie Poet* reminded readers that, before moveable type, and for several centuries after, reading manuscripts, rather than printed books, was, if not the norm, then exceedingly common.³⁵ Despite criticism from reviewers (including a biting review from **Jonathan Goldberg**), **Marotti’s** book revived interest in manuscript circulation and reading among friends.

In closing, we must acknowledge the prime place **Donne** studies hold in the undergraduate curriculum and in the scholarly community. In the space of forty years, **Donne** wrote love poems, satires, elegies, epigrams, sermons, and self-examinations. As **A. J. Smith** puts it in his *DLB* review of **Donne’s** life and works, “The amorous adventurer nurtured the dean of St. Paul’s.”³⁶ One wonders what **Donne** would have made of the undergraduate focus on the love poetry, when he clearly was a man who, in some ways, outgrew that genre for the magisterial sermons that are neglected by all but the specialist. 🍀

Book Reviews from page 43

few back to the 1990s. For example, the review of the Wikipedia is from 2007, and American Factfinder is from 2011. Many of the tangible sources are also available digitally, but the digital version is not reviewed. There are subject and title indexes, but the book is so well-organized that they are almost unnecessary.

Despite the inclusion of works that are older than some librarians would like, there is a case to be made for the usefulness of resources that are not extremely recent. *The Reference Librarian’s Bible* will probably be most helpful to library science graduate students learning their way around reference sources, but it is also a solid collection development tool, and a good refresher for librarians in areas other than reference.

ATG Reviewer Rating: I need this in my library. (I want to be able to get up from my desk and grab this book off the shelf, if it’s not checked out.) 🍀

Endnotes

1. **Eliot, T. S.** “The Metaphysical Poets.” *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 20, 1921: 669-670.
2. **Grierson, Herbert J. C.** *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921.*
3. **Johnson, Samuel.** *The Lives of the English Poets*, ed. by **George Birkbeck Hill**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905.*
4. **Eliot**, “The Metaphysical Poets.”
5. **Donne, John.** *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Edited by **John Sparrow**. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015.*
6. **Donne, John.** *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*. Edited by **John T. Shawcross**. New York: New York UP, 1968.
7. **Donne, John.** *The Complete English Poems*. Edited by **A. J. Smith**. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971.
8. **Donne, John.** *The Divine Poems*. Edited by **Helen Gardner**. 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.
9. **Donne, John.** *The Complete English Poems*. Edited by **C. A. Patrides**. London: Random House, 1991.*
10. **Donne, John.** *Selected Poems*. Introduction and notes by **Iona Bell**. London: Penguin, 2006.*
11. **Donne, John.** *The Complete Poems of John Donne*. Edited by **Robin Robbins**. London: Routledge, 2010.*
12. **Donne, John.** *John Donne’s Poetry*. Edited by **Donald R. Dickson**. New York: Norton, 2006.*
13. **Donne, John.** *The Sermons of John Donne*. Edited by **George R. Potter** and **Evelyn M. Simpson**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62.
14. **Donne, John.** *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013-<2017>.*
15. **Donne, John.** *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*. Edited by **Gary Stringer**, et al. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995-<2017>.*
16. **Abrams, M. H.**, and **Geoffrey Galt Harpham.** *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11th ed. Boston: Cengage, 2015.*
17. **Donne, John.** *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, quoted in **Brian Vickers**, “Revived Again.” *The Times Literary Supplement*, January 25, 2008: 11.
18. *Digital Donne: The Online Variorum*. Accessed November 7, 2018. <http://donne-variorum.tamu.edu/>.
19. **Smith, A. J.** “John Donne.” In *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 121: *Seventeenth Century British Nondramatic Poets*, edited by **M. Thomas Hester**, 77-96. Detroit: Gale Research, 1992.
20. **Donne, John.** *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Death’s Duel: with the Life of Dr. John Donne* by **Izaak Walton**. New York: Vintage, 1999.*
21. **Gosse, Edmund.** *The Life and Letters of John Donne, Dean of St. Paul’s*. London: Heinemann, 1899.
22. **Bald, R. C.** *John Donne: A Life*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1970.*
23. **Carey, John.** *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.*
24. **Taylor, Edward W.** “[Review] *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 36 (1983): 148-151.
25. **Stubbs, John.** *John Donne: The Reformed Soul*. New York: Norton, 2008.*
26. **Carey, John.** “Love & Heresy in John Donne.” *New York Review of Books* 54, no. 10 (June 14, 2007): 59-61.
27. **Mallon, Thomas.** “Love’s Deity.” *The New York Times Book Review*, May 13, 2007: 26.
28. **Shami, Jeanne, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester.** *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016.*
29. **Fraser, Robert.** “Riddling Soul.” *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 5, 2011: 3-4.
30. **E.C.M.** “Review of *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*.” *Contemporary Review* 293 (2011): 396.
31. **Bloom, Harold.** *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.*
32. **Williamson, George.** *Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader’s Guide*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2001.*
33. **Gardner, Helen.** *The Metaphysical Poets*. London: Penguin, 1960.*
34. **Martz, Louis L.** *The Poetry of Meditation*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1962.*
35. **Marotti, Arthur F.** *John Donne, Coterie Poet*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1986.*
36. **Smith, A. J.** “John Donne.”

Editor’s note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.