Introduction

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John Donne produced some of the finest writing in any language about the pleasures and mysteries of love and religion. His restless imagination and voracious intellect invested his poetry and prose with an unprecedented dramatic energy and metaphoric intensity. His work is formally inventive, aggressively pushing against the very generic boundaries it enters. Even commonplace sentiments are rendered breathtakingly vivid and witty when filtered through Donne's singular intelligence.

Yet wit and intelligence sometimes come at a cost. Donne can be difficult, deliberately difficult. Even his friends and contemporaries sometimes had trouble understanding his works. Ben Jonson, the Renaissance dramatist and poet, thought "That Donne himself, for not being understood, would perish."[1] And as Nicholas Nace demonstrates in his accomplished essay in this volume, Jonson was nearly a prophet: Donne in fact almost vanishes from the eighteenth-century literary landscape. Whereas the reputation of William Shakespeare, Donne's slightly older contemporary, entails a relatively continuous rise through the centuries, Donne's reputation has risen and fallen violently over time. But as James Longenbach and Linda Gregerson, both practicing poets and critics, demonstrate in the last two essays in the collection, it is impossible to imagine poetry of the last 200 years without the influence and example of Donne. Donne's seesaw reputation over the centuries offers a salutary lesson in the shifting values of literary taste.

Donne was most decidedly a writer of his age, and he is most emphatically a writer for ours. This collection is designed to ensure the lasting defeat of Jonson's portentous prophecy, by making significant elements of Donne's remarkable achievement available to the twenty-first century reader. While Donne's work sometimes requires the help of an expert in the frequently arcane forms of knowledge that Donne relishes, his complexity is never gratuitous. Rather, it is a consequence of his uncompromising effort to honor the full complexity of lived experience. Donne

possesses a remarkable eye for tacit connections among apparently unrelated phenomena, and is fascinated by the way that mundane existence and arcane knowledge can be made to gloss each other. Perhaps only Donne would have dared – in a single stanza of a single poem – to compare the parting of lovers to the legs of a compass, separated but still conjoined, and found emotional comfort in that profoundly cerebral comparison ("A Valediction Forbidding Mourning").

Indeed, part of the immense pleasure of reading Donne is coming to apprehend the full impact of his startling metaphors and dense syntax. Donne repeatedly challenges his readers to sustain a level of knowledge and attention few can consistently muster. Even scholars occasionally require assistance in discerning Donne's deeply learned utterances. One of our finest close readers, William Empson, interrupts a discussion of the extravagant textures of Donne's poetry to offer an uncharacteristic apology for the need to give historical context in order to understand the work's aesthetic accomplishment: "I feel I should apologize for so much 'background material,' but with Donne it seems to be mainly doubt about the background which makes a critic reject the arguments from the text of the poems."[2] As Empson's explanation makes clear, Donne's works frequently require knowledge of "background material" in order to comprehend the complex architecture of the works. The essays of this volume were specifically solicited from scholars who possess the necessary expertise in the various genres and modes of knowledge that Donne's work participates in. But none of the essays supplies merely inert background material; rather together they demonstrate boldly and convincingly the ways that scholarly knowledge of Donne and his culture can be mobilized to enhance, and even electrify, our reading of his works. The goal of this collection is to offer fresh interpretations of this immense body of work by supplying the background and contextual information required to appreciate his works fully. The context is explicitly designed not to bury, but rather to uncover, the elaborate, highly referential text of Donne's works. Written in a wide range of genres, for disparate occasions, and repeatedly challenging the interpretive skill of the reader, Donne's works demand an almost unique combination of contextual knowledge and new critical techniques. The reader must continually move outside a poem in order to be able to enter it fully. The poems may be well-wrought urns, but they are urns that contain rather than exclude the essence of the world around them.[3]

This collection, then, aspires to represent the remarkable range of Donne's writings by exploring the various contexts in which he lived and worked. Through a series of concise, pointed essays from an international

group of outstanding scholars and critics, Donne's works, and his world, are allowed to come alive. I want Donne's twenty-first-century readers to see that when they are given enough information to understand the particular situation of the writer, the tone of the speaker, the arcane knowledge exploited by Donne, and the formal choices made by the author, even the most difficult texts can yield lasting pleasures. It is hoped that the volume will prove useful to general readers, students, scholars, and teachers in their efforts to understand, appreciate, and enjoy Donne's works. The volume is premised on the idea that Donne's deep originality, what his contemporary Thomas Carew termed his "fresh invention" (28),[4] can be best appreciated amid the various contexts in which his invention flourished.

For all of its range, and the erudition of its numerous contributors, this volume is not exhaustive – no single collection could be for such a sumptuous and substantial body of work. Donne wrote in an extraordinarily wide range of genres and subgenres, from cynical paradoxes that flirt with atheism, materialism, and antifeminism to sermons that stir the devotional soul. He composed caustic satires, poetry of fulsome praise, racy elegies, sincere love poems, devotional meditations, and touching letters of remarkable warmth, wit, and intimacy. This collection aspires to be almost as intellectually promiscuous as Donne himself. It says something about Donne's mind that it requires the expertise of thirty-one scholars to begin to approach the range of his learning and interests. The collection contains essays on Donne's biography and self-representation (Cheney, Howe, Selleck), his chosen media (Brown, Rundell, Trevor, Johnson, Bell), his various genres (Sanchez, Strier, Daybell, Marno, Conti, Ferrell, Hadfield), his education (Ettenhuber, Wallace), his attitude to the natural world (Bushnell), his ideas about emotion and sensation (Tilmouth, Campana), the cultural practices that fascinated him (Landreth, Bates), the institutions that shaped him (Kneidel, Murray), and the ideas that absorbed him (Teskey, Pender, Healy, Sherman). Of course, there is rich overlap among these categories, but this list bestows some sense of the various threads of continuity that unite these scholarly engagements.

The time is ripe for a full and multifaceted reappraisal of John Donne. A major research tool, the *Donne Variorum*, is currently being produced, with several volumes already out. As several of the essays in this collection discuss (see Brown and Rundell), Donne rarely published in print, and when he did, he tended to regret it later. But his works were popular, and circulated widely in manuscript, with variants introduced almost every time the work was copied. He is perhaps best known today for a single line

from one of his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* – "No man is an Island, entire of itself" – but his pungent and pithy phrasing has been the source of many book titles (Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and John Gunther's *Death Be Not Proud* among the most famous). While his poems and devotions are generally admired, Donne deserves an even wider audience. Donne's Holy Sonnets were recently at the center of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *W;t* by Margaret Edson, which mentions prominently the work of one of our contributors (Strier). The new *OHJD* provides a delightful companion for readers of Donne. Donne's fascinating life has been the subject of a biography by John Stubbs, *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* (Norton, 2008). There is a very useful new edition of Donne's poetry from Longman, edited by Robin Robbins (2008, rev. 2010), and another from Penguin (2012), edited by Ilona Bell (another contributor to this volume), which is used whenever relevant in this collection. Of crucial importance to T. S. Eliot and the other modernists, Donne's work remains indispensable to any account of English poetry. His sermons and devotions are some of the richest religious utterances in any language, and continue to permeate the devotional discourse of various religious persuasions.

This volume is designed to help today's readers appreciate the infinite riches of John Donne's remarkable works. The multifaceted format of this volume is tailor-made for exploring the many sides of Donne. At times imperious, at others profoundly vulnerable, Donne's voice is always fresh and compelling; his works speak to us forcefully across the centuries with a power that moves both brain and heart, if we only have ears to hear.

Notes

1. Ben Jonson, *Conversations of Ben Jonson with William Drummond*, ed. Philip Sidney (London: Gay and Bird, 1906), 25.
2. William Empson, "Donne the Space Man," in *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, ed. John Haffenden, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1: 114.
3. I refer here to that famous work of New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), which discusses, and takes its title from, Donne's "The Canonization."
4. Carew, "Elegy."