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0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

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Following the success in paperback of William Empson's *Essays on Shakespeare* (1986), this first volume of his *Essays on Renaissance Literature* (1993) now appears in an accessible format. The volume gathers Empson's passionate and controversial essays on John Donne in the context of contemporary science, and includes previously unpublished pieces on some of the most influential Renaissance writers and scientists. Among its themes are the ideological and ethical conflicts that inspired Donne's work, and Empson shows how the poet was profoundly inspired by new scientific discoveries which helped form his advanced views on church and state. Lucid, closely argued, and provocative, the book provides a rich analysis of the Renaissance mind torn between a defunct cosmology and a new world order.

Edited and introduced by leading Empson scholar John Haffenden, this is a book for anyone interested in Renaissance literature and philosophy, the history of science, and the history of literary criticism.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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VOLUME ONE

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

WILLIAM EMPSON  
ESSAYS ON RENAISSANCE  
LITERATURE

EDITED BY  
JOHN HAFFENDEN

*Professor of English Literature, University of Sheffield*

*Volume one*

*Donne and the new philosophy*



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

Material by William Empson © Lady Empson 1993  
Introduction and notes © John Haffenden 1993

First published 1993  
First paperback edition 1995

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Empson, William, 1906–1984

William Empson: essays on renaissance literature / edited by John Haffenden.

v. 1.

Includes index.

Contents: v. 1. Donne and the new philosophy.

ISBN 0 521 44043 2 (hardback)

ISBN 0 521 48360 3 (paperback)

1. English literature – Early modern, 1500–1700 – History and criticism. 2. Renaissance – England. 1. Haffenden, John.

II. Title.

PR423.E56 1993

820.9'003 – dc20 92-20647 CIP

ISBN 0 521 44043 2 (hardback)

ISBN 0 521 48360 3 (paperback)

Transferred to digital printing 2002

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Sources and acknowledgements</i>	xiii
Introduction by John Haffenden	1
1 Donne and the rhetorical tradition	63
2 Donne the space man	78
3 Donne in the new edition	129
4 Rescuing Donne	159
5 Donne's foresight	200
6 Copernicanism and the censor	207
7 Thomas Digges his infinite universe	216
8 Godwin's voyage to the moon	220
Appendix on Galileo	255
<i>Notes</i>	259
<i>Index</i>	291

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface

It is twenty years since William Empson, just a year after his retirement from Sheffield University, truly turned his mind to collecting his essays and articles. Uncharacteristically invoking the gospel of St John (9, 4) – or maybe he was thinking more immediately of John Donne's Satire III, line 84 – he wrote to his old friend and publisher Ian Parsons in 1972: 'I well know that the night cometh when no man can work, and that I had much better be getting my affairs in order. In fact I meant to do it when I retired, but the inflation is so alarming that it seems better to keep in employment while I may. Besides, I am always finding mistakes in my old articles while having to read some book again for a lecture.'<sup>1</sup>

As that letter suggests, whenever he tried to gather up his writings he invariably felt it necessary to review the argument and ammunition he had originally marshalled for any particular piece. In addition, he found it imperative, not merely to substantiate points of old controversy, but to drive forward into new areas; he was not one to rest on his offprints. He willingly granted in the introductory remarks to his Clark Lectures, given at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1974: 'I am usually saying things that other people disagree with, and I need to present a much stronger case in print than I do in a lecture. It has been getting pretty near the point of just calling each other liars...' At about this time, in 1972, for instance, he began intensive work on *Doctor Faustus* in relation to both the English and the German Faust-books; and by January 1979 he had amassed so many hundreds of pages of notes and typescript drafts that he knew he had in prospect not just an essay, but a substantial book (*Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-book and Marlowe's 'Doctor Faustus'* has been edited by John Henry Jones, 1987), so it is not in the least surprising that he was reluctant to face the day when it would be necessary to take ultimate stock of the growing number of his

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

*Preface*

occasional essays. Not idleness, but an ever-enquiring mind: that was the problem. 'Kind of you to enquire', he wrote to Parsons in 1975,

I have been delayed by various things but am going on quite well now, and if I keep it up will finish 'Elizabethan Plays' within a year at least. One keeps finding soft bits that need more information to carry the needed weight, but most of it is just re-writing now. A good deal of the Clark Lecture material comes in, but by no means all. There are a number of old articles I was planning to bring in at the end, but the thing is getting so long I am not sure there will be room. If not they can join the rag-book [*sic*]; we can settle that later.<sup>2</sup>

In the event, he concentrated his energies on three specific volumes – *Using Biography*, *Essays on Shakespeare*, and a collection of essays on other Elizabethan and Jacobean writers (as well as the extended study of *Doctor Faustus*). Yet at his death in April 1984 he had finished only the first, containing essays on Marvell, Dryden, Fielding, Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Joyce, which was published by Chatto and Windus later that year. In 1986 David B. Pirie edited for Cambridge University Press *Essays on Shakespeare*, a volume that was almost complete when Empson died; with the single exception of an essay on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which survives in several confusing drafts and was accordingly left out of the book, the contents are those that Empson had decided to include. The following year, the present editor assembled a volume that is distinct from the canon; *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, containing both substantial items and a plethora of occasional pieces, constitutes what I believe Empson would have considered his 'rag-book'. Apart from specifying the theme and contents of *Using Biography*, Empson had made known his intentions only in respect of the Shakespeare volume and of the collection of essays on 'other Elizabethan playwrights', as he sometimes vaguely called the companion collection; so it was not hard to design the *omnium gatherum* of *Argufying*: it was necessary only *not* to include those articles which had to be tagged for the Renaissance tome.

There is no substantial guidance, whether preferred or inferred, about the outstanding Elizabethan and Jacobean collection. 'There are several other puzzles which I need to clear my mind and record my opinion about, before I die or become ga-ga, and I know I must hurry up', he wrote to CUP ('Guy Fawkes Night 1981'). 'The plan of one Shakespeare book and then one Jonson etc. book seems to me an admirable one, settling a whole area, and I had much better do

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

that next. But of course I must arrange them as real books...’ We know that the Shakespeare collection added up to a ‘real book’ in his estimation; we cannot be at all certain just how he meant to compose the remaining Renaissance essays. ‘The next one is about other Elizabethan playwrights, and perhaps a poet or two’, he told Christopher Ricks in 1981; and then, in September 1982: ‘The book on Shakespeare and one on other Elizabethan playwrights are to be done by CUP, and... there is stuff I want to hold back for further works, such as the Donne argument...’<sup>3</sup> One title that occurred to him in 1982 was *Some Elizabethan Plays and their Stage* – though ‘of course I would be glad to be advised of brisker titles’, he sensibly allowed.<sup>4</sup> What is evident is that he wanted to collect his essays on Kyd, Marlowe, Jonson, and Webster, substantially revised (if necessary) since their first periodical appearances; also the several pieces he had written on John Donne and his poetry – which he had loved for a lifetime. (It is not otherwise evident what he meant by ‘a poet or two’, unless he had it in mind to write more about Herbert or Vaughan.) Moreover, on top of all his other extensive writings – about *Doctor Faustus*, the secret marriage of Andrew Marvell, and further projects – he undertook in the 1970s to do even more research on the urgent business of establishing the context of John Donne’s interest in cosmology, and to draft a number of extra pieces – on the astronomer Thomas Digges, on the place of Copernicanism in the Elizabethan world, and especially on the precocious, sky-flying science fiction of Francis Godwin, *The Man in the Moone*. (For reasons which will be made clear as you read on, he thought at one time of entitling this last essay ‘Young Donne and Godwin’s Man in the Moon’.) All in all, he wrote such a sizeable body of passionate, closely argued essays on the subject of John Donne that it has become irresistible to gather them into a single volume augmented by these other pieces. Only by reading Empson on all aspects of the Donne controversy – biographical, bibliographical, ideological, and aesthetic – is it possible to appreciate the full burden of his commitment to the poetry. For reasons of space and economy, therefore, Empson’s pieces on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama will now take their place in the second instalment of a two-volume edition of his essays on Renaissance literature. To say the least, all of the pieces in the present volume are interdependent.

Maybe Empson had an inkling of this happily cogent consequence as long ago as January 1973, when he told Ian Parsons that, of all the



Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

*Preface*

essays he had to review and possibly revise, ‘I had better first do the difficult ones on Joyce and Donne – both I should think will end up as merely long articles in books of collected articles, but perhaps the Donne, as so many angles to it have been cropping up, could make a short book to itself.’<sup>5</sup>

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the help I have received during the preparation of this volume. First and foremost, as in editing *The Royal Beasts* and *Argufying*, I must thank Hetta Empson for entrusting me with the task, for her unintrusive faith, and for her unstinting hospitality in Hampstead (where I am also cheered by the fellowship of John Henry Jones). Rodney Dennis, Curator of Manuscripts, is always a welcoming and most witty host during my visits to the Houghton Library, Harvard University; and Elizabeth A. Falsey, who has undertaken the staggering job of cataloguing the Empson Papers, is unfailingly resourceful in helping me to get at the multitudinous bits and pieces I need. For their advice and information in various capacities I am indebted to Professor Sir Frank Kermode, Dr Barbara Ozieblo, Dr David B. Pirie, Dr Theodore Redpath, Professor Christopher Ricks, Professor Mark Roberts, and Mr Colin A. Ronan. Finally, for their bottomless patience and professionalism (and their surprising friendliness) I offer thanks to Anne McDermid, my agent at Curtis Brown, and to Kevin Taylor of Cambridge University Press.

I am immensely grateful to the British Academy for the award of a Research Readership which enabled me to make happy progress both with this volume and with a biography of Empson; and to the Research Fund of the University of Sheffield for timely financial assistance.

John Haffenden  
University of Sheffield

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Sources and acknowledgements*

‘Donne and the Rhetorical Tradition’ was first published in *The Kenyon Review*, 11, Autumn 1949. Copyright 1949 by Kenyon College. Reprinted with permission. ‘Donne the Space Man’ was first published in *The Kenyon Review*, 19, Summer 1957. Copyright 1957 by Kenyon College. Reprinted with permission. ‘Donne in the New Edition’ first appeared in the *Critical Quarterly*, 8, 1966, and is reprinted by permission of *Critical Quarterly*. ‘Rescuing Donne’ was first published in *Just So Much Honor: Essays Commemorating the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of John Donne*, edited by Peter Amadeus Fiore; University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972, pp. 95–148. Copyright 1972 by the Pennsylvania State University. Reproduced by permission of the publisher. I am grateful to Professor Sir Frank Kermode for supplying me with an offprint of ‘Rescuing Donne’ with emendations in Empson’s hand: I have incorporated in this edition the few small alterations and corrections that Empson desired. There is one essay I have chosen not to include here – “‘There Is No Penance Due to Innocence’”, Empson’s review of *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* by John Carey (*The New York Review of Books*, 28:19, 3 December 1981, pp. 42–50) – not because I feel it necessary to protect the innocent, though it is an angry essay (John Carey clearly needs no such protection), but because the largest part of the critical debate it covers, especially the discussion of Donne’s ‘Elegy XIX’, is fully rehearsed in ‘Rescuing Donne’; even though there is bound to be a degree of reiteration in a collection such as this, to insist on downright repetitiousness seems beyond the call of editorial duty.

The other essays – specifically ‘Donne’s foresight’, ‘Copernicanism and the censor’, ‘Thomas Digges his infinite universe’, ‘Godwin’s voyage to the Moon’, and ‘Appendix on Galileo’ – are taken from Empson’s own typescript drafts. All of these latter pieces

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

*Sources and acknowledgements*

post-date ‘Rescuing Donne’ (1972), and indeed it is apparent that Empson had been working on draft after draft of them throughout the last decade of his life; there is some evidence, for example, to suggest that ‘Copernicanism and the censor’ dates from about 1982. The pieces on Godwin and Galileo were provided with titles by Empson himself; other titles are editorial. As John Henry Jones found to his anguish when editing *Faustus and the Censor*, Empson always wrote numerous drafts of his books and essays: it was, for him, a matter of both principle and experience that an essay should be kneaded into readability by being urged through the typewriter as many times as necessary – sometimes a dozen or more times – until he was satisfied it had achieved the careless ease that was characteristic of his best prose. In the case of the first three of these previously unpublished essays, and the ‘Appendix on Galileo’, it has been a fairly straightforward matter to determine the most developed state of the typescript. ‘Godwin’s Voyage to the Moon’ was a serious challenge, however, since there are some five or six (it is even difficult to be quite sure) typescript drafts – hundreds of pages of top copies and carbons – in varying states of revision; but I feel reasonably confident, after tackling the big job of collation, that the text in this volume represents the most advanced state of the essay. As far as Empson was concerned, all of these essays were trial pieces; I believe they demonstrate that his intellectual pep went undiminished to the end. Occasionally – very occasionally – I have had to synthesise a sentence or a phrase, but the words are 100 per cent Empson.

Professor Sir Frank Kermode has generously given permission for me to quote extracts from his letters to William Empson. Extracts from the letters of the late Dame Helen Gardner are published by kind permission of Katherine Duncan-Jones.

In editing both published and unpublished essays, I have been mindful of Empson’s protestation, in a letter to the *New Statesman* (5 June 1955), that ‘the bits of my prose which Mr Vallins blamed in *Good English* had been written with particular care, chiefly to avoid misunderstanding in the reader, and... I thought the complaints against them wrong-headed’. As far as style goes, therefore, I have tried to limit myself to correcting infrequent misspellings and to normalising or supplying some points of punctuation for the sake of clarity. Other silent emendations have been of a usual copy-editing order. But I am also conscious that Empson is famous for being able

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Sources and acknowledgements*

xv

to quote vast amounts of poetry from memory, and equally famous for misquoting (poetry and prose) in his published works. ‘I am very bad at correcting proofs of my own writing’, he wrote in a letter to the *Hudson Review* in Autumn 1966,

always seeing what I meant to write and considering whether it should be improved, and in my first book I foolishly imitated Hazlitt in what seemed a civilised practice, making incidental quotations as I remembered them, which was sufficient for the purpose. The effect of the combination was that a close study of an odd bit of punctuation in a poem would sometimes appear with the punctuation wrong, and nearby there were evidently careless quotations. My paragraph would make nonsense until the punctuation was put right, and I struggled to do this as soon as possible, but my opponents were already saying that I had cheated; I had misquoted the text in order to make it fit my interpretation, they said, and they have continued to do so. Now ... almost any other form of our mortal frailty would then have tempted me more.

Accordingly, I have attempted to check the majority of the quotations, both poetry and prose, in this volume, though I cannot claim to have been comprehensive (some of them I just could not locate). I can only hope against hope not to have introduced misquotations, and more importantly not to have harmed any of Empson’s interpretations and their supportive evidence.

Quotations from Donne’s poetry have normally been collated with the standard text edited by Herbert J. C. Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912). Although Empson always favoured the Grierson text, he was casual about orthography and often modernised the titles of poems (e.g. ‘The Ecstasy’ rather than ‘The Extasie’): I have not felt it necessary to regularise Empson’s usage in respect of titles, except for just a few occasions where an uncorrected citation could be confusing.

One other matter needs a word or two of explanation. While Empson himself rarely supplied details of sources and references, I have chosen to furnish quite a full apparatus of annotations, together with additional references; and some of these annotations extend to works of criticism that have been published in the years since Empson’s death in 1984. My reason for supplying such references is not just to equip Empson’s essays with the patina of pedantic scholarship; it is because Empson committed himself for more than fifty years to putting forward deeply felt and long-deliberated arguments about Donne, his poetry, and his world, and I am sure he

Cambridge University Press

0521483603 - William Empson: Essays on Renaissance Literature, Volume One

Edited by John Haffenden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

xvi

*Sources and acknowledgements*

would hate to think that his essays were being gathered together merely for the sake of the historical–critical record. These studies were vital to him, so I have provided annotations with a view to setting the essays in the widest possible context of the living debate about Donne; to show how the argument goes on – and Empson’s continuing centrality to it.