Collecting to the Core — The Works of John Donne

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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

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ometimes 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). 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 ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, 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 1624.4 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.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 “overlong paragraphs of 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...
reviewing literary criticism, devoted a full page to the book with a review by novelist Thomas Mallon.22

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.23 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 opinedon Harold Bloom in John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets, George Williamson’s Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader’s Guide, or Helen Gardener’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 ground-breaking 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, 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 would have made of the un-amorous adventurer nurtured the dean of St. Paul’s.”36


Smith, A. J. “John Donne.”

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