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*The Works of*  
*John*  
*Donne*

*with an Introduction*  
*and Bibliography*

*Johnson*

*John Donne*

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with an Introduction and Bibliography



*Wordsworth Poetry Library*

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## INTRODUCTION

John Donne was born in 1572, only eight years after Shakespeare, yet the two poets seem to inhabit very different emotional and literary atmospheres. Donne, with his startling scientific images, his muscular, colloquial directness and his complex, even tortured intelligence, appears to us very much as a figure of the seventeenth century of scientific discoveries and philosophical rigour. Some of this emotional complexity and intellectual sophistication can be ascribed to the fact that most of his life was spent in London, around or aspiring to courtly circles, and that he was born into a Catholic family at a time when Catholics were severely restricted and often persecuted in the exercise of their faith. His mother was related to Sir Thomas More, and an uncle led the Jesuit mission in England. After the early death of Donne's father his mother married another Catholic. While still very young Donne attended both Oxford and Cambridge, but was precluded by his faith from taking a degree. In 1593 his brother died in prison, after having been caught harbouring a priest. Donne, it seems, renounced Catholicism at about this time. While this undoubtedly removed a barrier to his ambitions, it should not be seen simply as an opportunistic move: for Donne faith and creed were matters of the most profound seriousness, to be probed throughout his life – initially in *Satyre III* where we find those famous lines whose vigorous, mimetic complexity seems to describe Donne's own style:

On a huge hill,  
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will  
Reach her, about must, and about must goe.

The fear of damnation, of a very real hell-fire, permeates much of his religious poetry, and scholars agree that the abandonment of his ancestral faith was not arrived at easily.

Like most ambitious young men of his day Donne needed aristocratic patrons to further his career, even to subsist. After buccaneering expeditions with Essex and Raleigh he became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton.

However, in 1601 he wrecked his prospects by marrying Ann More, Lady Egerton's niece. This led to a brief imprisonment and fourteen years of poverty and anxiety, poignantly summed up in the little triplet, 'John Donne, / Ann Donne, / Undone' (which gives us the pronunciation of his name, something he used with majestic punning in 'Hymn to God the Father'). They were to have twelve children, before her death after the last birth in 1617. Eventually the efforts of friends and patrons commended him to the notice of James I, but the king insisted that Donne's advancement must be in the church, and an initially reluctant Donne was ordained in 1615. At first he held plural livings, then travelled to Germany as chaplain to a diplomatic mission, before the influence of high-placed friends elevated him to the Deanery of St Paul's. Here, for the last ten years of his life, he preached with a passion and eloquence which brought him renown and respect. He died in March 1631.

Today Donne's reputation stands high, but this is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Succeeding generations found his verse too odd, too rough, too 'incorrect' to be either pleasing or edifying, and his eroticism, playfulness and cynicism were repugnant to many in the nineteenth century. It was modernists like T. S. Eliot, who finding that his daring, his cerebral qualities and his rugged diction chimed with their own preoccupations, began his rehabilitation. Nowadays Donne is taught in schools, and many a bookish adolescent will have got his or her first intuition of joyous sexuality from the love poems:

License my roaving hands, and let them go,  
 Before, behind, between, above, below.  
 O my America! my new-found-land . . .

*Elegie XIX*

Readers should not be troubled by two of the terms frequently attached to Donne. One is that he was a 'metaphysical' poet, along with such contemporaries as Marvell, Herbert and Traherne. This has no connection with the philosophical school but was an epithet coined by a disapproving Dr Johnson for seventeenth-century writers who flaunted their learning and employed abstruse 'conceits' – the other difficult term. A conceit is simply a learned or far-fetched image, of which there are plenty to be found in Donne: a flea, in the eponymous poem, becomes both the fortunate ravisher of the obdurate beloved – an ancient poet's joke – and, having sucked the blood of both lover and beloved, their marriage bed. In the grave and tender 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' the parted lovers' united souls are 'like gold to airy thinness beat', or



If they be two, they are two so  
 As stiffe twin compasses are two . . .  
 Yet when the other far doth rome,  
 It leanes, and hearkens after it,  
 And growes erect, as that comes home.

Rather more disturbing, though physically evocative is an image in the rapt love poem, 'The Extasie':

Our eye-beams twisted, and did thred  
 Our eyes, upon one double string.

Again and again readers will be arrested by startling turns of phrase, by pungent frankness or by the poet's imperious commands ('For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love'; 'Goe tell Court-huntsmen that the King will ride'; 'Batter my heart, three person'd God'; 'Death, be not proud'), and, it has to be said, puzzled by some unfathomable phrase or allusion. There is no evading the fact that Donne is a difficult poet. To this day scholars are scrapping over the exact significance of obscure references or quarrelling over some particularly convoluted piece of syntax.

Nevertheless, much of Donne is wonderfully accessible to modern readers. Most will start with the *Songs and Sonnets*, a large number of which are love poems. These were almost certainly written over a long period, many probably after his marriage to the beloved Ann. Though those nurtured on the poetry of the Romantics may be troubled by worry about his sincerity, there is no real difficulty here; it may be helpful to think of Donne as a supreme actor, giving voice to intense and passionate feelings which he understood well but did not attach to specific autobiographical events. The lyrics vary widely in tone, from the playful magic of 'Song' ('Goe, and catche a falling starre') through the jocund arrogance of 'The Sunne Rising' to the elegiac 'A Nocturnall upon S. Lucie's Day', written on the illness of his loved patroness, Lucy Countess of Bedford. However difficult some passages may be, each poem has an unmistakable voice which speaks directly across the centuries, and awakens an equally direct response. Such vigour and directness are quite as telling in the religious poems, whose power and, often, anguish can be felt even by readers who have little feeling for religion and no knowledge of seventeenth-century theology. Belief was integral to the lives of almost all Donne's contemporaries, and Donne's probable disquiet about his renunciation of Catholicism may augment his sense of having a 'blacke soule' and inspire Sonnet XVIII of the *Divine Poems*, 'Show me deare Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear'.

The Epithalamions, once the reader becomes accustomed to the elaborate, hyperbolic diction, give a lively sense of aristocratic panoply and ceremony, and a tender evocation of marital eroticism. Like the poems addressed to patrons, these worked within a convention of homage and, in the case of women, courtly love, which was well understood by the recipients and by Donne's contemporaries.

Not all the poems are so accessible. Few but Donne specialists plough through the 'Anniversaries', written to commemorate the death of a fifteen-year-old girl Donne had never met, in the hope of continued patronage from her father. Information about their recipients is needed for some of the verse letters, and several of the Satyres and Elegies demand specialist knowledge. Others, however, leap off the page. In Elegie XVI the poet, after imploring his love not to follow him abroad disguised as his page, imagines her dreaming of him during his absence and waking terrified:

Nurse, O my love is slaine, I saw him goe  
O'er the white Alps alone.

Such vividly strange moments gleam through Donne's poetry – 'This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare'; the baroque 'At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow / Your trumpets, Angells'; '... cloysterd in these living walls of Jet; 'A bracelet of bright haire about the bone' – echoing down the centuries and haunting the reader. The vitality, the individuality, the paradoxical modernity of this complex seventeenth-century man speak with piercing directness to readers of the late twentieth century.

Editorial note:

Many scholars now doubt the attribution to Donne of Elegies XIII, XIV and XVII.

#### FURTHER READING

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