

# Colloquium: *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

## Introduction

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Late in November 1623 John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, fell ill with epidemic typhus or, as it was then called, "spotted fever." The progress of the disease was swift and intense, and Donne nearly died of it. But by mid-December he was out of danger, spending the initial month of his long recuperation readying for the printer his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Several Steps in My Sickness*. In his own words: "Though I have left my bed, I have not left my bed-side; I sit there still, and as a Prisoner discharged, sits at the Prison doore, to beg Fees, so sit I here, to gather crummes. I have used this leisure, to put the meditations had in my sicknesse, into some such order, as may minister some holy delight."<sup>1</sup>

Printed by Augustine Matthewes early in 1624, the *Devotions* was a longish book (630 pages in the duodecimo edition), dedicated to Prince Charles Stuart, prefaced by a Latin poem entitled "*Stationes*" which charted the progress of the illness, and structured into twenty-three three-part *Devotions*. As much poetry as prose, the *Devotions* is the masterpiece of Donne's last years. Yet today, in contrast with his verse and even his sermons, the *Devotions* is to be found rather on the shelves of rare book rooms than those of Barnes & Noble. This is due to several

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<sup>1</sup>*Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London, 1651), p. 249.

causes: it has been placed, and often overlooked, in Donne's prose canon, until recently a matter of secondary interest to readers. And although it provides an index to Donne's vast learning (allowed no reading during his illness and recuperation, he drew its matter solely from his memory and imagination) as well as an insight into his spiritual life, it is difficult of access both as prose and poetry. Moreover, the modern practice of fragmentary anthologizing does not serve the *Devotions* well: it must, to be grasped as a masterwork, be taken in its entirety, as with many great works a daunting task.

The printing history of the *Devotions* mirrors its critical reception: after an initial spate of publication in the seventeenth century, editions of Donne's *Devotions* have been relatively few and sporadic. Of the four twentieth-century editions, only two are in print. However, recent textual and historical inquiry still has focused on Donne's prose works, including the *Devotions*. The panel of scholars assembled to discuss this work at the 2005 John Donne Society Conference reflects this interest in major ways: Brooke Conti addresses the uneven critical history of the *Devotions*; R. V. Young its theological position, a topic of current intense inquiry; Mary Papazian the import of the work's political and personal contexts; and Helen Wilcox the thorny problem of how one approaches pedagogically such a complex and sometimes historically removed artifact. The panel's intent has been to awaken readers to the *Devotions* and to stimulate future study. The papers here presented demonstrate their commitment to the work of John Donne and especially to the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.

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