

Book Reviews

Fresh Sequencing and Fugitive Conversation in *The Holy Sonnets*

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Gary Stringer, gen. ed., *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne: Volume 7, Part I, The Holy Sonnets*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005. cvii + 608 pp.

Like its predecessors, the fourth volume of the *Donne Variorum* enterprise to appear is a triumph in every way. Like them, *The Holy Sonnets* consists of two parts: texts and historical commentary. The former have been prepared by Gary A. Stringer, Dennis Flynn, Ted-Larry Pebworth, Theodore J. Sherman, and Ernest W. Sullivan, II; and the latter by Paul A. Parrish, Helen B. Brooks, Robert T. Fallon, and P. G. Stanwood. Both parts match the extremely high standards set by preceding volumes, and as far as the text is concerned, build on stemmatic knowledge gained during the completion of those volumes, particularly the *Elegies* volume that appeared in 2000.

In a departure from the fully collaborative division of labor followed in previous volumes, the textual portion is primarily the work of Gary Stringer (Ted-Larry Pebworth and Ernest W. Sullivan, the *Variorum*'s other senior textual editors, will fulfill similar roles for the forthcoming volumes on the Satires and the Verse Letters, respectively). In the space of just over forty pages Stringer's general textual introduction painstakingly makes an irrefutable bibliographical case for presenting three sequences of the Holy Sonnets: an original twelve-poem sequence, the nineteen-poem NY3 (Westmoreland) sequence, and a revised

twelve-poem sequence. The original twelve-poem sequence, headed "Diuine Meditations," is to be found in what are customarily known as the Group III manuscripts. (Two of these artefacts—C9 and H6—add from a Group II exemplar four more of what later became the "Holy Sonnets" but entitle them "Other Meditations" to match the nomenclature of their original collection.) The original sequence of twelve has never before been presented in print, and H5 is used as its copy-text. At the next stage of evolution, with several of their texts revised, this original set of poems appears at the beginning of the collection of "Holy Sonnets" in the Westmoreland manuscript (NY3), the only Group IV artefact; and to it have been added a group of four "replacement sonnets" (which are employed in the "revised sequence" that follows in the next stage) and a further group of three sonnets unique to NY3 (among which is "Since She whome I lovd" on the death of Donne's wife). For this nineteen-poem sequence, of course, NY3 is used as the copy-text. Finally, in a second revision, the sequence is restructured and the texts of individual poems again revised: this "revised sequence" of "Holy Sonnets" retains eight poems of the original Group III sequence, replaces the other four with those added in the NY3 collection, and moves *HSPart* from its original fourth position to the twelfth place. These twelve sonnets form the sequence in Groups I and II (the latter omitting the heading "Holy Sonnets"), and here the copy-text is DT1. The 1633 print follows this Group I–II sequence, and the remaining seventeenth-century prints (1635–1669) interpolate—drawing on a Group-III source—the four sonnets discarded in the move from the original to the revised twelve-poem sequence, producing a sixteen-sonnet sequence that has no manuscript authority. The entire course of events is portrayed in a quite magnificent stemma to be found on p. lxiv, adeptly set into type by J. Syd Conner, whose departure from the project during 2006 after thirteen years is much to be regretted.

The description of the evolution from the Group III sequence to its reconstituted and revised Group I–II form is given far too succinctly here, but the weight of the bibliographical proof represents the most serious engagement with modern editorial treatment of these poems that has ever been attempted. The volume enables this engagement because of the quite astonishingly generous wealth of textual material it presents. It has been said (by W. Speed Hill in an earlier review in the *Huntington Library Quarterly*) that the *Variorum* is as definitive as it is because even if

you don't like the text (or in this case texts) which the editors have come up with, the apparatus is sufficiently full for you to compile your own edition; and for this fact, subsequent editors must be indebted.

It will be seen that what the *Variorum* analysis has achieved is convincingly to reconstruct the various manuscript recensions through which the seventeenth-century printed texts were constructed. Few of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editions so thoroughly discussed here (with the striking exception of Grosart [1872-1873]) seem to have paid much attention to the poems in manuscript, and Grierson's examination of the manuscripts in preparing his *Poems* of 1912, while enabling him to resolve certain textual cruces, was intended primarily to vindicate his choice of A (the 1633 edition) as the basis for his edition. In the case of the Holy Sonnets, Grierson drew for order and layout on B (the 1635 imprint), and he is responsible for perpetuating this compositorial sequence of sixteen poems (with the unique Westmoreland sonnets appended) throughout the twentieth century. The notable exception to this perpetuation is Helen Gardner, who re-sifted the evidence of the manuscripts and early prints in preparing her edition of the Holy Sonnets (*The Divine Poems*, 1952) and concluded that only the Group I-II sequence was authorial, all other extant orderings resulting from scribal corruption and mishandling of one kind or another. With its re-examination of the evidence and dramatic reordering of the poems, Gardner's edition was hailed as innovative and definitive, yet it failed to recognize the validity of the original, Group-III sequence, presenting instead a truly bizarre account of the conflation of a supposed set of "penitential" sonnets with a set on the "Last Things" to make up the whole. Gardner's views on these matters were adopted in all essential respects by John Shawcross in his edition of 1967.

The *Variorum* volume is tactful and courteous in handling Gardner's shortcomings, which are now accepted as of a piece with her attempt to construct an anachronistic "Anglo-Catholic" Donne, a Donne influenced by the Oxford Movement, a Donne, in short, whose confessional position was pretty much her own. Stringer delivers a detailed six-point *coup de grâce* (pp. xciii-xcix: Dennis Flynn [1988] is named as an honorable exception) to what he terms the way in which Gardner's views on dating the Holy Sonnets "have [been] accepted . . . as the last word on the matter." Gardner's theory "represents merely the final stage of a cumulative discussion that has evolved over a period of some 80 years

and, regrettably, incorporates a number of bibliographically indefensible and interpretively questionable assertions." To this reviewer "it seems a kind of outrage," as Gardner herself once confrontationally remarked of some other matter, that she should for so long have exercised so tenacious a grasp on Oxford University Press's editorial policy regarding seventeenth-century poetic texts in English.

The three sequences presented take up 22 pages of text, and with the exception of a nine-page Appendix presenting the eclectic 1635 sequence, the remaining 90 or so pages are given over to the textual apparatus. This leaves nearly 500 pages of commentary. The commentary is, quite simply, a masterpiece of patient teasing out of over 350 years' engagement with these poems. There is a wealth of items—some very slight, some derivative, and some of real importance—written not just in English, but in French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Polish, and Hungarian, to say nothing of Korean and Japanese. The general commentary is arranged under a number of well-chosen headings: dating and order; the poet/persona; genre and traditions; language and style; prosody; sacred and profane; themes; and the Holy Sonnets and other works. This arrangement is repeated for each individual sonnet, and to avoid confusion, the sonnets are here arranged in alphabetical order under their *Variorum* title. Nonetheless, it is striking how little real *conversation* there is in the history of commentary on the Holy Sonnets in general. One gains a sense of fugitive insights, often not related to anything that has come before, although much of the material in languages other than English does draw on earlier material in English.

Familiar debates are, however, present. The commentators' scrupulous, non-judgmental presentation of their material allows us to see in Barbara Lewalski's obsession with "the Protestant paradigm of salvation in its stark Pauline terms" (the rebarbative-ness of her own prose hardly endears her case to the general reader) an attempt to contest Louis Martz's far more subtly conceived "'topics and structure' of Ignatian meditation," or even Gardner's own interest in the Last Things (p. 140). Yet even this very central debate is hardly prosecuted further in the commentary as a whole. (This of course reflects on the debaters and not those who record the debate.) Later interventions are noted (Young 1987, p. 153; and Strier 1994, p. 156) but these do not really constitute engagements with the debate as much as take the form of position papers. And disappointingly noticeable—and of a piece with the

extraordinary lack of attention the *Variorum* project has so far suffered among UK scholars, although there are indications that things are changing—is a telling juxtaposition on pp. 143–144. Dennis Flynn, writing in 1988, challenges Gardner's theory concerning the dating of the Holy Sonnets (1609), as indicated above, addressing among other things the identity of the “E. of D.” on which so much of Gardner's argument hangs. Flynn suggests that the “E. of D.” was William Stanley, sixth Earl of Derby, and that Stanley was admitted to Lincoln's Inn when Donne and Rowland Woodward (the scribe of NY3) were there. This could support a dating as early as the 1590s, another period of spiritual crisis for Donne (what in 1981 John Carey incorrectly termed his “apostasy”). Flynn's is a provocative suggestion, and one would expect it to be engaged with.

Also scrupulously inventoried here is a kind of commentary, mostly to be found in the sections comparing the Holy Sonnets both individually and collectively with other works, and particularly with works in other (European) languages. Frequently the commentators in question seek not to urge influences (even if this were possible) but rather to sense affinities: Ellrodt on Lope de Vega, Hemmerich on Andreas Gryphius, Prescott on Ronsard, and Warnke on Huygens are particularly gratifying non-dogmatic instances. There are also interesting summaries of musical settings, such as Morris on Britten (pp. 204–207).

Not surprisingly, it is *HSBatter* that has stimulated the most commentary, and as with all individual sonnets, some of this is truly scintillating. Perhaps of all the Holy Sonnets it is the prosody of *HSBatter* that almost defies analysis, and the commentary justly cites at length the staggering scrutiny of Jean Fuzier (1983), equally awe-inspiringly summarized for us on p. 238. Serious gratitude is due to the commentator whose French was of a standard capable of abstracting this argument: it really is one of the high points of a Commentary that one hopes will continue to be updated online in future years.

In addition to a bibliography extending over 30 pages, there are three indices: one of authors cited in the commentary, one of writers and historical figures cited in the commentary, and one of titles. There are a couple of minor problems with Germanic languages other than English. While “Universiteitsbibliotheek” is incorrectly hyphenated on p. xxxvii, the spelling of this repository of the University of Amsterdam is correct when given on p. xv. On p. xxvii the German-language journals *Englische*

Studien and *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* are misspelled, and since these items will presumably reappear in subsequent volumes this slip may be noted here. On p. 560, place of publication in the entry under Den Boer should read "s-Gravenhage," which is the full Dutch form (meaning "the Count's hedge" or "enclosure") of "The Hague."

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