

A Variorum: "How It Goes"

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The Variorum Edition of Poetry of John Donne. Ed. Gary A. Stringer, *et al.* Vols 6 and 8. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Lvii+692 and lxiv+512.

Life is all a variorum. We regard not how it goes.

Robert Burns, *The Jolly Beggars*, 8th Air

And that is what we may think of this one: do we really regard how it goes? We have been told, at length, what wonderful things the editors have found. What have they found? I would like to say that they have found gold, but I must say that they have found silver. We have, at long last, the first two volumes of the Donne Variorum (DV), albeit that they are Volumes Six and Eight. But this follows a long and honorable tradition of publishing when ready rather than in some artificial order; we must remember that, for example, the Revised Short-Title Catalogue published volume two, then one, then three. This edition is a monument to Donne scholarship, and although it is not perfect, it will change the way serious students of Donne read and interpret his poetry.

The appearance of these volumes calls, I believe, for some general discussion of what variorum editing is. There has been much discussion of late of the theory and practice of critical editing, of the work which goes into, or should go into, something like the Oxford Byron, the Gabler *Ulysses*, or the CEAA Crane. Less discussion, for various reasons, has been devoted to variorum editing, which, al-

though it is like critical editing in many respects, is also unlike it in many others. And of course there have been many misuses of the term "variorum edition" in this century — the Yeats Variorum, for example, which should be more properly termed the Yeats Critical Edition. It is certainly the case that variorum editing does very much concern itself with the establishment of the text, but since that text is not really for reading, and, sadly, not often for the undertaking of literary criticism, the way the variorum editor goes about her/his work will differ from the way the merely critical editor goes about his/her work. The text in the variorum edition is really a peg, certainly a very important peg, but a peg nonetheless, upon which the history of critical commentary is hung. Indeed, the earliest use of the term in English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1989) is from *Chambers' Cyclopaedia* in 1728: "an edition, esp. of the complete works of a classical author, containing the notes of various commentators or editors." On 11 June 1955 in *The Times* the definition was expanded, according to the *OED*, to the following: "an edition, usually of an author's complete works, containing variant readings from manuscripts or earlier editions" (the reference is to the Yale Johnson), but the *OED* adds the following comment: "this use is deplored by some scholars." In part the deploring of this definition is because "variorum edition" has come to mean, at least in some English language studies, not only the inclusion of variant readings but the inclusion of a very extensive critical commentary which attempts to take account of all significant critical utterances about the work being edited.

In fact, some variorum editions of this century have not even bothered with the text at all. *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* says:

The Columbia edition of Milton's complete works (20 vols., New York, 1931-40) is the text used for all references and quotations Since the Columbia abbreviations for the titles of Milton's poems and prose writings . . . necessitate continual recourse to this code, the Variorum editors devised a set that would be immediately intelligible. (vol. 2, p. xi)

The problem here is, of course, not really being entirely in control of the whole edition. Thus, in the abbreviations conversion table mentioned we get "Acced" for Columbia's "G" for the *Accedence Commenc't Grammar*, "Carrier 1,2" for "UC" for the Hobson poems; and "NewF" for "FC" for the "New Forcers of Conscience." Perhaps even worse is that the text to which the commentary is keyed appears to now be out of print save for volume two, part two; in the British Library printed catalogue the edition has no shelf-mark and it can only be found in the online BL catalogue by searching for "John Milton" "Complete Works," and then further refining by date (e.g., 1929-1945); searching merely by author and/or title produces nothing. This may not be the sort of variorum deplored by some scholars, but it is certainly not what most of us are used to.

I suppose it could be argued that the text of Milton's poems presents no great problems and that it is just as well to hang the new commentary on an existing framework, though even that presents problems as I have indicated. The editors of the Spenser Variorum (ed. E. Greenlaw, *et al.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1932-49, 1958) chose to produce both edited text and commentary together, even though it was then thought that this poet's texts presented few problems. This situation is about to change, at least regarding the text of *The Faerie Queene*, and I suppose any new version of the Spenser Variorum will be much more concerned with textual matters than was the first version.

But the New Shakespeare Variorum, started by Horace Howard Furness in Philadelphia in 1871, and now being carried on under the general editorship of Richard Knowles, Robert Turner, and Paul Werstine, made the text nearly as important as the commentary, and set the model which almost all variorums of English authors have followed in the succeeding century. Something like variorum editions of Shakespeare had been produced by Johnson and Steevens in 1773, Malone in 1790, and Malone and Boswell in 1821. However, Horace Howard Furness thought that so much work had been done on Shakespeare by the 1860s that the members of the Philadelphia Shakespeare Society "were constantly threshing old straw." Furness

sought to solve the problem by making "a mighty variorum *Hamlet* cutting out the notes of five or six editions besides the Variorum of 1821 and pasting them on a page with a little rivulet of text."¹

Thus, the question for any editor, variorum or critical, is still, much as we have been beaten about the head and shoulders concerning the matter of authorial intention, what is the importance of "the text"? I believe that we must assume that any author, except, perhaps, for works of composite authorship, must have imagined the work being published, that is, being made public, by whatever method, in a particular form.² This problem is not a new one in English literature. In the 1780s Edmond Malone was contemplating a new edition of Pope and discussed the matter with Dr. Johnson. Johnson's reply is indicative of one school of editing: "An author's disposition of his own work is sacred, & an ed[ito]r has no right to vary it" (Bodleian MS. Malone 30, fols. 60-65). It is interesting to note that even then Malone did not subscribe to this theory,³ but it was one which has directed much editing for the last two hundred years.

What, then, should a variorum edition be? It should, I believe, present a clear and conservatively edited text of the work, or works, in question. It should be conservative because its aim should be to preserve as many "original features" of the work as possible. Even a slightly modernized text will obscure, by its silent, or semi-silent, changes, the basic textures of the chosen copy-text. It is not the place of a variorum edition to make those leaps of emendation, inference, and conjecture which may be properly the place of other sorts of editing. For example, it will not introduce chariots into the entry of Titus into Rome in 1.1. of *Titus Andronicus* as Eugene Waith's New Oxford Shakespeare edition does.

Second, a variorum edition should display all those substantive, and semi-substantive, variations from the copy-text which have appeared in the history of printing or copying of the text. It is on this step, as you will see later, that I think the Donne Variorum falls down, or at least stumbles. As Fredson Bowers once said, true critical editing is like playing cards with all the cards face up. I'm not sure that the Donne Variorum does this.

Third, a variorum edition should provide a comprehensive historical summary of the important critical comment on the text. Such an edition may have other features, for example, the physical appearance of certain particular forms of the text, and the like.

What kind of variorum is the Donne Variorum? Certainly one of its glories will be its use of manuscript and other previously unknown sources. These volumes under review do, because of the nature of their contents, rely heavily on printed editions. However, it is worth noting in passing the amount of the new material even in these volumes:

In addition to the seven collected printings issued between 1633 and 1669, they [the textual materials] include 239 manuscript sources (nearly 100 of which have been unknown to any of Donne's previous editors); 3 inscriptions on monuments; over 200 seventeenth-century books that collectively contain over 800 copies of individual Donne poems or excerpts (approximately 700 of which have been unknown to Donne's previous editors); and over 20 historically significant editions of all or of parts of the canon from the eighteenth century to the present. (6 xlv)

But even in the printed material which forms the base for all the poems for which most of us will use these volumes (i.e., *The Anniversaries* [including the "Funeral Elegy" and "The Harbinger to the Progress"], "Elegy on the Death of Prince Henry," the Epigrams, and the Epithalamions) there is a fascination. For example, the third edition of 1621 of *The Anniversaries* (RSTC 7024; DV siglum c; BL copy C.122.a.10.[1-2.]) is a marvelous little "pocket" volume, measuring 128 x 85 mm., with each page of text being box-ruled with a wide double ruling on the fore-edge of each page for marginalia, and a surprising amount of printed ornamentation for such a slight volume. There is also Joshua Sylvester's *Lachrymæ Lachrymarum* (RSTC 23758; DV siglum 12a)⁴ with its unusual xylographically printed pages.

The Donne Variorum is also very good on the question of Donne's revisions, and the description of the textual history of the revisions of

the "Eclogue" which precedes the "Epithalamion" for the marriage of the earl of Somerset and Frances Howard (8. 140-42) is a masterpiece of its kind. And, indeed, most of the textual explanations in both these volumes are meticulous and clear. One would have to give the editors very high marks on their abilities to explain the textual situations in which these works have lived. With the *Inscriptions* the editors' work has been further complicated by the fact that their copy-texts are from monuments, not the printed books and the manuscripts which followed these monuments. It is interesting to note that the sort of compositor errors we are all used to from printed texts of the period are to be found in the work of the monumental masons of the same period, and so, at least in the case of Donne, we have textual problems of both setting and incising error. For specific instances see Donne's "Epitaph for Robert and Anne Drury" and "John Donne's Epitaph in St. Paul's Cathedral" (8. 183, 195). Also, on occasion, the reader might like a little more detail on the sort of stone that is being incised; "black stone" (8. 176, 183) seems hardly adequate, and one could have wished for more detailed photographic reproductions of the actual inscription on the tomb of Robert Drury, such as we get for Elizabeth Drury.

By and large, we are given a carefully edited text with which I can find very little fault. However, I do find some fault with the critical apparatus. The fault, or faults, I detect are rather mixed ones of recording too much detail in some instances and in others too little. For example, in "The Second Anniversary," l. 171, "Bedddd" in the copy text is emended to "Bedded." However, in the historical collation this reading is not to be found, nor is it noted that the emended reading is to be found as early as 1621 (siglum C), even though the addition of a comma after the work in sigla A-G is noted. But the emendation of the copy-text's lacking a "y" after "ill" is fully noted in both the list of emendations and in the historical collation. Indeed, this problem arises as early as the marginal note to line one of "The Second Anniversary" where "entrance:" in the copy-text is emended to "entrance." and although the list of emendations records this change,

the historical collation does not note that this particular change can be found as early as 1621 (siglum C).

Again, in volume six, we have the curious situation in the "Elegy for Prince Henry" where the various readings of "w'haue" in line 78 are recorded, but siglum A (1633)'s reading of "we'have" is not recorded in the historical collation. The record of sigla would make it appear that A agrees with the copy-text, but it does not. Further, although in line one of the "Elegy on Prince Henry" the absence of a comma after "Fayth" is noted for both occurrences, the spelling differences are not noted, though spelling and punctuation variants are noted for WN1 (National Library of Wales). Furthermore, in the same poem, the absence of a comma after "For", in line two, is not recorded for B14 (BL Addit. MS. 27407); and in line three the variant spellings of "centre" as "Centers" is not noted, and a comma is said to be found in B14, but it is not there.

There are other problems with the simple transcribing and recording of textual facts, and although I do not believe that any of these faults are fatal, they do give the reader pause since my examples come from a mere random inspection of the original documents. What one expects from any edition, particularly a variorum edition, is accuracy, yet here the Donne Variorum has not succeeded. In the "Elegy for Prince Henry" we are told that A (*Poems*, 1633; RSTC 7045) lacks a comma in line one after the word "me"; what we are not told is that it is spelt "mee." In the light of M. H. Nicolson's reading of the *First Anniversary* and the importance of spelling of "Shee," "she," and "She," one might have thought that such things did matter. In line four the lemmatic reading is "FAITH," with variants such as "faith," but A reads "Faith." Does it matter? I think it does.

I could multiply instances, but an examination of the "Elegy for Prince Henry" in Bodleian Rawlinson poet.26 (siglum 029) shows some of the problems. In line one "Me" is really "mee," in line two "Centres" really reads "Centers," it is not recorded that a comma is omitted in line nine after the initial "But," or that a comma is missing in line 14 after the initial "for." And so it goes.

Checking of volume eight does indicate some of the problems encountered in volume six do not occur as frequently, but there is still the worrying fact that many variant spellings and variant capitalizations are not recorded, and some seemingly obvious variants are. For example, in the "Epithalamion for Frederick and Elizabeth" it is noted that in line six the almost non-words "lirque" (siglum C8; Cambridge Add. ms. 8467) and "Lyrique" in B13 (British Library Add. Ms. 25707) and B46 (British Library Stowe Ms. 961) is not recorded. There is also, perhaps, a problem with regularization. If "VV" has been regularized to "W," a perfectly reasonable thing to do, then why is such regularization recorded as an emendation (e.g., "Elegy on Prince Henry," ll. 61, 64, 66, 73, 80, 82)? Indeed, these non-emendational regularizations account for all but three of the eleven "emendations" of this 97-line poem. There seems to be some confusion over what the editors mean by "regularize" and "emend":

The Variorum texts preserve the distinct forms of "i" and "j" and "u" and "v," the ligatured vowels "ae" and "oe," and the fonts of words as they appear in the copy-text. We have, however, expanded brevigraphs, *regularized* "VV" to "W" and "ff" to "F" (6. xlvihi; emphasis mine)

In the printed editions there are similar problems. The "Elegy for Prince Henry," in its first printed form, the copy-text for this edition (Joshua Sylvester, *Lachrymae Lachrymaru*, 1613 [RSTC 23578]) has the normal upper-case roman "W" seven times on E1v; it has "VV" five times on E2r, and three 'normal' "W"s (ll. 79, 91, and 90) on this page. On E3v and E4r there are six "W"s on each page. These are not really textual differences, but properly studied they may tell us a bit about the order of compositorial work based upon the supply of the letter "W" in Humfrey Lownes' typesets. In all of inner E there are, aside from those noted above, six regular "W"s on E3v, and six on E4r. In outer E there are six regular "W"s on E1r, none on E2v, three regular "W"s on E3r, but two "VV"s. On E4v there are three "W"s and one "VV." What does this tell us about the way a Donne manuscript made

its way into print? Well, the *Donne Variorum* does not tell us. It should concern itself with these problems.

If a *variorum* edition is meant to present a conservative text with an apparatus that allows a reader to reconstruct any textual history of the work, then the *Donne Variorum* does have a few shortcomings. If, on the other hand, a *variorum* is intended to present a conservative “best text,” and only to present a selection of the most significant variations, then the text and apparatus of the *Donne Variorum* is a good, solid piece of work. The problem, or a warning, I suppose, must be that although the *Donne Variorum* presents textual evidence never before available, it is the case that its text must be treated with the same circumspection with which we have treated the Oxford and Shawcross editions.

The commentary presents a vast survey of the history of Donne criticism. It is well structured and clearly presented, and will be a real aid for those writing about the poems. The volumes are worth their price for this aspect alone. To get some notion of the extent of the commentary it is worth noticing that in volume six the texts, apparatus, and general introduction for these fifteen poems take up 236 pages while the commentary, list of works cited, and indices take up 453 pages. The proportions in volume eight are about the same, and I assume that this will be true of other volumes.

I do not wish this review to be taken as being overly negative. What has been produced here is a great advance in Donne studies and it will influence the way we read and write about this poet for generations to come. The textual problems encountered by the editors have been complex, probably some of the most complex ever seen, and the fact that I am not entirely happy with the way some things have been done does not mean that most things have not been done well. Editors will, I suppose, always agree to disagree, and this is simply another instance of that. I must say that I congratulate and applaud the editors on their achievements and I look forward to seeing the whole edition brought to a conclusion.

Notes

1. Quoted in Robert Kean Turner, "The New Variorum Shakespeare," *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook: 1985*, ed. Jean W. Ross (Detroit: Gale, 1986), p. 158.
2. For a careful study of how texts could be made public in ways other than print see Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).
3. Peter Martin. *Edmond Malone Shakespearean Scholar: A Literary Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), p. 57.
4. It is not at all clear why the Donne Variorum reproduces in the siglum the reading *Lacrymaru* when the tilde is simply being used to represent the loss of the nasal *m*. No other standard references do this.