John Donne Journal
Vol. 36 (2017)

Was Donne Curious?[1]

Brent Nelson

Was John Donne curious? Donne was certainly curious in the way we most commonly use the term today: he was interested in new knowledge—specifically, in new developments in "science." When scholars have talked about Donne and the new science, it has almost always been with respect to what we might call astronomy, and the general consensus is that Donne was informed and interested, if not fully enthusiastic about this new direction in knowledge. Most famously, in *Ignatius His Conclave*, Donne was among the first writers to remark on Copernicus and (in the narrator's mind) his followers, Kepler, Brahe, and Galileo, a testament that Donne kept himself well informed of the latest intellectual developments.[2] While Donne was, in this sense, curious, he was also conflicted at the implications for received notions about the order of things. We see this, of course, very clearly in the first anniversary poem, a poem that is, interestingly, sub-titled an "Anatomie of the World," a metaphor evoking one of the other new sciences.[3] Donne was quick to recognize

---

[1] This paper is a slightly revised version of my Presidential Address at the 33rd Annual Conference of The John Donne Society, 27–30 June 2018, University of Lausanne. I wish to thank my colleagues in the Society for enriching and informing my thinking about Donne in this and other endeavors through the years.

[2] See for example, Charles M. Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 209-10.

[3] Catherine Gimelli Martin finds anti-Baconian parody in the first anniversary ("The Advancement of Learning and the Decay of the World: A New Reading of Donne's First Anniversary," *John Donne Journal: Studies in the Age of Donne* 19 (2000): 163–203). There is of course some attention given to anatomy in Donne, but not much of it related to the emerging science: see

these new developments in astronomy and their implications, but this is not the domain that would come to define curiosity in the early modern period. Rather, it was the mundane sciences, those concerned with the objects closer to home and those emerging from a rapidly expanding terrestrial world: anatomy, botany, zoology, mineralogy, to name a few—what would become the natural sciences—mixed in with rudimentary archeology and ethnography and, significantly, develop–ments in the mechanical arts. These bring us quite a bit closer to what Krzysztof Pomian calls the "culture of curiosity" as it would develop in the seventeenth-century.[4]

In this context, to be curious came to mean something quite particular. There was at this time a building tide of resistance to the Augustinian aspersions against curiosity as an unruly and potentially dangerous passion. Curiosity maintained that taint through the Elizabethan period, burdened with a status similar to that of ambition: it was all about policing the boundaries. Around the turn of the century, though, those boundaries were being broken by a widening world of discovery in many domains. Curiosity was an idea in transition. It became a kind of bell-weather of early modernity. K. Whitaker expresses well this new kind of curiosity as "[a]n attitude of mind involving a fascination and admiration for the rare, novel, surprising, and outstanding in all spheres of life."[5] It is this sense of curiosity that was

---

Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995); Stephen Pender, "Essaying the Body: Donne, Affliction, and Medicine," in *John Donne's Professional Lives*, ed. David Colclough (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 215–48; Richard Sugg, "Donne and the Uses of Anatomy," *Literature Compass* 1.1 (1 Dec 2003); and Thomas Willard, "Donne's Anatomy Lesson: Vesalian or Paracelsian?," *John Donne Journal: Studies in the Age of Donne* 3.1 (1984): 35–61.

[4] Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice 1500-1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990). First published in French in 1987.

[5] K. Whitaker, "The Culture of Curiosity," in *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. Nicholas Jardine, James A. Secord, and E. C. Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 75. On the semantics and applications of "curious" see Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 2-8. This association with ambition and transgression did not disappear quickly: see Barbara M. Benedict on the

applied to the first builders of the modern museum, such as the famous royal gardener John Tradescant the elder, characterized in the epithet of his close friend and follow botanist, John Parkinson, as a "curious, and diligent searcher and preseruer of all natures rarities and varieties."[6] This is where the question of Donne's curiosity is to be answered, in Donne's engagement with the material world of things—in Bacon's formulation in the *New Organon*, *res ipsae*, with things themselves.

Context: Cabinets of Curiosities

In 1599, Swiss student and traveler Thomas Platter visited England with his brother Felix, hitting the cultural hotspots. This was before the heyday of the grand tour, but it was a visit of a similar nature, intended as an extension of Platter's education while a medical student in Montpellier. Englishmen made similar journeys to the continent. Among the many sights Platter records seeing in England (including Hampton court, where he saw a unicorn's horn, an old Latin manuscript Bible, and several objects from Henry VIII's hunting accoutrements) was a cabinet of curiosities amassed and owned by Sir Walter Cope, a wealthy gentleman and influential, well-connected bureaucrat, serving as secretary to William Cecil until Cecil's death in 1598. He was also a member of the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries and was among the first to build a cabinet of curiosities in England.[7] In his visit to Cope's collection, Platter saw a dizzying array of strange and interesting objects, both natural and artificial, originating from all over the known world, such as

> 3. Beautiful Indian plumes, ornaments and clothes from China. …
> 6. A felt cloak from Arabia. …

association of these with curiosity in *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 115-6, 245-54.

[6] John Parkinson, *Paradisi in sole paradisvs terrestris* (1629), p. 346, sig. [F5v].

[7] Peter Mancall, *Hakluyt's Promise: An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 156.

> 12. The horn and tail of a rhinoceros, [which, he adds] is a large animal like an elephant.[8]

Some of these objects played upon the boundary between the natural and the artificial, such as "A handsome cap made out of goosefoots from China." Others were of interest for their deviation from natural form and order, such as "A round horn which had grown on an English woman's forehead." Cope possessed many classic curiosities of the type that show up in other collections, such as a "long narrow Indian canoe, with the oars and sliding planks, hung from the ceiling of this room"; a "unicorn's tail" (the more common bit of course being its horn); and an "embalmed child (Mumia)."[9] This last one is interesting, because it illustrates how a single object might evoke a number of points of curiosity—its cultural and geographical origin, its anatomical signi–ficance, as well as (in this case) its use-value in medicine. There were other objects, too, that were curious in part because of their uses: an "African charm made of teeth" and a "stone against spleen disorders."[10]

Cope's was not the only collection on the tourist's radar. Platter concludes his account of his visit with a bit of context, recording that "[t]here are also other people in London interested in curios, but this gentleman is superior to them all for strange objects, because of the Indian voyage he carried out with such zeal," adding that the whole city is "brimful of curiosities."[11] Platter and his brother are not the only such visitors on record. Philip Julius, Duke of Pomerania-Wolgast (a duchy along the south coast of the Baltic Sea), also visited Cope's collection, on 18 September 1602. The Duke's diarist, Frederic Gerschow, says the Duke had heard about the collection and decided to arrange a visit. There he saw "many wonderful objects," such as "many strange worms,

---

[8] Thomas Platter, *Thomas Platter's Travels in England, 1599: Rendered into English from the German*, ed. and trans. Clare Williams (London: J. Cape, 1937), pp. 171-2.

[9] Ibid., pp. 172-3.

[10] Ibid., pp. 171-2.

[11] Ibid., pp. 173-4. Cope invested in both the Virginia Company and the East India Company, among others. See Elizabeth Allen, "Cope, Sir Walter (1553?–1614)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/6257>, accessed 30 Sept–ember 2021. There is no indication that Cope himself travelled.

birds, and fishes," "many Indian manuscripts and books," "a passport given by the King of Peru to the English, neatly written on wood," and "some crowns worn by the Queen in America."[12] Richard Hakluyt, the famous anthologizer of travel writing, visited Cope's collection in the 1580s, along with another belonging to one Richard Garth, about which and whom we know nothing.[13] We do know that there were other, even more accessible collections in London. The collection of curiosities, chiefly *naturalia*, was a central feature of a network of tradespeople, guildsmen, apothecaries, botanists, and medical practitioners conducting empirical investigations in the Lime Street neighborhood of London in the 1590s.[14] These were practical-minded folks, seeking human benefit from the natural world, while collecting (and displaying in their shop windows) objects, both natural and artificial, as part of their labors.

A cluster of direct references in works composed and circulating in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries confirm Donne's awareness and (at some level) interest in such collections—two in his *Catalogus Librorum*, and another in the epigrams, all in the satiric mode; as we will see, there is at least one interesting point of intertextual connection between his Rabelaisian book list and the epigrams.[15] The Variorum dates the earliest group of epigrams (seven or more poems in all, including the one of concern here) to the early- to mid-1590s.[16] Daniel Starza Smith et al. have recently argued the initial date of composition of the *Catalogus* as falling somewhere between late summer 1603 to late autumn 1604, with Donne perhaps tinkering with it as late

---

[12] Gottfried von Bülow and Wilfred Powell, ed. "Diary of the Journey of Philip Julius, Duke of Stettin-Pomerania, through England in the Year 1602," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, n.s. 6 (1892): 27.

[13] Mancall, p. 156. Mancall cites no source for this information.

[14] Deborah E. Harkness, *The Jewel House: Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 32-33 and passim.

[15] Anne Lake Prescott, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 173-5.

[16] John Donne, *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer, vol. 8. *The Epigrams, Epithalamions, Epitaphs, Inscriptions, and Miscellaneous Poems* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 16; Gary A. Stringer, "An Introduction to the Donne Variorum and the John Donne Society," *Anglistik* 10.1 (1999): 92-3.

as 1605, placing all three references squarely in the time of Cope's collection.[17]

The Courtier's Library

Two such references to this very particular culture of curiosity occur in Donne's *Catalogus Librorum* (1650). The longer title in Trinity MS B.14.22 is "Catalogus Librorum Aulicorum incomparabilium & non vendibilium," which Evelyn Simpson translates, "The Courtier's Library of rare books not for sale."[18] The title, as Smith et. al. argue, has little authority, but it does nonetheless make clear an implicit kinship with collections of rarities and curiosities. These collections, indeed, often contained rare books and manuscripts. In this case, the books are so rare, they don't actually exist. Sir Thomas Browne takes-up and elaborates Donne's conceit in his own title of his fantastical wish list of curiosities: "Musaeum Clausum, or Bibliotheca Abscondita: Containing Some Remarkable Books, Antiquities, Pictures & Rarities of Several Kinds, *Scarce or Never Seen By Any Man Now Living*."[19] Browne's list includes such books as "Marcus Tullius Cicero his Geography" and "Seneca's Epistles to S. Paul," along with such pictures as "a Draught of three persons notably resembling each other. Of King Henry the Fourth of France, and a Miller of Languedock; of Sforza Duke of Milain

---

[17] First printed with the *Poems* in 1650. Smith et al convincingly argue, given evidence compiled by the editorial team of the forthcoming Oxford University Press edition of the correspondence of John Donne, that the letter to Goodyer referring to his recall of the manuscript of the *Catalogus* has been misdated 1611 by Evelyn Simpson, R. C. Bald, and others and that it rather belongs to 1605: Daniel Starza Smith, Matthew Payne, and Melanie Marshall, "Rediscovering John Donne's *Catalogus Librorum Satyricus*," *The Review of English Studies* 69 (2018): 455–487. As they demonstrate, the newly discovered Westminster Abbey ms (MS WA2 as they call it) is earlier than the Trinity ms.

[18] I am using Simpson's text from *The Courtier's Library: Or, Catalogus Librorum Aulicorum Incomparabilium et Non Vendibilium*, ed. Evelyn Simpson ([London]: Nonesuch Press, 1930).

[19] Sir Thomas Browne, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, vol. 3 (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 109. Browne concludes his tract with "He who knows where all this Treasure now is, is a great Apollo. I'm sure I am not He" (Ibid., p. 119).

and a Souldier; of Malatesta Duke of Rimini and Marchesinus the Jester"; and such objects as "*Batrachomyomachia*, or the Homerican Battel between Frogs and Mice, neatly described upon the Chizel Bone of a large Pike's Jaw."[20]

Early in Donne's *Catalogus*, we have a reference to an object that would have been a prime candidate for collection in a cabinet of curiosities.

> 3. *The Art of copying out within the compass of a Penny all the truthful statements made to that end by John Foxe,* by Peter Bales.[21]

Peter Bales himself would have been an interesting figure to Donne's coterie of readers. He was well known at Elizabeth's court, with such prominent patrons as Sir Christopher Hatton, Sir Francis Walsingham, and Lord Burghley.[22] Bales was famous at court and beyond for his handwriting, particularly for his "micrographical" skill. He was, in the words of the *Biographia Britannica* of 1747, a master of "curiosity in miniature."[23] Bales first came to the attention of the Queen in 1575 when, as recounted in Holinshed's *Chronicles*,

> a rare péece of worke and almost incredible, was brought to passe by an Englishman borne in the citie of London named Peter Bales, who by his industrie and practise of his pen, contriued and writ within the compasse of a penie in Latine, the Lords praier; the créed, the ten commandements, a praier to God, a praier for the quéene, his posie, his name, the daie of the moneth, the yeare of our Lord, and the reigne of the quéene. And on the seuentéenth of August next following at Hampton court he presented the same to the quéens maiestie in the head of a ring of gold, couered with a christall, and presented therewith an excellent spectacle by him

[20] Browne, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 214, sig. [P3v].

[21] Simpson, ed., p. 21.

[22] See Lucy Peltz, "Bales, Peter (*bap.* 1547, *d.* 1610?)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi-org / 10.1093/ref:odnb/1179 >, accessed 30 September 2021.

[23] William Oldys, ed. *Biographia Britannica: Or, The Lives of the Most Eminent Persons Who Have Flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, from the Earliest Ages, down to the Present Times*, vol. 1 (London, 1747), p. 430.

> deuised for the easier reading thereof: wherewith hir maiestie read all that was written therein with great admiration, and commended the same to the lords of the councell, and the ambassadors, and did weare the same manie times vpon hir finger.[24]

This object multiplies curiosity, embedding the wonder-inspiring micro-text inside a carefully crafted container—a crystal-encased compartment mounted on a gold ring—together with an optical device for reading the tiny text. Writing on the art of micrographia in his 1763 book on *The Origin and Progress of Letters*, William Massey cites this same artefact to illustrate the "many wonderful things done this way by *Englishmen*, which are to be found in the cabinets of the curious."[25] Isaac Disraeli in 1825 reports a similar instance recorded in Harleian MS 530 of "a rare piece of work brought to pass by Peter Bales" which, he says, seems to have been the whole Bible "in an English walnut no bigger than a hen's egg. The nut holdeth the book: there are as many leaves in his little book as the great Bible, and he hath written as much in one of his little leaves as a great leaf of the Bible." It was, purportedly, "seen by many thousands."[26]

Fueled by such feats of virtuosity, fame of Bales's skill spread. He set up shop as a scrivener in the upper end of Old Bailey where he also conducted a school for children of prominent citizens in London, and in 1590 he published *The Writing Schoolemaster, a* book in three parts, touching on "Brachygraphie" or the art of shorthand, orthography, and calligraphy. Bales cemented his fame on Michaelmas Day 1595 when he went head to head with a younger rival, one Daniel Johnson, in a handwriting competition for a "Golden pen of twentie pounde."[27] The

---

[24] Raphael Holinshed, *The Third Volume of Chronicles: Beginning at Duke William the Norman, Commonlie Called the Conqueror: And Descending by Degrees of Yeeres to All the Kings and Queens of England in Their Orderlie Successions* (London, 1586), p. 1262.

[25] William Massey, *The Origin and Progress of Letters. An Essay, in Two Parts* (London, 1763), pp. 148-9.

[26] Isaac Disraeli, *Curiosities of Literature*, vol. 1 (London: Baudry's European Library, 1835), pp. 275-6.

[27] The contest was to see who could write the best in all kinds of usual hands, as well as in "secretary and clerklike writing," and also to see who was

public event took place in the "conduit yard" in Blackfriars and was presided over by a panel of distinguished judges, who declared Bales the winner. Bales himself details the event in a manuscript titled "*The Originall Cause*" (Harleian MS 675). Then ensued a "battle by broadsides," in which Johnson published a libel accusing Bales of shady dealings, including stacking the jury, and Bales countered Johnson's claims in kind.[28] This was not the first nor the last cause of Bales's notoriety. Bales was employed by Francis Walsingham as early as 1586 in his now infamous espionage operations, working with Thomas Phelippes and Arthur Gregory in transcribing intercepted letters—in some cases adding forged content before sending them on—in order to draw out further intelligence in the correspondence.[29] Interestingly, there is a reference to this same Phelippes and his interception activities in the *Catalogus*, item 9: "*Anything out of Anything; Or, The Art of deciphering and finding some treason in any intercepted letter*, by Philips."[30] In 1600 Bales was again involved in a very *public* libel case involving an attempt to forge and sell some damaging letters attributed to the Earl of Essex.[31]

But to come, now, to the point of Donne's reference: this micro-treatise is just the kind of thing Bales could and did pull off. The real butt of the joke, though, is of course John Foxe and his embellishments in his famous book of martyrs. The full ironic force of the joke depends on its reference to a common object in collections of curiosities: very small surfaces (often pits or stones from fruit) with surprisingly large scenes (either in volume or importance) depicted upon them, like Browne's *Batrachomyomachia*. This sort of virtuosity-expressed-through-miniature was not new to this period, but it was certainly in vogue and

---

best at instruction in writing: Ambrose Heal, *The English Writing-Masters and Their Copy-Books, 1570-1800; a Biographical Dictionary and a Bibliography. With an Introduction on the Development of Handwriting by Stanley Morison. Illustrated with Portraits of the Masters and Specimens of Their Hands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 9. Oldys indicates there might have been another such contest involving multiple competitors (Oldys, p. 435).

[28] Heal, p. 10

[29] Oldys, p. 430. See Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), pp. 210, 217.

[30] Simpson, p. 45.

[31] Oldys, p. 435; Heal, p. 10.

well suited for cabinets of curiosities. Georg Christoph Stirn, a German student visiting England in 1638, records seeing in the Tradescant collection "the passion of Christ carved very daintily on a plumstone."[32] The Tradescants' own catalogue of this museum, *Musaeum Tradescantianum* (1656), records a few such objects, including "A Cherry-stone, upon one side S. Geo: and the Dragon, perfectly cut: and on the other side 88 Emperours faces."[33] Similar objects were also common in continental collections by the late sixteenth-century.[34]

These sorts of objects revel in the witty interplay of great and small (a variant of Donne's microcosm trope), and of the natural and artificial, but they are also valued for their wonderful craftsmanship and ingenuity, a tribute to the care (*cura*) and skillful execution of the artificer. The achievement provokes wonder and awe. In the first instance, one expects there to be very little text on a penny (based on common experience). But we are first surprised to learn that some clever person has found a way to inscribe a massive tome on this very small surface. And then we are surprise again: it turns out there is not much to be found on the penny after all, because there is so little truth to be found in Foxe's book.[35] This ironic reversal creates in a new

---

[32] Herman Hager in an "Appendix" to his review of K. H. Hager, *Geschichte der Deutschen in England* (Strassburg, Trübner, 1885) published in *Englische Studien* 10 (1887), p. 450. The author of the travel diary does not identify himself, but Hager accepts a prior attribution of Stirn based on biographical evidence in A. Neubauer, "A German on Oxford in 1640," *Athenaeum*, no. 2951 (17 May 1884), p. 632.

[33] John Tradescant, the Younger, *Musaeum Tradescantianum: Or, A Collection of Rarities. Preserved at South-Lambeth Neer London by John Tradescant* (London, 1656), p. 38, sig. [D3v]. On the popularity of such miniature works of virtuosity in collections, see Oliver R. Impey and Arthur MacGregor, ed., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 2.

[34] See for example "A cherry stone carved with 185 human faces and heads" presented by the Imperial Counsellor and later Lord Chamberlain Christoph von Loß (1545-1609) to Elector Christian I of Saxony in 1589: "Kirschkern mit 185 geschnitzten Köpfen," Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/117609>.

[35] See also Claire Preston, "The Jocund Cabinet and the Melancholy Museum in Seventeenth-Century English Literature," in *Curiosity and Wonder*

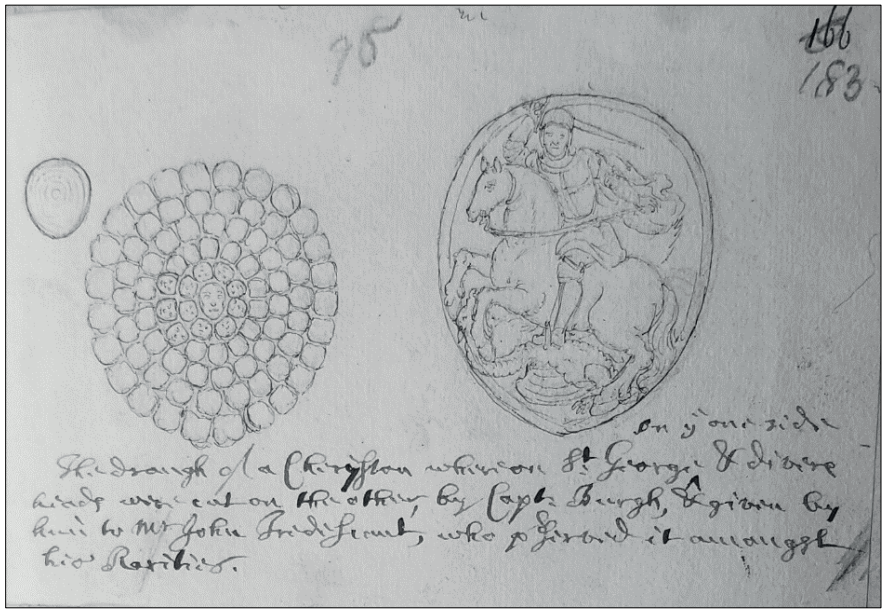

Figure 1. Figure of Tradescant's carved cherry stone. Bodleian MS Ashmolean 1131, f. 183.

perspective. But Donne's jibe goes in the other direction as well. There is a hint of fakery in the accusation directed at Foxe that might also apply to its artisanal virtuosity. A drawing made by Elias Ashmole of Tradescant's cherry stone gives a telling indication of the observer's impression (fig. 1). The claim of eighty-eight emperor's heads must be taken on faith in the face of understandable doubt: are these really faces at all, much less anything that represents emperors with any specificity?

We find a second, even more explicit reference to the collection of curiosities in item 11 of the *Catalogus*. And again, here in the very early days of such collections in England, we have Donne making some incisive comments on this cultural practice.

> *Believe in thy havings, and thou hast them*. A test for antiquities, being a great book on very small things, dictated by Walter

from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, ed. R. J. W. Evans and Alexander Marr (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 87-106.

> Cope, copied out by his wife, and given a Latin dress by his amanuensis John Pory.[36]

This is a pithy and astute characterization of a collector's misguided psychology. The title references a "rule" (in Piers Brown's translation) or guide for collecting antiquities or curiosities, suggesting something that gets to the essence of the practice.[37] That essence is an acquisitive ambition, the desire to have. The emphasis on belief calls attention to the gap between an elusive object (remote, rare, strange) and one's ability to possess it.[38] The collector's achievement is in closing this gap, again, evoking wonder in those who witness the collector's acquisitive ability. The need for belief is proportionate to the rarity of the object and thus the difficulty—even near impossibility—of acquiring it. But there is also a suggestion (born-out in experience in the later history of collection) that there might also be a gap not only between what a collector might want to have and what he might be able to achieve, but also between what the collector thinks (or claims) he has and what that object really is. This brings us back to Donne's title, or rather, subtitle, in Latin: "*Crede quod habes et habes. Criterium Antiquitatum*… ."[39] Criterion (κρῐτήρῐον) in Greek derives from κρῑ́νω (krī́nō), the verb meaning "to discern or judge," thus this *Criterium* is ironic, implying in title an entire lack of judgement.

Again, in this item, there is a discrepancy between the container and the content, but this time the relationship is reversed. This is a *big* book that contains *little* content, or at least, the subject is little things, in fact, tiny things. But there is also implication that the rule for acquiring such objects can't be substantial enough to warrant such a large book. The suggestion is that this enterprise is all vanity. This is indeed the primary joke of this whole collection of books: it is empty; the books don't exist.

---

[36] Simpson, ed., pp. 45-6. Note that Cope's name is elided in the Trinity ms.

[37] Piers Brown, "'Hac ex consilio meo via progredieris': Courtly Reading and Secretarial Mediation in Donne's The Courtier's Library," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61 (2008), p. 861.

[38] Preston, rather strangely, reads the import as pertaining to "testing the age and authenticity of antiquities" (Preston, p. 98).

[39] Simpson, ed., p. 32.

This is a critique of the pursuit of extremity, whether in size (miniatures), rarity, or strangeness.

The translator of this book on Cope's rule is John Pory,[40] a known "energetic factotum, a great collector of news," according to Simpson's gloss, whom Donne mentions a number of times in his correspondence.[41] The gist of this characterization is that Pory is a dealer in nothing, in gossip and rumour passed off as news. In the very early days of the seventeenth century, he was very closely associated with Cope, who was his patron and employer. Pory, in his earlier career, was an assistant to Richard Hakluyt (coincidentally, one of the few confirmed visitors of Cope's collection) and at his master's urging published in 1601 a translation of *A Geographical Historie of Africa, Written in Arabicke and Italian by John Leo, a More* (1600). Hakluyt's interest in global geography was further expressed in his 1602 edition of *An Epitome of Ortelius his Theatre of the World*. Ortelius, incidentally, was also a collector of curiosities with connections to the Lime Street community through his son-in-law James Cole,[42] who in fact inherited and displayed Ortelius's collection on Lime Street.[43] The world of collecting was, in more ways than one, a small one. It is also notable, as will become clear below, that Cope's wife plays the role of amanuensis.[44]

Epigram: The Antiquary

These pseudo-bibliographic entries of the *Catalogus Librorum*, dense and allusive, are in many ways close cousins to Donne's epigrams, where

---

[40] Here I accept Simpson's emendation (rather than correction) of the 1650 reading of "Povy" to "Pory," which is the reading in the Trinity College MS B.14.22 (Simpson, 62). Westminster MS WA2 also reads "Povy," which Smith takes to be a mistake or spelling variant, thus supporting Simpson's emendation (pp. 475, 482). "Pory" makes perfect sense in the context I am developing here.

[41] Simpson, p. 62.

[42] Merchant and son of Flemish physician and naturalist Mathias de L'Obel (Harkness, p. 19-20).

[43] Ibid., p. 33.

[44] Interestingly, Cope's wife, Dorothy, is known to history: she was daughter of Richard Grenville of Wotton Underwood, Buckinghamshire, and Mary, née Gifford.

Donne again addresses (and attacks) a collector figure. [45] This body of poems is generically linked not only with the *Catalogus* but also his formal verse satire, all of which circulated in the early seventeenth century.[46] The Variorum edition of the epigrams presents three distinct, authorial sequences, and the poem of interest appears in all three. In the intermediate and later versions, the collector is figured (in a title, which the earlier version lacks) as an "antiquary," a sometimes-vague term in the period. It was common for collectors of curiosities, including *naturalia*, to be called "antiquaries," lacking for the time being a more fitting and indicative title for such practitioners.[47] Later, in the seventeenth century, the more common term would be virtuoso. As we have seen, Cope was a collector of curiosities, as well as a member of the Society of Antiquaries. Interestingly, here, again, (as in the reference to Cope in the *Catalogus*) we have a collector and his wife.

> *Antiquary*
> If in his study Hammon hath such care
> To'hang all old [strange] things, let his wife beware

It is worth pausing here to consider the epigrammatic form and Donne's execution of it. In a recent work on the epigram in England, James Doelman contends that owing to its brevity, the epigram "is substantially dependent on something outside itself, whether that something is a thing or a person or a text."[48] In a similar vein, M. Thomas Hester describes the epigram as "accommodating itself to the world beyond its borders."[49] The external picture pithily evoked here is that

---

[45] Smith, for example, notes the epigrammatical quality of the *Catalogus* (3).

[46] On dating of the epigrams, see Stringer (*Variorum*, vol. 8, pp. 14-18).

[47] See, for example, Thomas Nash, *Pierce Penilesse His Svpplication to the Divell*, in *Works*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow and F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), pp. 182-3.

[48] James Doelman, *The Epigram in England, 1590-1640* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2016), p. 2. Doelman here is building on the work of Peter Hess and the concept of the "Objektbezugk."

[49] M. Thomas Hester, "Donne's Epigrams: A Little World Made Cunningly," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 80-1, citing Norman K. Farmer Jr., "A Theory of Genre for Seventeenth-Century Poetry," *Genre* 3 (1970): 295.

of the collection of curiosities, with objects displayed in every available space, even fixed to or hung from the ceiling. In the present case, such things are significantly and easily evoked. Platter describes Cope's cabinet, an "apartment" in his house, as "stuffed with queer foreign objects in every corner," with "[s]addles from many strange lands . . . placed round the top on stands" and (as noted above) a canoe hung from the ceiling.[50] "Old" things, in this context, are collected things—objects taken from their original context, no longer used, now on display, gathering dust. The addition of "strange" in the third sequence further generalizes the kind of objects at play. The reference to a "study" does not detract from this association. John Dee's library was what we might call nowadays a mixed-use space, containing not only books and manuscripts but also globes, maps, navigational instruments, natural rarities, and alchemical instruments.[51] For many collectors, including those working in the neighbourhood of Lime Street, and even for John Tradescant, the collection was part of a larger workspace. This was supremely so of Thomas Browne later in the century, whose "whole house & Garden," said John Evelyn, was a cabinet of rarities and curiosities.[52]

And again, here we have a collector along with his wife, who is somehow associated with the collection. The gist is clear. There are two butts of this joke. First, there is the wife, who is old and no longer useful or intended to be used, ready to be put on display.[53] Over time, she becomes susceptible to being indistinct among these objects. There is also here a jibe at the lost use-value of these collected things. She no longer functions as a wife, but as a curious object. The "Antiquary" of the title in later versions of the poem might then apply to her as the object, in the sense of a person of "great age, an ancient" (OED B.1).

---

[50] Platter, pp. 171-73.

[51] William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance*. Massachusetts Studies in Early Modern Culture (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 30-8.

[52] John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 594.

[53] See Christopher Martin, "Fall and Decline: Confronting Lyric Gerontophophia in Donne's 'The Autumnall,'" *John Donne Journal: Studies in the Age of Donne* 26 (2007): 35-6 on "The Antiquary" and "The Autumnal" as poems of estrangement and objectification that come with age.

The second target is the collector himself, suggesting his values and priorities are skewed, that he is interested in things that are no longer useful and have no purpose. He is *too* interested in things: old things, strange things. Which takes us back to the wife. There is also something of the absent-minded professor, who unconsciously scoops up his wife along with a host of other objects to put on display. In any case, his attentions are misapplied. There is, then, great irony in the antiquary's "care." This is an interesting choice of words, derived from the Latin "curiosus," which is associated with "cura" from which our word "curator" derives (though not until later in the 17th-century).[54] This is curiosity as carefulness, related to craft, but also tending toward fastidiousness, a thorough-going interest in a subject, object, or pursuit, again connoting single-mindedness.

In this epigram we have the formation of the "curious" man as a social type. In Doelman's formulation, the external reference of an epigram may also be to a text or a person. In some of the epigrams, Donne seems to have a particular person in mind, but in others (as indicated by the titles given to the later versions of the poems) he seems to be dealing with what Shawcross recognizes as "satirized 'types'," similar to those who were the subject of the character essay that would become popular in the seventeenth-century—in the case of Donne's epigrams, "A Self Accuser," "A Licentious Person," the "Disinherited."[55] It is in the midst of these that the later sequences place "The Antiquary." I am thus arguing that this is a poem *principally* about a type, and that someone like Walter Cope and his collection provides the crucial contextual frame of reference. This association would certainly come to mind for Donne's coterie readers, given that the epigrams and the *Catalogus* were circulating at the same time.[56] This would at least be the case for the

---

[54] The OED's first reference in application to a collection (II.5) is, interestingly, in the context of the Royal Society: "1667 *Philos. Trans.* (Royal Soc.) *2* 486 The Curator of the Royal Society."

[55] John T. Shawcross, "The Arrangement and Order of John Donne's Poems," in *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. Neil Fraistat (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 123. The antiquary as collector would become a fixture of these prose characters.

[56] This reference would have been topical around 1603, the year in which Cope was knighted.

second, intermediate sequence, which provides the title of "Antiquary."[57]

This reading is complicated somewhat by the fact that in the earliest version of the poem, there is no title, and the collector is given a personal name in the first line, "Hamon." In this connection, the *Catalogus* is not help at all; a clear identification of a contemporary referent is elusive.[58] This reference (and any interpretation built upon it) is further complicated by the fact that a Hammon (from the Book of Esther evoking Haman) is also referenced at the end of Satire V, addressing the "fool" who plays the court officials' game and gets fleeced in the process:

> Thou'hadst much; and Laws Vrim and Thummim try
> Thou wouldst for more; and for all hast paper
> Inough to clothe all the great Carraques pepper.
> Sell that, and by that thou much more shalt leese
> Then Hammon if he sold his antiquitees.
> (83-7)

There are some elements in common here with the antiquary of the epigram. The foolish suitor is wasting his time, his efforts, and his luck in seeking returns via legal actions from a corrupt officer. It is all a waste of paper and will earn him less than Hammon received when he sold his antiquities. Tom Hester interprets these antiquities to be "God's people and the wisdom of their religion" whom the biblical Haman sold and for which he earned nothing but his death by hanging.[59] Hester is basing this interpretation on two OED definitions of *antiquity* meaning "The people (or writers, etc.) of ancient times collectively" and "Matters, customs, precedents, or events of earlier times" (2.5 and 2.6). The clearer association, here and in the epigram, is of Hammon as a collector of curiosities, which is hard to square with the biblical

---

[57] The intermediate sequence was compiled and so arranged "between June 1596 and 1602" (Stringer, *Variorum*, vol. 8, p. 18).

[58] For Grierson, the interpretive crux is the identity of the collector, Hammon (vol. 2, p. 59). Certainly, as Shawcross points out, Haman from the Book of Esther comes to mind (*The Complete Poetry of John Donne* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967], p. 403, n. 93).

[59] Esther 5-7. Hester, p. 83.

reference. The reference to hanging is tantalizing, but in the epigram, wife that is hung, not Hammon, although the point here seems to be a warning that those who intend to hang (transitively) might end up being the hung.

So, is there a personal object of attack? Grierson points to a variant spelling of "Hammon" as "Hammond" and speculates (with little conviction) that this might be "John Hammond, LLD, the civilist, the father of James I's physician and Charles I's chaplain."[60] Grierson admits that Hammond (1542-1589) had no known collection of antiquarian interests but argues a connection nonetheless on pretty shaky ground, that Hammond was an expert on tithes and an anti-Catholic puritan member of the high commission and an examiner of the type that persecuted Donne's family. Both Hester and Theresa DiPasquale build their interpretations on this connection to issues of recusancy.[61] However, Hammond was probably dead by the time Donne wrote and circulated his epigrams.

So, where does that leave us with respect to the collector? In both the epigram and the satire, Donne expected his coterie readers to get the reference. As secretary to Lord Burghley in the 1590s, Cope was well known to Donne and his coterie and was well known as a collector. That said, if the reference is to Cope, the precise incident of the selling of curiosities is hard to square (since he collected well into the seventeenth century), unless we take this to be a general reference to the worthlessness of the curiosities *if* he were to sell them. In any case, the reference hits upon a common theme, that collected objects have no use-value, therefore no real value at all. They are a vain pursuit, empty.

What of the fact that the personal name is replaced with a pronoun in the latter version? Hester argues that because Hammond's son had become closely associated with James I, attending Prince Henry in his illness in 1612, the reference to the father became dangerous. Or perhaps the referent was Walter Cope, whose association with Haman

---

[60] Herbert J. C. Grierson, ed. *The Poems of John Donne*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 59.

[61] Hester, "Donne's Epigrams," pp. 83-4, and Theresa M. DiPasquale, "Donne's Epigrams: A Sequential Reading," *Modern Philology* 104.3 (1 February 2007): 353-5. Hester also picks up on language that, he says, was often used as an epithet for Catholics: "old," "strange," and "thing" (Hester, p. 84).

from the Book of Esther remains unclear, and who in 1603, became knighted and therefore out of bounds for attack in an epigram. Or perhaps, as DiPasquale notes, Donne's epigrams, subject to repeated revision in their sequencing, in changing social and historical contexts, shift in meaning and significance.[62] I argue, again, that the epigram, especially in its third iteration, is best understood as an attack on a character type. Whatever Donne's reference to Hammon entailed in the 1590's, by the third sequence, certainly by the time it was published in the 1633 poems, the antiquary clearly had become a type modeled on a figure like Cope. In his *Microcosmography* of 1628, John Earle presents among his prose characters "An antiquary" whose values are upside-down. He is "enamoured of old age and wrinkles, and loves all things (as Dutchmen do cheese), the better for being mouldy and worm-eaten."[63] The antiquary is the picture of impertinence and credulous to a fault: "Beggars cozen him with musty things which they have raked from dunghills, and he preserves their rags for precious relics."[64] He has more coins with Caesar's head on them than either of Elizabeth or James—a comment on how his resources are spent. Earle continues, "Printed books he contemns, as a novelty of this latter age. … He would give all the books in his study (which are rarities all) for one of the old Roman binding, or six lines of Tully in his own hand." And like Hammon or Cope, or whomever is behind Donne's antiquary, "His chamber is hung commonly with strange beasts' skins, and is a kind of charnel-house of bones extraordinary."[65]

Reception

This, indeed, is how Donne's epigram looked to posterity. An anonymous embellishment of Donne's epigram published in a few magazines in 1733, including *The Gentleman's Magazine*, helps to make clear (with the benefit of hindsight) the cultural context and some of the related themes we have been tracking.

---

[62] DiPasquale, p. 330.

[63] John Earle, *Microcosmographie, or a Piece of the World Discovered in Essays & Characters*, ed. Israel Gollancz (London: J. M. Dent, 1899), p. 14.

[64] Ibid., p. 15.

[65] Ibid.

To Sir Gimcrack Noddy

Sir Gimcrack round his Hall *hangs* all Things *odd*,
An *embalm'd Pismire*, and a *Straw-stuff'd Cod*,
Alike to Things *antique* his Taste inclines,
Old *Roman Shields*, maim'd *Heads*, and rusty Coins;
But if the *oldest*, *oddest* Thing in Life
To these you'd *hang*, Sir *Gimcrack*—hang your *Wife*.[66]

By the time this anonymous poem was published, the private collection was giving way to the public museum. Tradescant's museum had become the founding collection of the Ashmolean Museum, and Hans Sloane's collection would be bequeathed to the English nation upon his death in 1753, forming the foundation of the British Museum and British Library. But still, there are traces of the museum's origins in seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities and still a strong memory of association between collection and collector. This collector is even more explicitly a satiric caricature. In seventeenth-century usage "Gimcrack" was a "showy, unsubstantial thing," especially as applied to a "useless ornament" (OED *n.* A.2.c.), and "noddy" denoted a fool or a simpleton (OED *n.* 1.). There are echoes here of Sir Nicholas Gimcrack, the titular character and object of satire in Thomas Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* (1676). This reworking of Donne's epigram also makes a clear connection between the old and the odd (in lines 1, 3 and 5) in a collection that contains both natural and artifactual objects. It also picks up on the fascination with incongruity of scale (of incredible smallness), but here evoking wonder at the virtuosity required to embalm an ant, but also the vanity and impertinence of the act. What's the point? An ant hardly requires such intervention for preservation. The reference to a "staw-stuff'd Cod" is more realistic—collections were sites of early (and rather crude) attempts at taxidermy—, but the primary force of the reference is probably obscene. It is hard to know what to make of "maim'd Heads," except to observe that severed heads (and other body parts) did show up in collections. There is certainly resonance in the "rusty coins" reference. The suggestion here (like in Earle) seems to be that it is the fact of the coin and its age (a corollary of which is rust)

[66] Stringer, ed., *Variorum*, vol. 8, pp. 290-91.

that is of interest, rather than the intellectual content (and valuable historical information) it contains—again, an emblem of impertinence. The reference to the shield is a very particular one, and one which relates back to the ridiculousness of the character of the collector as indicated in his name. In 1713 Dr. John Woodward published a treatise on a Roman shield he had acquired in 1693, purchased from the daughter of a deceased apothecary, one John Conyers. Woodward was a physician and Gresham Professor of physic and fellow of the Royal Society. He was a devotee of the new empirical science and a collector of curiosities, particularly *naturalia*, and especially minerals, best known (perhaps) for his collecting and theorizing of the origins of fossils. He gained an international reputation for *An Essay toward a Natural History of the Earth and Terrestrial Bodies* (published in 1695) and was alternately celebrated and attacked for his startling ideas. This background is important to the incident of the shield. Woodward may have been a pompous blow-hard, but he was not a born fool, though he was easily made to seem one—even before the incident of the shield, which he believed to be of ancient Roman origin, which he elaborated in a 1713 treatise.[67] As it turned out, it was in fact a mid-16th century French buckler, done-up with classical themes. For all his efforts to make much of his prize item, Woodward only revealed himself to be all-too-credulous, fooled by fakery.

Interestingly, this elaboration of Donne's epigram was published in the same year as (and was perhaps inspired by) Alexander Pope's embellishment (and in his mind "versification") of Donne's fourth satire. One of Pope's embellishments is another topical reference to Woodward (actually two references) and to his fellow collector, Sir Hans Sloane. Published anonymously as "The Impertinent, or A Visitor to the Court" (subtitled, with equal anonymity, "A Satyr. By an Eminent Hand"), Pope puts a finer point on Donne's reference to a domain that was very much relevant to the collection of curiosities. In Donne's

[67] Joseph M. Levine recounts a section of *The Memoir of Martinus Scriblerus* where Cornelius's (John Woodward's) shield has been scoured by a maid and robbed of its traces of antiquity: *Dr. Woodward's Shield: History, Science, and Satire in Augustan England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 244-6. As early as 1696, Woodward was identified with the stock character of the virtuoso, in Drake's *An Essay in Defense of the Female Sex* (1696).

original, the courtier (or, as Greg Kneidel argues, the professional snitch), is

> A thing more Strange, then on Niles slime, the Sun
> Er bredd; Or all which into Noahs Arke came;
> A thing which would haue pos'd Adam to name;
> Stranger then seauen Antiquaries Studyes,
> Then Africks Monsters, Guyanas rarityes.
> (18-22)[68]

The principal reference is to monster lore, but rarities of the collected kind were closely allied to the strange, exotic, and category-exploding experience of geographical expansionism. Pope, in retrospect, sees the connection:

> A verier Monster than on *Africk's* Shore
> The Sun e'er got, or slimy *Nilus* bore,
> Or *Sloane*, or *Woodward*'s wondrous Shelves contain;
> Nay, all that lying Travellers can feign.
> (28-31).[69]

Woodward recurs again in the poem. This time, the narrator who belches, spews, spits, and looks "pale and sickly like a Patient" (109-110) is more specifically "one of *Woodward's* Patients," presumably suffering under the doctor's quackery (138-9, emphasis in the original).[70]

---

[68] *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer, vol. 3, *The Satyres* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 135. Kneidel argues that the court intended here is not Queen Elizabeth's court but the Royal Court of Laws at Westminster and that the Horatian pest is a *qui tem* informer—a "professional informer" who makes a career of snitching on others under the guise of interest to the crown (a case in which the informer has no direct involvement) for a percentage of the fines paid (*John Donne and Early Modern Legal Culture: The End of Equity in the Satyres* [Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2015], pp. 115-8).

[69] Quoted from Appendix 2 in Stringer, gen. ed. *Variorum*, vol. 3, p. 405.

[70] Most scholars are concerned with the stylistic differences between Donne's and Pope's poems. Ian Jack cites the lines on Woodward only to illustrate his point that one key stylistic difference between Pope and Donne

Conclusion

This trail of bread crumbs has taken us a hundred years into the future from Donne, but the vantage point is helpful as we return back to the question, was John Donne curious? I began by affirming that yes, of course Donne was curious, but I have also called into question his enthusiasm for one especially early modern expression of curiosity. What can be said in Donne's favor with respect to the culture of curiosity is that he was at least interested enough to note and to consider this new interest in the material world as expressed in the practice of collecting. Indeed, he is among the first and most prescient of those who engaged in the early days of this cultural phenomenon.[71] Donne certainly deserves credit for quickly recognizing the cultural practice and seeing the potential problems within it, establishing themes that would carry through satiric representations of the virtuoso to the end of the seventeenth-century and beyond. Here we see Donne establishing what would become the dominant literary mode for engaging the culture of curiosity generally and the collecting of curiosities particularly, namely, satire. It seems Donne wasn't curious in this particular application. But we need to add a caveat. We ought to note that these references come in forms and modes that assume a stance of skepticism and critique. So, it might be that the attitude we detect here is dictated by generic choices and rhetorical circumstances. Or, one must admit, it could also be that these references occur in these satiric forms because the conventions of these forms are amenable to the attitude Donne himself had to this culture of curiosity. Indeed, despite Hester's claim that, unlike the lyric, the epigram is "addressed to us directly by the poet (not a persona)," we ought to be wary of precisely locating Donne, the private self, in any voice, in any genre.[72]

---

is the readiness of the latter to name names ("Pope and 'The Weighty Bullion of Dr. Donne's Satires,'" *PMLA* 66.6 (December 1951): 1010.

[71] In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo describes an apothecary's shop populated with objects well represented in such establishments, which were important sites in the curiosities network, though less so in England than on the continent (5.1.37-48). Nash, as noted above, referenced the collecting of curiosities in *Pierce Penniless*, published in 1592.

[72] Hester, p. 80.

Notwithstanding these qualifications and equivocations about genre, I am still not convinced that Donne was entirely enthused about the cultural and intellectual pursuits that would come to define the intellectual landscape of the seventeenth-century as expressed, for example, by the Royal Society a half a century or so later, or even by Sir Thomas Browne. Rather, I probably agree with Thomas Festa, that Donne "flirts with … intellectual curiosity."[73] In other contexts, Donne could not quite shake the Augustinian-Elizabethan suspicion of curiosity as a passion. The next consideration in this line of inquiry is the degree to which Donne manages and polices the potentially transgressive tendencies of curiosity in his more public-facing works.

University of Saskatchewan

[73] Thomas A. Festa, "Donne's Anniversaries and His Anatomy of the Book," *John Donne Journal: Studies in the Age of Donne* 17 (1998): 34. Many scholars credit Donne with intellectual curiosity, but mostly this is a curiosity of interest, or at most, inquisitiveness. An exception is T. Ananda Rao, who characterizes Donne as having an "almost Satanic curiosity of analysis" of the natural world: "Nature in John Donne," *The Literary Endeavour: A Quarterly Journal Devoted to English Studies* 2.1 (1980): 63.