

## Tribute to Tom Hester<sup>1</sup>

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**T**om Hester was my teacher, my mentor, and my friend. I studied with him while pursuing my Master's degree at North Carolina State University from 2000 to 2002. Like Matthew Lynch, I would not be here with you all today were it not for Tom.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this tribute was given during the final dinner at the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Donne Society Conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on 15 February 2020.



Because you can read—and probably have read—Sean McDowell’s wonderful piece in volume 33 of the *John Donne Journal* on Tom’s contributions to Donne studies, I’ll mention only a few highlights of his biography and then some stories.

Tom was born in 1941 in Owensboro, Kentucky. After receiving his B.A. from Centre College, he earned his Ph.D. from the University of Florida. He joined the NC State faculty in 1971 and built his career there, living in Raleigh with his wife, Grace, and their lovely daughter. Tom told me that, after he and Grace found out they were expecting, they went out to dinner one night, bought a good bottle of red wine, and refused to leave the table until they’d chosen a name. They decided on “Claire,” Tom said, because he knew that their child would bring clarity to his life, as well as purpose.

He developed close friendships at NC State, particularly with Robert Young. Together they founded the *John Donne Journal* in 1982 and co-edited it for many years, with Tom’s one-time student, Brian Blackley, serving for much of that time as managing editor. Lucky students served as editorial assistants over the years, including Matthew, Tracy



McLawhorn Hayes—whom many of you know as a vital member of the *Donne Variorum* team—and myself.

In 2001, thanks to Tom, I first traveled to Gulfport, MS, to the John Donne Society conference. He had bragged for months that it would be the highlight of my year, as it always was for him. He called it his “annual family reunion.” As one of the fathers of this conference and this Society, Tom loved Dennis Flynn, Ernie Sullivan, Achsah Guibbory, and other members of their accomplished coterie, and he reveled in mentoring early-career scholars. Tom and I were from the south, where debutante balls still take place, and he told me that, when Theresa DiPasquale gave her first outstanding paper at the conference, she “made her debut to the only *society* that really matters.”

Tom didn’t always make life easy for scholars behind the podium. He challenged our ideas and pushed us to defend and expand upon them, but always with great affection. Then, he would offer proudly his annual toast (“To old friends, new friends, and John Donne forever!”) and jump up with Jeanne Shami to lead the anti-conference—singing “American Pie,” dancing (badly), and reciting his metrically creative limericks.

His scholarly contributions are formidable, as you know. His book on Donne’s verse satires, his collection of essays related to Anne More, his



work on the *Variorum* and on the *Oxford Handbook*, his early contributions to the Oxford edition of Donne's prose letters in progress, and of course his editorial work on *JDJ* are only some of his many contributions to Donne studies—contributions that will continue to enlighten and inspire us for years to come. I just regret that he never got to write the screenplay that he envisioned: it would begin (you'll love this) with Donne dying in his bed, dropping dramatically from his hand his treasured secret family heirloom: his half of Sir Thomas More's tooth.

Tom had a wonderfully wicked sense of humor, and he could laugh at himself: at his own Miltonic prose—"complex prose for complex ideas," he'd say—and at what he called his "scholar slump," from a lifetime of leaning over his desk.

I had the privilege of seeing Tom at that desk nearly every day for two years while he, Tracy, and I shared an office. When students came in with questions, Tom talked with them for hours because he believed that the most important teaching moments happen outside of the classroom. Teaching was Tom's vocation. He considered it his responsibility to push students to believe themselves capable of original

interpretations. He insisted that we take classroom discussions seriously, threatening frequently to throw erasers at us if we didn't work harder, although he never did (or would have). Tom taught me to read closely and critically and to write. "To learn to *write* well," he would say, "you have to *read* great critics. Read my friends."

Tom also encouraged me to apply for a paleography course at the Folger Shakespeare Library, which I did, and he was so impatient waiting to learn whether or not I had been accepted that he called them one day while I was in the office. "Uh huh, okay, well thank you," he said soberly and then hung up the phone. After about 5 seconds of somber head shaking, he broke into a huge smile, clapped his hands, and said, "You're in!" As invested as Tom was in his students' success, and as much joy as he found it in, it's no surprise that he once told me that, on the day that teaching began to feel like a job, he would quit.

To conclude, I will fulfill a request that Tom made of me: in the wake of 9/11, he and I were speaking in his office one day about mortality, and he told me that, when he passed away, he didn't want for anyone to give a eulogy at his funeral. All he wanted was for one of his former students to stand up and read a particular poem by Donne. Since this isn't his funeral, I've sidestepped his request that the person say nothing else about him. But I know that here, with you all, is the perfect place to honor Tom's wish:

Death bee not proude, though some have called thee  
 Mighty and Dreadfull, for thou art not soe  
 For those whom thou thinck'st thou dost overthrowe  
 Dye not poore Death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.  
 From rest, and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,  
 Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flowe  
 And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,  
 Rest of their bones, and Soules deliuerie.  
 Thou art slaue to Fate, Chance, Kings, and desperate men,  
 And dost with poyson, warr, and sicknes dwell  
 And Poppie or Charmes, can make vs sleepe as well  
 And better then thy stroak, why swell'st thou then?  
 One short sleepe past, wee wake æternallye  
 And Death shall bee noe more. Death, thou shalt dye.