

Book Reviews

A Handbook of History and Hermeneutics

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Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xxxv + 845 pp.

John Donne's mind was a funnel through which the knowledge of Western civilization passed. Mentally he reached out and grasped at almost all the strands of thought that conspired over the space of some three thousand years to form what came to be called the Renaissance. As many of these strands of thought were conflictive, he came to live with their contradictions as though their sum total was never something big enough to challenge ultimate truth. That the ancient Chaldeans estimated the age of the world at 470,000 years meant no more to him than the estimate of others that placed it at 100,000 or 8,000 years. As a Renaissance humanist, man's life was to him a phenomenon to be seized upon in terms of the present nature of the human soul. He dallied intellectually with everything the Renaissance inherited from the past, and he himself incarnated intellectually the subtle knot, that lasted but briefly, between the European age of faith that immediately preceded and the age of scientific materialism that was gestating. A single scholarly and/or critical volume intending to picture such an individual who was a religious outsider, a social maverick, a sometime courtier, a suspect royalist, a prose stylist more Latin than English, a real lover and an ambiguous lover who can be easily accused of having found God

easier to love than human beings, and ultimately a priest and a preacher, represents a formidable task.

The editors of *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*—Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester—have chosen the path of history and hermeneutics, of what happened and of interpretation. More exactly perhaps the historical as a practical guide for a scholarly, often editorially destined future. The editors' avowed aim, as the introduction says, is to provide "conceptual tools to orient and unfold Donne scholarship," to create a *Handbook of Donne* that is intended to be "a source of directions, a guard against misdirections, and an indicator of new directions" rather than "a mere summary of existing knowledge" (p. 1). Their ambitious objectives are repeated by Shami in her introduction to Part I (p. 9), by Hester and Heather Dubrow in their introduction to Part II (p. 99), and by Flynn in his introduction to Part IV (p. 663). The volume has several of the same contributors as the much less ambitious *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* that came out only in 2006, but the series of essays in the Cambridge volume was restricted to creating an in-depth picture of the figure that Donne has cut in literary history up to today with the express purpose of teaching students "how" to read him. With its directive and editorial bents, and although it necessarily covers some of the same ground as the *Cambridge Companion*, the new *Oxford Handbook* assumes a magisterial role to guide active Donne critics, researchers, and editors, as well as students, along the paths of knowledge it privileges. Amid their contributors the editors have largely chosen individuals who tend to reflect their points of view of the hermeneutics, the history, and the editing related to Donne. The reader consulting the volume may therefore feel *hors de la clique, point de salut*, but the editors' policy is fair enough in the light of the work's need for unity. In the long run of things the volume may not really say anything fundamentally new as its editors believe it does, but certainly by bringing the scope of Donne into the confines of a single pair of covers it achieves the near impossible feat of encapsulating the mind of a genius in one work.

The volume of some 800 pages has four principal parts: on research resources for Donne, on the genres in which he wrote, on biographico-history, and finally on problems of literary interpretation. Because of the mass of often striking scholarship it represents over so long a space, its reader will normally be a consulter. For the volume's four parts, there are in all 56 articles by 48 different contributors (if I counted correctly),

excluding the general introduction and the introductions to each part that are alternatively from the pens of one, two, or all three of the volume's editors, with the participation once of Dubrow. All the contributors have known scholarly or critical interests in Donne and they represent a gamut of very varied interests harnessed more or less most of the time to the *Handbook's* purpose of pointing the right direction to future explorations of Donne. In some articles the aim of the volume as instrument is much more obvious than in others, but this is no reflection on the individual worth of any one of them. The appendices contain a fine bibliography of holograph and non-holograph manuscript sources of Donne's works and of sources related to his work and a limited bibliography of published works on or somehow concerning him from his time to ours. At the end there is also a handy list of "Conceptual Tools" (Index 1) to probe into Donne studies.

The volume must be broached in the light of its considerable aspirations. The organizational skills required to put the volume together, it must be recognized immediately, were formidable and as a collection of varied criticism it is remarkable. As a number of the individuals who partook in its production are involved in the *Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne* and of other scholarly editions of his work, the *Handbook* has a marked interest in editing. The consulter of the volume will rejoice in Gary Stringer's (the general editor of the *Variorum* poetry) infinite sensitivity to Donne's control or lack of it over the circulation of the manuscripts of his individual poems (p. 18) and in his, Stringer's, own sense of humor (bottom of p. 24), and later in his masterful description (he actually makes it sound interesting) of previous editions of Donne's verse (pp. 46–49). Stringer's restraint in the face of his claims contrasts with the declaration in the "General Introduction" that the study of Donne's writings "is today assuming the indicative function for English literary scholarship that a century earlier was taken on by study of Shakespeare's writings" (p. 2). It is doubtful that Shakespeare scholarship did that and that Donne scholarship will.

The challenges in the editing of Renaissance texts like Donne's are nevertheless multiple. For the *Variorum* on poetry, Richard Todd writes in the second *Handbook* article on the editing of Donne's poetry that he and his colleagues have determined copy texts on "a poem-by-poem basis" from among available seventeenth-century resources (manuscript and printed) to get closest possible to the truth of Donne's holograph

manuscripts (p. 57). The poem-by-poem procedure is in fact genial and a welcome innovation. As a practice it makes primal in the editing of each poem the circumstances under which it was composed. Hence, the history and the hermeneutics that the *Handbook* proposes. We are led away from the sometimes near-stranglehold dependence on competing stemmas (or should I say stemme) in the creation of a correct text. However, another editor might protest that the first edition of Donne's poems or of any other contemporary writer was probably set entirely from a holograph manuscript and therefore has precedence (this is surely the case of practically all of Donne's minor prose works). As the *Handbook's* intent is directive for its reader, the *Variorum's* procedure is by inference made to seem the incontrovertible way to proceed, which is misleading.

So too is Ernest W. Sullivan, II's evaluation of my editions of three of Donne's prose works—*Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, *Pseudo-Martyr*, and *Essayes in Divinity*—as research tools for the future, in which I am given what in Canada we call a "snow-job," such that I asked myself for a time why the editors of the *John Donne Journal* ever thought of sending the *Handbook* to such a foul editor as I for review. It would appear that Helen Gardner's abandonment of her work on her edition of *Devotions* when mine was published was not recommendation enough. Or perhaps the problem is that the review of my edition of *Essayes in Divinity* in *Renaissance Quarterly* when it came out described me as "the preeminent editor of Donne's prose."¹ Whatever the case, the thrust of Sullivan's criticism is that the texts of my editions are invalid as definitive texts because none of them is based on a "copy text." Among the other points he brings up, firstly the matter of what is an "issue" of an edition of an early work and what is not and secondly whether or not a definitive edition must maintain the old form of lettering or not, were questions that were already out-dated when I raised them in the Rare Books Room of the University Library and with Philip Gaskell the librarian of Trinity College in Cambridge forty years ago when I was working on *Devotions*. With the exception of certain uses of "issue," both questions have long become a matter of personal editorial choice.

¹Hannibal Hamlin, review of *Essayes in Divinity: Being Several Disquisitions Interwoven with Meditations and Prayers* by John Donne, ed. Anthony Raspa, *Renaissance Quarterly* 58 (2005): 1449–1451; quotation from p. 1449.

As for Sullivan's main argument, if I understand its drift correctly (and I am not sure I do because I find it vague), I should have 1) made lists of all the variants of all of the copies of, for example *Devotions*, that I consulted, and 2) established a pattern in these variants that pointed to what Donne's holograph text was. Then I would have used this pattern as a "copy text" to judge how all the copies I consulted deviated from the holograph manuscript. Or does he mean to say that among all the copies I examined the copy that most corresponded to this pattern should have become my "copy text" by which I would have considered all the other copies. In either case the challenge in the editing of a seventeenth-century prose text for which no holograph or other manuscript exists is that an indisputably best "copy text," whatever it means, is impossible. Such a copy text is an illusion for two reasons: first, because no editor can get to consult all the copies that were printed in the edition of the work in question; and second, because of the printing conditions of the seventeenth-century press. For the first reason, we never know where all of the surviving copies of the first edition of any early book are and hence, if they exist, we are unable to identify their variants, and we also ignore totally how many copies have been destroyed over the centuries, each with its own particular variants. For example, the Bibliothèque Bonenfant of my Université Laval (to turn back to poetry for a moment) has a copy of the first edition of Donne's poems (1633) which, so far as I know, is listed nowhere except in our catalogue, and I own a copy of the first edition (1653) of Francis Bacon's posthumous *Scripta in Naturali et Universali Philosophia* that is listed nowhere either, and I am sure that each of these copies has its own surprise variants or lack of variants. So far as I know no one has ever used either of these early books for a scholarly edition.

For the second reason, involving seventeenth-century printing practices, the causes of our editorial uncertainties with such literary treasures that have come down to us are due to the "outer forme" and the "inner forme" of the early press, each contained in a frame in the press itself. In the preparation for printing in the case of a folio volume, for example, the "outer forme" included pages 1 and 4 and the "inner forme" pages 2 and 3. The number of alterations and corrections as the printing progressed first on the "outer forme" and then finally on the "inner forme," in the latter case using the blank side of the sheet already printed on, are impossible to count. Because of the hand-setting of each wooden

(and later partially metal) letter of every word in these frames and because of breakage of letters and their repair during printing, and because of the variants these created, as Donald R. Dickson points out in his *Handbook* article, "Research tools and their pitfalls for Donne studies," "each copy of an early book is potentially unique, and many copies of an early printing will be found to differ" (p. 83). The dispersion of the variants was also compounded by the fact that it was not necessarily the sheet just printed on in the "outer forme" that passed immediately to the "inner forme" as another sheet printed earlier could do so. Later, after the printed sheets had dried, their final accumulation into individual books from piles of sheets was also necessarily haphazard. The sheet that dried first was the first to go on the pile and the sheets didn't go onto the pile in the order in which they came off the press.

To produce a definitive text of an early work, one (or more) of its finely preserved copies, free of our preconceptions and theories, must be our first consideration if we are not to fall into the misdirections for editing Donne that the *Handbook* editors would have us avoid. The copy or copies used for a critical edition must enable us to make out the sense of what the author has written without being encumbered 1) by the ink that during the printing hundreds of years ago soaked through some pages in some copies making reading hazardous (particularly in the earliest printed books), and 2) by the dampness that has damaged other existing copies (often because of the quality of the paper used in the printing—this was especially the case in *Devotions*). With such working copies as a guide—call them "copy text" or what you will—each variant must be treated in context as the *Variorum* poetry suggests for each poem. The purpose of this is to correct 1) the mechanical accidents that happened during the printing (the mechanical accident that produced one variant was not necessarily the mechanical accident that produced another), 2) the errors of the printer (often more than one) as he (or they) put the text into the "formes," and 3) the author's own errors of attribution and fact. These errors were corrected and sometimes not corrected and exist as variants among surviving copies. The commentary at the end of a scholarly edition is also editorially wholly essential. A genuinely complete commentary to an early prose work as densely referential as Donne's is infinitely arduous to compile. It takes years. However, once completed such a commentary reveals considerable information not only to explain what the author is saying but also to

establish his original holograph text and marginalia. In the case of *Pseudo-Martyr*, the commentary was a more apt corrector of the text—incredibly—than the variants, all of which, incidentally, I noted minutely in the textual apparatus at the bottom of each page (as in all of my editions).

The need of a thorough commentary for a work by Donne is demonstrated by the *Handbook's* nineteen articles in Part II on the literary genres he used and by its 22 concurrent essays in Part III on the eleven stages of his life and on the background history of each. Several of the *Handbook's* articles on the genres should find their way into the commentaries of new editions of Donne because of the clarity with which they highlight the formal character of his work originating in Classical and later traditions. Even the most seasoned scholar/critic needs to be reminded of the subtleties of genres that we sometimes take for obvious. Because of this, I must say that I found Part II the most rewarding section of the volume, but undoubtedly another “consulter” would make another choice.

Among Part II's articles on the genres and amid the mass of truly measured knowledge they contain, Hester's on “The epigram” and Margaret Maurer's on “The prose letter” and on “The verse letter” must be singled out because they interlock so illuminatingly with the late Albert C. Labriola's article on “Donne's military career” in Part III. Hester's and Maurer's articles turn Labriola's use of the genres in question in “Cales and Guiana,” “The Calm,” “The Storm,” and the prose letter to an unidentified recipient, in his account of the still youngish Donne's military career, into fascinating reading (pp. 430–433). Elsewhere, among many others which it is impossible to mention, R. V. Young's article on “The elegy” articulates the development of the elegiac mode in the streams of Classical, medieval, and Renaissance love verse—contrary to several of our expectations—and he shows how Donne appropriated the mode. Jeffrey Johnson in “The essay” redefines Michel de Montaigne's purported scepticism strikingly as “corrective” engagement with ideas, in relation to Donne's method of argument in his own *Essays* (we are relieved of the idea that Montaigne was a new historicist or a deconstructionist). Finally, Graham Roebuck in “The controversial treatise” (like Flynn in “Donne's family background, birth and early years” and “Donne's education” in Part III) demonstrates how profoundly sensitive the mind of an interpreter of Donne must be to the

ambivalences and contradictions of human experience. In the life of a human being as complex as Donne, absolutes are impossible.

With its 300 pages Part III, which is designed to illuminate the eleven stages of Donne's life, covers almost half the volume. The division of the stages is arbitrary but is usually relevant. Each stage is attributed a biographical article and is twinned with another article by a different author on the English history of the time forming the background to the part of Donne's life being considered. Most often the biography comes first and the history follows but, somewhat disconcertingly, not always so (incidentally, Kenneth Fincham's name appears erroneously at the top of the left-hand pages meant to identify Peter McCullough's excellent article on "Donne and court chaplaincy," pp. 556–564; Fincham's informative article on "The hazards of the Jacobean court" follows). The system of the twin articles is really enlightening as the articles on history contextualize Donne's life sometimes with a vital immediacy. On a fair number of occasions the articles on history repeat themselves somewhat—Carr, the Devereux, and the Howards recur often under different pens if one is consulting several articles at a time, as well as do events such as the expedition to Cadiz and the marriages of the Infanta of Spain and Elizabeth of Bohemia. But the articles on history sustain the general intentions behind the *Handbook* to flesh out the chronology of Donne's life. In the first of them, "The English Reformation in the mid-Elizabethan period," to be noted because it establishes the tone for the *Handbook's* historical point of view, Patrick Collinson sets the literary mind straight as to what was and what was not Catholic, recusant, Protestant, and Anglican when Donne was born, setting the stage for the picture of him that follows. Later, Alastair Bellany's article on "The rise of the Howards at Court," with its detailed description of the tensions in James's Court created by the opposing factions of the Howards and of Wriothesley and Herbert, paints a picture that contrasts with the circumstances of Donne's decision to take orders.

In the biographical articles there is a net revisionist tendency of the criticism that attributes profoundly opportunist motives to Donne as he tried to find employment, religious and secular, particularly by R. C. Bald in *John Donne: A Life* and by John Carey in *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*. The revisionism is implicit in Alexandra Gajda's article on "Education as courtier" and in Emma Rhatigan's article on "Donne's readership at Lincoln's Inn and the Doncaster embassy," and is

supported explicitly by Collinson in his historical article (p. 378). The revisionism is later sustained at length by Achsah Guibbory on “Donne and apostasy,” which is the first of the seven articles in Part IV, and by Hugh Adlington’s article, “Do Donne’s writings express his desperate ambition?,” in the same section.

Of Part IV, “Problems of literary interpretation that have been traditionally and generally important in Donne studies,” the consulter’s interest will or will not be awakened by his or her desire or reluctance to embark once more onto any one or all of the troubled personal and literary waters of Donne’s existence. Somehow the fact that Donne’s remains went up in smoke with Old Saint Paul’s Cathedral in the Great Fire of London fits. Perversely, so does the disappearance of Anne More’s remains, if there were any, with the World War II bomb that crashed through the roof of Saint Clement Danes Church in the Strand where she was buried. Perhaps that is John Donne’s and Anne More’s way of asking us to leave them alone. That being said, the number of human lives dedicated to the study of Donne in one way or the other represented by the *Handbook* is mind-boggling and we are grateful. It is extraordinary that anyone who had so troubled an existence and who is dead 400 years could provoke so many present lives to the pursuit of professional truth and that most of them somehow had the courage to find it because of him. It’s also regrettable that when the project of the *Handbook* came to a conclusion some of them had left us. These lives, those who are still with us and those who have left us, represent an eternity and an infinity that Donne would have captured in a “paradox” (the late Michael W. Price, pp. 149–150). For their part, in a happy moment, or if they don’t like what the *Handbook* says or if it tries to shoot them down, the volume’s consulters may compress the same eternity and infinity satirically into a “problem” (Price, p. 243). Everything that’s in time passes. In the meantime, as I wait for my own eternity, I’ll delude myself with its semblance in the shape of the three copies of each of my editions of *Devotions* and *Pseudo-Martyr*, and of the two copies of my edition of *Essays* that the British Library has on its shelves.

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