

Book Reviews

John Donne Overdone?

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Robin Robbins, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols., London and New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008. xxxi + 460 pp. / 20 + 529 pp.

The Longman Annotated English Poets is a distinguished series, boasting a number of fine editions. I have long found the John Carey/Alastair Fowler version of Milton, for instance, extremely useful, if not absolutely indispensable. Robin Robbins's Longman *Donne* is comparable in the care and comprehensiveness of its annotations. Robbins is manifestly a man of acute critical insight as well as formidable erudition, who has devoted many years to this project; and the result is admirable in many ways. While other scholars will doubtless dispute some of his explanations, emphases, interpretations, and various editorial decisions, few will fail to learn from the wealth of information and exegesis he brings to bear on Donne's poems. For students, his explanatory notes may well seem a cornucopia of data about the poet's life, historical context, and literary and intellectual sources.

For all that, it is difficult to envisage the intended reader—much less the probable purchaser—of these volumes. Although Robbins has based his text on the manuscripts, rather than starting with the printed editions, he has not been able to collate and assess the former with the thoroughness of the editors of the *Donne Variorum*. Moreover, in keeping with the practice of the Longman series, he has generally modernized spelling and punctuation—so it is difficult to see why

anyone would cite this edition in scholarly work in preference to the *Variorum*. If these volumes weren't so expensive (\$225 each), it might be worth buying just to have a complete edition with a comprehensive commentary on the home or office shelf; but for such a substantial investment, it would seem more prudent simply to acquire the *Variorum*. In addition to the high cost, the bulk of the two volumes makes this edition an unlikely choice for classroom use. In any case, in my experience, most students in the United States would be overwhelmed by the range and density of the notes, which could be almost as difficult for many of them as Donne's poems.

How comforting it would be to think that there is a not insignificant array of general readers available, who would be willing to invest in two handsome, hefty books for the pleasure of having in their personal libraries all of Donne's poems in a readable version with interesting and edifying commentary. We are assured by authoritative surveys, however, that the supply of avid readers of poetry and lovers of books is rapidly diminishing—probably because everyone is too busy reading surveys. That the “need” for such an edition as this seems questionable to me may, then, be attributable as much to the decadence of contemporary literary culture as to any inherent flaws in the work.

Presentation of the text of Donne's poems to the doughty band of scholars and their students who may hopefully be regarded as enthusiastic readers of his verse is, in any case, fraught with sufficient difficulties. With a handful of exceptions, most notably the *Anniversaries* on the death of Elizabeth Drury, Donne's poems did not begin to be printed until two years after his death in the edition of 1633, but there is likewise no authoritative manuscript version; indeed, only a verse epistle to Lady Carey has survived in the poet's own hand. The *Variorum* editors inform us that there are 239 manuscript sources, over 200 seventeenth-century books containing poems by Donne, and more than 20 significant editions since the eighteenth century that include all or a substantial part of the canon. This is an enormous body of material to master, and since no one manuscript is definitive, the relationships among them are especially crucial. A thorough knowledge of the manuscripts is required to determine, for example, whether the verb in the last line of the holy sonnet “What if this present” should be “assumes” or “assures.”

Interpretation is likewise difficult. Ben Jonson informed William Drummond that Donne wrote his epitaph on Prince Henry to match Sir

Edward Herbert in “obscurity,” and Donne accuses himself of “an hyproptique and immoderate thirst for learning.” Both the obscurity and the learning are deployed freely—sometimes with reckless abandon—in the poems, thus requiring of the commentator both painstaking research and the ingenuity of a cryptographer. Discretion is also necessary to keep the learning and the ingenuity in proper balance: is the “moving of the earth” in the third stanza of “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” the movement of the earth around the sun—evidence of Donne’s knowledge of Galileo’s empirical argument for the Copernican theory, as Charles M. Coffin argues in *John Donne and the New Philosophy*—or is it rather an earthquake?

Robbins is often an admirably adroit commentator, evincing more than sufficient learning to cope with Donne’s allusions, verbal acuity equal to the challenge of the poet’s syntax, by turns densely involved or elliptically elusive, and cautious judgment capable of reining in the imprudent conjectures that often accompany such skills. On the matter of “moving of the earth,” for instance, he sensibly suggests that it is a rendering of the Latin *terrae motus* and then provides an abundance of primary and secondary sources establishing the plausibility of this reading to the point of virtual certainty. The extensive citations should prove valuable for other scholars. Very often this edition provides an exemplary account of a crux in Donne’s poems along with a thorough treatment of additional germane references.

At the same time, there are occasions when it seems Robbins says either too little or too much. When he glosses “profanation” in the second stanza of the same poem as “desecration,” one has to wonder *cui bono*. Anyone who knows the explanatory term will already know what it is supposed to explain, while most American undergraduates will have two words to look up instead of just one. The latter would benefit more from an explanation of how words like “profanation,” “joys,” and “laity” confer a sacredness upon earthly love that occurs frequently in Donne’s lyrics, and that is both echoed and challenged by the erotic overtones in many of the divine poems. It is also surprising that Robbins says nothing about Izaak Walton’s report that Donne wrote this poem as a parting gift for Anne when he accompanied Sir Robert Drury to France, leaving his pregnant wife behind with their children. While this may be another of Walton’s errors, it is at least as interesting and relevant as Robbins’s

reference to contemporary accounts of Lord Burleigh's calm death in 1598.

Robbins's handling of the text leaves me similarly ambivalent. The general editors of the Longman series remark that, in some editions, "modernization has presented difficulties, which have been resolved pragmatically, trying to balance between sensitivity to the text in question and attention to the needs of the modern reader." Such a balance is exceedingly difficult to strike. Here, for instance, is the definitive text of lines 9–10 of "Batter my heart" as the *Variorum* presents it:

Yet dearly I loue you, and would bee loued faine
But am betroath'd vnto your enemye.

And here is Robbins's text:

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.

Now the regularization of "u" and "v" according to modern practice and modernized spelling of "faine," "betroath'd," and "enemye" may make reading easier, but what is one to make of silent and pronounced "-ed" printed identically? An unwary student will have some difficulty figuring out that "loved" has to be two syllables: surely he would have less trouble dealing with "betroath'd," and surely he would be far more likely to elide "dearly I" intuitively without the benefit of the curved macron than to pronounce "-ed" without the indication of a grave accent? Oddly enough, Robbins does supply the grave accent over "-ed" in some poems—lines 1 and 8 of "Oh my black soul," for example, where we are offered "summonèd" and "imprisonèd."

Another problematic decision is to print the *Songs & Sonets* in alphabetical order by their titles. To be sure, no edition or manuscript presents an order with pretension to represent the author's intention, but the titles aren't authorial either, and it seems pointless to impose an artificial reference-book order in preference to the familiar if random listing. Besides, Robbins has undermined such convenience as the alphabet provides by sometimes departing from the usual, established titles for alternatives in his copy texts. I spent a frustrating few minutes

looking for "Love's Alchemy" until I realized that it was printed under the title "Mummy," and the poem routinely known as "Love's Growth" appears in Robbins's edition under the title "Spring."

I end as I begun, in a quandary. I read these volumes with pleasure, often edified and delighted by the editor's unveiling of allusions, intellectual and topical sources, and possibilities of unpacking syntax that were new to me; and I was equally engaged by those parts of the commentary where he forced me to reconsider the grounds on which I disagree with his view. Any student of Donne's poetry can only rejoice in the encounter with the wealth of learning and insight that Robin Robbins has brought to bear in the creation of this edition. At the same time, I remain nonplussed about the rôle this very expensive, somewhat unwieldy version of Donne's poems can reasonably play in the academic treatment of the poet, since it seems too little for the scholar and too much for the inexperienced student.

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