

# Documenting the Donne Explosion

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John R. Roberts, *John Donne: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1979–1995*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2004. xxviii + 605 pp.

This latest volume of John R. Roberts's annotated bibliographies of Donne criticism, which identifies and annotates 1572 published items, is the third in a series that began in 1973 with the publication of *John Donne: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1912–1967* (1280 items) and continued in 1982 with his bibliography covering the years 1968–1978 (1044 items), both issued by the University of Missouri Press. Taken together, these three bibliographies span almost a century of intense critical and scholarly interest in John Donne and his poetry and prose, and in the last 35 years, they themselves have been a vitally important element in the fostering of Donne studies.

Like its predecessors, Roberts's third Donne bibliography is arranged chronologically by year of publication, and within each year the ordering is alphabetical according to author. Also following the format of his previous bibliographies, Roberts has provided three indexes to aid the reader: one to authors, editors, translators, reviewers, and illustrators; one to subjects; and one to Donne's works *mentioned in the annotations* (Roberts's emphasis). This last index does not provide a list of all published discussions of any particular Donne work, especially those that are included in book-length studies that consider in passing many of Donne's works. The user must examine all books and articles that from their titles or annotations may seem likely to contain discussions of the work in question in order to compile such a comprehensive list.

Although its title implies that this annotated compilation considers only criticism, Roberts's bibliography treats scholarly works as well: biographical, historical, textual, and bibliographical studies, as well as editions of Donne's works that contain critical discussions and/or notes. It lists reviews of books treating Donne and his works, but does not annotate them unless they are review articles. The only exclusions from the bibliography are unpublished theses and dissertations and brief references to Donne in literary histories, encyclopedias, and anthologies.

In his treatment of the individual items included in this compilation, Roberts continues the method that worked so well in the first two Donne bibliographies. His annotations are roughly proportional in size to the length and importance of the works being annotated. Significant books devoted entirely to Donne, such as those by John Carey (1981, entry 162), M. Thomas Hester (1982, entry 282), and Arthur F. Marotti (1986, entry 698), have annotations extending to several columns while brief notes, such as Philip Miller's *Explicator* item (1993, entry 1360), are accorded only a sentence or two. Articles generally receive a column or so of annotation, depending on the complexity of their arguments.

Aware that "what is important and/or useful to one scholar is not equally significant to another" (Preface, p. ix), Roberts has—as in his previous bibliographies—eschewed "evaluative" annotations in favor of "descriptive" ones. But this is not to say that the annotations do not convey value judgments. As Roberts notes, his summaries "are quite detailed and quote extensively from the items in order to convey a sense of the approach and level of critical sophistication. Therefore, the readers should be able to judge for themselves whether a particular book or essay will be useful for their purposes" (Preface, p. ix). While Roberts does not intrude his own opinions when summarizing critical arguments, the amount of space devoted to particular items tends to indicate their relative importance. Moreover, he notes errors of fact and guides the reader to sources that provide correct information.

In defense of his ordering of the items chronologically (rather than the more common alphabetical arrangement by authors' surnames), Roberts offers the argument that in reading through the bibliography, one "will be able to obtain a sense of the various shifts and developments that have occurred in Donnean criticism during the 17-year period covered"; and he notes some of the "critical sieves" through which Donne's works were run during those years: linguistic, stylistic,

biographical, psychoanalytic, bibliographic, textual, feminist, new historicist, political, and formalistic (Preface, p. ix). In fact, this bibliography provides virtually a map of the various critical and scholarly approaches espoused by critics and scholars during those 17 years, some complementary, some antagonistic to others. Roberts's annotations point up and clarify differences of approach and opinion and serve as guides to ongoing critical and scholarly debates.

What may not be immediately apparent to users of this third Roberts bibliography is that much of the diversity reflected in it was encouraged, if not actually inspired, by three institutions that began life during the period covered by it. Significantly, Roberts has been intimately involved in all three institutions and has from their beginnings been a major contributor to their success.

The first of these is the on-going, multi-volume *Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, begun in 1981 under the general editorship of Gary A. Stringer. Since the *Variorum* presents both newly edited texts of Donne's poems and detailed historical synopses of the criticism of them, its compilation has inspired books and articles on textual theory, scribal publication and manuscript culture, reception history, and general criticism. Indeed, we now know much more about the nature and distribution of texts in the early modern period and about the often complicated transmission and reception of those texts in subsequent centuries than ever before. Many of the critical and scholarly works on those subjects have been written by the textual and commentary editors of the *Variorum*, while others have been contributions by scholars who were not directly involved in the project itself but have nevertheless been inspired by it. Roberts's bibliography summarizes all of those discoveries through the year 1995.

The second of those institutions is this present publication, the *John Donne Journal* itself, begun in 1982 under the editorship of M. Thomas Hester and R. V. Young. Since its inception it has welcomed many critical and scholarly approaches, and a surprising number of items in this third Roberts Donne bibliography were published in *JDJ*.

The third institution established during the period covered by the bibliography is the John Donne Society of America, founded by members of the *Donne Variorum* project, which held the first of its annual meetings in February of 1986. This organization, also open to a variety of critical and scholarly approaches to Donne, provided the first

venue for many articles subsequently published in various journals and collections of essays and now annotated in the Roberts bibliography: Roberts was a founding member of the society and was unanimously elected its first president.

The study of John Donne's poetry and prose is clearly flourishing, and Jack Roberts has been intimately involved in its nurture and growth. In deftly summarizing Donne scholarship and criticism since 1912, he has provided a solid base on which contemporary scholars can build.

Duquesne University Press should be commended for supporting this worthwhile project. It is an essential purchase for research libraries. However, the publication of this bibliography in hard copy is unfortunate. The arduous and lengthy process of seeing a book such as this through the press invariably means that it is dated before it actually appears in print. In addition, its print format precludes any post-publication correction of errors (such as the typo in the title of item 1255). Finally, its cost in printed form—\$145.00—is prohibitive for most individual scholars, and even for many college and university libraries, faced as they now are with shrinking budgets for print publications. This valuable bibliography—and its audience—would have been far better served had it been published online or as a cd. In an electronic format, it could have appeared years earlier than it did, its errors would be easy to correct, it could be easily updated, and it could be made available at a much lower price.

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