John Donne Journal
Vol. 15 (1996)

The Early Audiences of Donne's Poetic Performances

Ted-Larry Pebworth

One of the most exciting developments in Donne studies in the last several years has been a recontextualizing of his poetry, stemming from a growing realization that almost all of his poems were originally performances designed for specific audiences—coterie works written for distribution to and reaction from a small number of friends, colleagues, patrons, and prospective patrons—and only gradually circulated to wider audiences during his lifetime, primarily through manuscript copies.[1] This recent recontextualizing of Donne as a coterie poet has been enlightening, but some careful distinctions need to be drawn, emphasizing the multiplicity of Donne's audiences during his lifetime, the access of each of those audiences to only a part of the canon, and especially the variety of ways in which Donne addressed his primary audiences. Knowing the nature of these original audiences is important to our own reading of his poetry because Donne was so constantly aware of and responsive to audience, even to the point of imaginatively assuming the stances of his addressees. This awareness of audience is essential to Donne's ethos of performance, his tailoring of perspective to particular occasion.

From their headings and other artifactual evidence, we know—by name or initials—the immediate audiences of 58 Donne poems, more than one-fourth of the extant canon. These include friends such as Christopher and Samuel Brooke, Rowland and Thomas Woodward, Henry Goodyer, and Henry Wotton; fellow poets such as Ben Jonson and George and Edward Herbert; patrons and prospective patrons such as the Countesses of Salisbury and Huntingdon, Sir Robert Drury, Lady Lettice Carey, the Earl of Somerset, and—preeminently—Lucy,

Countess of Bedford. A total of 29 individuals and one institution constitute the initial recipients of all of Donne's verse epistles, the two Anniversaries with their accompanying "Funeral Elegy," two epithalamia, five epicedes and obsequies, and a handful of commendatory poems and inscriptions. These original recipients must have received their respective poems either directly from the poet's hand; through the post, as in the case of the famous holograph verse letter to Lady Carey (now Bodleian Library Ms. Eng. poet. d. 197); or through an intermediary such as Henry Goodyer, who acted as go-between in Donne's dealings with the Countess of Bedford. Thus, it is evident that the (initial) audience for many of Donne's poems is clearly and narrowly circumscribed.

The roll call of the original recipients of Donne's poetic performances helps define as a primary audience the several circles of friends and patrons with whom Donne shared works that range from the satires, elegies, and epigrams written at the beginning of his poetic career to the very few poems written after his ordination. I use here the word "circles"—in the plural—deliberately. Some scholars and critics have spoken of Donne's coterie—in the singular—as though there were only one group of people in Donne's poetic universe, all of whose members he addressed in much the same way. But such is simply not the case. Over the years, there were multiple, often overlapping coteries to whom Donne delivered his poetic performances; and the membership of each was fluid, some members dropping out and others joining as time passed and as the nature of Donne's poetic performances changed. First, there was the coterie of friends dating from his years at the Inns of Court, his service with the Earl of Essex, and his employment with Lord Keeper Egerton. Its members were young men much like Donne himself with whom he was on intimate terms. Second, there was also a circle of poets and lovers of poetry who were probably Donne's acquaintances rather than his close friends. Then, after his career prospects were dashed by his imprudent marriage, Donne entered the patronage culture of his age with a new urgency and developed a circle of patrons and prospective patrons among the gentry and the aristocracy. In addition, Donne may well have been

aware, eventually, of a wider audience of readers and collectors who prized his work.

A poet who publishes almost exclusively in manuscript can, at least initially, limit his audience; and Donne, who seems to have had a genuine dread of print publication, took advantage of this feature of manuscript transmission. His conception of highly circumscribed audiences accounts for several salient features of his poetry. As Claude J. Summers has recently demonstrated with reference to the epicedes of 1609, Donne's coterie works are dynamic social exchanges, informed by and impinging upon relationships with others.[2] For example, the verse letters to his close friends are highly referential communications firmly tied to specific occasions; they are frequently frustratingly cryptic and notably intimate precisely because they are written to friends with whom Donne shares a history the details of which are now elusive.[3] Conversely, however, the verse letters addressed to patrons and prospective patrons tend to be more abstract and philosophical, qualities that likely resulted from Donne's lack of intimacy with these recipients and his (sometimes bridling) consciousness of his social subservience to them. More generally, Donne's sense of writing for small circles of particular readers meant that he could presume in his audiences a certain level of sophistication and an appreciation of the socio-literary circumstances of composition. As Arthur F. Marotti has argued, Donne's "creation of a sense of familiarity and intimacy, his fondness for dialectic, intellectual complexity, paradox and irony, the appeals to shared attitudes and group interest . . . , the explicit gestures of biographical self-referentiality, the styles he adopted or invented all relate to the coterie circumstances of his verse" (*John Donne: Coterie Poet*, p. 19). So too does Donne's general conception of poetry as a complex social transaction, most apparent in the verse letters but evident in various ways throughout the canon.

The initial recipients of Donne's poetical performances were those poems' initial audiences, yet in all but a few cases they seem not to have been their exclusive audiences. Those few cases of exclusivity are themselves illuminating. For instance, Donne's verse letter to Henry

Wotton fighting in Ireland survives in a single early transcription, probably copied directly from the holograph sent to Wotton, and the poem evidently had no other audience until Grierson published it in 1912.[4] Likewise, Donne also apparently severely restricted the initial audience of his last three holy sonnets—those beginning "Since she whom I loved," "Show me dear Christ," and "Oh, to vex me"—since again only one seventeenth-century copy of these three poems survives, in this case in the hand of Donne's friend Rowland Woodward, and they were not printed until the late nineteenth century.[5] These three sonnets are, of course, addressed variously to God and Christ, but unless Donne conceived of the poems—probably occasioned by the death of his wife—only as therapeutic exercises, he likely had a human audience in mind as well. Was that audience only Woodward, his old friend from his days at Lincoln's Inn? Or was Woodward given the task of preserving the poems for posterity, a wide audience that Donne sometimes imagines in his Songs and Sonnets? And in the cases of these four poems, why did Donne so limit their initial audiences? The verse letter to Wotton may have been restricted because it was both private and—at the time it was written, in the waning years of Elizabeth's long reign and during Essex's disastrous Irish adventure—politically dangerous. The primary reason for the restriction of the three holy sonnets may have been only their extremely personal nature rather than any fear of being faulted for them, although "Show me dear Christ" is a daring statement for an Anglican churchman with aspirations to preferment. At the other extreme, Donne acquiesced in the print publication of the Anniversaries, the "Funeral Elegy" on Elizabeth Drury, the elegy on Prince Henry, and his verses on Jonson's *Volpone* and Coryat's *Crudities*, making those poems immediately available to wide audiences. Are there aspects of those poems that are directly affected by Donne's awareness of a large audience for them? Does Donne's revulsion from the stigma of print insinuate itself into these works?

Most of Donne's poems fall between these two extremes, however, and Donne must have thought of the audiences for them in the plural rather than in the singular. This large body of his work, which

even includes most of the poems initially addressed to individuals, was made available, selectively and progressively, by their author—either through vocal performance or through manuscript transmission—to members of his various coteries. I use the modifiers "selectively" and "progressively" because it is obvious from the surviving artifacts that Donne did not send everything he wrote, as soon as he wrote it, to every member of every coterie. Indeed, although Everard Gilpin paraphrased lines from Donne's politically innocuous Satire I in 1598 (see Smith, p. 33), it was only about 1600, well into his close friendship with Wotton, that Donne proposed to share with the latter "all" of his writings, including the satires and the elegies. And even then, he begged his friend that "no coppy shalbee taken for any respect" of "my compositions sent to you," since "to my satyrs there belongs some feare and to some elegies . . . perhaps shame."[6] Clearly, during his employment with Egerton, Donne was worried about the effects that a wide circulation of his satires and elegies might have on his reputation and his hopes for advancement in public affairs. And it was only when the politically dangerous final years of Elizabeth's reign were safely in the past (and after his injudicious marriage had ended his employment with Egerton) that Donne allowed a wider distribution of all five satires, sending them to Ben Jonson, who, in turn, sent along a copy of them—accompanied by his own Epigram 94—to Lucy, Countess of Bedford. The fact that there are four surviving manuscript booklets containing only the satires and "The Storm" and "The Calm" also suggests that the satires eventually circulated widely as a group among members of Donne's coteries during his lifetime.[7] The several early references to and quotations from the satires cited by A. J. Smith in *The Critical Heritage* and Ernest W. Sullivan II in *The Influence of John Donne* also attest to their expanding circulation.

We have concrete information concerning the progressive circulation of other poems as well. Beginning about 1609, manuscript and printed references to and quotations from a few unpublished Donne poems begin to appear, among them "The Expiration," "Break of Day," "The Autumnal," "The Sun Rising," and "Lecture upon a Shadow" (see Smith; Sullivan, *Influence*). We know that in 1613

William Drummond of Hawthornden read a manuscript book of "Jhone Dones lyriques" (Smith, p. 73). We know from one of Donne's prose letters that in 1614, Henry Goodyer had an "old book" of Donne's poems in manuscript.[8] We know that Ben Jonson quotes a phrase from "The Autumnal" in *Epicoene* (1609) and that before 1612 he had read at least a fair number of Donne's epigrams, since his own Epigram 96 addresses Donne as the master of the genre. We know as well from Jonson's *Conversations with Drummond of Hawthornden* that by 1619 Jonson had read Donne's *Metempsychosis* and that he had "by Heart" Donne's elegy "The Bracelet," his epigram "Phryne," and at least a portion of his verse letter "The Calm" (see Smith, pp. 67-70). We know from the Burley manuscript that by the 1620s, Wotton had in his possession 23 Donne poems, including 18 epigrams. We know from the Conway manuscript (British Library ms. 23229, ff. 10-14v, 55, and 76) that Henry Goodyer at one point copied several Donne poems not specifically addressed to him. And we know from the Westmoreland manuscript that sometime after 1617 Rowland Woodward had in his possession a large body of Donne's verse letters, elegies, and epigrams and the complete corpus of his satires and holy sonnets.

What is suggested by this artifactual evidence is that Donne conceived of certain friends as a primary audience for most (though not all) of his poems. Moreover, Ernest Sullivan has recently argued persuasively that the progenitor of the so-called Group II manuscripts of Donne's poems was a collection originally made for Donne's one-time employer, Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, and enlarged by his son (*Dalhousie Manuscripts,* pp. 4-7). This suggests both that at least some of Donne's patrons, beyond receiving individual poems written specifically to or for them, must also have been numbered among the audiences of other of his poems, and that Donne's audience constantly grew throughout his lifetime as one collector of his poems shared them with others. I have recently discovered, for instance, that the Bridgewater manuscript of Donne's poems, paradoxes, and problems was acquired by Frances Egerton, Countess of Bridgewater, not her husband, as Grierson supposes, and

that its original poetic contents were augmented at her direction, perhaps with the assistance of her fellow noblewomen within Donne's circle of patrons. What now seems likely is that the 30 large (but individually incomplete) collections of Donne's poetry comprising Helen Gardner's five "Groups" (as expanded by Beal) originated not from collections made by Donne himself in 1614 and 1619, as Gardner asserts, but from members of his various coteries (see Sullivan, *Dalhousie Manuscripts,* p. 10). Such nonauthorial origins would explain why none contain the complete canon, as well as why there are noncanonical works included in almost all of them and why the texts in many, being several removes from the holographs, are scribally corrupted. While Donne, as a manuscript poet, could control the immediate audiences of his works, the dynamics of manuscript transmission are such that he eventually lost control of their audiences—and of their texts—as his primary audiences shared his poems with other collectors both inside and outside the various coteries.

What is remarkable, given the piecemeal manuscript transmission of most of his poetry, is that Donne so quickly became known as a significant poet. The reputation that Donne gained as a poet during his lifetime is, indeed, eloquent testimony to the power of manuscript publication within the close-knit literary community of early seventeenth-century England. Yet it is clear that during his lifetime Donne's reputation was based on a fragmented knowledge of his poetic canon. Indeed, the word "canon" may be an anachronism when applied to Donne's attitude toward his poetry, since he—unlike his friend and almost exact contemporary Ben Jonson—seems to have had little concern for compiling and preserving his entire body of verse. That compilation and preservation was left to his collector friends and patrons; and from the artifactual evidence surviving, none of them managed to acquire copies of all of the more than 200 Donne poems now known to exist. The five manuscripts of Gardner's Group I, the single member of her Group IV (the Westmoreland manuscript), and ten of her eleven Group V manuscripts preserve fewer than 100 Donne poems each; two of her eight Group II manuscripts collect as many as 143 poems each; and three of her four Group III manuscripts contain

no more than 140 poems each (see Beal, pp. 250-53). The single exceptions to these numbers within Groups III and V (the O'Flahertie manuscript in Group III and the Bridgewater manuscript in Group V) are, in different ways, instructive. When Frances Egerton, Countess of Bridgewater, acquired her manuscript of Donne's poems, paradoxes, and problems sometime between October 1627 and April 1631, it contained only 108 Donne poems. During the next few years she collected and had added to it 14 additional Donne poems. We can see reflected in this manuscript, then, the urge of an aristocratic collector to acquire and preserve as many of Donne's poems as possible; yet despite her efforts, Frances Egerton managed to acquire only 122 Donne poems.[9]

The O'Flahertie manuscript (Harvard ms. Eng. 966.5) also attempts to collect all of Donne's poetry, in this case probably to serve as the printer's copy for an edition: its title page reads "The Poems of D. J. Donne (not yet imprinted) . . . finished this 12 of October 1632." Along with its less complete cognate, the Narcissus Luttrell manuscript (now Cambridge University Library Add. ms. 8468), which contains only 140 Donne poems, the O'Flahertie manuscript begins the process of "canonizing" Donne's poetry, grouping the individual poems into the generic categories that we still use: Epithalamia, Songs and Sonnets, Epicedes and Obsequies, etc. Yet despite the late date of its completion, more than a year after Donne's death, and its obvious attempt to be inclusive, the O'Flahertie manuscript contains only 169 Donne poems.

Even after Donne's death, his poetic canon was not presented completely. The first edition of *Poems, by J.D. with Elegies on the Author's Death* (1633), which was not set from the O'Flahertie manuscript, contains only 154 authentic Donne poems. The second and subsequent seventeenth-century editions and issues of his collected poetry (1635-1669) added a few more poems,[10] but it was not until the twentieth century that the publication and consequent circulation of Donne's poetic canon approached completion.

Moreover, relatively few of his contemporaries must have been aware that many of his poems existed in multiple versions. Donne

frequently exploited one of the advantages of scribal publication and revised poems already in circulation and then introduced the new versions into the stream of manuscript transmission. For example, three distinct versions of his "Hymn to God the Father" circulated during his lifetime and shortly thereafter; and he prepared and released three distinct sequences each of his epigrams and his holy sonnets, along the way discarding some of the original poems, adding new ones, and making textual changes in the poems that were retained.[11] Occasionally one finds manuscripts, such as the Bridgewater, that shortly after their compilation had their contents compared with those of another manuscript and variant readings from different versions noted in the margins, but evidence of an awareness of multiple versions is rare during Donne's lifetime. Indeed, until quite recently, the existence of multiple authorial versions of Donne's poems has been largely overlooked or underrecorded even by his editors, a condition now being rectified by the Donne Variorum. Very few members of even his primary audiences, then, could have known his poetic oeuvre in its totality and its complexity, nor could they have had a sense of his canon as coherent or unified.

In addition to the primary audiences of Donne's poetry, there were during his lifetime two other, secondary audiences that deserve our attention, audiences over which he exercised little or no control. Their members probably did not know Donne personally; they received his poems third or even fourthhand, no doubt ultimately from members of his primary audiences who allowed outsiders access to some of the Donne poems in their possession; and they had available to them far fewer poems than did members of the coteries. One of these audiences consists of compilers of manuscript poetical miscellanies, some of them young men connected to the Inns of Court or to Oxford or Cambridge, others members of the educated gentry. Some of the Donne poems that they collected seem to have been passed to them orally; a fair number of Donne items in contemporaneous manuscript miscellanies seem to be reconstructions of imperfectly memorized poems that their collectors pieced out in often stumbling fashion. Other collectors seem to have received Donne poems through the post.

Surviving in composite manuscript volumes are several seventeenth-century copies of individual Donne poems or small groups of poems on single sheets or bifolia that show creases caused by folding for insertion in letters. Among these are copies of the Lincoln's Inn epithalamion and the verse letter addressed to Thomas Woodward beginning "At once from hence" among the West papers in British Library Add. ms. 34744 (ff. 47-48); "Lovers' Infiniteness" and "Good Friday 1613 Riding Westward," both in Henry Goodyer's hand, among the Conway papers in British Library Add. ms. 23229 (ff. 55 and 76-77, respectively); Donne's elegy on Prince Henry (accompanied by Edward Herbert's elegy on the same) and "Hymn to the Saints and to the Marquess Hamilton" in Bodleian Library ms. Rawl. poet. 26 (ff. 91-92 and 112-13, respectively); and "Elegy: The Bracelet" in the Eaton Estate Office ms. Personal Papers 2/54.[12]

These early seventeenth-century compilers of verse miscellanies seem to have taken great pride in collecting Donne's poems—especially after their author had become Dr. Donne—even to the point of ascribing to him poems not of his authorship, especially satiric and erotic verses. Much work still needs to be done on these manuscript miscellanies, dozens of which survive but most of which are not signed or dated. Mary Hobbes is pointing the way in her recent studies of miscellanies that can be associated with Christ Church, Oxford, a college populated in the 1620s and 1630s by a remarkable number of young men who went on to become poets in their own right.[13]

The other secondary audience, and potentially the largest of all of Donne's contemporaneous audiences, is made up of readers who first experienced Donne's poetry in its scattered but surprisingly numerous early printings. With the exception of the Anniversaries and the few other poems that Donne himself allowed to be printed, however, most of what this audience had access to were only excerpts, and most of those excerpts were presented anonymously, so that Donne's early print audience was largely unaware that what it was reading had come from Donne's hand. In *The Influence of John Donne,* Ernest Sullivan has recently shown us just how much of Donne's poetry was available in print during his lifetime—much more than we had previously

known—and has provided an analysis of Donne's print audiences that should provoke our rethinking of his early reception history.

The question of audience is especially tantalizing with reference to those poems for which specific audiences are presently unknown. Perhaps future artifactual discoveries may illuminate those audiences. In the meantime, we can only speculate. Were most of the Songs and Sonnets, for example, written for the entertainment of the young men who comprised Donne's Inns of Court coterie, as Arthur Marotti argues (in *John Donne: Coterie Poet*); or were most of these love lyrics initially written for the delight of an audience of one, Ann More, as Ilona Bell proposes?[14] Obviously, in the absence of concrete artifactual evidence, the answer one gives to such a question crucially determines (or reflects) one's readings of the poems themselves. But, of course, the question ought not be phrased as either/or. It is possible that Donne composed the songs and sonnets with an audience (or audiences) in mind that included both Ann More and his male friends, and even unknown readers, including posterity. While we are only beginning to explore the question of Donne's audiences, it is clear that they were multiple, various, fragmented, and an indispensable element of the ethos of performance that in so many ways dictated so many characteristic features of the poetry.

University of Michigan-Dearborn

Notes

[1]Recent studies of Donne's early reception history, to which this essay is indebted, include A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Peter Beal's entries for Donne in *Index of English Literary Manuscripts,* vol. 1, part 1 (London: Mansell, 1980), pp. 243-564, 566-68; Ted-Larry Pebworth, "Manuscript Poems and Print Assumptions: Donne and his Modern Editors," *John Donne Journal* 3 (1984): 1-22, and "John Donne, Coterie Poetry, and the Text as Performance," *Studies in English Literature* 29 (1989): 61-75; Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), "Manuscript, print, and the social history of the lyric," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 52-79, and *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995); and Ernest W. Sullivan, II, *The First and Second Dalhousie Manuscripts: Poems and Prose by John Donne and Others* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), and *The Influence of John Donne: His Uncollected Seventeenth-Century Printed Verse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

[2] "Donne's 1609 Sequence of Grief and Comfort," *Studies in Philology* 89 (1992): 211-31.

[3] On this point see, for example, Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, "Donne's Correspondence with Wotton," *John Donne Journal* 10 (1991): 1-36.

[4] This unique transcription is in the Burley manuscript (now Leicestershire Record Office ms. DG7/Lit.2), a composite volume containing, among other items, one of Wotton's letter books that includes copies of Donne poems.

[5]Woodward's transcription of these three poems is in the Westmoreland manuscript (New York Public Library, Berg Collection). They were first published by Edmund Gosse in the 1890s.

[6] Letter no. 11 in Evelyn Simpson, *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne*, 2nd ed., rev. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 316; see Summers and Pebworth, "Donne's Correspondence with Wotton," pp. 26-27.

[7] The four manuscripts are British Library Ms. Harley 5110; Queen's College, Oxford, Ms. 216; Victoria and Albert Museum, Dyce Collection, Cat. No. 17, ms. 25.F.16; and the privately owned Heneage ms.

[8] Letter dated 20 December 1614, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651): A Facsimile Reproduction,* intro. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977), p. 197.

[9] Beal reports that the Bridgewater manuscript contains 123 Donne poems, but that calculation counts the two parts of Donne's epithalamion on the marriage of the Earl of Somerset (i.e., the prefacing eclogue and the epithalamion proper) as two different items when they are in fact two parts of a single poem. The information in this paragraph is taken from an unpublished paper, "The Early

History of the Bridgewater Manuscript of John Donne's Poetry and Prose (Huntington ms. EL 6893)," which I delivered at the 1994 conference of the John Donne Society.

[10] For the contents of the seventeenth-century editions and issues of *Poems, by J.D.*, see Geoffrey Keynes, comp., *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), pp. 190-207.

[11] For the three versions of the hymn, see Ted-Larry Pebworth, "The Editor, the Critic, and the Multiple Texts of Donne's 'Hymne to God the Father,'" *South Central Review* 4.2 (Summer 1987): 16-34; and for the three sequences of the epigrams, see *The Epigrams, Epithalamions, Epitaphs, Inscriptions, and Miscellaneous Poems,* vol. 6 of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 5-11 and 14-25. The *Holy Sonnets* volume of the Variorum, forthcoming, will present the three sequences of those poems.

[12] I owe the notice of this last item to a colleague on the Donne Variorum project, Dennis Flynn, who discovered this manuscript during the summer of 1996. He is preparing an essay on his discoveries for publication.

[13] See "Early Seventeenth-Century Verse Miscellanies and Their Value for Textual Editors," *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700* 1 (1989): 189-210; the introduction to her facsimile edition of *The Stoughton Manuscript: A Manuscript Miscellany of Poems by Henry King and his Circle* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1990); and *Early Seventeenth-Century Verse Miscellany Manuscripts* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1992).

[14] See "The Role of the Lady in Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 23 (1983): 113-29; and "'Under Y^{e} Rage of a Hott Sonn & Y^{r} Eyes: John Donne's Love Letters to Ann More," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne,* ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 25-52.