



Revised Edition

A Preface to Donne

James Winny



Preface Books

A series of scholarly and critical studies of major writers intended for those needing modern and authoritative guidance through the characteristic difficulties of their work to reach an intelligent understanding and enjoyment of it.

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The melancholy and pleasant humour were in him so contempered that each gave advantage to the other, and made his Company one of the delights of Mankind. (Walton)

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Foreword

Dr Winny's book is intended for those who are fresh to the poetry of Donne and realize that critical guidance is essential before this intricate verbal art can communicate to us today—and this in spite of the fact that Donne has been claimed as a modern ever since T. S. Eliot drew critical attention to him through his literary criticism and his own modernist poetry of the 1920s.

A number of intellectual, scientific, religious and artistic patterns are traced in the first four chapters. These may suggest to the reader that Donne is more medieval than modern, though the voice that emerges from the study and is present in the poems analysed in the fifth section is universal and compelling. We do not assume that the poetry is in any meaningful way *about* maps, mandrakes or compasses: nor are D. H. Lawrence's novels about the psychology of Freud. Donne and Lawrence, together with Shakespeare and Hardy, are pre-eminent in their definitions of the stages of love because of the sensitivity they show to the intellectual currents of their age as well as the power they possess of realizing emotional states.

Especially important in the present study, I believe, is the attempt to revise the common estimate of the poetry of the early seventeenth century, for years said to be the work of a 'school of Donne'. In Dr Winny's words: 'There could be no school of Donne, for his style was a uniquely personal instrument which could not serve the needs of other poets.' His philosophical ideas were largely familiar to educated people in 1590, but the attitudes taken up towards such inherited concepts are inimitably Donne's own. In order to equip the reader, who already has the sensibility, with the necessary information and then to blend both in his imaginative recreation of the poetry has been the guiding principle in the preparation of this book.

In preparing the revised edition a good deal of new material has been added and the layout has been slightly altered. The *Elegies* are poems frequently neglected, especially by those who know their Donne only through anthologies, and a discussion of some of them gives a more fully rounded analysis of the poetic output of a virtuoso writer. Since a great deal of Donne's adult life was spent in the service of the Church it is of particular value to the reader to consider the series of meditations *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, a record of a psychological breakdown, with which Part Two now ends. This substantial addition to the book will be welcomed especially by those who recollect that Donne's reputation among his contemporaries was established not as a love poet but as Dean.

MAURICE HUSSEY General Editor

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For Maurice

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Part One

The Poet and His Setting

Chronological table

| DONNE'S LIFE | HISTORICAL EVENTS |
|---|---|
| 1570 | Elizabeth I excommunicated and deposed by the Pope |
| 1572 John Donne born, third child of John Donne, a London ironmonger, and his wife Elizabeth (formerly Heywood) | Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day |
| 1574 | Persecution of English papists begins |
| 1575 | English Anabaptists burnt at the stake |
| 1576 Death of Donne's father. His mother remarries | Theatre playhouse built in London suburb. First recusant priests arrive secretly in England |
| 1577 | Drake's circumnavigation begins (1577-80) |
| 1578 | Lyly's <i>Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit</i> published |
| 1579 | Jesuit mission to England organized |
| 1580 | English recusants encouraged to regard assassination of the Queen as 'lawful and meritorious' |
| 1581 | Clandestine recusant press set up in Essex. Edmund Campion executed |
| 1582 | Plague in London |

| | | |
|---------|---|---|
| 1583 | | Somerville's recusant plot exposed |
| 1584 | Donne and his brother Henry matriculate from Hart Hall, Oxford: probably at Oxford until 1588 | |
| 1585 | | Netherlands expedition under Leicester |
| 1586 | | Death of Sidney. Following the battle of Zutphen. Trial of Mary Queen of Scots. Star Chamber decree requiring all published works to have ecclesiastical approval |
| 1587 | | Execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Pope proclaims a crusade against England |
| 1588 | Death of Donne's stepfather | Defeat of the Spanish Armada |
| 1589–91 | Donne probably travelling in Europe | |
| 1591 | Donne enters Thavies Inn as a law student. His mother married for the third time | Increasingly severe measures taken against recusants |
| 1592 | Donne admitted to Lincoln's Inn. Most productive period of poetic writing— <i>Songs and Sonets</i> , <i>Satires</i> , <i>Elegies</i> —probably begins about this date | |
| 1592–3 | | Plague in London; all playhouses closed |
| 1593 | Death of Henry Donne of jail-fever in Newgate prison | Penalties for recusancy increased. Death of Marlowe |

| | | |
|------------|--|---|
| 1595 | | Robert Southwell executed. Deaths of Drake and Hawkins in West Indies |
| 1596 | Takes part in the expedition to Cadiz as gentleman adventurer | Essex storms Cadiz |
| 1597 | Sails with the Islands expedition, July–October | Failure of expedition to the Azores |
| 1598 | Enters service of Sir Thomas Egerton as secretary | |
| 1599 | | Death of Spenser. Essex sent to Ireland; returns to England without permission and is imprisoned |
| 1600 | | East India Company founded |
| 1601 | Elected MP for Brackley. Lives in the Savoy and in December marries Ann More | Rising and execution of Essex |
| 1602 | Marriage revealed to Sir George More. Donne briefly imprisoned, and dismissed from his secretarial post. Reunited with his wife after a lawsuit establishes the validity of his marriage | |
| 1603 | Living in Pyrford, Surrey, at the home of his wife's cousin | Conquest of Ireland completed. Death of Elizabeth I; accession of James I (1603–25) |
| 1604– 7 | Working with Thomas Morton, one of the King's chaplains, to convert recusants to Anglicanism | |
| 1605 | | Gunpowder Plot exposed |

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| 1606 | Moves to Mitcham with his family of three children. Friendship with Mrs Herbert may date from this time | Penal legislation against recusants |
| 1607 | Morton urges Donne to take holy orders | |
| 1608 | Countess of Bedford acts as godmother to Donne's second daughter, Lucy. Tries without success to obtain secretaryship in Ireland | Milton born. Separatists emigrate to Holland |
| 1610 | Publishes <i>Pseudo-Martyr</i> , arguing that recusants are sham martyrs. Receives honorary MA from Oxford | Commons' Petition of Right and Petition of Grievances |
| 1611 | Publishes <i>The First Anniversary</i> . In November, leaves England for Amiens, Paris and Germany with Sir Robert Drury, returning in September 1612 | King James Bible published |
| 1612 | Moves to a house in Drury Lane with his family of seven children | Death of Prince Henry, the heir-apparent |
| 1613 | Seeks appointment as ambassador at Venice | |
| 1614 | Sits as MP for Taunton. Deaths of two of his children | Parliament dissolved after protesting against impositions |
| 1615 | Ordained deacon and priest at St Paul's cathedral, and appointed a royal chaplain. At the King's command, receives honorary DD from Cambridge | |

| | | |
|------|--|---|
| 1616 | Granted livings in Huntingdonshire and Kent | Death of Shakespeare |
| 1617 | Ann Donne dies after giving birth to a stillborn child | Pocohontas presented at Court |
| 1618 | | Raleigh executed |
| 1619 | Travels to Germany as chaplain with ambassadorial party: <i>A Hymn to Christ at the Author's last going into Germany</i> | Death of Queen Anne |
| 1620 | Returns to London | Voyage of the Mayflower to New England |
| 1621 | Installed as Dean of St Paul's | Andrew Marvell born |
| 1622 | Appointed JP for Kent and Bedfordshire; instituted as rector of Blunham in Bedfordshire | King restricts preaching |
| 1623 | Seriously ill in November–December. His daughter Constance marries Edward Alleyn, the actor | |
| 1642 | Publishes <i>Devotions upon Emergent Occasions</i> | |
| 1625 | Preaches first sermon to Charles I. Again falls ill. Goes to live in Chelsea to avoid the plague | Death of James I; accession of Charles I (1625–49). King marries Henrietta Maria of Spain. Recusancy laws suspended. Plague in London |
| 1629 | | Death of Bacon. Parliament impeaches Buckingham, and declares poundage and tonnage illegal |
| 1627 | Deaths of his daughter Lucy, his close friend Sir | |

Henry Goodyer, the
Countess of Bedford and the
former Mrs Magdalen
Herbert, all within six
months

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| 1628 | Death of his lifelong friend Christopher Brooke | Petition of Right becomes law. Buckingham assassinated. Bunyan born |
| 1629 | | Laudian censorship of the press. Commons passes resolution against popery and Arminianism |
| 1630 | Falls seriously ill, makes his will | Great Migration to New England begins. George Herbert rector of Bemerton |
| 1613 | Death of his mother. Delivers his last sermon at Court on 26 February. Dies on 31 March | Laud enforces religious conformity |
| 1632 | Effigy placed in St Paul's, showing him in his shroud | |
| 1633 | Unauthorised publication of his poems, with further editions in 1635 and 1639 | Laud appointed Archbishop. Death of Herbert |
| 1640 | <i>LXXX Sermons</i> published | |

1 John Donne

Donne is not usually seen as a typical Elizabethan. Many of his readers, indeed, seem unready to associate him with the period of Elizabeth, and prefer to regard him primarily as a seventeenth-century poet, ignoring Ben Jonson's opinion that Donne wrote 'all his best pieces' before he was twenty-five, and thus before the end of the sixteenth century. It is not difficult to understand why the facts should be resisted. Donne's metaphysical style, with its bare scientific allusions and its insistently dialectical manner, seems almost completely at odds with the richly evocative language and the delight in natural creation that we find in Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare. Where their poetry expands imaginatively to take in great tracts of experience, Donne works tortuously towards a single, barely accessible point: his solution of a baffling intellectual problem.

If we associate the term 'Elizabethan' with discovery and colourful adventure, with richly textured speech and a sense of man's magnificence, it may be easy to feel that Donne falls short of the aureate quality that characterizes the literature of his age. His restless intellectual probing and questioning, we may feel, belong rather to the seventeenth century: not Shakespeare but Bacon is his contemporary in spirit. It is a commonplace of literary appreciation—not necessarily one to be approved—that the scientific interests revealed in Donne's poetry show him to be a forerunner of the new age of enquiry to which Bacon was herald. But it may be too readily assumed that references to spheres, maps and compasses demonstrate Donne's concern with the new science whose outlines Bacon seems to have perceived, or indeed that they indicate a scientific interest of any kind. The poets of the 1930s who mentioned gasworks and pylons were drawing attention to objects with a certain symbolic potency, not commenting on the progress of modern technology.

Shakespeare probably represents his age more completely than any other Elizabethan, but no one man can reflect every aspect of his times. Another writer may be strikingly unlike Shakespeare in style and outlook without ceasing to be typically Elizabethan. Such is Donne's case. The respects in which his thought and expression characterize the age will be discussed in later chapters of this book. For the moment, where we are concerned mainly with the biographical facts of his life, we shall find Donne typically Elizabethan in the uncertainty which dogged him throughout his career, in private belief as in material circumstances. He was born a Catholic at a time when increasing pressures were being applied to those of his faith, whose resistance endangered the newly established Anglican Church