A Note on the Eighteenth Century's Knowledge of John Donne

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In his Critical Heritage volume on John Donne, A. J. Smith cites numerous allusions and critical assessments of the so-called metaphysical poet and divine. One of the clichés one often finds echoed is that the poetry of Donne “wasn’t familiar in the eighteenth century because most readers didn’t encounter it, couldn’t easily get hold of it even if (like Cowper) they wished to. Tonson’s edition of 1719 dropped out of sight and was hard to come by; the reprints of 1779 and 1793, very small items in the omnia of Bell and Anderson, made no impression until late in the century . . .”¹ Comparatively this may be true, but the fourth amplified edition of John Dryden’s Miscellany Poems includes a number of Donne’s poems with somewhat modernized texts drawn from the 1669 edition of his poems. Its influence in the first half of the century may well have been significant; a fifth edition appeared in 1727. It is difficult, thus, to accept the historical statement without pause when this popular collection, now relatively scarce probably because of that popularity, contains some well-remembered poems and has not previously been cited in Donne studies.

The six volumes which build upon Dryden’s original 1684 collection have the following (or slightly variant) title page: “The FIRST PART of / Miscellany Poems. / Containing Variety of New / TRANSLATIONS / OF THE / ANCIENT POETS: / Together with Several / ORIGINAL POEMS. / By the Most Eminent Hands. / Publish’d by Mr. DRYDEN. / The FOURTH EDITION. / LONDON: / Printed for JACOB TONSON at Shakespear’s / Head over-against Katharine-Street in / the Strand. M DCC XVI. /” Included are fifteen poems, all of which are assigned to Donne in the Table of Contents and along with the printed texts: “The Will,” III.328-29; “The Canonization,” IV.77-78; “A Fever,” IV.79; “Break
of Day," IV.80; "Twicknam Garden," IV.81; "Confined Love," IV.82; "Loves Alchymy," IV.82-83; "The Indifferent," IV.120-21; "The Bait," IV.121-22; "The Broken Heart," IV.122-23; "The Ecstasie," IV.123-25; "A Valediction forbidding Mourning," IV.126-27; "Love's Diet," IV.127-28; "Negative Love," V.70-71; "To M. M. H." ("Mad paper"), V.71-73. While the texts are not significant as texts, they have presence in the kind of volume which the more casual and everyday reader might peruse rather than the collected Poems on Several Occasions. Written by the Reverend John Donne, D. D. Late Dean of St. Paul's (1719), also from Tonson's press. Anthologies are much more popular with ordinary people even today than an author's collected volume of poems, and this particular anthology, by its infrequency today, must have been read to pieces. The fifth edition in 1727 helped keep at least these fifteen poems before the more popular audience and attests to the demand for these volumes. It is interesting to note that some of the items which Smith includes in the Critical Heritage volume (pp. 169-73, dated ca. 1730-1749) refer to or imitate some of the inclusions in the Miscellany: "The Bait," "Break of Day," "The Indifferent," "The Canonization," as well as others not in the volume.

There are numerous citations of references, discussions, and imitations from the first half century in the Smith collection. One he does not include is in a verse letter from Dr. John Byrom (1692-1763) to Roger Comberbach (born 1693?), "Occasion'd by the foregoing Preface and Ode":

Whereas in all poetical respect,  
This one advantage, is one great defect,  
One source of ruin to the minor clan,  
Who think verse good verse, when they words can scan:  
By this advantage they run hobling on,  
Yea men of sense sometimes, like Doctor Donne;  
With woeful proof what benefit is gain'd,  
By being less to quantity restrain'd. . . .

It is printed in A Dispute; Consisting of a Preface in Favour of Blank Verse; With an Experiment of it, in An Ode, Upon the British Country Life, by Roger Comberbach, Esq; For T. and T. Longman: London; and J. Lawton: Chester [London: n.d.], p. 9. The reference is mixed in evaluation of Donne, calling him a man
of sense, yet implying one whose verse has "not kept accent," as Ben Jonson had phrased it. Donne, of course, did not write in blank verse. Roger Comberbach of Chester was a lawyer, a supplier of important biographical information to Francis Peck for his New Memoirs of the Life and Poetical Works of Mr. John Milton (London, 1740), and an author of "Miltonicks," that is, poems in blank verse. In any case, Donne is so familiar to Byrom and Comberbach that he can be alluded to without explanation of meaning and used to serve for just what Byrom wants to remark: even the poet of poetical sensitivity can "run hobling on." Donne's verse is hardly unknown during the mid-eighteenth century despite a lack of an edition of his poetry between 1719 and 1779. There is a reputation, even if negative, during that period.

A quotation from the Preface to the 1685 edition of Rochester's Valentinian appears in John Oldmixon's Reflections on Dr. Swift's Letter to the Earl of Oxford, about the English Tongue (London, [1712]), p. 18, which original is found as No. 55 (p. 157) in Smith's collection. Smith says the author is anonymous, but Oldmixon identifies him as "Mr. Wolseley"; that is, Robert Wolsey (1649-97), a friend of Rochester's, also indicated as the author of this preface in his DNB account. It is the verse that is commented upon, and again hobbling is associated with it. We should remark another seventeenth-century reference in James Lowde's A Discourse Concerning the Nature of Man (London: Printed by T. Warren, for Walter Kettily, 1694) [Wing, L3299]. On p. 189, in Chapter VI on "Religion the best Foundation of Civil Government," Lowde quotes from Chapter 6 of Pseudo-Martyr. It was apparently republished in 1698.

No. 92 in Smith quotes Peter Whalley in his edition of The Works of Ben Jonson (London, 1756), I, xlviii, on Jonson's high regard for Donne. But it should be noted also that Whalley quotes Donne's poem from Volpone, I, 10-11 and note; references appear in Volume VI; and Jonson's Timber reprints his comments on Donne in Volume VII. The references in Volume VI include Jonson's epigram to Lucy (p. 258), Jonson's poem on Donne (p. 260 and note), the epitaph allegedly by Donne in the 1633 edition reprinted as "Renowned Spenser, lie a thought more nigh" (pp. 301-02 note), Donne's poems on Lucy, Countess of Bedford (p. 326 note), and the elegy "To make the doubt clear" (pp. 397-400 and notes).

While Donne was certainly not extensively used to exemplify
language, images, ideas, as were Shakespeare and Milton during the eighteenth century, he does turn up from time to time. In Robert Nares’s *Elements of Orthoepy: Containing a Distinct View of the Whole Analogy of the English Language* (London, 1785), two lines from *Satire I*, ll. 61-62, assigned to Donne, are quoted to illustrate the use of “antique” in the sense of “antic” (see p. 328): “What fashion’d hats, or ruffs, or suits next year, / Our giddy-headed antique youth will wear.” The 1633-54 editions give “subtile-witted antique”; 1669 gives “giddy-headed,” which is the reading of 1719, 1779, and 1795, all three of which, however, give *antick*. Two lines are also quoted and assigned to Donne as illustrative exercise (among others from Milton, Watts, Pope, etc.) for the use of compound tenses and auxiliary verbs: “And now thy alms is given, / And thy poor starveling bountifully fed” ("To Mr. T. W. ['Pregnant again'], ll. 7, 9), in Volume 1 of Peter Walkden Fogg’s *Elementa Anglicana; or, the Principles of English Grammar Displayed and Exemplified* (Stockport, 1792), p. 165. And Mrs. Hester Piozzi assigns two lines of poetry to Donne in *British Synonymy* (London, 1794), I, 351, in reference to a man’s knowing many languages. The lines—“And sure, said I, you find yourself so able, / Pity you was not druggerman at Babel”—are Alexander Pope’s rendition of *Satire IV*, ll. 63-65, except that Pope gives “Till I cry’d out, You prove yourself so able” (ll. 82-83).


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pour la poésie, des dous extraordinaires & beaucoup de savoir."

Neither derives from Izaac Walton's Life or from Smith's No. 79, an English augmented version of Pierre Bayle's dictionary, A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical (London, 1736). This version was the work of John Peter Bernard, Thomas Birch, and John Lockman. The entry on Donne in this edition was translated into French by Jacques George de Chaffepié in Nouveau Dictionnaire Historique et Critique, Pour Servir de Supplement ou de Continuation au Dictionnaire Historique et Critique de Mr. Pierre Bayle (Amsterdam et La Haye, 1750), II, 35-40. This version should be compared with the immediately preceding 1740 French edition of Bayle, which has no entry on Donne, despite the date of the English edition with its entry on Donne. The Chaffepié edition is also unnoticed by Smith, who does not specifically discuss Donne's eighteenth-century reputation on the continent. We might also note that Friedrich von Hagedorn's Poetische Werke. Dritter Theil (Hamburg, bey Johann Carl Bohn, 1757), alludes to Donne in the "Vorbericht," pp. xxiv-xxv. 

It seems clear to me from Smith's extensive references and quotations concerning Donne and his work, along with such incidental items as I have noticed here, that Donne was not so totally unfamiliar in the eighteenth century as one has been led to believe by commentary of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He was not Shakespeare, Spenser, or Milton; but he was better known, more reprinted, and more influential than George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw, the poetic Ben Jonson, and most of his Sons.

NOTES

Arch; and for Bell and Bradfute, and J. Mundell and Co., Edinburgh). The full set is in the King Library.

2The Margaret I. King Library owns copies of Donne's 1669 and 1719 Poems and Dryden's 1716 Miscellany. The National Union Catalogue lists seventeen copies of the 1719 edition (not Kentucky's) and thirteen copies of the 1716 Miscellany Poems (including Kentucky's). The 1727 reprinted Miscellany Poems is located in fifteen libraries.

3It was reissued as The Contest, perhaps in 1755 since it is reviewed in the Monthly Review 13 (August 1755): 95-99 (owned by the library). The lines quoted here also appear in the review. A Dispute is listed by NUC only at Yale University; The Contest is not entered. The British Library owns copies of both. There are eighteenth-century editions of Byrom's poems as well.

4Wing lists nine copies total, four in the United States; NUC lists six copies, three of which are included by Wing. The apparent 1698 reprint is based on a unique copy in Dr. Williams's Library, London (Wing, L3300).

5It was first published in 1752 (four copies listed in NUC), and republished also in 1755, 1759, 1766, and in Italian translations in 1758, 1768, and 1781. NUC lists copies of the 1753 edition only at Columbia University, Stanford University, and New York Public Library. I cite the M.I. King Library copy.

6The entry on Donne may be included in other editions of Moréri; I have checked only some of the numerous reprintings. The library owns the 1759 edition.

7There were various editions of Hagedorn's poems in the eighteenth century. NUC lists thirteen copies of the 1757 edition, including Kentucky's. The library also holds the 1740 French edition of Bayle, as well as the 1736 English version and the 1750 Chauffepié.