

Headnote for John Donne

By Rachel Retica

John Donne (1572-1631) had a life story that would be worth telling even if he had never become famous. He was born in London to Elizabeth Heywood, the daughter of a poet and great-niece of the Catholic martyr Sir Thomas More, and John, a well-to-do ironmonger, also Catholic; so Donne was raised in a faith that was dangerous to inhabit in a turbulent post-Reformation England. We know little about the years before he enrolled at Oxford, age twelve, with his brother Henry. In 1591, he entered the Inns of Court to pursue a degree in law, and two years after that, set sail on expeditions to Cadiz and the Azores. On his return, Donne was awarded a secretary position with the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton. He moved to the Egerton household to begin a post with the promise for more success.

But Donne fell in love. In 1601, he was married in secret to Anne More, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Lord Egerton's brother-in-law. Her family's response was damning and swift. Donne lost his post; he was imprisoned briefly; and then he and Anne moved to Mitcham, near London, where they lived in and out of poverty over the next several years. These years were difficult ones. Anne gave birth to twelve children, five of whom died, while Donne wrote beseeching letters to potential patrons, published polemical tracts, and then two Anniversary poems (the only poetry he would allow to be published in his lifetime). He was trying to support a growing family and rebuild his reputation at the same time. Finally, in 1615, he took holy orders. From there, his ascent was remarkable. He preached at court just the next year and was named dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in 1621. Sermon-goers crowded the cathedral to hear him speak. On at least one occasion they packed in so tightly that the crowding became dangerous. Donne preached until his death in 1631, when, cognizant of the illness that would soon claim his life, he delivered his own funeral sermon. He died a little over a month afterwards, remembered in elegy as "a king that rul'd, as he thought fit, / The universal monarchy of wit."

It is difficult to date with certainty when Donne wrote most of his poetry. The satires, elegies, and epigrams come from the 1590s and the Holy Sonnets from 1609-1610. With the exception of a handful of published texts, the rest of his 200-odd poems were written between those years and circulated in manuscript to friends and patrons. In all, he wrote most of his poetry before he took orders. This division has contributed to a longstanding biographical partition (first suggested by Donne himself) between Jack Donne, the clever and daring poet, and Reverend Dr. John Donne, an august and holy dean. While this is a useful way to understand his career, it is by no means the only one, nor is a binary enough to capture the life of a man who loved paradox, contradiction, and complexity as much as anyone. It might be nearer to the truth to say that the religious imagination of the reverend dean was already present in the young poet, and the roving freedom of the younger man still at work in the free-wheeling hyperbole of the sermons that echoed in St. Paul's Cathedral.

Donne's poetry mingles the sacred and the profane, the divine and the worldly, to a degree that few if any English poets can match. His love poems resound with religious imagery, while his ruminations on the divine are shot through with sex, desire, and bawdy humor. Take, for example, Satire III, which begins with a bitter voice comparing religions to women, so that adhering to one is akin to loving a "wither'd and worn strumpet," another like loving "coarse country drudges," and so on – until suddenly the poem gives way to a beautifully strong image:

On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must and about must go,
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.

Reading Donne can feel just as demanding; whatever truths are embedded in his verse resist their reader. He is famously difficult. It's hard to catch his tone as it flips between lightness and gravity, cynicism and devotion, and harder still to follow his circuitous logic as it twists and turns around complex analogies. With Donne, it can sometimes seem that the only way to know you are heading in the right direction is to feel the hill's incline – or the poem's diction -- working against you.

Donne's religion was central to his poetry and famously hard to pin down. "The first thing to remember about Donne," John Carey wrote, "is that he was a Catholic; the second, that he betrayed his Faith." Catholic and Protestant devotion wrestle in his verse, neither able to monopolize it. "The Flea," for example, plays ambiguously with the doctrine of the Eucharist and "The Relique" flirts with miracle-making. The god Donne imagined was distant, violent, and unknowable. In the Holy Sonnets, he cries out: "Batter my heart, three person'd God, for you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend; / That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me." But God never speaks in his poetry. Donne sees divinity in small things and wonder in vast ones. He's especially adept at describing the latter, which he chases with hyperbole: "the effusion of beams of glory," he wrote in a sermon, "began not to shine 6000 yeares ago, but 6000 millions of millions ago, had been 6000 millions of millions before that." He loved the Psalms above all, which could "spread themselves over all occasions." In so doing, they revealed the unity of scripture, and satisfied his "native passion for essentials," for the quintessence of things, and for the stripped-down, fundamental patterns of true religion.

Donne also drew his imagery from the busy world around him. His poetry touches on alchemy, physics, astronomy, philosophy, politics, and sea exploration. The love poems can be almost anthropological. "The Sunne Rising" conjures an image of a world of "late school boys and sour prentices"; "The Canonization" gestures to the "countries, towns, courts," to "merchant's ships"; "The Relique," to a gravedigger, a bishop, and a king. But love is set off from all this activity. In the same poems, the speaker tries to distance the lovers: "Will he not let us alone, / And thinke that there a loveing couple lies"; "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love"; "Why dost thou thus, through windows and through curtains / call on us." The lovers, left alone, make their own world: "This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere." Love makes "one little room an everywhere." They lie close to paradox: love offers them both close confines and great freedoms, the promise of self-sufficiency and that of interconnectedness. Between self and world, Donne trafficked, wondered, and explored. Later in his life, he would write the lines that have cemented into idiom: "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe... Any Mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."

The final piece of drama involving Donne is his literary reputation. At the end of his career, he was recognized by many as a skilled poet. Ben Jonson, his contemporary, called him "the first poet in the World in some things." Jonson was also one of the first to give voice to an enduring critique: that Donne's work, "for not being understood, would perish." In the years that followed, this latter prediction proved more true: his poetry fell from favor, bottoming out among the eighteenth-century readers who preferred poems with regular rhymes and rhythms. Donne's style was deemed too difficult, too loose with its meter, and too dependent on its elaborate conceits. Samuel Johnson famously accused the "metaphysical poets" – Donne chief among them – of writing poetry in which the "most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." It was not until the twentieth century that T.S. Eliot in England and the New Critics in America (among others) helped to revive Donne's legacy. Eliot praised the "telescoping of images and multiplied associations" that gave Donne's poetry its vitality. "A thought to Donne," he writes, "was an experience; it modified his sensibility." What Donne's reputation will be in the twenty-first century depends, in part, on you. Can these unique, complex, pored-over poems from the seventeenth century still modify the sensibilities of those readers, hundreds of years later, that Donne could only have dreamed of?