

LONGMAN ENGLISH SERIES

POETRY 1600 to 1660

Editor Maurice Hussey



Poetry
1600 to 1660

Selected and edited by
Maurice Hussey

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For Gregory Norris

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Foreword

This selection of seventeenth-century poetry is grounded in the 1590s, the last years of Queen Elizabeth I when patriotic exhilaration was waning. It must be stressed, however, that the dates of poems are often uncertain since writers frequently felt no urge to print and that publication in the poet's lifetime was the exception before 1660. If there was a stagnation in the court culture about 1600, the accession of James I in 1603 provided an intellectual stimulus. In his reign the increased attention paid to such writers as Donne, Jonson and Bacon, for instance, ensured a new strength that the brilliant if quirky monarch himself enjoyed. After his death in 1625, however, these philosophical strains gave way to the greater preoccupation with the visual arts characterizing the outlook of Charles I himself. This might indeed have proved the most brilliant epoch of all if it had not been built on the brink of the Great Rebellion of 1642.

The event that proved traumatic for the entire nation was the execution of Charles I in 1649 the total collapse of his cavalier supporters, among them many artists and poets, and the period we know as the Interregnum. But the arts were by no means confined to the defeated side since both Marvell and Milton demonstrated that poetry could be perfectly consistent with Puritan ideals and even be enhanced by war. These two writers appear to have studied the traditions admired by poets of the opposite side and set about the task of surpassing them on their own ground.

Milton, however, like Shakespeare, is a universal author and not adaptable to a small period anthology. Here they both assume the humble status of book-ends enclosing a group of writers of the first rank, and others, but their genius must be understood as environing the entire epoch. All the poets are arranged in two sections devoted to profane and sacred themes and within each in chronological order.

One of the surviving Jacobean places that most wholly embodies the culture of our period is the Palladian Banqueting House that Inigo Jones built for James I in Whitehall. Landowners, artists and intellectuals vied with each other for position or patronage there while outsiders criticized, often with justice, the immorality and superficiality of its courtly culture. No doubt

Jones would have gone on to develop a great deal of London if political and economic stability had permitted, but the Banqueting House is all that remains, a work of bright grace and proportion. An ironic tribute was paid it in 1649 when the Cromwellians had the ironic intelligence to erect the scaffold and execute the monarch immediately in front of it, so that one focal building could be interpreted as an emblem of the rise and fall of a monarchy.

Inigo Jones, thwarted of his dreams of town-planning, nevertheless inspired Sir Christopher Wren in his day to complete the task. At the same time, Inigo's collaborator in many Stuart entertainments, Ben Jonson, was acclaimed as the master dramatist of the century right to the end while Shakespeare suffered the indignity of revision and Donne relegation to the position of a malign influence and perverter of language. So the whirligig time brought in its changes. This collection is intended to offer examples of the poetry, minor and major, cavalier and puritan, profane and sacred, from an epoch which our own has acclaimed as never before, disinterred and resuscitated.

Although some of the items within slightly predate the starting date of 1600, the cut-off date, marked by the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, has been more precisely observed: the poem on p. 87, Marvell's return to Lord Fairfax's estate, may well be a product of the later 1660s and contemporary with the political satires he produced in those years which are much less highly esteemed by us than they were by his original audience. Only Milton among our contributory poets produced his greatest verse after the Restoration. For him that political change marked the collapse of the rule of the saints, a theme which provides an occasional subtext in *Paradise Lost*. For all writers the 1660s introduced a new age in English civilization as 1649 had done but the Stuarts were not swift to depart.

Looking back on the contents of the anthology we are tempted to ask: when was love poetry so striking again? When was the poetic expression of faith (or doubt) so finely articulated afterwards? The answer must lie in the Romantic era and the nineteenth century and not before. By that time the fusion of wit and rhetoric with strong feeling and psychological insight, the fingerprints of renaissance poetry, had receded into history and been forgotten. The poets in the present anthology stand with their technical and spiritual mastery among the greatest writers in the language.

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Profane

Saint Cupid, then! and, soldiers to the field! (Love's Labour's Lost)

The larger section of this anthology consists of texts from the profane or secular realm, the majority of them upon private love affairs but a number, too, dealing with the greatest challenge of the era, the increasing split between the monarchy and Parliament felt in every part of the Stuart kingdom.

We first consider JOHN DONNE who came into poetic eminence in the 1590s but whose reputation remained in private hands, as copies of poems passed from one to another for reading at suitable gatherings, until the posthumous publication of 1633. In his imagination the problems of human passion and sexuality, together with other psychological and moral issues, attain a special bite of immediacy and edge of fantasy that speak still with complete authenticity in our own time. His intellectual obsessions are today admittedly often puzzling since he was rarely prepared to allow humanity and the world of the senses to speak for themselves. To give stature to his deliberations, his speculative mind was whirling away in rhythms like:

If all things be in all,
As I think, since all, which were, are and shall
Be, be made of the same elements:
Each thing, each thing implies and represents.

In what we find to be not blank verse but couplets is explained one of the principal intellectual facets of metaphysical poetry: everything, if correctly viewed, is part of everything else and involves the rest of creation, while man's mind resorts to still more diverse images to explain what might have grown simpler and simpler upon close knowledge. In the interests of more exact definition, Donne sought out analogies from the learned sciences, from commerce, exploration and warfare, not because they would startle the reader but because they were precise in their terms of reference, and plausible ways to pin down the subtlety and evasiveness of irrational states that might defy definition.

In general, Donne's poetry offers a series of transitions from

the body's domain to the soul's that contemporary readers happily assimilated and to some extent imitated, but for which we lack the technique or have lost the language. He himself expressed his insights in images of intermingling, interanimation and interfusion, the penetration of one limit by another and these cultural references remained valid from roughly 1590 to 1660. Had Andrew Marvell not been working at the end of that period as the last of the metaphysical poets, Donne's style would have died with Charles I, since several poets in this anthology perished in spite of their youth by 1649 also.

Modern readers also have a difficulty in adjusting to the 'metaphysical aesthetic' because they usually carry in their minds what can be called 'adjective poetry', that in which the strain is taken principally by the epithets. However, a statistical survey of Donne's use of language demonstrates him as the laureate of the short connective word. Pay full attention to the conjunctions, he seems to have thought, give prominence to the *ifs*, *buts*, *thuses* and *therefores* and the whole poem will be locked up and complete. Reading his poetry, one often attests the truth of this and occasionally there emerges the poem — I think 'The Prohibition' (p.000) is one — where the dialectic and syntax are well controlled but the texture not completely filled out. Such imperfect passages, and there are many more, show how he worked and the preference he gave to logic over imagery, just as when an old musician lacking some of his former virtuosity still handles the keys with a command of what is to him the outstanding features of the appropriate style.

However the poetry is fleshed out with imagery, the essentials of a metaphysical poem may be expressed in some such scheme as this:

- 1 A bid for the reader's attention with a question, a command or some daring or challenging utterance.
- 2 A statement and development of images or a pattern of dialectic distinguished by its *wit*, (erudition rather than humour). If a single figure of speech dominates the poem it may be termed a *conceit*, deriving from 'concept' and not from pride, and a feature of much Elizabethan and later poetry.
- 3 A finale demanding some new resolve or returning to a former state with its procedures in some way transfigured.

The reader may test poems against the scheme.

Thomas Carew's infinitely quotable 'Elegy' on p. 56, which is both tribute and erudite parody, expressed the indebtedness of

poets of his own generation to Donne, the monarch of wit who had

opened us a mine
 Off rich and pregnant fancy, drawn a line
 Of masculine expression.

Here he intended the linguistic toughness and tension of what have been called the 'strong lines' of Donne's poetry which reappear no less in the Elegy itself. He was trying to express the virtuoso command of rhythm, the constant on and off of regularity, neither the language of small talk nor exactly iambic and regular. We ourselves approach Donne's verse also with expectations fed upon free verse, as in T.S. Eliot who so much admired him. The task as we confront that 'masculine expression' is identified by the only great critic of the nineteenth century to write upon Donne at all, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He wrote: 'in poems where the writer *thinks* and expects the reader to do so, the sense must be understood in order to ascertain the metre.' He insists that there is a metre and that the poetry in performance must be verse and not chopped-up rhymed prose. Carew had presumably heard it read aloud as it needed to go and with a subtlety and precision that poetry in performance cannot always achieve with the printed word alone.

With a smile, Carew attributed to the dead Dean both a pregnancy of fancy and a masculinity of mind. Whatever was an able-bodied young man's approach to life was in his youth Donne's (and Carew's) also. As was then customary, Donne had learned postures and conventions derived over many decades from literary authorities. That posture of adoration before the lady the Elizabethans found in Petrarch, while a cynical *machismo* that some affected could be located in Ovid's works. Poetry in the renaissance was a cosmopolitan art. One is not, therefore, being asked to accept that Donne had had to live through these states before he could enact them in poetry. He was not, as we say, 'sincere' though he was plausible and convincing in his literary psychology. A contemporary comment upon him was that he was 'not dissolute, but very neat', an assurance at least, and he himself remarked that he was most successful in those poems in which there was the least truth. What he did was to put forward as his narrators or spokesmen men in part like himself, but nobody should for a moment see in him the lotioned

slick operator of 'The Perfume' (p. 19). But the monologue is most convincing and strangely neglected.

At one extreme the literary persona is seen lying immobile all day in the Petrarchan manner as at the start of 'The Ecstasy' while at another, with a rush of passion to the head, he exclaims:

She' is all states, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.

(*'The Sun Rising'*)

From Petrarchiana he inherited the conceit of the rejected lover who must crawl away and die. Such a persona rages throughout the curse poem 'The Apparition' (p. 16), where the theme is that after a death from frustration and despair he will haunt the lady. He articulates it very completely without apparently remembering that it will be too late for her to relent. Rationally viewed, the conceit collapses; so does the quotation above about the supremacy of sexual possession. And so in poem after poem, the tension of many playlets is enacted, witty demonstrations that:

Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one.

As an undergraduate in the arts in the sixteenth century, Donne knew the artificially constructed dilemmas of the schools. Several times a week he had had to participate in oral exercises such as disputations which created various human predicaments. He had learned the forty-five illegitimate devices of logic, a monstrous number, and rich opportunities for learned irony, far outweighing the mere nineteen legitimate ones. Those who shared such education recognized exactly the appropriate tone of voice behind the verse where we may take so much of it with a uniform solemnity.

No less baffling for us is the language of abstract thought that Donne and his contemporaries drew from Aristotle and other philosophers. He himself was a pronounced dualist, one for whom man was both body and soul, or, as in his Sermon XI, he later expressed the conviction that 'the body is not the man, nor the soul is not the man, but the union of these two makes up the man.' Or, in the phrase of the critic, Christopher Ricks, Donne knew that 'body and soul are one but not one and the same.' If such ideas frequently inform his work, they acquire

symbolic form in the plays of Shakespeare. At the close of *The Tempest*, for instance, he juxtaposed the white-magician Prospero and the untamed brute Caliban as a type of frozen allegory of the spirit and the beast in man. These lines by Prospero express a complete responsibility for the beast within and do not seek to repudiate it:

This thing of darkness
I acknowledge mine.

To explain a fusion of body and soul Donne borrowed a series of spirits or messengers in the bloodstream to mould both into one:

As our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
That subtle knot, which makes us man.

('The Ecstasy')

Metaphysical poetry proper may be said to grow out of such conceits, though the term was not coined at the time, being delivered as a gibe by John Dryden later and one that has remained a confusing label. He himself presumably was only anxious that his friends who read the manuscripts understood the learned conceits and paradoxes that amused and went as far as possible into the realm of the absurd and irrational. He would have agreed with words of Ben Jonson on Donne's Satires (p. 36) that 'rare poems ask rare friends.'

The modern reader has to work harder with these precisely varied stanza forms to meet the poet and recognize the intellectual source of his personal fusion of words and music dancing together in patterns. It is hoped that the friendly reader new to Donne will be richly rewarded, for there is much truth in an observation from our own day by W.H. Auden:

Art if it doesn't stop there, at least ends
Whether aesthetics like the thought or not
In an attempt to entertain our friends.

POETRY AFTER SUPPER

Inevitably much representative poetry of our period offers an invitation into private lives; a body of it nevertheless seeks to

interpret the public issues that were of most moment to the poetic community. These attempts were sometimes heroic and sometimes pathetic when the battles of Cupid were overtaken by the battles of Mars, but many of the poets took comfort and strength from a common mentor, BEN JONSON, dramatist, poet and literary dictator. Lest it be thought that the greatest success in poetry was the prerogative of those with a university education, then Jonson, like his colleague Shakespeare, contrived superbly without it. He was an egregiously sociable man who set up what resemble post-graduate seminars in poetry in various London taverns where he propounded his own view of classical literature and the morality of poetry for those whom he called the Sons of Ben.

The social intercourse in which poetry mingled with the wine in Jonson's school is described in 'Inviting a Friend to Supper' (p. 26) a paradigm of such occasions. With some truth Lady Macbeth remarks at her ill-fated banquet:

to feed were best at home;
From thence, the sauce to meat is ceremony;
Meeting were bare without it.

(*Macbeth*, III. iv)

An invitation to Jonson's dinners secured admission to a ceremony of food and drink garnished with conversation upon aesthetics, politics and ethics. Among the poets included at different times were Herrick, Suckling, Carew, William Drummond, Sidney Godolphin, Thomas Randolph and a dozen more. These were called the Cavaliers in the 1640s, the gentlemen who wrote with ease and admired technical neatness, urbanity, and what was called 'perspicuity' or plainness, which could be set over against the strength, the reliance upon metaphor and the various mannerisms that characterize the work of the whole-hearted metaphysicals. It was not, in fact, a decision to opt for a cavalier style or a metaphysical one because many of the poets of the 1630s and 1640s wrote verse that can be identified with both schools of thought.

The Jonsonian school corresponds more nearly than the Donnean (to the extent that it ever existed) to the historical idea of the renaissance. These writers favoured poetic genres like the ode, elegy, verse letter, epigram and epithalamium, for all of which there was ample classical precedent and all of which were

practised by Jonson himself. In the revival of classical models lies one of the characteristics of the English literary renaissance. These writers were, to a man, royalists and attempted to celebrate the traditions of English society in extended verse forms. They composed poems on the order of nature and the culture of the country in which the salient features of history and hierarchy were highlighted so as to show what it was like to live in England in their day and to put it on record.

The genre that has been most often cited in recent years as especially royalist is the country-house poem in which the landscape contains the work of both nature and of art. The first of these, and considerably the finest, is Jonson's 'To Penshurst'. To study it is to realize that the poet has structured his tribute with great care. It is not as if it were a photograph of scenes from the outer woody region, on into the orchards and so to the hall for supper. Everything in it is weighed against classical precedent or contemporary symbolic value which, towards the end, places the royal seal of approval on the entire Penshurst estate in Kent by the visit of James I and the Prince of Wales. It becomes a perfect microcosm of society of about the year 1612, thirty years before the war and without any inkling that the good society visible there would ever be threatened.

Other poets followed suit: THOMAS CAREW at Saxham and at Wrest Park; ROBERT HERRICK in his Devon village and on the Pemberton estate in Northamptonshire; later John Dryden explained in a kind of verse letter his visit to his kinsman, John Driden of Chesterton; to his regret Alexander Pope spent an unprofitable day on the estate of the landowner he called Timon. These later poems all depend upon the model set up at Penshurst, changing with the fortunes of the country as a whole in the portions of the hierarchy that they present for admiration.

A genre with a longer reach into the future and allied to the country-house pastoral is the landscape poem, whose greatest example in our period is 'Cooper's Hill' by SIR JOHN DENHAM. It was published in 1642 on the very brink of the war and the public events of that year colour his presentation of the view of several counties. These include a glance at Windsor Castle and Runnymede, the scene of the signing of Magna Carta, places steeped in royalist significance, and a tribute to the River Thames as an artery of English life and a symbol of its economic strength. The poem became a classic immediately and was frequently reprinted. Its Jonsonian qualities of evenness, fluency,

and clarity commended it to a century of readers and imitators and it emerges as a forerunner of a more distant school of landscape poetry by Wordsworth and the Romantics. It deserves, both for its intrinsic qualities and its power to inspire other writers, to be far less neglected than it has now become. The passage on the Thames (p. 74) is about one sixth of the whole poem.

THE ROYALISTS IN ECLIPSE

The failure of Charles I before the forces of Parliament might have been foreseen from the time of the Bishop's Wars in Scotland in 1639, to which Carew refers in his letter to 'G.N.' (p. 62). One wonders whether Jonson who died in 1637 had had any inkling of what was to come. Poems about the war itself are few and the songs of the actual campaigning are not included here. What we can trace in poetry is the effect of the execution of Charles I and of living in the Interregnum between 1649 and 1660. A supertime poem like RICHARD LOVELACE'S 'The Grasshopper' (p. 75) expresses the weariness of life for the defeated Cavaliers and HENRY VAUGHAN'S 'The World' (p. 132) depicts the misery of living in a Puritan republic.

Inevitably, the Puritans would inherit whatever they pleased in poetic genre as well as religious and public ceremony. We turn from the defeated royalists to the two Puritan poets who dominate, ANDREW MARVELL and JOHN MILTON. In 'Bermudas' (p. 82), Marvell created a kind of colonial estate poem with the good life symbolized in an exquisite series of images. He realized evidently that the essence of the genre was that it was communal and not private experience. Accordingly he has his Puritans arriving by boat uninvited and sharing in a hymn of praise to all they see. Milton, the major poetic force among the Cromwellians, might have been lost to that ideology if we judge from the work he produced in his own royalist days. He wrote, for different members of the family of the Earl of Bridgewater, two masques, *Arcades* and *Comus*. In the latter performance after supper he dramatized the dangers for the children of the family in the wilder woods of the estate at Ludlow on the borders of Wales celebrating at the same time the therapeutic power of family love in their education as young royalist nobles.

Both Marvell and Milton pulled away from the political meaning of these poetic forms in later years. Marvell's