



*The Early Works of John Donne*



Select poems by John Donne  
with Introduction and Notes by Dana England





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*INTRODUCTION*  
*John Donne, Metaphysical Poet*

This collection of poems by John Donne (1572-1631) contains his earlier works, before his shift into highly religious poetry as a man of the church. A highly literary poet, Donne fits within the category of the “metaphysical” poets: men and women that used conceits of philosophy and science to explore commonplace topics such as love and friendship. A great majority of Donne’s contemporaries and predecessors used tired Petrarchan conceits of love and desire: if a man wanted a women, he wrote a poem praising her beauty and comparing her likeness to that of a goddess. Donne was one of the first to break this mold, using such strange imagery as a household pest which represents love in “The Flea” to the intense, otherworldly bond of the poetic voice to his beloved in “A Valedictorian Forbidding Mourning.”

Donne was highly skilled. Though he wrote about love and longing just as his contemporaries did, he deeply varied both form and content. Gone was the exhausted Petrarchan sonnet form; even if Donne did employ the use of this specific poetic form, he did so either while varying the representation of his topic – such as love – or offering commentary on the literary climate of the day. “Air and Angels,” for example, can easily be broken down into two fourteen-line stanzas, or the rough form of the Petrarchan sonnet. However, Donne is not trying to woo a woman





through empty praise, but rather comparing his lady's love to the purity of angels (to which, of course, it pales in comparison).

Donne's work was both highly literary and monumentally passionate. In his younger years, Donne – or at least his poetic voice – was fixated on love and lust. Later in life, once he began working for the church, Donne's poetry shifted almost wholly to the subject of religion, but he retains the same vigor seen in the following selection of poems.

The aim of Literature is to constantly change, morph, and revolutionize what we call “art.” Donne succeeded in his task time and time again, and his body of poems is still highly-respected and studied to this day. Many seem far more modern than they truly are, and this kind of striking difference from his contemporaries is what will keep him in the Western literary canon for ages to come.

The following selection of poems only represents a smattering of Donne's early works in no particular order. Notes are provided for the sake of clarity and understanding.





THE FLEA

MARK<sup>1</sup> but this flea, and mark in this,  
How little that which thou deniest me is;  
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.  
Thou know'st that this cannot be said 5  
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;  
    Ye this enjoys before it woo,  
    And pamper'd<sup>2</sup> swells with one blood made of two;  
    And this, alas! is more than we would do.

O stay, three lives in one flea spare, 10  
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.  
This flea is you and I, and this  
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.  
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,  
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.  
    Though use make you apt to kill me,  
    Let not that self-murder added be,  
    And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

---

<sup>1</sup> identify  
<sup>2</sup> over-indulged





Cruel and sudden, hast thou since  
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?  
Wherein could this flea guilty be,  
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?  
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou  
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.

'Tis true; then learn how false fears be;  
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,  
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.





WOMAN'S CONSTANCY

NOW thou has loved me one whole day,  
Tomorrow when thou leavest, what wilt thou say?  
Wilt thou then antedate<sup>3</sup> some new-made vow?

Or say that now

We are not just those persons which we were?  
Or that oaths made in reverential fear  
Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear<sup>4</sup>?  
Or, as true deaths true marriages untie,  
So lovers' contracts, images of those,  
Bind but till sleep, death's image, them unloose? 10

Or, your own end to justify,  
For having purposed change and falsehood, you  
Can have no way but falsehood to be true?  
Vain lunatic, against these 'scapes I could  
Dispute, and conquer, if I would;  
Which I abstain to do,  
For by tomorrow I may think so too.

---

<sup>3</sup> assign to an earlier date

<sup>4</sup> to deny an oath





❧ *AIR AND ANGELS* ❧

TWICE or thrice had I loved thee,  
    Before I knew thy face or name;  
    So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame,  
Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be.  
    Still, when, to where thou wert, I came, 5  
Some lovely glorious nothing did I see.  
    But since my soul, whose child love is,  
Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,  
    More subtle than the parent is  
Love must not be, but take a body too; 10  
    And therefore what thou wert, and who,  
        I bid love ask, and now  
That I assume thy body, I allow,  
And fix itself in thy lips, eyes, and brow.







~ A VALEDICTORIAN FORBIDDING MOURNING ~

AS virtuous men pass mildly away,  
And whisper to their souls to go,  
Whilst some of their sad friends to say,  
“Now his breath goes,” and some say, “No.”

So let us melt, and make no noise, 5  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
‘Twere profanation<sup>9</sup> of our joys  
To tell the laity<sup>10</sup> our love.

Moving of th’ earth brings harms and fears;  
Men reckon what it did, and meant; 10  
But trepidation of the spheres,  
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary<sup>11</sup> lovers’ love  
--- Whose soul is sense --- cannot admit  
Of absence, ‘cause it doth remove 15  
The thing which elemented it.

---

<sup>9</sup> degradation

<sup>10</sup> laymen/commonpeople

<sup>11</sup> beneath the moon (metaphysical conceit)





But we by a love so far refined,  
That ourselves know not what it is,  
Inter-assured of the mind,  
Care less eyes, lips and hands to miss. 20

Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat<sup>12</sup>.

If they be two, they are two so 25  
As stiff twin compasses are two;  
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,  
Yet, when the other far doth roam, 30  
It leans, and hearkens after it,  
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,  
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;  
Thy firmness makes my circle just, 35  
And makes me end where I begun.

---

<sup>12</sup> This is a reference to the gold leafing process. A small amount of gold could be flattened to cover a huge space.





~ THE RELIC ~

WHEN my grave is broke up again  
Some second guest to entertain,  
---For graves have learn'd that woman-head,  
To be more than one a bed---

    And he that digs it, spies           5  
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,  
    Will not he let us alone,  
And think that there a loving couple lies,  
Who thought that this device might be some way  
To make their souls at the last busy day           10  
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

    If this fall in a time, or land,  
    Where mass-devotion doth command,  
    Then he that digs us up will bring  
    Us to the bishop or the king,           15  
    To make us relics; then  
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I  
    A something else thereby;





All women shall adore us, and some men.  
And, since at such time miracles are sought,       20  
I would have that age by this paper taught  
What miracles we harmless lovers wrought.

First we loved well and faithfully,  
Yet knew not what we loved, nor why;  
Difference of sex we never knew,       25  
No more than guardian angels do;  
                  Coming and going we  
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;  
                  Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals,  
Which nature, injured by late law, sets free.       30  
These miracles we did; but now alas I  
All measure, and all language, I should pass,  
Should I tell what a miracle she was.





~ THE APPARITION ~

WHEN by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead,  
And that thou think'st thee free  
From all solicitation from me,  
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,  
And thee, feign'd vestal, in worse arms shall see: 5  
Then that sick taper will begin to wink,  
And he, whose thou art then, being tired before,  
Will, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think  
    Thou call'st for more,  
And, in false sleep, will from thee shrink: 10  
And then, poor aspen<sup>13</sup> wretch, neglected thou  
Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lie  
    A verier<sup>14</sup> ghost than I.  
What I will say, I will not tell thee now,  
Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent, 15  
I'd rather thou shouldst painfully repent,  
Than by my threatenings rest still innocent.

---

<sup>13</sup> quaking, shaking

<sup>14</sup> more properly named





❧ *THE TRIPLE FOOL* ❧

I AM two fools, I know,  
For loving, and for saying so  
    In whining poetry;  
But where's that wise man, that would not be I,  
    If she would not deny?           5  
Then as th' earth's inward narrow crooked lanes  
    Do purge sea water's fretful<sup>15</sup> salt away,  
I thought, if I could draw my pains  
    Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay<sup>16</sup>  
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,       10  
For he tames it, that fetters<sup>17</sup> in the verse.

---

<sup>15</sup> corrosive

<sup>16</sup> lay aside

<sup>17</sup> confines





But when I have done so,  
Some man, his art and voice to show,  
Doth set and sing my pain;  
And, by delighting many, frees again 15  
Grief, which verse did restrain.  
To love and grief tribute of verse belongs,  
But not of such as pleases when 'tis read.  
Both are increased by such songs,  
For both their triumphs so are published, 20  
And I, which was two fools, do so grow three.  
Who are a little wise, the best fools be.





THE GOOD-MORROW

I WONDER, by my troth,<sup>18</sup> what thou and I  
Did, till we loved? were we not wean'd till then?  
But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?  
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?  
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be;           5  
If ever any beauty I did see,  
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,  
Which watch not one another out of fear;  
For love all love of other sights controls,           10  
And makes one little room an everywhere.  
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone;  
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown;  
Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,           15  
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;  
Where can we find two better hemispheres  
Without sharp north, without declining west?  
Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally;  
If our two loves be one, or thou and I           20  
Love so alike that none can slacken, none can die.

---

<sup>18</sup> faithfulness





≈ **FURTHER READING** ≈

All texts in this microedition are directly sourced from *Poems of John Donne*, edited by Edmund Kerchever Chambers and published by C. Scribner's Sons (1986, New York). Definitions from Oxford English Dictionary: Online Edition (2012).

