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## Review of Lara Crowley, *Manuscript Matters: Reading John Donne's Poetry and Prose in Early Modern England*

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Manuscript Matters: Reading John Donne's Poetry and Prose in Early Modern England.* Lara M. Crowley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. vii+255.

Early modern readers loved John Donne: some five thousand copies of his individual works survive in contemporary manuscripts, making him probably the most popular poet of the era—at least as judged by the number of people who took the time to copy down his works. The resulting variants have proven both a scholarly challenge and a treasure trove. Editors of Donne's works have long grappled with these many manuscript witnesses, and over the past two or three decades they have grown more central to the work of the average scholar as well. But although the literary critic who attempts to make an argument about a Donne poem without acknowledging its variants may do so at her peril, it remains common to speak about a given work's manuscript instantiations without attention to their surrounding context. In *Manuscript Matters: Reading John Donne's Poetry and Prose in Early Modern England*, Lara Crowley focuses on that context, demonstrating the kind of analysis that close attention to manuscript compilations opens up.

Through her examination of several carefully assembled literary manuscripts, Crowley makes a compelling case that such compilations provide a rare window onto how Donne's contemporaries read him. Because early modern readers rarely left interpretative commentary on secular literary texts (4–5), present-day scholars have often been left to guess or speculate about how a given work was received. We know that Donne was popular, and that some works appear to have been more popular than others—but why? And what did those works mean to their readers and collectors? Some literary manuscripts offer few clues, their contents assembled seemingly at random. But others show principals of selection and organization that

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reveal how their collectors and scribes understood Donne's poetry and prose. Building on pioneering work by Arthur F. Marotti and more recent studies by Joshua Eckhardt and Daniel Starza Smith,<sup>1</sup> Crowley examines some of Donne's most puzzling texts within the larger context of the manuscripts in which they appear. In doing so, she proves that manuscript compilations are a form of literary criticism in their own right (5–6).

After an introductory chapter, the book consists of four case studies that each consider a single Donne work (or a handful of similar works) within a single manuscript. First is *Metempsychosis*, one of Donne's longest and most confusing poems; it has been described, variously, as an epic, a mock epic, and a satire, but its exact satirical targets are unclear. Next, Crowley examines the prose paradoxes and problems, which more recent centuries have tended to dismiss as juvenilia but which were extremely popular among Donne's contemporaries. Her fourth chapter focuses on a translation of Psalm 137 that has long been relegated by Donne editors to his "dubia" (and usually assigned to Francis Davison, who, unlike Donne, was known for his psalm translations). Finally, Crowley considers love lyrics of Donne that appear, heavily altered, in a manuscript that belonged to Margaret Bellasis. In each of these chapters, Crowley takes the conventional scholarly wisdom about Donne's texts and tests that wisdom against the manuscript evidence. Sometimes her consideration of a given work and its manuscript leads her to endorse the interpretations of prior critics and sometimes to overturn them—most dramatically in her chapter on Psalm 137, where Crowley all but demolishes the case that has been made against Donne's authorship. Perhaps inevitably, the debunking mode provides a more satisfying sense of payoff than chapters where Crowley concludes that the manuscript evidence largely supports prior hypotheses. But all four case studies have their pleasures, and all illustrate the value of her method.

This book's primary audience will be Donne scholars; Crowley's impeccable archival work and her patient guidance through the thickets are best appreciated by those who know the lay of the land, and the more expert a reader is in Donne, the more riches he is likely to find. A second potential audience may be scholars of Renaissance literature who work on Donne occasionally or not at all and who have limited experience analyzing early modern literary manuscripts. For this latter group, Crowley's introductory chapter helpfully lays out a practical approach to using manuscripts as a form of reception criticism, including which textual and material features

1. See Arthur F. Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Joshua Eckhardt, *Manuscript Verse Collectors and the Politics of Anti-courtly Love Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2009); and Daniel Starza Smith, *John Donne and the Conway Papers: Patronage and Manuscript Circulation in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

to attend to and giving advice about how to identify the richest manuscript miscellanies for the purposes of literary analysis. This audience is likely to have less background for the issues and debates that animate the subsequent chapters, but each chapter provides a master class in how manuscripts shape meaning. For less specialized readers, Crowley's final chapter, which focuses on Donne's more familiar love lyrics (and one copyist's eccentric rewritings of those poems) will be most rewarding; indeed, I could see opportunities for translating some of its material into the undergraduate classroom.

Crowley's description of her project as recovering the literary criticism of Donne's earliest readers is a powerful formulation, sure to appeal to historicists and formalists alike. I would have preferred to see somewhat bolder claims—both within the individual chapters and as a structure for the book as a whole—but much of the author's modesty seems intentional. A scrupulous scholar who declines to get ahead of her evidence, Crowley also seems to wish to create space for the work of future critics, allowing them to build on her work rather than foreclosing interpretation. Donne scholars will be doing so for years to come.

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