

**THE LOVE POEMS OF
JOHN DONNE,
SELECTED AND EDITED BY
CHARLES ELIOT NORTON**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649445516

The Love Poems of John Donne, Selected and Edited by Charles Eliot Norton by John Donne & Charles Eliot Norton

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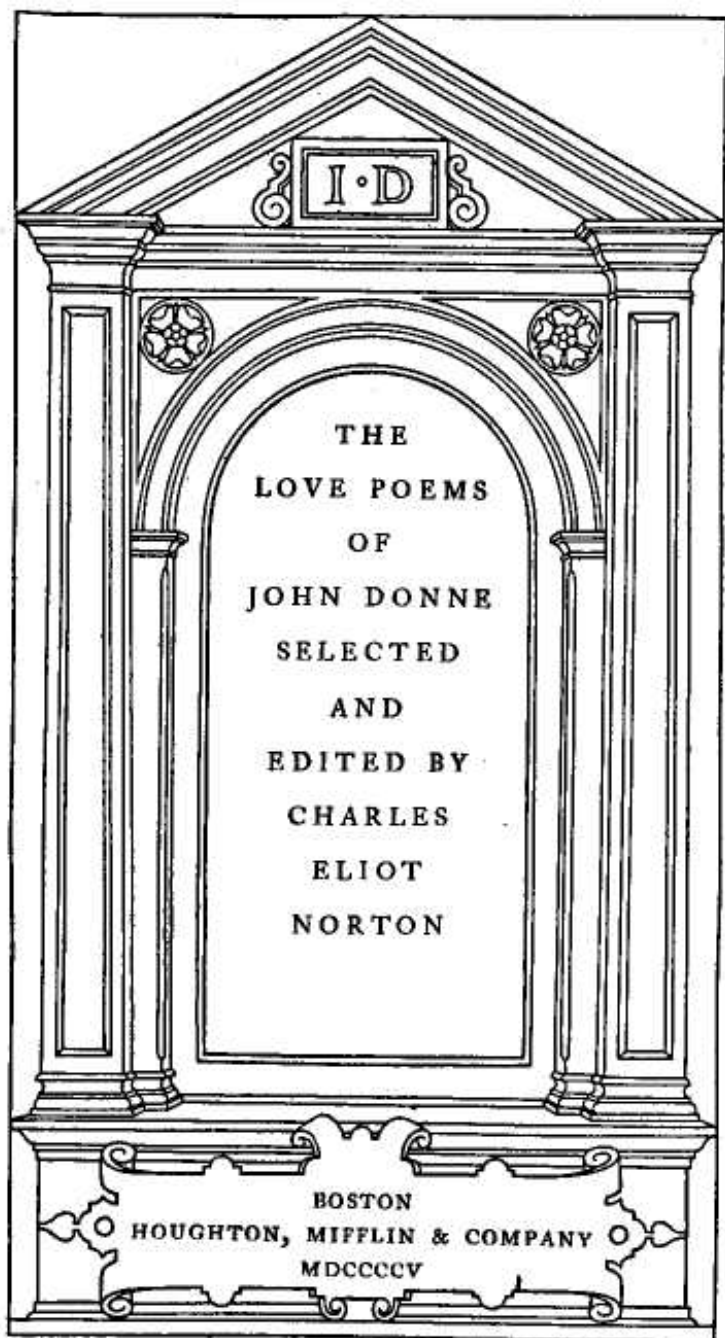
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JOHN DONNE & CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

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PREFACE

 HIS little volume contains all of Donne's Love Poems, save such as offend by a license of speech more pardonable at the time when they were written than it is to-day, and one or two of inferior worth. They were products of youth, and Walton in his incomparable narrative of Donne's life declares that, 'in his penitential years, viewing some of those pieces that had been loosely (God knows, too loosely) scattered in his youth, he wished they had been abortive or so short lived that his own eyes had witnessed their funerals.' It is, then, doing no wrong to the poet to exclude from these pages poems the existence of which he regretted, and it is doing a service to lovers of poetry to present to them those others which justify Ben Jonson's saying to Drummond of Hawthornden that 'he esteemed Donne the first poet in the world for some things.'

It was not till two years after Donne's death

Some of the poems are omitted.

that a collection of his poems was published. Many of them had had a wide circulation in manuscript, but only a few of his occasional pieces had been printed during his lifetime, and when in 1633 the first edition of his poems appeared, they received no proper editing but were thrown out to the public, shuffled together without regard to chronological order, and only partially grouped according to their respective subjects. It would have been well for Donne's fame, and fortunate for the lovers of his poetry, had he himself overseen its publication, for much of it required the revision which only the author could give.

But Donne never made poetry his profession, and for the greater part of his life he was far more scholar and preacher than poet. His nature was extraordinarily complex. Heaven and Earth contended in it with a force that made his life a succession of alternating exaltation and depression, loftiness and baseness, rapture and despair. His work, whether in prose or verse, is the expression of a powerful intelligence, a passionate temperament and a vivid imagination irregularly subject to the check of a keen, practical under-

standing. As Jonson could justly hold him for some things the first poet in the world, so Dryden, with equal justice, could speak of him as 'the greatest wit, though not the greatest poet of our nation.'

The reader who has been unacquainted with Donne's poetry will be struck by the difference of the poems in this volume from the common love poetry of his sonneteering contemporaries. They show an individuality of sentiment, no less than of expression, which distinguishes them sharply from other poetry of the class to which they belong. Donne is essentially English, — a characteristically Elizabethan Englishman. There is no soft familiar Italian echo in his verse. He has often, indeed, been criticised for the harshness of his versification, and Ben Jonson (to cite another of his sayings concerning the poet) went so far as to assert that he 'deserved hanging for not keeping of accent.' His sins in this respect are frequent, but are committed more often in his other poems than in his love verse, and some of the faults of rhythm attributed to him are due to the reader rather than to the poet. He employs slurs and elisions to a degree that sometimes makes

a faultless verse seem rough and difficult to a reader who may lie open to the charge which Holophernes brings against Sir Nathaniel in regard to his reading of Biron's sonnet,—‘ You find not the apostrophes, and so miss the accent.’ Donne sometimes moulded his verse more by the sense than by the sound, and used a license in versification strange to less eager and impassioned poets, and there is truth in the saying of Coleridge that ‘ to read Dryden, Pope, etc., you need only count syllables, but to read Donne you must measure time, and discover the time of each word by the sense of passion.’

In this little collection I have attempted to arrange the poems in a more natural order than that in which they have hitherto appeared. They fall for the most part into two divisions, the first being of those written when one mistress after another enthralled the youthful poet's susceptible fancy in a transient bondage, the second of those when his affections were fixed and his heart devoted to the woman who became his wife. Two or three poems lie outside either division. I have added a few notes at the end of the volume.

The text usually follows that of the edition of Mr. Chambers in the so-called Muses' Library, London, 1895, with which the text of the edition issued by the Grolier Club, also in 1895, closely corresponds. I have drawn a few improved readings from two manuscripts in my possession, both of earlier date than the first edition of the poems.

CHARLES ELIOT NORTON.

May, 1905.