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A *Novel* Donne

R. V. Young

John Stubbs, *Donne: The Reformed Soul*, New York and London: Viking/Penguin Books, 2006. xxvi + 565 pp.

In *Satyre IV* Donne's persona finds himself besieged by a dangerously *knowing* fellow:

> More then ten Hollensheads, or Halls, or Stowes,
> Of triviall houshold trash, he knowes; He knowes
> When the Queene frown'd, or smil'd, and he knowes what
> A subtle States-man may gather of that;
> He knows who loves; whom; and who by poyson
> Hasts to an Offices reversion;
> He knows who'hath sold his land, and now doth beg
> A licence, old iron, bootes, shooes, and egge-
> shels to transport. . . .
>
> (97–105)[1]

The poem never actually reveals the identity of this somewhat sinister personage: is he a disguised Jesuit missionary or a pursuivant disguised as a disguised Jesuit—or just an affected nuisance? This new biography of Donne is not unlike the pertinacious character conjured up by the poet. It *knows* a great deal—but much of it is "triviall houshold trash," much more is mere conjecture, and some is simply wrong. And like Donne's persona, the reader may well wonder where the display of knowledge and guess-work is going. The figure who accosts Donne's speaker seems

[1] *Satyre IV*, in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 29. All citations of Donne's poems are to this edition.

risibly bizarre, but he may be dangerous: his intentions ambiguous. Analogously, the intended audience of this new Donne biography is a mystery.

It is difficult to see how such a book will appeal to the "general reader" (an endangered species with no Federal protection). With nearly 500 pages of text followed by another 50 pages of notes and more than seven more pages of "Further Reading," this is not a book to tuck under one's arm while going through airport security. At about two-thirds the length, David Edwards's *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit* (2001) seems a more inviting companion for the general reader. On the other hand, Stubbs's book offers little for scholars in the way of new material. The actual facts about Donne's life presented in this biography have been generally available since the publication of R. C. Bald's *John Donne: A Life* (1970), and, although the often sardonic tone may remind some readers of John Carey's *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (1981), Stubbs provides nothing comparable to Carey's relentless revisionist thesis that reduces Donne's life to apostasy explained by ambition.

Stubbs's distinctive thesis might be called a "Protestant" interpretation of Donne, but what is really on offer is less Protestantism than vulgar anti-Catholicism. The "Introduction" begins with an anecdote from John Stow about a brawl between two priests in a London parish church in 1532. This incident is invoked to explain how the Reformation was the result of popular discontent with a scandalous and corrupt clergy and, presumably, to justify Donne's renunciation of the Catholic Church, which Carey designates "apostasy." Nothing is done, however, to link the poet's religious opinions to a minor scuffle that occurred forty years before his birth. A perusal of Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) ought to be sufficient to disabuse anyone of a simplistic account of the English Reformation as a popular uprising, but Stubbs seems not to be a careful reader. He cites Duffy once after delivering the following assessment of the teaching of "the old Roman Church":

> . . . all the trusting believer needed to do, to reach heaven, was to attend services, receive the sacraments, observe holy days, feast days and times of abstinence. . . . The Church offered a complete package. For parishioners merely to witness the priest blessing the communion bread and wine was enough to

> infuse them with the real presence of Christ's body and blood. You were close to God, and you could ask your favourite saint—one of literally hundreds—to put in a good word for you. Catholicism before the Reformation was, as Eamon Duffy has shown, a community religion. . . .
>
> (p. 266)

So much for the Faith that inspired St. Francis and St. Thomas Aquinas; for which Donne's ancestor, Sir Thomas More, and his brother, Henry, died. So much for the painstaking, subtle scholarship of Eamon Duffy.

In fact, Stubbs has so much disdain for Catholic Recusants that he has difficulty identifying them correctly. Sir Thomas More—Donne thought of him, Stubbs remarks with evident disapproval, "as a man of most tender and delicate conscience" (p. 70) rather than as "a genocidal zealot" (p. 71)—is called the poet's great-great-grandfather rather than his great-great-grand uncle. Misreading one of his most important scholarly sources, Louis Knafla's essay "Mr. Secretary Donne: The Years with Sir Thomas Egerton" (in *John Donne's Professional Lives*, 2003), Stubbs invents a "Thomas" Campion where Knafla refers to the martyr Edmund Campion (p. 91). Slips like these make one reluctant to trust wholeheartedly Stubbs's statements of fact, especially since they are so often bound up with what is plainly conjecture, some of which is, to be sure, impressively vivid.

It is indeed this biographer's gift for vivid description that is both the most engaging aspect of his work and potentially the most misleading. Here is Bald's comment on the fact that Donne's mother's sister-in-law and her husband owned an inn in Oxford when the poet and his brother were very young students at the University: "Donne and his brother, however, were more fortunate than most of their fellow undergraduates in having relatives living in Oxford, and no doubt they visited the Blue Boar Inn from time to time to see the members of the Dawson family."[2] Here, by way of contrast, is Stubbs: "In the little network of alleys running behind the Blue Boar, shady cobbled passages on which it is still easy to turn an ankle after closing time, in the big yard out the back, on the steep twisting staircases; or in the tavern itself, one of those deep, deep pubs, stretching a long way inwards, John and Henry had some of their relatively few chances for play" (p. 8). If the Blue Boar had not been

[2] *John Donne: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 43–44.

torn down in 1893, one might conjecture that Stubbs himself had twisted an ankle in one of the "shady cobbled passages . . . after closing time" as an Oxford undergraduate. Such a surmise about the biographer would have as much basis in fact as his surmises about the furtive recreations of the play-deprived Donne brothers. One might consider such speculation harmless decoration, but it becomes more mischievous when Stubbs creates an image of a boorish, pompous, self-deluded Sir George More with the evident intent of making him fit the portrait of the unpleasant father in "The Perfume." There is really no evidence that Donne's reluctant father-in-law was regarded by everyone as a graceless bore, but it fits nicely with Stubbs's tacit assumption that the poems are all in some measure autobiographical, even confessional.

It is his treatment of the poetry that finally sinks Stubbs's biographical enterprise. Donne is important enough to be the subject of lengthy scholarly biographies only because of the power of his unique and compelling poetry and—to a considerably lesser extent—of his religious prose. One can forgive a good deal of historical error and crude prejudice on the part of a scholar who illuminates Donne's writing and helps us to grasp its significance and respond to its energy. Regrettably, Stubbs has it just backwards: the poetry is routinely pressed into service for the construction of the life, as if it were so much biographical building material. The very first chapter begins with an elaborate prose reconstruction of the scene conjured up by "The Perfume." Although Stubbs concedes in passing that "it might all be made up," he spends more than a page fleshing out the "lusty adventure" as if it were drawn directly from the poet's life (p. 3). Similarly, the elegy "Going to Bed" is sufficient to establish with no qualification that he was "a seasoned Lothario" (p. 26).

Moreover, Stubbs is as careless a reader of poetry as he is of secondary sources. With some justification he treats "The Storme" and "The Calme" as expressions of Donne's actual experience of the Island Expedition of 1597, but he misreads the latter in order to bolster a peculiar conception of Donne's sense of alienation among the other adventurers drinking and joking at the Pope's Head Tavern in Plymouth:

> That was all well and good if one got the jokes and felt the fervour; but Donne didn't, quite. He couldn't, not yet. The poems he wrote during the 1597 campaign preserve a fine but

> definite and calculated division between the homeland—'England, to whom we owe, what we be, and have'—and the powers running it, 'a rotten state'.
>
> (p. 72)

No reasonable interpretation would take the term "state" in the second quotation, derived from "The Calme," as a reference to the government. The poetic persona is explaining the possible motivations for embarking on the expedition and subjecting oneself to horrors such as the dead calm the poem describes:

> Whether a rotten state, and hope of gaine,
> Or, to disuse mee from the queasie paine
> Of being belov'd, and loving, or the thirst
> Of honour, or faire death, out pusht mee first,
> I lose my end. . . .
>
> (40–44)

Obviously "state" here means the speaker's "circumstances" or "situation," much as it does in *Satyre II*, where the "state" of poets is said to be "poore, disarm'd, like Papists, not worth hate" (9–10; see also "state" in line 2). Stubbs twists the meaning of the line in order to justify a preconceived biographical premise, and this is his usual procedure throughout: the poetry is continually put in harness to pull the narrative of the poet's life.

It is remarkable that a book purporting to unveil Donne's most intimate thoughts and recount hidden events is so careless about actual details of all kinds. Stubbs accepts that the verse epistle beginning "See Sir, how as the Suns hot Masculine flame" was written to the Earl of Dorsett to introduce a set of holy sonnets, apparently without an inkling that American textual scholarship has decisively discredited this notion. He describes the Synod of Dort as "an ecclesiastical conference that had been called to prevent war breaking out in the Low Countries" (p. 349), an assessment that, while not exactly *wrong*, rather misses the point and may prove misleading to an unwary reader. Stubbs is so intent on making the poet as virulently anti-Catholic as his biographer that he is at times oblivious to the force of passages that he selects as evidence. He quotes a 1622 sermon in which Donne is upbraiding the Catholic clergy for being "within Rule of no temporall Law" in order to show that Donne "still

had brutal words for the personal morality of Papist priests," although Donne expressly says in very same passage, "I speake not of the viciousnesse of their life, I am no Judge of that, I know not that" (p. 386).[3] This is an odd illustration of an attack on "personal morality."

The dust cover of *Donne: The Reformed Soul* suggests that this biography started out as John Stubbs's doctoral dissertation. He may well have been more suited to a creative writing program. With a very little adjustment this book could be turned into an historical thriller about how the young John Donne escapes the clutches of the "genocidal zealots" associated with Popery. In this way the dreary business of facts—and the difficulty of determining them—could give way to the pleasures of fiction. I am even willing to offer a title: *The Bellarmine Conspiracy* or, better still, *The Recusant Code*. Does anyone fancy Tom Hanks as Jack Donne?

North Carolina State University

[3]Stubbs quotes the text of the sermon from *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 4:198.