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"a part of the *maine*": The Interior Life of John Donne

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Andrew Hadfield, *John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion*. London: Reaktion Books, 2021. 246 pp.

"I had never thought of writing a biography before," Andrew Hadfield confesses in the preface to his *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012), where he admits that he was so exhausted by the effort that he "will almost certainly not write one again." Fortunately for Donne studies, Hadfield has recovered from that herculean labor and undertaken another life, if on a radically smaller scale. His *John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion*—a volume in the Renaissance Lives series published by Reaktion Books—is closer in spirit to James Winney's *A Preface to Donne* (1970) and Derek Parker's *John Donne and His World* (1973), biographical overviews handsomely illustrated with reproductions of portrait paintings, period artwork, and pertinent documents, than it is to his exhaustive and magisterial life of Spenser. And while his *John Donne* is poised to become, like Winney and Parker before him, a reliable short life which may serve as a gateway to Donne studies that instructors may confidently recommend to students, Hadfield departs from the example of his predecessors by structuring his chapters not according to the periods of, and major events in, Donne's life (ancestry; education; military and secretarial service; marriage; ordination; deanship; sickness and death) but topically (religion; sexuality; marriage; learning; friendship), providing as much an interior life as a narrative of events and social actions.

And rightly so. For however engaging the story of Donne's life, it is the witness that his writing gives to a mind in search of certainty in a terrifyingly uncertain world ("'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone; / All just supply, and all Relation") that commands our attention. Too often such admittedly dramatic events as the death of Donne's brother Henry while imprisoned for having harbored a priest, Donne's military ventures with Essex and Raleigh, his dismissal from Egerton's service following his clandestine marriage to Anne More, his change in allegiance from Rome to Canterbury, his near-fatal illness recorded in the *Devotions*, and his later preparations for death (as narrated by Walton) have proven the bejeweled cover that distracts laymen from the "mystick" book of Donne's interior life. Indeed, the title or subtitle given to some past lives—such as Edward LeComte's *Grace to a Witty Sinner* (1965) and John Stubbs's *The Reformed Soul* (2007)—might have been as appropriate for a novel based on Donne's life as for a critical biography. Rather, by subtitling his biography "In the Shadow of Religion," Hadfield looks to transcend the facile division between Jack Donne and Dr. Donne, and between the secular and sacred writings, popularized by Izaak Walton and Edmund Gosse, to flatly assert that religion was the most consistent element of Donne's existence, the fabric from which every part of his life and work was cut and fashioned.

The greatest strength of Hadfield's biography is its blunt rejection of traditional approaches to, and classifications of, Donne in favor of a religious syncretism.

> We often discuss Donne's religion in terms of Protestantism and Catholicism, but this may be to miss a more fundamental point. Like many, perhaps most, English people in a post-Schism world he had to rely on himself and his personal relationship with God to determine how he should live in the world. The Reformation may or may not have thrown his early beliefs into doubt, but the concentration on the relationship between the self and the soul remained with him throughout his relatively long life, a constant preoccupation in the interesting times in which he lived. (44)

Broadly speaking, Queen Elizabeth I's refusal to open windows into the souls of her people and her insistence, rather, on a public, almost perfunctory, conformity to the rites of the Church of England freed

individuals to search their own consciences and formulate their own private systems of belief, even while depriving them of the safety net that came with the ecclesiastically-authorized assurance of salvation or damnation. Not surprisingly, as a direct result of the Reformation the confessor would some three centuries later be succeeded by the Freudian analyst or, slightly later still, the therapist as the individual's guide to negotiating spiritual distress and obtaining peace of mind. Positioned as he was just *after* the loss of an authoritative, dogmatic Church that possessed the power to forgive sin and ensure salvation, but long *before* the dawn of better living through psychiatry, Donne was left to wrestle all his life with the need to make sense of a "complicated, dangerous and fractious world" (16) largely on his own, doubting wisely as he progressed circuitously up the Hill of Truth.

The result, Hadfield demonstrates, is a Donne who should be prized as one of the most vigorous and original thinkers of the European Renaissance.

> Read as a poet of sexuality he undoubtedly looks outdated, perhaps even offensive. Read as a poet, theologian and writer who explores the possibilities of the self, the body and the soul[,] and the ability of an individual to interact with others, as well as the limits of state power and the nature of toleration, he looks like a significant thinker. (9)

Donne's significance as a thinker is put effectively on display in Hadfield's study in both major and minor ways. For example, Hadfield prefaces his reading of *Satyre I* with an insightful contrast of Donne's and Ben Jonson's radically different styles of engagement with the Greek and Latin classics that disparages neither poet but shrewdly juxtaposes the different ways in which their minds worked (150). Likewise, the value of Hadfield's attempt to demonstrate "how capacious and interconnected his [Donne's] imagination was" (10) is illustrated early in the book as he traces across genres and periods of Donne's life his use of the image of a ship sailing through a storm or negotiating dangerous straits, which Hadfield proposes to be an emblem of Donne's lifelong spiritual struggle. And, while attempting to unpack the complex nature of the soul and the self for Donne, Hadfield astutely reads *Biathanatos* in the context of the Holy Sonnets, hymns,

and *Death's Duell*, providing one of the most provocative brief analyses of the place of *Biathanatos* in Donne's canon that I've read.

I am particularly taken by the fact that in Hadfield's mapping of the trajectory of Donne's life, Donne's struggle to understand the relationship of the self to the soul, of identity to spirituality, culminated not in a closer relationship with God (as per Walton or Gosse), but in the creation and celebration of community. Hadfield initially suggests that Donne's verse epistles were written as attempts to overcome the inequities of court preference by seeking friends with whom he can function on equal terms (13). (Hadfield might have noted in this regard that many of the love poems seek a similar reciprocity: "What ever dyes, was not mixt equally.") The culminating topic of Hadfield's study, however, is Donne's lifelong search for integration into a community, whether in an individual love relationship, through a social network, or as a member of the cosmic choir. In Hadfield's telling, ironically, the poet long known for bold assertions of individuality and celebrated for his genius for idiosyncrasy found that the best defense against a world in which nothing coheres proved to be harmonizing one's voice and melding one's identity with those who are likewise "a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*." In a biography in which the always popular but seemingly conflicting issues of religion and sex are addressed early on, Hadfield concludes with an analysis of the centrality of friendship in Donne's life, which I find to be a wonderfully illuminating way to approach Donne's psyche. I'm only sorry in this regard that Hadfield did not explore the implications of Donne's claim that he wrote *A Litanie* for those "lesser Chappels, which are my friends."

As compelling as is the large picture that Hadfield draws, I'm uncomfortable with some of that picture's details. Hadfield openly subscribes to the theory that, rather than being fictionalized attempts to explore certain ideas and attitudes, Donne's poems give explicit witness to Donne's actual life experiences. Although he offers no support whatsoever for the claim, Hadfield asserts that specific *Songs and Sonets* such as "The Flea," "The Relic," and "The Canonization" were written for Anne More rather than "a scarlet woman" (10) or some "racy, loose woman" (21). (Hadfield betrays an almost Victorian discomfort with Donne's sexual *jouissance*, quaintly referring to the prostitute who appears in *Satyre I* as "a woman of easy virtue" [149].)

Similarly, Hadfield's penchant for reading in the most literal manner the details of certain poems results in what seem to me forced interpretations of those works. For example, Hadfield understands the marriage bed imagery in stanza 2 of "The Flea" to refer quite literally to Donne's relationship with his wife, which leads Hadfield to paraphrase the poem as Donne's argument to Anne.

> [T]he reason why the lady will not be shamed by surrendering to him is because [. . .] there is nothing wrong with a husband and wife making love. Even more to the point, perhaps, their marriage has already brought them a great deal of poverty and shame, so advertising their love life will probably not make a lot of difference to their reputation (and the poem only circulated in manuscript after Donne's death). Donne refers to the "parents' grudge," surely signaling Sir George More's objection to the marriage, which never really abated. (120)

Not only do the textual notes attached to "The Flea" in the *Variorum Edition* indicate that the poem circulated in manuscript before Donne's death,[1] but I am hard-pressed to imagine why Donne might have had to resort to such an elaborate argument to persuade his oft-pregnant wife to have sex with him.

In a similar manner, Hadfield reads "The Canonization" as a response to "a letter from his friend Tobie Matthew [. . .], who had criticized Donne for failing to attend court as part of his professional duties." Hadfield further speculates that Matthew's conversion to Catholicism may lend additional resonance to the poem's title, which "may contrast the proper love of the Donnes with Matthew's betrayal of his country" (128). Likewise, Hadfield proposes to date "Woman's Constancy" to *after* the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, thereby making the poem less the "misogynistic tirade" that it is often taken to be than "a reflection on the paranoia of the times, in which nobody told the truth because everybody had a motive to lie and be deceitful" (161). Possibly

[1] *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne: The Songs and Sonets*, Vol. 4.3, ed. Jeffrey S. Johnson et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), p. 78.

the compressed format of the Reaktion series preempted as ample a presentation of Hadfield's provocative arguments surrounding these poems as a serious reader might desire.

Of greater concern, however, is Hadfield's seeming lack of familiarity with some of the finest Donne scholarship published during the last thirty years. For example, when he comments that after Alexander Pope "paraphrased Donne's *Satires*, adapting them to eighteenth-century standards of taste, [. . .] Donne fell largely out of favour until T. S. Eliot's famous essay revitalized interest in him" (8), Hadfield seems unaware of Dayton Haskin's acclaimed study, *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Likewise, when seeking to associate the voice and rhetorical operations of the speaker of the *Holy Sonnets* with those of the penitential psalms (63-64), he overlooks the valuable article on this subject published in 1987 by Mary Ann Radzinowicz, which might have done some of the heavy lifting for him. Most curiously, to support his claim that "Donne inherited a long-standing Catholic tradition and his family was to make much of their connection to Sir Thomas More" (46), Hadfield cites John Stubbs' *Donne: The Reformed Soul* (2006), while ignoring Dennis Flynn's seminal *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Indiana University Press, 1995).

Nevertheless, as the current iteration of the type of lavishly illustrated introduction to Donne first popularlized by Winney and Parker, Hadfield's biography indicates just how far Donne studies has come in the past fifty years. For example, whereas both Winney and Parker only mention *Pseudo-Martyr* in passing, quoting the passage about how Donne's family suffered for its adherence to Rome as part of the biographical record, Hadfield astutely demonstrates the importance of *Pseudo-Martyr* to understanding the centrality of religion in Donne's life. Hadfield's stated determination to read the entire of Donne's canon "as a whole" succeeds admirably. Whatever qualifications or amplifications one might seek regarding portions of his argument, Hadfield's emphasis on the centrality of religion in Donne's life and thought effectively illuminates the coherence of Donne's creative effort across decades and genres. "All, all of a piece throughout, / Thy chase had a beast in view," Dryden wrote in 1700 while saying goodbye to the

old year/century and welcoming in the new. The same might be said of the Donne who emerges in Hadfield's study.[2]

The Peony Pavilion, Malagar

[2] Hadfield's claim to be the first book to treat Donne's canon as a whole echoes the claim made by John Carey about his own *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (Oxford University Press, 1981). In his autobiography, *The Unexpected Professor: An Oxford Life in Books* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), Carey notes that "My D.Phil. thesis had been about Donne the poet, but I wanted the book to be about Donne the preacher and thinker as well, and I wanted to show that they were the same person—that the poems and prose were fabrics of the same imagination. No one had tried to do that before, and no one has since" (316).