

John Stubbs. *John Donne: The Reformed Soul*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 576 pp. \$35.00. Review by SEAN MCDOWELL, SEATTLE UNIVERSITY.

In John Donne scholarship, *the* nonfiction book one is most likely to find not just in libraries but also in chain bookstores across the English-speaking world is *John Donne: The Reformed Soul*, the new full-length biography of Donne's life by English scholar John Stubbs. Published first in the U. K. in 2006 and subsequently by W. W. Norton in 2007, *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* was the recipient of the prestigious Royal Society of Literature Jerwood Award in 2004 as a work-in-progress. It has received commendations from a host literary critics, poets, and writers, including Harold Bloom, Edward Hirsch, Peter Ackroyd, Andrew Motion, and Katherine Duncan-Jones and has garnered for twenty-nine-year-old Stubbs the kind of international fame that not many biographers of Renaissance writers enjoy. How many other biographers can boast of being a finalist in the annual book awards competition sponsored by the Costa Coffee chain?

The reasons for the popularity of Stubbs' biography are easy to see. In his attempt to steer somewhere between what he considers the "pious" account of R. C. Bald's *John Donne: A Life* (1970) and the "iconoclastic" account of John Carey's *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (1981), Stubbs creates a lively representation of Donne that is at once critical and sympathetic, the product of someone who is dedicated to conveying the complexities of Donne's personality even while committing himself to the basic thesis that Donne was a "reformed soul" who moved away from the stridency of his family's illicit Catholicism and toward a broader, less partisan view of human community. The book is well-written stylistically. Indeed, it frequently possesses an almost novelistic energy, as when Stubbs characterizes the immediate aftermath of Donne's arrest after his clandestine marriage to Ann More in 1602 came to light: "Donne felt his life flaking apart. All that he had spent almost ten years trying to avoid had suddenly come to pass. His struggle to convert outwardly—and inwardly—to the prevailing religious orthodoxy, his ordeals at Cadiz and in the Azores, his day-to-day t-crossing and i-dotting for the Lord Keeper, might all be traced to the simple fear of being confined and hurt, even dying, merely for the sake of who he was" (165). A reader might find it hard not to get caught up in Stubbs' continual usage of the single character subjective point of view to convey the enigmatic Donne's most

intimate perceptions and attitudes.

Moreover, the book shows evidence of an excellent sense of humor, as when Stubbs discusses the knighting of Thomas Egerton, Jr., the Lord Keeper's son: on the "peachy shores" of San Miguel, Stubbs writes, "Egerton became one of the very few on the [Azores] expedition to receive a knighthood, which Essex conferred on him for reasons that aren't particularly clear—perhaps for services to beach sports" (89). As this passage suggests, Stubbs relishes trying to capture the personalities of the figures in Donne's life in lively, memorable strokes. Thus, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, "was a legend, the hero of flash young men . . . less for any tangible achievement than for his unfailing energy and panache" (53); Sir Robert Drury possessed "a heedless tongue and a hot temper, but what he lacked in discretion he was prepared to make for with pugnacity" (270); and James I's "fascination" with George Villiers, "which he expected every other loyal follower to understand and share, was a mixture of doe-eyed crush, paternal care and the love of a guru for his favorite disciple" (366). By far, the strength of the book derives from these characterizations and from similar fluid explanations of geographical and cultural contexts. Stubbs' treatments of the Cadiz and Azores raids, for instance, read like adventure narratives. Moreover, for those unfamiliar with the locations of the various episodes of Donne's life, Stubbs gives more than a name; he works to conjure an experiential sense of the habitation. Indeed, at their most successful, the localized parts of the book are reminiscent of James Shapiro's insightful *A Year in the Life of Shakespeare, 1599* (2005), a book at once a probing exploration of Shakespeare's creative development, a page-turner, and a guided tour of Elizabethan London.

While Stubbs' character sketches and place descriptions are wonderfully entertaining, the lynch pin of his account of Donne's personality is the poetry, which Stubbs reads, more often than not, as immediately responsive to Donne's biographical circumstances. Stubbs quotes Donne's poems more extensively than any other source materials, including Donne's letters. On the surface, this practice accords with the aforementioned entertainment value of the book: some lines from Donne liven and relieve blocks of plain text, and for Donne aficionados, who can complain about encountering stanzas of such poems as "The Extasie," "The Good Morrow," and "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," sometimes in surprising places? But for Renaissance scholars, Stubbs' usage of the poetry as biographical evidence skirts several important

critical issues. First, how does such a usage accord with Renaissance notions of persona and rhetorical theory? How does such a treatment of the poems as purely confessional, for the most part, square with our understanding of the coterie readers who originally circulated Donne's verse? Finally, how does this reading practice address the concerns raised in recent scholarship regarding thesis-driven interpretations of Donne's life, in the cases of the biographies of Izaak Walton, Bald, and Carey? Rather than address any of these issues in a substantive way, Stubbs treats the poems as key evidence, a practice that oversimplifies the complexities that many Donne scholars see in the relationship between the poet and the poems.

The greatest concentration of poems serving as evidence of Donne's perceptions, of course, concern his relationship with Ann, a relationship that fascinates the majority of Donne's modern readers, but about which we lack enough evidence to satisfy our collective curiosity. Stubbs sees in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* especially a chronology of the relationship, as well as key indicators of Donne's attitudes about it at various junctures. "The Good Morrow," for instance, describes Donne falling in love with sixteen-year-old Ann, while "The Flea" expresses Donne's frustration at living under the same roof as she (York House) and beginning each day in a "separate chamber" from her. "The Extasie" concerns the love "without nervousness" they shared. Later, a few lines from "The Sun Rising" and "The Dream" become evidence for Donne's "complete fulfillment" in his early married life at Pyrford. After 200 or more pages of biographical readings of the poems, one's overriding impression is that Donne was a kind of proto-Robert Lowell, ready and willing to trot out with abandon his innermost thoughts, daily impressions, and frustrations to his circles of friends and patrons.

To be sure, several prominent scholars—Dennis Flynn, Ilona Bell, Camille Wells Slight, and others—have made persuasive cases for biographical readings of some poems and thereby have expanded the list of "biographical" poems that J. B. Leishman posited long ago in *The Monarch of Wit* (1951). Hence, it is as disingenuous to say we should treat all of Donne's poems as fictions as it is to claim all are autobiographical. Anyone who has written poetry knows firsthand how complicated the relationship between writer and writing can become. Even in the most intentionally fiction utterances, the poet must draw on his or her own experiences to create a persuasive version of the experience depicted. Yet the kinds of intrusions a poet's life may make

in his or her poetry far outnumber the simple reading of “true” stories in the poems. To treat “The Indifferent” as an accurate account of Donne’s views of women at a particular time in his life (pre-Ann) is to deny the possibility of dramatic irony as well as the number of rhetorical gestures that may be at work in this deceptively simple poem. The same may be said of Stubbs’ readings of poems he uses to corroborate his presentation of Donne’s mood, attitudes, or perceptions about life circumstances. Stubbs often writes a description of Donne’s state of mind and then locks it into place with poem. Speculation thus “proves” the evidence, as much as evidence “proves” speculation.

A related weakness in *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* concerns the many surprising scholarly omissions throughout the book: while Stubbs mentions a handful of American and Canadian scholars, he shows little, if any, awareness of the full range of Donne scholarship published outside of a small coterie of British scholars. As a result of this selective focus, he ignores important scholarly developments in regard to some of his source materials. For example, he treats Walton’s early *Life of Donne* as an authoritative account of key moments in Donne’s life, much the way R. C. Bald did before him, without acknowledging that scholars such as David Novarr and Dennis Flynn especially have demonstrated that Walton’s account of Donne’s life cannot be trusted because of Walton’s hagiographical intentions and his biased attitude toward his own source materials. Elsewhere there are other signs that Stubbs is not fully engaged in *international* Donne studies. Nowhere does he mention the work of Jeanne Shami on the sermons, for instance, even though he quotes sermons frequently; or that of Mary Papazian or Kate Gartner Frost on *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*; or that of Margaret Maurer and Ernest W. Sullivan on the prose letters; or indeed many of the non-British scholarly developments described recently by John R. Roberts in the *John Donne Journal* (vol. 23, 2004, pp. 1-24). Stubbs even prints a citation of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne* as if all of its volumes were currently in print, rather than just the four that have been published.

Perhaps Stubbs or his publisher is confident that his life of Donne will retain its currency long after the *Variorum* edition is complete. If so, he may be right. Readers interested in an entertaining passage through Donne’s life will enjoy *John Donne: Reformed Soul* for its vividness, pace, and speculative anecdotes about Donne’s milieu. These readers most likely will keep this book in

print for a long time. However, readers who want a definitive life of Donne, one that corrects the thematic biases of past biographies and recognizes the possibilities of both biographical truth and fiction-making in the poetry, will have to wait a little longer. Oxford University Press has engaged M. Thomas Hester and Dennis Flynn to edit a complete edition of Donne's letters, which will surpass in completeness even the I. A. Shapiro edition promised years ago but never published. Undoubtedly, these letters will offer a trove of material that could clarify some of the more obscure patches of Donne's life. Until then, the poetry may seem for some too tempting a source for biographical speculation to resist.

Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005. Cloth \$ 55.00. 319 pp. Review by NABIL MATAR, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA.

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said wrote about the polarization between Western European countries, specifically Great Britain and France, and the Islamic East. He described the "discourse" about the East that underpinned the European imperial project on regions extending from Morocco to Iran and India. By focusing on the world of Islam, Said showed how the West had vilified the civilization and culture of the Muslims in order to justify domination.

While some scholars agreed with Said's thesis, others found it too damning and inflexible and sought evidence to challenge it. These latter critics contested the idea that the West was to blame for the "clash of civilizations" (a phrase that post-dated Said), and they turned to study medieval, early modern, and modern sources in the hope of demonstrating that the West had not really always vilified or demonized the Islamic world—especially when the West had not yet possessed the military or economic power to do so.

In *Traffic and Turning*, Jonathan Burton urges readers to move beyond the binarism of Said. For him, even critics who disagree with Said remain confined within the parameters of the established discourse. Burton therefore argues that early modern British drama—and the book is nearly all focused on English plays (*Tamburlaine*, *Lust's Dominion*, *Othello*, *A Christian Turn'd Turk*, and *The Renegado*) and some travel accounts—showed "more multiple, fluctuating,