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## Review of Andrew Hadfield, John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion

Brooke Conti  
*Cleveland State University*, [b.conti@csuohio.edu](mailto:b.conti@csuohio.edu)

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ANDREW HADFIELD. *John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion*. London: Reaktion Books, 2021. Pp. 256. \$22.50 (cloth).  
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Andrew Hadfield's *John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion* is an accessible introduction to Donne, geared chiefly to interested lay readers and nonspecialists. Hadfield, the author of a magisterial biography of Edmund Spenser, notes in his preface that this book, by contrast, is not intended as a biography of Donne (11). Rather, his hope is to enhance a reader's enjoyment of Donne's works through a series of meditations on important themes, contexts, and aspects of the writer and his times. With chapters titled "The Soul and the Self," "Religion,"

“Sexuality,” “Marriage,” “Learning,” and “Friendship,” Hadfield does a nice job of highlighting these key issues across a range of Donne’s works. In addition to Donne’s poetry, Hadfield devotes considerable attention to his polemical prose, including works such as *Biathanatos* that rarely get discussed even by scholars. He thus moves confidently across most of the body of Donne’s work (his devotional prose gets strangely short shrift), teasing out connections among them.

Despite the book’s subtitle, “In the Shadow of Religion,” Donne’s religious identity and the larger religious context of his works mostly drop out of view after the first two chapters. This is not exactly a weakness: in the later chapters Hadfield continues to focus on important themes and topics in Donne’s life and works. But the shift does highlight the fact that the book is not argument-driven. Hadfield’s chief goal seems to be to reframe Donne for an audience that he imagines to be most familiar with Donne’s erotic verse—perhaps from a few weeks’ exposure in a college classroom?—by bringing in new contexts, including the vast scholarship on Donne and religion. Another implicit motive seems to be to ameliorate the caddish impression the speaker of some of those poems may have left on his readers; as Hadfield says at the outset, “read as a poet of sexuality, [Donne] undoubtedly looks outdated, perhaps even offensive” (9). Unfortunately, in addition to fleshing out Donne’s complexity by introducing nonspecialists to Donne’s prose and nonerotic verse, Hadfield spends a great deal of time defending Donne against these imagined offended readers, insisting that Donne did not really mean his misogynistic poems—he was just following the poetic conventions of his day—and that most of his seduction poems were probably written for his wife, Ann More. Although a few of Donne’s love poems can indeed be dated with reasonable confidence to the period after his marriage, Hadfield is eager to redeem more than just these few works. Of “The Flea,” he says that, although it is usually presumed to reflect “the lecherous and witty young Jack Donne at his most rampant,” in fact “the voice in the poem is . . . more subtle, witty and personal than has often been realized, which suggests that it was written after rather than before his marriage to Ann” (118). If it is surprising to hear that the subtlety and wit of “The Flea” have gone previously unremarked, it is even more surprising to be told that only a poem written to Donne’s wife could have brought forth these qualities.

As a frequent teacher of Donne, this reader sympathizes with Hadfield’s desire to redeem Donne and expand the contexts in which casual readers encounter him. But in addition to the sheer tendentiousness of arguments such as the above, softening or domesticating Donne does not seem like the way to win him new fans. In this teacher’s experience, twenty-first-century undergraduates continue to be fascinated by Donne’s erotic verse, albeit in a less naïve way than their predecessors may have been; they can enjoy the outrageous wit while freely identifying the shame, anxiety, and misogyny that often undergird that wit. Given the excellent contextualizing that Hadfield provides in many parts of this book—his treatment of *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Biathanatos* will be of particular use to nonspecialists—it is disappointing to see so much wild biographical speculation sprinkled throughout.

The strengths of *John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion* are Hadfield’s lucid prose, his interest in a wide range of Donne’s works, and his careful selection of topics and themes of importance in Donne’s life and works. It is not written for Donne scholars and it is not quite an introduction for true beginners, but it may find a receptive audience among those who already have some familiarity with Donne and his works. Readers should not expect a deep look at Donne and religion, and they will want to approach the biographical interpretations with appropriate skepticism. All the same, casual Donne enthusiasts will surely learn new and useful things about both the man and the world he lived in.

Brooke Conti 

Cleveland State University

[b.conti@csuohio.edu](mailto:b.conti@csuohio.edu)