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ACHSAH GUIBBORY, *Returning to John Donne*. Pp. x + 268. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015. Hardbound and eBook. £77.99. (ISBN 978 1 4094 6878 3)

'Donne, with his rage for order, epitomizes our nature as meaning-seeking beings' (4-5). Where Milton tracks man's place in history, Donne 'obsessively analyzes the experience of living' (5). Donne casts himself as the observer of a divinely created world that is figurative and in which God speaks through metaphor; it is by paying close attention to Donne's own acts of interpretation, then, that the reader can travel alongside him as he 'figures things out'. These traits encapsulate Achsa Guibbory's longstanding fascination with John Donne, and almost every aspect of his secular and devotional poems and prose works.

Like a Greatest Hits album, *Returning to John Donne* brings together thirteen articles and book chapters, ten of which were published separately elsewhere between 1983 and 2011, and which have been rekeyed and their referencing updated. Guibbory imposes order by means of a three-part division. The latter two on 'Love' and 'Religion' are solid sections of six and four chapters respectively, though the first, 'Time and History', is somewhat less thematically coherent with two chapters, one of the theme of decay and the other on the ways in which Donne and Jonson addressed, and conceived of, their present and future readers. The book is furnished with a new introduction and section heads that reflect on Guibbory's personal experience and scholarly engagements. At times I wish these headnotes would engage more thoroughly with the movements of Donne scholarship over the decades, but this field is now so vast that this would easily inflate these pithy reflections to unmanageable proportions, and what is refreshingly frank here is how Guibbory's own personal and scholarly identity is brought into conversation with Donne's works. Rounding out the book are three new chapters: a concise reading of Donne's *Devotions to Emergent Occasions*, which oddly comes before the three parts and so belongs to none; a short coda to the section on love dealing with 'Depersonalisation, Disappointment, and Disillusion'; and as the most substantial new offering, a chapter on cross-confessional toleration that ranges widely across Donne's works.

Reading Donne requires the negotiation of many seemingly irreconcilable positions. In the *Elegies* and other love poems, Donne's speakers both revere the female body and indulge in a troubled and troubling misogyny (which Guibbory sees as politically inflected, in response to Queen Elizabeth and Donne's perceived threat to patriarchal values). He was simultaneously a 'convert', 'apostate', and 'conformist' (214); a socially radical outsider and a centralist careerist; and in confessional terms, reputedly first a Catholic, then as an early preacher exhibiting a Calvinist theology, and ultimately ending up in the later 1620s, as Guibbory argues perhaps most controversially, as spiritually if not politically committed to Arminianism and anti-Calvinism. If Donne's writing is and will remain characterized by these entrenched rhetorical positions, Guibbory's concluding new chapter goes some way to consider Donne as a proto-liberal author and proponent of toleration that would only fully come of age in the later seventeenth century. She places Donne alongside two other radical early voices, John Milton and Baruch Spinoza. *Satyre III* becomes, convincingly, a poem 'speaking for the radical liberty of conscience' and 'prescient in its concluding protest against religious persecution' (234, 235). Some of the *Songs and Sonnets*, celebrating a resolute individualism, are pitted against the institutions

of the early modern world (church, state, court, community). In his *Devotions* and later sermons, Guibbory finds Donne 'more flexible, less dogmatic in his statements than Milton' (253). Donne's attraction to the doctrine of universal grace, Guibbory suggests, anticipates the radical toleration of the excommunicated Dutch Jew, Spinoza, who in turn influenced the Enlightenment Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. To place Donne in this long history of toleration offers genuinely new insights into his philosophical and theological significance, a subject to which Guibbory may well return.

As some of the chapters in *Returning to Donne* have long been canonical in early modern literary scholarship (e.g., 'The Politics of Love in Donne's *Elegies*'; 'Donne's Religion'), the quality of its parts renders this book an important contribution which conveniently bundles Guibbory's criticism. That there is not an overarching argument holding it together may, however, divide readers. *Returning to Donne* occupies the no-man's land between a loosely organized essay collection and single-author monograph. Since no changes have been made to the original publications in terms of their argument, there are few cross-references, even when ideas or discussion of particular texts overlap and so the reader would have benefitted from a more explicitly cumulative argument. From the outset, Guibbory confesses to never having had a single unifying thesis which might underpin a monograph on Donne and so she never wrote one. It seems to me though that she has always been writing a book on Donne, but it took over thirty years of dedicated scholarship to learn enough in order to do justice to his staggering intellect, rhetorical sophistication, and generic mastery. Few scholars range across the variety of Donne's works as confidently as does Guibbory, and so any such thesis would ultimately have been reductive.

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