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Review Essay: George Parfitt, *John Donne: A Literary Life*

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Graduate students and general readers who may require a brief, clearly written account of Shakespeare's professional background will also benefit immensely from Dutton's book. But it is probably fair to say that to Shakespeare specialists or scholars most of the information will be very familiar, especially to those who have read E. K. Chambers's classic work in this area, which is Dutton's major source. Granted, discussions of these subjects may also be found in prefatory matter of the major anthologies of the plays, but what is found in summary form there is discussed and judiciously weighed here.

One of the most appealing features of the book is its balanced presentation and dispassionate analysis of various sides of an issue. The book and the series to which it belongs (*Literary Lives*, published by St. Martin's Press) qualify the historicizing tendency of the school of criticism that makes the individual author only one of a huge array of factors and influences that determine the creation of a literary text. The "death of the author in literary studies," proclaims the book jacket, echoing Mark Twain, is "an exaggeration."

I definitely recommend this book for students. I intend to require mine to read it.

William F. Gentrup
Arizona State University West

George Parfitt, *John Donne: A Literary Life*, St. Martin's Press, 1989, viii, 140 pp., biblio., \$35.00

This study examines John Donne not as a single figure but "as a multiple made up of the interaction of personality with the shaping qualities of the modes in which he is working and the specific circumstances which bear upon his adoption of these modes and not others" (71). Ambition, in Parfitt's view, is the link that connects Sir Thomas Egerton's secretary and Ann More's husband and the Church of England priest. This addition to the *Literary Lives* series (which traces the outlines of writers' working lives in light of professional, publishing, and social contexts) provides a good overview of Donne's career, although it often does so at the expense of a problematizing analysis or an engaging critique. Parfitt states his objections both to the ahistoricism of John Carey's Catholic-dominated study and to the possible reductivism of Alan Sinfield's materialistic criticism; however, despite the fact that he wants to see the poems as "energetic concentrations of experience" (31), he ends up stressing the social contexts of these opportune experiences in ways that almost bypass their literary importance.

His study is first-rate when it explores and explains the different genres in the various stages of Donne's career: the witty superior satirist entertaining a coterie of like-minded young men, the more traditional modes of the penitent husband, and the elitist performance of the *via media* Anglican preacher. Equally precise at contextualizing Donne's differences from satirists like Marston and Hall, as well as from devotional poets like Herbert, Parfitt makes a strong case for the continuing sense of restlessness, doubt, and debate with the self throughout Donne's mask-filled writing.

Yet, along with this thoroughness, there is a curious offhand quality to Parfitt's observations in two key areas: Donne's treatment of women and his role in the tense religious politics of the seventeenth century. Although Parfitt acknowledges "the rise of feminist studies" (30), he still parades the conquests of the "self-satisfied" young man as merely "a brilliant projection of a very common male viewpoint whereby women are to be denigrated (perhaps out of fear) and also celebrated as objects for male gratification, to be shown off, stripped and [f—d]" (37). He mentions pornography, colonization, and dehumanization and goes so far as to admit that "women may justly resent" (78) this portrayal; but he then concludes, somewhat stereotypically, that these poems tell the "disturbing truth" (79) about men. The question of Donne's religious loyalty is even more slippery for Parfitt. A self-declared "atheist" (125), Parfitt not only dismisses contemporary Anglicanism wholesale as "an etiolate memory of an idealized past and a sentimental indulgence for patriots" (119), he also accounts for Donne's "orthodox Anglicanism, . . . hybrid Calvinism . . . co-existing with residual Catholicism" (97) by resorting to labels rather than exemplifying these tenets in Donne's poetry and prose.

Situating writers in their time invariably involves some anachronistic assumptions. With certain gaps and simplifications, Parfitt has succeeded in keeping alive the drama between the secular and the spiritual, the opportune and the felt responses in the work of John Donne.

Patricia Demers
University of Alberta

Miguel de Cervantes, *The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda, A Northern Story*, trans. Celia Richmond Weller and Clark A. Colahan, University of California Press, 1989, 395 pp., ill., biblio., \$37.50.

Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, published posthumously in 1617, is, if we are to trust Cervantes's own assessment, his finest achievement in the realm