

From The Times

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## Simon Schama raves about John Donne

Donne, Milton and a man who can't stop swearing: truly all human life is on television

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**Simon Schama's John Donne** (BBC Two)

**Armando Iannucci: Milton's Heaven and Hell** (BBC Two)

**Tourettes: No Laughing**

**Matter** (BBC One)

**Who's Watching You?** (BBC Two)



### EDITOR'S CHOICE

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When people say, "All human life is there!" about television, they don't really *mean* it. Well, they do *mean* it — but they're wrong.

You only have to watch television for ten minutes to realise that, in actual fact, scarcely any of human life is there: it's all just cockneys, karaoke and Myleene Klass, occasionally garnished with a lion chasing an antelope. It's the same old things, time and time again: "Get ahtah moi pab!"; "I'm going to sing *Wind Beneath my Wings*, Simon," simper, simper; *roar*, chew, chew, chew. And then the next day, they do it all over again.

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This week, though, was a bit more of a freeform *mêlée* than the usual routine. We had Armando Iannucci on *Paradise Lost*, Simon Schama turning himself on in the snow with John Donne and the return visit to a documentary legend — John Davidson, from the 1989 film on Tourette

syndrome, *John's Not Mad*. There was also a duff, paranoid hour devoted to CCTV — a programme that seemed designed solely to give *Daily Mail* readers something to quack about on Twitter. But it's best we don't think about that too much.

First up was Simon Schama, clutching a paperback, and combusting with lust in the snow. I love Schama — he's still truly scandalised and thrilled about stuff that happened 500 years ago, which, as qualifications for being an eminent historian go, does it for me. Essentially, his entire career has been running into the room, going "Oh my God, have you heard? They're only starting the bloody Renaissance!" then delivering an hour of meticulously researched, gloatingly repeated gossip . . . er, I mean history. Also hugely in Schama's favour is that he is the only British academic whose name sounds like "Schmoo", as in the 1980s cartoon *The New Schmoo*. Until the advent of a rival historian

called "Captain Cavemon" this makes him pretty unbeatable.

This week Schama was running into the room and shouting *Oh my God* about John Donne — the 16th-century metaphysical poet whose smash hits include "No man is an island", "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love" and "O my America, my newfound land".

Schama was totally crushing on Donne. He would, it was clear within minutes, have done Donne.

"Donne is the poet who takes you right between the sheets," Schama declared, standing, swaddled, in London's February snows. "He is the most electrifying poet in the English language. No one else had ever anatomised love so piercingly — its panic, its extravagance. People call him a metaphysical poet — but to me, he is the most physical of poets. To Donne, the soul is a thing of flesh, and blood."

We had lingering shots of Donne's portrait — dreamy-eyed and lasciviously lipped. We could see that Schama believed Donne had the biggest flesh and blood soul he'd seen. We empathised with his Donne-love — doomed to remain unrequited for several key reasons (Donne was straight, married, and dead these 400 years).

From Roman Catholicism to apostasy, from ecstatic wenching to celibate preaching, from his teens until he died — through every phase of Donne's life, Schama loved him. He despaired — as Donne must have — that this swishy hornbag found himself a pitied charity case with 11 children, marooned in the countryside, by 30. Conversely, Schama seemed quite cheered by Donne's later years when — as a broken widower — he became a hellfire preacher, begging God to enter his soul with the masochistic longing of some ordained gimp.

By the end of a thunderous, horny hour, you were *definitely* interested in googling some of Donne's shorter poems, probably the sexy ones — as and when time allowed.