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Reading the Rhetoric of Donne's Sermons

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Brent Nelson, *Holy Ambition: Rhetoric, Courtship, and Devotion in the Sermons of John Donne*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Volume 284, Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006. xiii + 306 pp.

As Annabel Patterson has noted, Donne's sermons are back in fashion, and Brent Nelson's monograph, *Holy Ambition: Rhetoric, Courtship, and Devotion in the Sermons of John Donne*, comes just three years after Jeanne Shami's long-awaited monograph, *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit*.[1] Nelson states, however, that his study is to serve as a new departure in scholarship of Donne's sermons. While recent studies of the sermons have focused on Donne's politics and theology, Nelson sets up his book as an exploration of "Donne's effectiveness as a composer of sermons, focusing on his resourcefulness, particularly his ability to derive from his own culture diverse material that he could use in persuading his congregation toward a life of religious devotion" (p. 1). Hence, he argues that while "the particular circumstances of Donne's sermons and his responsiveness to these conditions must continue to be of interest to Donne scholars . . . , this should not be our end, for it was not his end" (p. 2). Rather, through a rhetorical analysis of the sermons, Nelson aims to show *how* Donne leads his congregation to an apprehension of God.

In order to construct a paradigm for this study of the rhetorical "how" of Donne's sermons, Nelson draws on Kenneth Burke's theory of "courtship." Burke defines "courtship" as the means whereby we bridge

[1]"Donne's Sermons Back in Fashion?," *John Donne Journal* 23 (2004): 363–370.

conditions of social estrangement by moving through a hierarchy towards an "ultimate term" or "object of desire." For Nelson, this concept of "courtship" becomes a model for Donne's attempt to lead his congregation towards God. Thus, he argues that Donne's principle of *inventio* is to infuse the message of Scripture into his congregation's cultural experience and then to employ culturally derived courtship models in order to structure the congregation's move to Christ. The sermon becomes a "rhetoric of rebirth" or a "ritual of cure" in which the congregation is made acquainted with their sinful condition and then raised up towards an identification with Christ. Nelson supplements Burke's model with early modern ideas of "courtship," drawing on visual and rhetorical examples of hierarchies which lead to objects of desire and contemporary discussions of rhetoric as a means to manipulate a congregation's spiritual aspirations. He devotes three chapters to outlining the ways in which courtship *topoi* function in Donne's sermons, in particular as a topic of *inventio* and a model for *dispositio* and, then, in the remaining three chapters provides close readings of three sermons: the sermon preached at Greenwich in 1615 on Isaiah 52:3; the sermon preached before the Lords on Easter Day 1619 on Psalm 89:48; and Donne's last sermon, *Deaths Duell*, preached at Whitehall on the first Friday in Lent 1630/1 on Psalm 68:20.

There is much that is valuable in Nelson's study. His thesis on the ways in which Donne employs models of similitude between secular and devotional models is convincing. Donne himself seems to refer to this process when, in a Lincoln's Inn sermon, preached on Ascension Day 1622, he states:

> We in our profession may embrace secular Learning, so far as it may conduce to the better discharge of our duties, in making the easier entrance, and deeper impression of Divine things in you.[2]

Nelson's culturally sensitive rhetorical analysis of the sermons is also extremely helpful. In particular, his attention to Donne's *inventio* and *dispositio* allows for sustained readings which demonstrate how essential

[2] *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 4:143.

it is to read the sermons as rhetorically integral wholes. He also includes a timely warning against the dangerous practice of seeking to draw conclusions about Donne's theology or politics from isolated moments in the sermons without taking account of the wider rhetorical objective of the passages.

Occasionally, though, Nelson's assessment would benefit from more attention to Shami's emphatic mantra that when reading Donne's sermons "context is all."[3] His argument that Donne does not "limit his legal and political discourse to court or to Lincoln's Inn, nor his mercantile discourse to St. Paul's or St. Dunstan's" (p. 25) is, of course, valid. But it does prompt the question of the different ways in which a legal image or juridical rhetorical structure might function in the Lincoln's Inn pulpit, as compared with the court pulpit or the St. Paul's pulpit. Furthermore, it is not always possible to separate entirely Donne's political and theological concerns from his pastoral aim to lead his congregation to God. When discussing Donne's sermon before Queen Anne at Denmark House, for example, Nelson argues that although Donne was urging the Queen to relinquish her Catholicism, his "chief concern transcends such political distinctions, aiming primarily at urging the Queen and her court to bring all desire within the purview of a pursuit of godliness" (p. 137). In the case of Catholicism, though, Donne's political concerns seem inextricably bound up with his purpose of guiding his congregation to God. His instruction that the Queen and her court seek God "at home," rather than "in a forrein Church," carries both political and pastoral implications.[4] Nelson also reads across the Donne canon without allowing for any change or development in Donne's preaching style. Donne's sermon on death in 1619 is read next to his 1630/1 sermon without any sense that his rhetorical strategies might have developed in the intervening eleven years. Nelson's emphasis on the rhetoric of the sermons does, however, provide a timely reminder that context is not quite all and that scholarship of Donne's sermons needs to allow space for both cultural context and rhetorical analysis.

It is, moreover, easy to sympathize with Nelson's desire to introduce new terms of debate into Donne studies. The battle between John

[3]"Introduction: Reading Donne's Sermons," *John Donne Journal* 11 (1992): 1–20.

[4]*Sermons of John Donne*, 1:246.

Carey's ambitious apostate and Jeanne Shami's discreet pastor has long dominated readings of the sermons. Moreover, in recent years, with the balance of opinion shifting increasingly towards Shami, there is perhaps a risk that the new "discreet" Donne will crystallize into a similarly enduring orthodoxy to the "ambitious" Donne. But I wonder if it is possible for Nelson to circumvent the debate over Donne's politics as neatly as he would wish. He states that he is "not interested in arguing with Donne's publicly stated purpose as a preacher" and nor will he "attempt to show how Donne uses transcendent discourse to court social ends in his sermons" (p. 74). However, in demonstrating Donne's mastery of hierarchical courtship models, Nelson does seem to be taking us very close to Carey's Donne, who is galvanized by the "urge for an absolute," or, indeed, to Jonathan Goldberg's New Historicist Donne, whose sermons are constituted by "a chain of authority."[5] The very title of Nelson's monograph, *Holy Ambition*, with its echo of Carey's chapter heading "The Art of Ambition," would seem to demand some discussion of this. At the least, Nelson's argument that Donne "deliberately embraces" courtship models as a rhetorical strategy would shed interesting light on Goldberg's reading of the sermons in which Donne's entire thought is structured by a "paradigm of descent and ascent in which God and the world are linked."[6]

Nelson's monograph does make a welcome addition to Donne studies. He demands that his readers fine-tune their ears to the sophistication of Donne's rhetoric and in so doing draws our attention to an aspect of Donne's sermons which has been wrongly sidelined. His book also opens up important questions for Donne studies about the inter-relationships among Donne's theology, political thought, rhetoric, and pastoral commitment. It will remain for future studies to tease out further the extent to which Donne's pastoral duty of preaching the Gospel can be separated from his politico-religious consciousness.

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[5]Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 115; and Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 215.

[6]Goldberg, p. 214.