John Donne Journal
Vol. 6, No. 1 (1987)

Kings and Desperate Men: John Donne Preaches at Court

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Addressing the powerful has always been an uncertain honor, an explicitly political act that challenges speakers to exercise their rhetorical skills discreetly. Not surprisingly, John Donne's own relations to the sources of power in his society have been variously interpreted, but most commentators, whether cynical, apologetic, or simply uneasy, see in Donne a failure to apply his observation and keen wit to the political issues of his day. In fact, his epithalamion celebrating Somerset's scandalous marriage to Lady Frances Howard, the verse letters to noble ladies, the *Anniversaries*, *Pseudo-Martyr*, and the sermon defending James's *Directions to Preachers* have all been invoked to prove that in awkward situations Donne consistently sacrificed conscience to political expediency.[1]

Annabel Patterson suggests a more reasonable approach to Donne's politics in her discussion of Donne's letters. She observes that, even in this private mode of communication, Donne is ambivalent about the "political pressures and inhibitions"[2] affecting his career. She sees in the letters a mixture of "candor and circumspection" (42), a tension, I would argue, that is more prominent still in his great public performances, the sermons, and particularly those preached at Whitehall or commanded by the King. Whether Donne resolves in these sermons the "painful contradictions" (47) he must have felt between private belief and public utterance remains to be examined. Are these sermons mere time-serving pieces of flattery, or examples of Donne's discretion in fulfilling the demanding responsibilities of his vocation as preacher? In answering this question, we must remind ourselves that Donne preached in a repressive political climate in which the risk of royal displeasure made the invitation to preach before the King a double-edged sword. James was a King fascinated by the power of words, especially his own, but though he encouraged preachers of much greater intellectual ability

than had preached from the Elizabethan *Book of Homilies*,[3] those drawn closer to the inner circle and capable of discerning the King's "secretest drifts"[4] risked banishment from the court, or worse. Lancelot Andrewes, for one, chose to preach sermons which were decidedly apolitical—witty, detached, and well-suited to the intellectual agility of the Court: in the matter of Somerset's divorce, for example, history has recorded his silent acquiescence to the King.

In this context, then, Donne's constant cry, his "woe unto me if I preach not the gospel," must be balanced against his actual practice in the court sermons. If preaching the "hard knowledge"[5] of the gospel is really Donne's end in these, what are the means by which he achieves it? We look in vain for subliminal criticisms, covert satires, clever equivocations, or subversive analogies. These occur occasionally, but are not Donne's consistent practice.[6]

On the contrary, Donne's comments about the power and function of Kings coincide surprisingly with the royalist view: "God hath called himselfe King; and he hath called Kings Gods. And when we look upon the actions of Kings, we determine not our selves in that person, but in God working in that person."[7] Accordingly, because "*Kings* are pictures of *God*" (VII, xvii, 422), "the Kings acts are Gods acts" (VIII, iv, 115). Kings are at the pinnacle of the hierarchy—social, political, and moral—that constitutes the order of things. They are the husband, head, and soul of the Kingdom (IV, ix, 245), the "*Head of the Church* that declares to us those things whereby we are to be ordered" (IV, vii, 199), the Head of the Body Politic (IV, x, 282), "Gods lieutenants" (I, iii, 210), and the root of all superiors: natural, civil, and matrimonial (IV, xii, 313). In fact, "The Kings of the earth are faire and glorious resemblances of the King of Heaven; they are beames of that Sun, Tapers of that Torch, they are like Gods, they are gods" (V, iii, 85). Queen Elizabeth is likened to Deborah (IV, vii, 189), a Queen "unmatchable, inimitable in her sex" (I, iii, 218). James is compared to the good King Josiah (IV, vii) and distinguished from the repressive Jeroboam (II, xviii, 348). "All his Actions, all that he did shew'd him fit for this Crown" (I, iii, 219).

Charles, too, is evoked in flattering terms, in a metaphor whose multiple meanings proved particularly useful to Donne. The metaphor is of the King as a "glass," and in an early sermon before Charles, Donne uses it to remark not only his powers but also his responsibilities:

> So *your Majestie* doth more of the offices of such a *Glasse*; You doe that office which *Moses* his *Glasses* did, at the *Brazen Sea* in the *Temple*, (for you show others

> their spots, and in a Pious and unspotted life of your owne, you show your *Subjects* their deficiencies) And you doe the other office of such *Glasses*, by this communicating to all, the beames which your *Majestie* receivd in yourself. (VII, ii, 72)

The metaphor most often means "mirror," although at times Donne uses it to mean "magnifying glass," as here, or sometimes "window." In most cases, it is a reminder to the King that the powers of Kingship are reflected ones and that they bring with them the burdens of "visibility."

The metaphor of the King as "glass" is a useful place, then, to begin examining the ways in which Donne fulfills his mandate as preacher and moral critic while circumventing the dangers faced by those "rash-headie Preachers" (6) that James denounces in *Basilikon Doron*. From his published statements, we know that James was fond of presenting himself as a figure answerable to God for all of his actions, particularly his public ones.[8] So, on one level, at least, the metaphor allows Donne to limit the King, within the conventions of censorship which both were testing, by taking him at his published word.[9]

In his court sermons as a whole, Donne reinforces this literal interpretation of James's words, and the burden of good example that they suggest, in several ways. Most constant is the contrast he draws between James as King and Christ, the King of Kings, and which he reinforces by repeated reminders to his audience that God's law is the final arbiter. Donne's discretion in making these statements directly to the King's face is another means of limiting the King's power. At court, Donne speaks ideally of the King's role (as James himself did), but in doing so challenges James personally to live up to this role and, indirectly at least, invites his audience to discern any ironic disjunctions between ideal and real. In the King's presence, Donne also establishes his own spiritual authority as analogous, and by implication equal to, the King's. Most limiting to the King's power, though, are Donne's claims for the sovereignty of conscience, a belief upheld in theory by James in *Basilikon Doron*, but which in practice he was reluctant to grant to any but himself.[10] In his court sermons, Donne takes James at his word.

Contrasting the King with the example of Christ, then, is perhaps the most constant and subtle limitation that Donne imposes upon James. Whereas Donne normally chooses to illuminate his texts with examples of a "middle nature," men like David and Paul or even Alderman Cokayne, his court sermons abound with comparisons to Christ.[11] This strategy allows Donne to remind Kings of their humanity, and so to limit

their absolutist claims, at the same time as it flatters. Not even James could claim equality with Christ, although he might approve of the comparison. Frequently Donne reminds his courtly audiences that Christ's example is the exception to a rule to which all other men, including the King, are subject. At a sermon preached to the House of Lords on Easter day while the King was dangerously ill at Newmarket, Donne offers Christ as the only answer to the question "What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death?" (II, ix, 206). Christ is he "whom no earthly King may enter into comparison with, the King of Heaven" (I, iii, 220). The contrast for Donne is even more striking. In a sermon preached before the dead king's body, Donne explicitly contrasts Christ who "is *like thee in everything*, but not absolutely for *sinne* is excepted" with "this glass presented now *(The Body of our Royall,* but *dead Master and Soveraigne)* [in which] we cannot, we doe not except sinne" (VI, xiv, 289). Only Christ is "singularly peculiar" in this, that his flesh shall not see corruption (X, xi, 238). Whereas the "hand of a great and mighty Monarch . . . will lie dead, and not be able to nip or fillip away one of his own wormes" (IV, xiii, 333), and whereas Kings must be included in the company of sinners whom Christ came to call (for "No man hath any such righteousness of his own, as can save him" [VII, v, 159]), Christ is the exception.

One of the interesting things about this strategy of typological comparison is that it enables Donne to cite an example that is clearly superior to the King but an example that the King must admit. The King himself cannot question the spiritual hierarchy that such comparisons imply. Still, Donne must tread carefully. So while he asserts the King's power when he argues that "Ignorance is no plea in any subject against the Kings lawes," he balances that with the assertion that "there is a King, in breach of whose lawes, no King, no Kings sonne can excuse by ignorance" (III, x, 233). Donne's distinctions often work in this double way. He insists, for example, that "we need such *Glasses* and such *Images*, as God shows us himself in the King" (VII, xiv, 357). But he must also explain that the influence of the King's example on his subjects cannot erase the fact that "the King is *nothing* to God" (VII, xiv, 357).

Donne's court sermons, then, reinforce that, in relation to Christ, monarchs are mere men, subject to the same mortality and obedient to the same Lord, that "when these great persons are in the balance with God, there they weigh as little, as lesse men" (VIII, xiv, 325). We see also in these sermons that the glass of kingship is necessary as an example, but not always as a model of perfection. Donne chooses David, for instance, as an example of a man and King whose soul is complicated in

an endless chain of sins (VII, ii, 81-82). And in a later sermon, Saul's eminent status makes him personally responsible for the stoning of Stephen, "though by the hands of other executioners": "Men of the best extraction and families, Men of the best parts and faculties, Men of the best education and proficiencies, owe themselves to God by most obligations" (VIII, vii, 182). In still another sermon, Donne uses the example of Jacob to remind his court audience that even the greatest men are mere men: "In all this [greatness], thou dost but wrap up a snowball upon a coal of fire; there is that within thee that melts there, as fast, as thou growest: thou buildest in Marble, and thy soul dwells in those mud-walls, that have moldred away, ever since they were made. Take thy self altogether, and thou art but a man; and what's that" (I, vii, 273).

The limitations suggested by Donne's discreet choice of examples and the equality of all men before Christ are reinforced in the court sermons by repeated references to God and the Law (not the King) as the foundation of moral order. King James had stated unequivocally that "Kings were the authors and makers of the Lawes, and not the Lawes of the Kings,"[12] but in Donne's first sermon preached in 1625 before King Charles, on the text "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous doe?" he chooses to ignore the absolutist implications of that statement and to educate James's son as to the real sources of power. It is a sermon on foundations in Church, State, Family, and ourselves, and cautions its hearers to discriminate carefully between fundamental and circumstantial things. He warns:

> we must not too jealously suspect, not too bitterly condemne, not so peremptorily conclude, that what soever is not done, as wee would have it done, or as wee have seene it done in former times, is not well done: for there is a large Latitude, and, by necessitie of Circumstances, much may be admitted, and yet no *Foundations destroyed.* (VI, xii, 243)

Not everything can be called foundation; what is important is that "Of all these foure houses ... *God* is the *Foundation*, and so *foundations* cannot be destroyed" (VI, xii, 251). Donne examines the particular foundations of each house in the second part of his sermon and concludes that Christ is the foundation of the Church, Law is the foundation of the State, Obedience is the foundation of the Family, and Conscience is the foundation of ourselves. As Donne's first sermon before Charles, this is

certainly a daring and deliberate effort to place the King in relation to the structure of power and authority and to make important political discriminations that transcend individual kings.

That all sovereignty comes from God (IV, ix, 241), then, is a theme reiterated in the sermons, and reinforced by the notion that law is the foundation of the state. Rhetorically, however, Donne seems reluctant to choose between King and Law, preferring to speak of them as interdependent: "The prince, and the law, are the two most reverend, and most safe things, that man can rely upon" (III, viii, 195). Even when he does discriminate it is to allow to God the undisputed authority in "fundamentall things" and to the King sovereignty "in those things, which are, in their nature but circumstantiall, and may therefore, according to times, and places, and persons, admit alterations, in those things, though they be appertaining to Religion" (III, ix, 255-56). The distinction is typical of Donne in that the King's prerogative is admitted, even while its limits in relation to "foundations" are subtly delineated. In a later sermon, Donne's discreet choice of adjectives makes a similarly sensitive discrimination: "Let the *Law* bee sacred to thee, and the Dispensers of the *Law*, reverend" (VI, xii, 259). Clearly it is the Law and not the King that is sovereign.

Donne also uses his court sermons to limit the King's absolute power by establishing the minister's spiritual authority and to remind his audience, including the King, of their duties as hearers. In an early sermon, Donne establishes his authority by analogy with the King's: Preachers fulfill an employment "from such a King as God, to such a State as his Church" (II, vii, 167). Another sermon establishes the authority of the preacher not only in relation to hearers, but more specifically in relation to Magistrates and Kings:

> Princes are sealed with the Crown; The Miter will not fit that seale. Powerfully, and gratiously they protect the Church, and are supreame heads of the Church; But they minister not the Sacraments of the Church. They give preferments; but they give not the capacity of preferment. They give order who shall have; but they give not orders, by which they are enabled to have, that have. (IX, ii, 80)

And in his sermon delivered while the body of King James was still at Denmark House, Donne goes even further in his claims for the authority of the Church: "in the *Church*, for the same testimony that *God* gave of

Christ given *of the Church*, to justifie her power . . . *If you disobey them*, [preachers] *you disobey God*; in what fetters soever they *binde* you, you shall rise bound in those fetters" (VI, xiv, 282). In all of these statements, Donne is eager to establish that there is a balance of power existing between King and Priest, for while he allows the King's jurisdiction over men, both body and soul, this control is in things circumstantial, in matters of religious discipline. In matters of moral authority the priest rules, and no one but God has final authority over the conscience, "this Law in his own heart" (I, ii, 173).

This power of conscience as the foundation of all authority suggests the most subversive way in which Donne limits the absolute sovereignty of the King. Although his two most fully examined cases of conscience were not preached at court, the questions he raises in them about the relationship between King and Law indicate his own real concern for the careful exercise of liberty of conscience, even to the point of disobedience to lawful authority.[13] In a sermon on Esther, Donne establishes the priority of God's law to the King's law: "if two Laws lie upon me, and it be impossible to obey both, I must obey that which comes immediately from the greatest power and imposes the greatest duty" (V, xi, 225-26). In it, Donne engages his hearers in untangling the complex relationships between law and conscience, exploring the nature of civil and moral law, but allowing the final arbitration to God and conscience, not to the King. Significantly, he preaches disobedience to Kings in sermons outside Whitehall, where the idea of disobedience was still too closely connected in court memory with the Gunpowder Treason.

But it is with Donne's conscience in relation to the King that we are most concerned and it is precisely as a case of conscience that one should examine his sermon at Paul's Cross defending King James's *Directions to Preachers*. Obviously, Donne himself saw it as one, stating in his dedicatory epistle to Buckingham that in the explication of the text he speaks "as the Holy Ghost intended" and in the application of it "as his Majestie intended" (IV, vii, 178-79). Patterson also notes this tension in his explanatory letter to Goodyere in which he uses "impersonal, passive, conditional constructs" to describe the effects his sermon produced ("*they* received comfortable assurance . . .") and personal constructs to express his own constraint ("I dare say nothing by a letter of adventure").[14] Obviously Donne was trying to accommodate himself to two masters, and at least one observer writes that he was not entirely successful. John Chamberlain wrote to Dudley Carleton that Donne preached "to certifie the Kings good intention . . . but he gave no great satisfaction, or as some say spoke as if himself were not so well satisfied."[15]

How are we to interpret Donne's defense of these restrictions upon preachers? Bald makes the point that "Donne was already, at least in part, in sympathy with the King's directions; more than once in the Lincoln's Inn sermons he had complained against excess of freedom in preaching,"[16] and cites a passage in which Donne reprehends "the impotency of a satyricall humour [which] makes men preach freely, and over-freely, offensively, scandalously" (III, xvi, 357). Carey, of course, concludes that Donne's defense of these instructions can be explained by his "pathological" fascination with the "exercise of power," an imagination "stirred by the image of numinous majesty, scattering opposition as the sun disperses clouds."[17]

But the sermon is obviously not an ambitious or cowardly attempt to win the King's favor; neither does it advocate unlicensed freedom of speech. Characteristic of Donne is the balance of law with discretion, the same balance achieved by Esther and Paul under similarly difficult circumstances. Typically, Donne tries to establish foundations and priorities, to find the "better" if not the perfect course. In this case, the foundation of his defense is the principle of Order and of God's ordinary means of establishing it. All orders of society—Princes, officers, merchants, judges, even the idle—have their role in this providential plan. Even the mention that "*The starres in their order fought against Sisera*" proves that God prefers orderly means: "It was no *Enchantment*, no *Sorcery*, no disordering of the frame, or the powers, or the influence of these heavenly bodies, in favour of the *Israelites; God* would not be beholden to the *Devill*, or to *Witches*, for his best friends. It was no disorderly Enchantment, nor was it no *Miracle*, that disordered these Starres" (IV, vii, 191).

The second part of the sermon reinforces the explication in the first, arguing forcibly that none are silenced as preachers if "they fight within the discipline of this Text" (IV, vii, 196). The proviso is crucial and typical of Donne who argues for actions of a "middle nature" and warns each hearer not "to thrust himselfe into unnecessary dangers, or persecutions, and call his indiscretion *Martyrdome*" (IV, vii, 173).[18] It is also the counsel of a man who preaches upon the text "Study to be quiet" (X, vii, 178), continually emphasizing the disadvantages of disorderly conduct, continually restraining, but not eliminating, critical comment. In this sermon Donne argues simply that "when there is not an uniforme, a comely, an orderly presentation of matters of faith, faith it selfe growes loose, and loses her estimation; and preaching in the *Church* comes to bee as pleading at the *Barre*, and not so well" (IV, vii, 197). None of this is surprising from a man who values foundations above superedifications, canon above apocrypha, matters fundamental above matters indifferent,

and whose middle way is quite clearly not the oversimplified *via media*, identified by some of his critics,[19] but always a careful balancing act over that "giddy and vertiginous" way which constitutes man's passage through this world.

The "two-fold *Order*" (198) which Donne defines in this sermon provides further evidence of Donne's discretion in justifying and placing in context the King's temporal power over God's spiritual warriors. Donne argues that as head of Church James is to be obeyed, and to justify this authority Donne alludes to historical precedents: the godly Kings of Judah, the Christian Emperors in the primitive Church, and even more recent English Kings beginning with Henry VIII. Furthermore, he notes that James's orders were limited voluntarily by consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury and included reasons for his actions, evidence that "he is too *Great*, and too *Good* a *King* to seeke corners, or disguises, for his actions" (201). Donne prefers not to judge the sincerity of James's motives. This public display is enough to inspire confidence in Donne that James, like himself, distrusts the seditious cowardice of indirection and only wants by these directions to distinguish "grave, and solid, from light and humerous preaching" (202). Solid preaching is nothing more than catechizing in fundamental points, a priority that Donne voices often in his sermons. Donne is telling other preachers that avoiding satire does not preclude directness or even controversy. His interpretation of the *Directions* allows him to claim that "In our *Articles*, in our *Homilies*, there is enough for *Positive*, enough for *Controverted* Divinitie . . . neither need any sober Man that intends to handle Controversies aske more, or go further" (207). These directions, he argues, will do nothing to discourage "*discreet and religious Preachers*" (208).

Donne's reluctance to preach satirically, so evident in this sermon, illuminates the difficulties he must have experienced as a court preacher.[20] Often Donne equates satire in sermons with libel, arguing that it is easy to be witty, and that satiric attacks often fail to achieve that "nearnesse" that brings sins home to his hearers.[21] Unlike the prophet Jeremy, who "preached heavy Doctrin, and therefore his Auditory hated him" (II, i, 52), Donne prefers to "speake so, as the congregation should not know I mean them" (IX, v, 152). Yet this does not mean glossing over the sins of the congregation. Even early in his career, Donne defends the foolishness of preaching against those who think scornfully "that as the Church is within the State, so preaching is a part of State government, flexible to the present occasions of the time, appliable to the present dispositions of men" (II, xviii, 348). However, Donne's reluctance to use his office as minister to cater to the times is complicated by the admission that perhaps he "brings a little *Amasiah* of his owne, in his bosome,

a little wisperer in his owne heart that tels him *This is the kings Chapell, and it is the Kings Court*" (II, xviii, 349). He knows that to add honesty to discretion there must be something of the prophet in him, some of "our owne *Amos*, as well as our *Amasias*" to speak of God's woes and judgments even at Court.

Critics like Carey and Gleason argue that in this struggle between Amasiah and Amos, Amasiah was ultimately the victor, that Donne's ringing claims for the moral authority of the preacher are made only when the King in question is no longer able to object.[22] Carey cites as typical of Donne's hair-splitting and weak-kneed moral discriminations a passage in which Donne tries to justify his own political stance by distinguishing between the extraordinary commission of the Apostles and the present day ordinary function of the minister.[23] Donne writes:

> And therefore they argue impertinently, and collect and infer sometimes seditiously that say, The Prophet proceeded thus and thus, therefore the Minister may and must proceed so too; The Prophets would chide the Kings openly, and threaten the Kings publiquely, and proclaime the fault of the Kings in the eares of the people confidently, authoritatively, therefore the Minister may and must do so. (II, xiv, 303)

To argue thus, Donne says, is to "argue perversely, forwardly, dangerously"—Donne might even add "satirically"—and to do so is not only to abuse the lawful authority of the minister's office, but to threaten the order of society. The time of emergency is past, he argues, and "no man will thinke that the Justices in their Sessions, or the Judges in their Circuits may proceed to executions, without due tryall by a course of Law, because Marshals, in time of rebellion and other necessities, may doe so, because the one hath but an ordinary, the other an extraordinary Commission" (II, xiv, 303-04). Far from being an obsequious admission of the King's absolute power, as Carey would have it, Donne's statement here is consistent with his more general belief that the Law is the foundation of the State, that men can act freely only within the context of their authorized positions, and that God most often uses ordinary means to advance his ends; his normal way is not by miracle, and modern day ministers have not been commissioned as prophets.

Like the King, who must satisfy the claims of both God and conscience, the preacher must walk a middle path between angry prophet and detached observer. Donne is aware that a satire can easily become a libel, and that "satyricall and libellous defamations of other men" (I, ii,

179) are not the most effective ways of bringing the lessons of the gospel home to his court hearers. Donne is not Jeremy, "a bitter, and satyrical preacher" (II, i, 53), nor has he been commissioned to be. Instead, he counsels his fellow ministers to preach through orderly means: "Looke so farre towards your way to Heaven, as to the Firmament, and consider there, that that starre by which wee saile, and make great voyages, is none of the starres of the greatest magnitude; but yet it is none of the least; but a middle starre" (209). And it is as a middle star that Donne concludes this sermon, a sermon consistent with Donne's priorities, and one which dramatizes him at his best in walking that difficult path between indiscretion and dishonesty.

If, as Patterson claims, Donne's letters demonstrate "the problem [Donne faced in his court sermons] of combining obedience with outspokenness, of offering the king palatable advice while avoiding 'the bed of whisperers,'"[24] the sermons themelves seem to resolve the tensions more satisfactorily. This can be readily demonstrated by a sermon preached at Whitehall on April 1, 1627, on the text "Take heed what you hear." This was a sermon which apparently displeased Charles I but about which Donne disclaims all subversive intent, adding in a letter to Sir Robert Carr, "I would I were a little more guilty."[25] Another letter compounds the tension by stating that "though I said then, that we are bound to speake aloud, though we awaken men, . . . yet after two or three modest knocks at the door, I went away" (307-08).

The doubleness in these disclaimers, inserted in his letters to Carr, does suggest Donne's disappointment and sense of inadequacy to the terms of his vocation, but the sermon itself seems neither "over-timorous" nor "over-venturous" (VII, xvi, 395). Donne applies the text primarily to ministers and "to you that are Hearers now" (396) and warns against hearkening to "*seditious rumours*, which may violate the dignity of the State, or of *schismaticall rumours*, which may cast a cloud, or aspersion upon the government of the Church" (395). The whole sermon seems to be directed against low voices, whisperings, half-silences, which are not God's ordinary means. This applies to both preachers and hearers. Preachers must speak "avowable doctrine" that "awake[s] them, that sleep in their sinne" (396); but his more challenging advice is directed to his audience. Donne argues that hearers must hear their superiors, that is obey them, and must take heed what they listen to. He urges his audience to "hedge thine eares with thornes; that he that would whisper a calumny in thine ear, against another man, may be pricked with those thornes, that is may discern from thee, that he is not welcome to thee, and so forbear; or if he will presse upon thee, those thornes may prick thee, and warne thee that there is an uncharitable

office done which thou shouldest not countenance" (405). This must be done to protect one's own safety as well as to maintain charity.

What Donne is presenting in this sermon on the discretion of hearing is a sermon on charity to ourselves and others, rather than a manual for avoiding trouble. It is advice reminiscent of a verse epistle to the Countess of Bedford which counsels innocence of conscience balanced by discreet wariness:

> He will make you speake truths, and credibly,
> And make you doubt, that others doe not so:
> Hee will provide you keyes, and locks, to spie,
> And scape spies, to good ends, and hee will show
> What you may not acknowledge, what not know.[26]

The notion of the preacher as spy rather than as martyr is helpful in understanding the kind of attitude Donne is encouraging in this sermon.[27] The preacher must probe, but carefully; he must persuade his audience rather than terrify or infuriate them. Calumny and whispering endanger everyone and undermine the foundations of State and Church, and Donne is urging in this sermon that the primary duty of every hearer is to hear carefully, but charitably, to leave aside private misinterpretations and criticisms, and to seek the light. "It is almost one," he writes, "to be scandalized by another, as to scandalize another; almost as great a sin, to be shaked in our constancy, in our selves, or in our charity towards others, as to offer a scandal to others" (IX, iv, 113).[28] He is not advising blindness to the corruptions of Church and State, but a charitable preference for order. Such discretion, he is saying, is the duty of both King and subject.

This sermon seems to raise as many questions about Donne's political strategies as it answers. One could conclude with Carey that we see here more evidence of a Donne motivated entirely by ambition—rapacious and unscrupulous at the end of "thwarted, grasping, parasitic life."[29] And of course we have Donne's own concern about the timidity of his voice. But the sermon also dramatizes Donne's homiletic response to the concerns of a lifetime. One of these is certainly the issue of vocation. As early as the satires, a vocation, and particularly an authorized vocation, was an absolute necessity. So we are not surprised to find Donne searching for the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness or by his reluctance "to speake of the duties of subjects before the King, or of the duties of Kings, in publike and popular Congregations" (VII, xvi, 403). This sermon also shows his continued uneasiness about satiric preaching, and asserts his reliance upon the power of the preacher's *ordinary*

commission, his awareness that preachers are God's "conduits" (*Satyre I*, 5) and that any true reform is best accomplished through the accepted channels of power than in "the bed of whisperers."

Apart from Donne's concern with vocation, his finely tuned sense of discretion is also evident in this and other court sermons. For Donne the ultimate indiscretion is to lose one's job (or even one's life) through an excess of zeal. This, of course, is the burden of his arguments against recusancy in *Pseudo-Martyr*, but is evident, for example, in his sermons which criticize the excessively self-deprecating, even foolhardy, bargains with God offered by Moses ("*Dele me*, Pardon this people, or blot my name out of thy Booke"), or St. Paul ("rather then his brethren should not be saved, let himselfe be condemned") (V, xvi, 329). While he may prefer speaking loudly to knocking modestly, he is also aware that losing one's calling is worse, a form of suicide: "For he that does so, by withdrawing himself from his calling, from the labours of mutual society in this life, that man *kills himself*, and God calls him not" (I, iii, 212). As always in Donne, the important thing is to discern foundations, to distinguish fundamental from indifferent things, to eschew vehemence and excess, to establish priorities, and to walk warily in this world so that you may continue to walk at all.

And this seems to be, finally, how Donne approaches the power of Kingship in his sermons. By upholding the example of Christ as contrast to the King, by stressing the supremacy of the Law of both God and Conscience as the final moral arbiters, and by asserting the balance of jurisdiction between Church and State, Donne challenges the King's words in a King's court. Although he believes in order and in the King's sacred office, the limitations and balances which Donne's court sermons continually assert allow Donne to qualify and limit that power. In them, he responds to the challenge of his vocation tactfully in sermons that serve as reminders of the delicate balance that constituted relations between Church and State in the early seventeenth century. Above all, they are models of the discretion required in channelling and guiding, if not absolutely controlling, the turbulent sources of political power.

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Notes

[1] On the epithalamion see Wesley Milgate, ed., *The Epithalamions, Anniversaries and Epicedes of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), p. xxiv; John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 88; Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 131-33; R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), p. 274; Margaret McGowan, "'As Through a Looking-glass': Donne's Epithalamia

and their Courtly Context," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 175-218.

On the verse epistles see Patricia Thomson, "The Literature of Patronage, 1580-1630," *Essays in Criticism* 2 (1952), 281, 284; Joseph Summers, *The Heirs of Donne and Jonson* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 32.

On the *Anniversaries* see Carey, p. 101; Bald, p. 249; and Barbara Lewalski's elaborate justification of the excesses as Donne's praise of the Image of God in Elizabeth Drury in *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974).

On *Pseudo-Martyr* see Carey, pp. 31-33, 64; Bald, pp. 226-27.

On James's *Directions to Preachers* see Carey, p. 116; Bald, pp. 434-35.

On the sermons in general see Gale Carrithers, *Donne at Sermons: A Christian Existential World* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1972), p. 302n; William Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 217-18; John B. Gleason, "Dr. Donne in the Courts of Kings: A Glimpse from Marginalia," *JEGP* 69 (1970), 599-612.

[2] Annabel Patterson, "Misinterpretable Donne: The Testimony of the Letters," *John Donne Journal* 1 (1982), 42. Patterson discusses Donne more fully in the context of censorship in the seventeenth century in *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 92-105 and *passim*.

[3] Carrithers, p. 113.

[4] King James I, *Basilikon Doron*, in *The Political Poetry of James I*, ed. Charles H. McIlwain (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 5. All references to James's works are taken from this reprint of the 1616 edition.

[5] John Donne, "Satyre III," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 25, l. 86.

[6] Goldberg's book cited in note 1 and an essay by Stephen Greenblatt entitled "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion," *Glyph* 8 (1981), 406-61, are suggestive of ways in which intelligent and complicated men such as Jonson, Donne, and Shakespeare subverted royal authority in their works, but are not directly applicable to Donne's court sermons. Patterson, in *Censorship and Interpreation*, p. 94, speaks of Donne's "subversive instinct, limited and marginalized though it may be" preserved intact behind "generic fences," and on p. 99 notes "signs of ambivalence" in several sermons.

[7] John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953-62), VIII, iv, 115.

[8] "A moate in anothers eye, is a beame into yours: a blemish in another, is a leprouse byle into you: and a veniall sine (as the Papists call it) in another, is a great crime into you" (*Basilikon Doron*, p. 12). See Goldberg, p. 117, for a statement of how the political power lost by recognizing individual consciences is restored to some extent by patriarchal assertions of the "willing obedience" his subjects owe him. Yet, as Goldberg points out, "Patriarchy represents a double bind; subjecting the king's subjects, it also subjects the king to God and . . . to his genealogy" (118).

[9] See Goldberg, pp. 113-16, for a discussion of the mirror as a bifurcating metaphor used by James to suggest the contradictions of transparency and obfuscation involved in his public image. See also Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, p. 75 and *passim*, who discusses the complex "conventions of political discourse, the unwritten rules and contracts evolved, broken, and relearned throughout the century, the formulae of protected speech and privileged genres, of equivocations shared by authors and authorities."

[10] Goldberg, p. 117.

[11] For a full discussion of this point see Jeanne M. Shami, "Donne's Protestant Casuistry: Cases of Conscience in the *Sermons*," *SP* 80 (1983), 53-66.

[12] King James I, *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, p. 62.

[13] These two sermons are discussed in detail in the article cited in note 11.

[14] Patterson, "Misinterpretable Donne," p. 47.

[15] *Sermons*, IV, 34.

[16] Bald, p. 434.

[17] Carey, p. 116.

[18] For a full discussion of Donne's sense of discretion see Jeanne M. Shami, "Donne on Discretion," *ELH* 47 (1980), 48-66.

[19] Thomas O. Sloane offers a persuasive view of the role of rhetorical *controversia* in Donne's *via media* in *Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985).

[20] Shami, "Donne on Discretion," pp. 61-63; Patterson, "Misinterpretable Donne," pp. 44-45, 50-51. See, however, an interesting and ambivalent passage in this sermon (IV, vii, 197): "*Wee command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you withdraw your selfe from all that walk Inordinate* . . . from all such as preach *suspiciously* and *jealously*; and be the garden never so faire, wil make the world beleeve, there is a *Snake* under every leafe, be the intenton never so sincere, will presage, and prognosticate, and predivine sinister and mischievous effects from it." The allusion to the "fair garden" and its "*Snake*" is difficult to interpret unless we understand it within the hermeneutics of censorship outlined by Patterson. While the audience has the responsibility not to lose the larger consolatory perspective of God's continued merciful relations with his people by focussing too closely upon the more terrifying sentences in Scripture, it is hard to believe that Donne is not also cautioning his hearers to be alert to the presence of the Snake in the garden, no matter how unlikely the identification may seem. See also *Sermons* VII, ii, 86.

[21] Shami, "Donne on Discretion," p. 49.

[22] Carey, p. 116; Gleason, p. 612.

[23] Carey, p. 113; 288, n. 47.

[24] Patterson, "Misinterpretable Donne," p. 51. Patterson, however, does not agree that Donne resolved his dilemma in this sermon, or in any others.

[25] John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651), ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), p. 305.

[26] John Donne, "To the Countesse of Bedford. On New-yeares day," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 232, ll. 51-55.

[27] See Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, p. 93, on "state spy-systems" and Donne's articulation of the "psychological consequences of a repressive culture."

[28] There is much room for discussion of Donne's notion of scandal, particularly Donne's criticism of those who are easily scandalized as opposed to those who create scandal. In *Censorship and Interpretaion*, pp. 99-100, Patterson mentions scandal briefly in connection with satire and cites *Sermons* III, 182, but the issue is more complex than she indicates. See also *Sermons* IV, xi, 301; IV, vii, 197.

[29] Carey, p. 80.