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"Goe forth ye daughters of Sion": Divine Authority, the King, and the Church in Donne's Denmark House Sermon

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> There are only two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland, that is King James the head of the Commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus the King of the Church, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member.[1]

On April 26, 1625, Donne preached a sermon at Denmark House, a few days before King James was removed for burial.[2] It would seem the natural place for Donne to commemorate King James or to comment on the monarchy. Strangely, this sermon seems almost to ignore James altogether, referring to him only in the final moments and there in a distinctly human form. Divested of his kingly authority, James is merely one member of the heavenly Church. In this sermon, Donne rewrites history so that the audience understands that true divine authority and power is to be found in the Church rather than in the King. In doing this, he proves to be more interested in the well being of the Church of England than in the well being of the monarchy.

Such a reading of the sermon, and indeed of Donne's political disposition, is in direct opposition to the reading furthered by new historicists John Carey, Debora Shuger, and Jonathan Goldberg.[3] In *James I and the Politics of Literature*, Goldberg uses this sermon to establish what he sees as Donne's overwhelming and long obsession with King James and monarchical power. He comes to this conclusion by overlooking and misreading all references to the Church and Christ (as the only divine monarch and head of the Church of God):

> Donne's self-constitution is absolutist; like Lear, his concern is who's in and who's out, and there seems to be no alternative to that either/or situation. He is fully made—or unmade—in relation to the powers of society. . . . In Donne's terms, the court is the center and the only reality of society; not to be there is to be nowhere.[4]

The final statement should more properly read "Goldberg's terms" because he imposes on Donne a narrow and modern definition of society and politics.[5] He defines both terms strictly in terms of the monarch; thus "politics" refers to the personal politics of the monarch and society refers to an elite courtly society. According to Goldberg, Donne has so completely internalized these definitions that he is haunted by the fear that he will become "nothing" when separated off from the King and court.

The Denmark House Sermon demonstrates that Donne has a much larger frame of reference. For him, all human identity is defined by membership in the Church of God; as a result, the individual becomes literally "nothing" when exiled from this heavenly Church.[6] Ultimately, the King's death reminds the audience that they should define themselves by their position in this overarching society. I am not arguing that Donne's interests are not political, but certainly they are not "political" in the narrow sense assumed by Goldberg. Insofar as Donne is interested in politics, he is largely interested in preserving and strengthening the Church of England. The Church of England, Donne argues, provides its members with ready access to the universal and heavenly Church of God.[7] With James's death, Donne reminds the audience that the Church of England remains viable and important, regardless of which monarch is the current temporal head.

Donne assures the audience that the Church will remain intact because Christ, rather than James, is and was always the "head" of the Church. To make this point, he dismantles the Jacobean absolutist model of kingship by applying it to Christ as head of the universal Church of God. The authority attributed to the King belongs exclusively to Christ. James attempted to consolidate his power over Church

and State by promulgating the image of himself as a new King Solomon, a quasi-divine steward of the Church. In using Solomonic imagery, the Denmark House Sermon clearly refers to the Jacobean model of kingship; however, it applies such imagery exclusively to Christ.[8]

Donne chooses a text from Canticles, a book said to be authored by King Solomon. The passage refers to Solomon in a seemingly heightened kingly form: "Goe forth ye daughters of Sion, and behold King Solomon, with the Crown, wherewith his mother crowned him, in the day of his espousals, and in the day of gladnesse of heart" (Canticles 3. 11). By referring to the "Crown" and the subjects, the daughters of Zion, the passage describes King Solomon in his most kingly glory. If applied to King James and his subjects, the text would certainly support the argument that Donne had internalized the absolutist model of kingship. Surely, this passage proves that Donne can use seemingly absolutist formulations in ways that tend to restrict the King's authority.[9] Indeed, the Denmark House Sermon, written after James had died, goes beyond many of his more "discrete" formulations delivered before the King. Here, Donne goes so far as to dismantle the absolutist model for kingship. In applying it exclusively to Christ, Donne implies that no King can usurp the authority properly invested in Christ as the true "head" of the Church.

From the beginning, Donne turns forcefully and overwhelmingly away from the King to the Church. In the *divisio*, he offers the audience guidelines on how to read this Solomonic text. Donne would appear to read the text against its grain when he insists that it refers primarily to the Church. In reinterpreting the Solomonic allusions, Donne trains the audience to look towards the Church. Thus, he directs the audience to read the passage as discussing three facets of the Church:

> For first, the *speaker*, the Director of all, is the *Church*, the *spouse* of Christ. . . ; And then the *persons* that are *called up*, are, as you see, *The Daughters of Sion*, the obedient children of the Church, that hearken to her voice: And then lastly, the *person* upon whom they are directed is *Solomon* crowned, That is,

> Christ invested with the royal dignity of being *Head of the Church.* (280-1)

The *divisio* directs the audience's attention to three facets of the Church—the Church as the spouse of Christ, her obedient members, and finally her head, the true King Solomon. The absolutist terminology works here to transfer attention away from James and earthly kingship. His subject is clearly the Church and its constant divine authority.

In order to strengthen the Church, Donne undercuts the absolutist claims of James's iconography. Christ, rather than James, is King Solomon, and the Temple is the Church as the universal and abiding spouse of Christ. The audience must direct its attention to "*Solomon* crowned, That is, Christ invested with the royal dignity of being *Head of the Church*" (280-1). The formulation ignores James altogether even while it places a greater emphasis on the Church itself. Notably, Donne uses images of kingship to describe Christ's role as head of the Church. Thus, he is "crowned" when he assumes his position as head, and his true "royal dignity" comes from this role. Significantly, Donne refrains from describing the relationship between the audience and Christ as one of subject and King. Members of the Church become "crowned" when they enter into heaven.

Donne makes a distinction between various types of King Solomon. He distinguishes, for example, between King Solomon as "son of *Bathsheba*" and Christ as the true King Solomon (286). The distinction clearly diminishes even the authority of the Old Testament King Solomon, the son of Bathsheba and thus product of David's sin. Furthermore, as Donne makes these distinctions, he urges the audience to direct their attention away from the Old Testament Solomon to Christ as the true King Solomon. He creates, then, a hierarchy of Solomons, and he imputes all the most extravagant Jacobean claims of kingship exclusively to the highest Solomon, Christ. At the same time, Donne describes Christ as the true peacemaker, yet another Jacobean image of kingship:

> For, *Solomon*, in this text, is not a *proper* Name, but an *Appellative*; a significative word: *Solomon* is *pacificus*, the *Peacemaker*, and our peace is made in, and by Christ Jesus: and he is that *Solomon* we are called upon to see here. (286)

Donne merges two words, Solomon and "peacemaker," both notably applied to James and his civil and ecclesiastical policies. James was, of course, called the peacemaker for his continued refusal to engage in war abroad (especially the Thirty Years War which effected his daughter Elizabeth). Donne applies this terminology, however, to Christ Jesus, so that their "peace is made" in him. In this move, Donne suggests that true "peace" comes from a final union with Christ in the Church of God.

James is barely present in this text, except insofar as the imagery suggests his kingship. In referring to the three Solomons, Donne effectively dismantles any absolutist claims furthered by him in his lifetime. At the very most, James would be an imitation of the biblical King Solomon—a Solomon twice removed. Donne sets the stage here for his final portrait of James as a man who shares with the audience a common sinfulness.

Donne strategically deflates James's absolutist model of kingship in order to redirect the audience's attention to the Church. He realizes, of course, that they participate in the English Church and State, but he wants them to do this while always remembering that they are and will be members of the universal Church of God. For this reason, Donne repeatedly underscores the transitory nature of temporal power. All individuals are merely "infants" here, and "all our *motions*, and preferments, from place, to place, are but the *rocking of a cradle*" (285). In fact, Donne commands the audience in seemingly contradictory terms to "see thy self, beyond thy self, to see what thou shalt be in the next world" (286). Donne's apparent contradiction makes sense if we consider the extent to which he deflates kingly authority. The audience must accept the transitory nature of their identity achieved here, especially in relation to the Crown, and as a result, they must come to define themselves by their future membership in the Church of God.

Such a move has practical consequences in supporting the Church of England. Throughout the sermon, Donne closely associates the Church of England with the Church of God. Christ is the head of the Church of God, and the Church of England is part of the Church of God. As such, Christ, rather than James or any King, is their head. Nonetheless, they should participate in the Church of England, as James himself did, in order to assure their ultimate position in the Church of God. In the beginning of the sermon, Donne urges conformity of the audience to the Church of England: "let no man presume of a better state, in the Triumphant Church, then he holds in the Militant, or hope for *communion* there, that despises *excommunication* here" (282). Similarly, he urges them not to "devest your *allegiance* to the *Church*" (283). Because Donne focuses primarily on the relationship between the Church of England and the Church of God, he ignores the temporal head of the former, King James. Indeed, the audience is urged to look towards the latter and thus towards Christ. Ultimately, Donne encourages obedience to the Church without ever explicitly urging them to obey the King (although he would never deny the importance of the monarch to the orderly running of the temporal Church).[10]

Goldberg, then, misreads the sermon by ignoring its repeated emphasis on the Church. He purposefully collapses the distinctions Donne so carefully makes between Christ and James, the Church of God and the Church of England. When Goldberg is forced to acknowledge the Church, he sees it as merely one useful weapon in James's absolutist arsenal. Even when he describes the daughters of Zion as members of the Church of England, Goldberg focuses primarily on them as subjects to the State and King. Goldberg describes the "imperative" and "authoritative" voice of the Church, only to turn quickly to what is clearly the power of the State and King:

> The voice of power reduces all hearers to the status of subjects and subjection (the text can no more be resisted than can the state, Donne says). Obedience and submission are registered best in the gender of those addressed and named as female. . . . (217; 281-2)

Goldberg purposefully confuses a number of distinctions, ultimately reading the entire section as an expression of Donne's obsession with absolute power. In his parenthetical statement, Goldberg quickly turns his attention to the State and its supposed irresistible power over its subjects, including Donne himself.

Donne shores up the authority of the Church of England. In the section Goldberg quotes, Donne is more concerned to describe the ways in which the Church is invested with a divine authority; he takes a decidedly non-absolutist stance in focusing on the divine authority of the preaching ministry:

> When he [Christ] has gone out of this world, men needed a more particular solicitation to heare him; for, *how*, and *where*, and *in whom* should they heare him, when he was gone? In the Church, for the same testimony that God gave of Christ, to authorize and justifie his preaching, hath Christ given of the Church, to justifie her power. (282)

Donne here establishes the authority of the Church without even referring to the King's role as ecclesiastical head. The preaching ministry, rather than the King, speaks with the voice of God as they interpret his Word.[11] As a whole, the sermon teaches the audience to focus on their membership in the Church of God, and it suggests that the Church of England and its preaching ministry plays an important role in guiding its members to this ultimate heavenly society.

In the final moments of the sermon, Donne returns to King James in order to alter the audience's understanding of his ultimate importance. He has already dismantled the Jacobean iconography by applying all its terms and all its most extravagant claims to Christ. Now he exalts James in terms which expose his shared humanity. James shares in a common mortality, sinfulness, and, therefore, an absolute dependence on God. Thus, his elevation requires an absolute submission to the true divine authority of God's hand. Donne uses the image of kingly authority—the hand invested with a quasi-divine power, but he strategically bestows that power on God. He observes, "But then the hand of God, *hath not set up*, but *laid down another Glasse*; a glasse

that reflects thy self, and nothing but thy selfe" (289). Donne uses the "laid down" King in order to remind the audience that they are similarly vulnerable; as such, they should seek to define themselves in the permanent Church of God.

In a lengthy passage, Donne describes all the powers *previously* invested in the monarch's hand; he begins by focusing exclusively on the power James had over the audience and ends by meditating on the vanity of all such civil authority:

> And when you shall find that hand that had signed to one of you a *Patent* for *Title*, to another for *Pension*, to another for a *Pardon*, to another for *Dispensation*, *Dead*. . . That Hand that ballanced his *own three Kingdomes* so equally, as that none of them complained of one another, and carried the *Keyes* of all the Christian world, and locked up, and let out *Armies* in their due Season, Dead; how poore, how faint, how paile, how momentany, how transitory, how empty, how frivolous, how Dead things, must you necessarily thinke *Titles*, and *Possessions*, and *Favours*. . . . (290)

The first part of the meditation focuses on what might appear to be absolute authority of the monarch. In life, he could give worldly honors to people and, even more significantly, dole out life and death to his subjects. Stripped of this authority in death, James becomes an example to the reader of the vanity of all "titles," "possessions," "favors," and ultimately personal power.

In this final section, Donne diminishes James's temporal authority so as to convince his audience to focus more immediately on their membership in the Church. Once Donne has deflated James's kingly iconography, he elevates him in a new form. James becomes an example to the audience of their own limitations: "in this glasse presented now (*The Body of our Royall*, but *dead Master and Soveraigne*) we cannot, we doe not except sinne" (289). Donne uses all the royal appellatives, but the word "dead," as in the previous passage, nullifies all their claims. Interestingly, Donne now praises James in a manner which is relevant to all Christians. They must "look" on James as

> a beame of that Sunne, as an abridgement of that *Solomon* in the Text; for every Christian truely reconciled to God, and *signed* with his hand in the *Absolution*, and *sealed* with his bloud in the *Sacrament*, (and this was his case) is a beame, and abridgement of *Christ* himselfe. (290-1)

James becomes a member of the Church, and as a result, he is now an "abridgment" of the true King Solomon. Donne importantly describes him as one more participating member. Before he died, he was not only reconciled to God but an active participant in two church rituals—the absolution and Holy Communion given in the Visitation of the Sick. James becomes an example for others in his lifetime participation in the Church of England and his ultimate fulfilled membership in the Church of God.

In the final prayer, Donne uses James as a reminder to the audience of their membership in the Church of God. They will, Donne admits, inevitably return to their daily lives, and as a result, they will become involved in court politics. Donne describes them as citizens who are affected by either the "old" or "new" King. They will go forth either "to the service of their *new Master* [King Charles]" or "to the enjoying of the Fortunes conferred by their old [King James]" (291). In referring to both kings, Donne nods at the reality of the lives of many elites; however, he does so in order to warn them to define themselves by their membership in a much different society. In the final moments, Donne makes a move typical of the Denmark Sermon as a whole. He reminds them, then, to define themselves by their membership in the Church of God, which he defines in opposition to their "busie endeavours in Court." The exhortation, "let none of us, goe so farre from him, or from one another," importantly describes a society where all individuals are equal members. They will become "nothing," Donne suggests, only if they allow themselves to be defined only by their participation here in the State. To be separated from the Church is to become "nothing" quite literally by being erased from the Book of Life.[12]

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Notes

1. Andrew Melville, as cited in Introduction, *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. xxi.

2. *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1959-62), 6: 208. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and cited by page number in the text..

3. John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981); Debora Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: U of Californi P, 1990); Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983). For critics who offer more complex criticism of Donne's politics see David Norbrook, "The Monarchy of Wit and the Republic of Letters: Donne's Politics" in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katherine E. Maus (Chicago: U of Chicago P. 1990), pp. 3-36; Annabel Patterson, "All Donne" in *Soliciting*, 37-67; Annabel Patterson, "John Donne: Kingsman?, in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), pp. 251-72; Annabel Patterson, *Reading between the Lines* (U of Wisconsin P, 1993), pp. 160-209; Joshua Scodel, "John Donne and the Religious Politics of the Mean" in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway,AR: UCA P, 1995), pp. 45-80; Shami, "Kings and Desperate Men: John Donne Preaches at Court" *JDJ* 6 (1987): 9-23.

4. Goldberg, 219.

5. In his recent work, Curtis Perry calls into question Goldberg's (and new historicists') definitions of politics. He takes issue with the Foucauldian definition of politics as "power," used by Goldberg and others. By adopting Foucault's terminology, all discursive productions are assumed to be productions of "the social elite or the king himself" (6). Such a model denies personal agencies, and as such, it does not allow for the possibility of an individual offering an alternate model of society, as Donne does in his Denmark House Sermon. See Curtis Perry, *The Making of Jacobean Culture: James I and the renegotiation of Elizabethan literary practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 5-8.

6. Donne repeatedly voices a fear that the individual becomes "nothing" when separated from the Church of God. This fear is especially poignant in the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* where Donne worries that he is, indeed, separated from the Church (and thus salvation). In sermons, Donne draws upon this fear of "excommunication" by urging the audience to conform to the Church of their baptism. In a sermon delivered at Whitehall in 1620, Donne warns that "sects are not bodies, they are but rotten boughes, gangrened limned, fragmentary chips, blowne off by their spirit of turbulancy" (3: 88).

7. Jeanne Shami has called into question the "absolutist" nature of criticism by Carey, Shuger, and Goldberg. She has especially argued that the view of "politics" is one-sided, urging criticism of the sermons to consider "how Donne could be a royalist supporter without, by definition, supporting the absolutist politics of that monarchy": *John Donne Journal* 1 (1992): 12.

8. In the brief notes to the sermon, Simpson observes that the chosen text "suggests a delicate allusion to the fact that James for his learning and his pacific policy had been called 'the British Solomon'" (27). She also notes, however, that the text is "comparatively sober and restrained" (27) and similarly that it largely refers to "Christ as prefigured by Solomon" (29).

9. Dave Gray and Shami, "Political Advice in Donne's *Devotions*: No Man is an Island," *MLQ* 50.4 (1989): 337-56; David Nicholls, "Divine Analogy: The Theological Politics of John Donne," *Political Studies* 32 (1984): 570-80; Nicholls, "The Political Theology of John Donne," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 45-66.

10. Donne undoubtedly supported the monarchy, but he did not support it absolutely. That Donne preached the 1622 Defense of *Directions* which restricted the content of sermons might seem to prove that he supported James's absolute power over the Church. That sermon, however, is far from an unproblematic endorsement of James's policy or of his kingship. He urges the ministers to obey his *Directions* because they should follow an "order." As Shami notes, "Donne relies on unusually limited testimony to justify the *Directions*, citing only emperors and Kings as James's precedents, and abandoning the witness of biblical *figurae* as well as Scriptural and patristic texts." This evidence suggests that Donne supported the limited, temporal authority of the monarchy. See Shami, "'The Stars in their Order Fought Against Sisera': John Donne and the Pulpit Crisis of 1622," *JDJ* 14 (1995): 1-58; 29. In the present sermon, Donne tells his audience that "you cannot divest your allegiance to the Church, though you would; no more than you can do to the State to whom you cannot say, I will be no subject" (283).

11. On Donne's view of preaching, see Lori Anne Ferrel, "Donne and His Master's Voice, 1615-1625," *JDJ* 11 (1992): 59-70.

12. The terminology has a theological underpinning. In describing "sin" and "evil," theologians argued that they must have no substantial existence or they would be attributable to God's creative powers. To become "nothing," then, is to fall prey to sin, and thus to unmake one's creation.