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"The meate was mine": New Work from the Oxford School

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Paul M. Oliver. *Donne's Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion.* London and New York: Longman, 1997. Pp. viii. 292. Bibliography and index.

Edward W. Tayler, reviewing John Carey's *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* some years ago, remarked: "The book cannot be ignored, nor should it be dismissed simply because it sometimes sounds like a mean-spirited hiss." The same might well be said of Paul M. Oliver's first contribution to Donne studies. Written with apparent animus against Donne, and like Carey's work attempting to rake up supposed 400-year-old psychological muck, Oliver's book is paradoxically titled. Usual meanings of the adjective "religious" are partly canceled by the adjective "feigned" in his subtitle, expressing the same dismissive indifference we had from Carey in regard to Donne's religious concerns. An introductory chapter repeats the point several times, asserting that Donne's "religious" writings are no more than "so-called religious writing."

Insisting that Donne's poems and prose are less than genuine, Oliver sets out to do three things for students new to them: (1) introduce them; (2) place them in their literary context; and (3) explicate them in their political and religious contexts. While his approach, with its burden of denunciation, is ill-suited to all three objectives, he can hardly succeed to any degree in the first of them. He is perhaps most successful in the third, assisted by the recent work of historians (Patrick Collinson, Kenneth Fincham, Peter Lake, Anthony Milton, and Nicholas Tyacke) who have greatly enlarged our sense of Elizabethan and Jacobean

Calvinism as mainstream orthodoxy in the Church of England. Their new perspective revises an earlier sense of Tudor and Stuart Calvinism as a rebellious force, destabilizing the "Anglican" consensus and preparing a Puritan revolution. Oliver cites this new work to good advantage, although in the end we are left with a somewhat confused result: Donne's poetry and prose are (but are not genuinely) Calvinist, uncomfortably, riddlingly, and irresolutely fitted into the historical context Oliver has so painstakingly borrowed.

The confusion is worst exemplified in the most disappointing of his chapters, the one on Donne's sermons, which abruptly ends the book, surprisingly and inconclusively. "Chapter 9: Recollections of the player-preacher" begins by cautioning that the texts of most of Donne's sermons cannot be assumed to express his "authentic voice." Oliver goes on to liken the sermons to the Holy Sonnets and other poems in which Donne's persona seems both self-referential and self-contradictory, calling for careful interpretation. The problem is that, though in earlier chapters Oliver has referred to the sermons frequently in passing, nowhere—even in this chapter devoted to them—does he show the interpretive caution he himself urges. Instead we find profuse examples of various critical abuses Jeanne Shami has recently catalogued. Her assessment of some earlier writers may be applied as well to Oliver's book: the sermons are read "as authoritative reference texts, a body of material which can be appropriated literally by readers to provide glosses on Donne's poetry and earlier writings, to confirm a biographical profile, or to support generalizations about Donne's beliefs" ("Introduction: Reading Donne's Sermons," *JDJ* 11 [1992]: 6). Oliver nowhere accords any sermon the kind of sustained critical treatment he devotes to various poems in earlier chapters.

He falls least short of this measure in his seven-page discussion of Donne's September 1622 sermon in defense of King James's *Directions to Preachers*. Oliver first uses the help of historians to try for once to put a sermon in context; he also cites passages from other sermons that illustrate what he calls Donne's "Arminian" attacks on the central doctrines of Calvinism, and on the other hand Donne's "relentless promotion of the absolute value of preaching," oft-repeated positions

that (according to Oliver) betray a two-faced Donne, both an ally and an opponent of a more straightforwardly Arminian preacher, Lancelot Andrewes. Oliver charges that this seeming paradox exemplifies a general tendency of Donne's to give what he calls "mixed signals," an inconsistency that betrays the "inability of Donne's writing to commit itself to a single viewpoint." Unlike Andrewes, a comparatively singleminded preacher concerned simply with the needs of his congregation, Donne in his sermons betrays a cleft persona, "an amalgam whose stablest feature is its very lack of stability, . . . someone much more aware of himself, of the sound of his own voice and of the fact that he is creating a spectacle, than of his listeners." Oliver continues at various points in extended discussion to describe Donne's September 1622 sermon as "heavy-handed," "contrived," "sycophantic," "perverse," "bizarre," and "forced." This is seriously misleading, especially for new students of the sermons, who are not well served by Oliver's pique over Donne's refusal to be type-cast.

All this is especially regrettable since available to him, but unnoticed, was Lori Anne Ferrell's perfectly lucid *JDJ* essay on the same phenomena Oliver finds so difficult to interpret. Anticipating Oliver's misguided argument, and presenting the same contrast of styles between Donne and Andrewes—shared ambivalence about Calvinism but differing emphases on the value of preaching—Ferrell argues to the contrary, and more persuasively, that to describe Donne's "complex sermons as the products of a divided or subversive mind" is a reductive distortion ("Donne and His Master's Voice, 1615-1625" *JDJ* 11 [1992]: 68). No teacher should assign Oliver's book in a course including Donne's sermons unless also assigning Ferrell's essay as a corrective. As for explication of Donne's supposedly incompetent and mendacious sermon on the *Directions to Preachers*, Oliver and his students would have benefited from his considering earlier work by Shami, who argues that this sermon "is obviously not an ambitious or cowardly attempt to win the King's favor" ("Kings and Desperate Men: John Donne Preaches at Court," *JDJ* 6 [1987]: 16).

The work of Ferrell and Shami, published in *JDJ* years ago, might have helped Oliver temper his baseless, Careyesque, and rather smugly

expressed conclusion that Donne's sermons express a "spiritual disorientation" resulting from his vain efforts to justify himself for having rejected Catholicism, despite the pressure on him "from family and friends." In the end, what is most disappointing about this final chapter of Oliver's book is not merely his failure to explicate the sermons in their context; not merely his unhistorical aside (at a crucial, summary point in the book) that Catholic victims of oppression, rather than oppression itself, were a damaging influence in Donne's religious life; not even his inability to decide whether, and if so in what sense, Donne's religious writing was Calvinist. More fundamentally, Oliver disappoints because he has read the sermons merely in order to confirm a biographical generalization that is not even accurate.

Our disappointment here is acute precisely because Oliver begins by addressing this pitfall, making his eventual descent into it all the more grave. His "Introduction: the two Donnes" resists the ways in which a "tradition of deferential interpretation" has succumbed to Donne's own life-long construction of a biography. The tradition referred to was stimulated by Donne himself, emerging in the "Elegies upon the Author" of the 1633 and successive editions of the *Poems*, and enshrined in successive editions of Walton's *Life of Donne*. Thereafter, "Walton's spiritual heirs" carried on the tradition until the 1970s, when R. C. Bald's Oxford biography broke deferential ranks, defining Donne's life as a quest for affluence and security rather than for Protestant sanctity. The notion that Donne's career was uppermost in his structure of values was a false jewel discovered by Bald, later sharply faceted by Carey, now buffed and highlighted by Oliver.

Throughout this book one gains a steadily increasing awareness of how understated is Oliver's prefatory acknowledgement that "Carey's work on Donne was the initial stimulus to my own." Although the two words "ambition" and "apostasy" hardly appear in Oliver's work, references to Carey far outnumber those to any other Donne critic. The book seems actually conceived to function as an ancillary text in a course assigning Carey's Oxford selection of Donne's poetry and prose. A unique, double system of references invariably adds, to any standard Donne edition cited, the page number where the poem or prose

appears in Carey's edition. In every instance but one, Oliver's readings of Donne's life and writings dovetail neatly with Carey's own. Despite Oliver's assuring us that for the "basic outline of Donne's life I am indebted to Bald," his style of biographical analysis shows unmistakeably that the assurance is true only to the extent that Carey too relied on Bald. But Carey goes beyond Bald, and Oliver follows Carey, stating in his introduction that "Donne's early experience of loss and rejection caused him to spend much of his time striving for the position and acceptance which Walton's Donne achieves." Bald may have thought Donne essentially ambitious, but he never went in for this sort of speculative and unsupported psychologizing.

Oliver, like Carey, relies completely on Bald for the facts rehearsed in his biographical chapter. Unfortunately for his student readers, he ignores recent corrections of several factual errors that occur in *John Donne: a Life*: to list a few, Donne's uncle Thomas Heywood was never "hanged, drawn and quartered"; nor was his uncle Jasper Heywood being "shown clemency" when the Privy Council deported him in January 1585; Donne was not at Oxford after Michaelmas term 1584; nor did he make friends there with Henry Wotton. Oliver himself contributes some original biographical errors in interpreting facts presented by Bald: for example, Donne's purpose in bringing suit in the Archbishop's Court at Canterbury was not "to annul a marriage he already regretted"; and Donne's appointment to preach in defense of the *Directions to Preachers* was less a "milestone in his rise up the establishment ladder" than the high water mark in his ecclesiastical career.

But these are relatively fine points. More egregious is the centerpiece of Oliver's book, his fifty pages in two chapters on Donne's Holy Sonnets. Here one must register shock and dismay rather than disappointment. The central arguments of these chapters have already been made in Robert V. Young's 1987 essay, "Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Theology of Grace" (*"Bright Shootes of Everlastingnesse": The Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, edited by Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth [Columbia: Univ. of Mo. Press, 1987], pp. 20-39). In discussing "What if this present were the worlds last

night?" Oliver argues that the poem mixes Calvinist and Catholic elements, remarking in particular that the speaker's concern in the octave of the sonnet is to gain assurance of salvation by looking into his heart "to contemplate a picture of a Counter-Reformation crucifix, complete with naturalistic tears and blood." Oliver goes on to say that this object of contemplation is "something which would have horrified any Calvinist since it is the Catholic image *par excellence*, a graphically painted Crucifixion scene." Four and a half pages in this vein include no reference to Young's essay, whose quite original point is here being repeated without acknowledgment.

For example, Young's essay argues that the poem's speaker, despite his "Calvinist subtext, like a magnetic field, exerting a subtle but continuous force," nevertheless looks in his heart and finds "a graphic, Spanish baroque crucifix" (pp. 34-5). Continuing to remark "the slyness of these lines," Young points out that "this is a crucial issue, for the interpretation of the 'picture' in the persona's heart—is it a 'marke' of election or condemnation?—is contingent upon the speaker's emotional response to Christ's countenance" (pp. 35, 36). In this way, Young concludes, "Calvinist notions of grace pervade the Holy Sonnets... not as principal theological inspiration, but as a lingering fear of faithlessness haunting the background of poems that in most of their features resemble the Catholic devotional poetry of the Continent" (p. 38). Anyone familiar with Young's essay must be startled to hear his argument proceed from Oliver as if he were presenting it for the first time.

But worse yet, adding insult to injury, five pages into his discussion of the Holy Sonnets, Oliver actually refers to Young's work in slighting terms: "R. V. Young is absolutely right when he says that the poem's persona wishes to know whether what is in his heart is 'a "marke" of election or condemnation,' but he misses the oddity of looking to an image for that confirmation." Oliver's tactic here would have been impossible had he cited the sentences from Young that appear above: while paraphrasing Young's argument without acknowledging it, Oliver outrageously then charges Young with having missed his own point.

Oliver's abuse of this important essay doesn't stop here, however. In fact the entire substance of Oliver's two chapters on the Holy Sonnets is already contained in the opening statement of Young's argument, a critique of the notion of a "Protestant poetics" as explanatory of these poems. For one thing, Young notes, such a view "attempts to establish the existence of an exclusively Protestant mode of poetry without determining whether the same features of theme and style are available in contemporaneous Catholic poetry" (p. 21). Young also disputes Barbara Lewalski's argument that Donne's "This is my playes last scene" should be seen as a Protestant poem because it uses the tropes of the pilgrimage and the race: "But the notion of life as a pilgrimage is too familiar an idea in the Middle Ages to require illustration" (p. 32 n 25). I believe Young was the first to level this argument against Lewalski's Protestant poetics. Oliver's parallel passage arrogates the same argument, without acknowledging Young: "Unfortunately for the cause of Protestant poetics, much of what is claimed as its terrain is just as easily traceable to the previously invoked Catholic models." Further examples of such questionable procedures would be tedious to enumerate. I had no idea when agreeing to review this book how unpleasant the task would become. But don't get me wrong. This book is not all bad. Oliver writes an engaging prose, and his arguments are sometimes challenging as well as entertaining. The book should not be ignored.

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