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Donne the Layman Essaying Divinity

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In the letter prefaced to his 1651 edition of John Donne's *Essayes in Divinity*, Donne's son wrote that the essays reflected "many debates betwixt God and himself, whether he were worthy, and competently learned to enter into Holy Orders," and they have ever since been analyzed as a window into Donne's decision to be ordained, or as apprentice work anticipating the master craftsman's sermons, or as evidence of Donne's theological development.[1] More recently, Arthur F. Marotti has argued that, viewed in the context of Donne's final quest for secular position, the work reveals Donne's "preoccupation with the sociopolitical world even as he abstracts himself from it devotionally."[2] This formulation places Donne in a lay culture, but it preserves the dichotomy that links lay status with secular interests and clerical status with devotion. It is true that as late as 1614 Donne seems not to have given up hope of a secular career. The *Essayes* contain no discussion about preparation for the ministry. In fact, there is strong internal

[1]See Edmund Gosse, *Life and Letters of John Donne*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1899), 2:321; Evelyn Simpson, ed., "Introduction," in *Essays in Divinity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. ix–xi; R. C. Bald, *John Donne, a Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 298–300; Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 14–20; Anthony Raspa, "Introduction," in *Essayes in Divinity: Being Several Disquisitions Interwoven with Meditations and Prayers*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), pp. xiii–xv.

[2]Marotti, "Donne as Social Exile and Jacobean Courtier: The Devotional Verse and Prose of the Secular Man," in *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), p. 92. For earlier accounts, see Gosse, 2:321; Bald, pp. 298–300; Raspa, pp. xvi–xxii.

evidence that in writing the work, Donne thought of himself as a lay man venturing into exegesis. What if we analyze the *Essayes* in that light?

Certainly, from what we can gather of Donne's attitude toward the laity, he did see the clergy as spiritually superior or exclusively called to theological meditation. Even once ordained, while he occasionally offers grandiose accounts of the power of the minister, Donne almost never calls for lay deference to clerical authority or asserts their obligation to honor God's priests, as we might expect from a preacher who has been described as a sycophantic supporter of established powers. John Carey's claim that the ministry finally offered power equal to Donne's ambition seems strained.[3] Donne's characteristic move is to refer to Christians as a whole as a priesthood. In a sermon on Easter Monday, for instance, he declares, "it is not onely to Priests that St. *Peter* said, *God had made them a royal Priesthood*," for "you are priests, as we are, since altogether make up the *Clerum Domini*," a point he repeats in many sermons.[4] Furthermore, in preaching, he tends not to place himself apart from his auditory. His pronoun of choice is "we," embracing self and congregation. Where he uses "I" it is to present himself as an example of shared Christian experience, as in his famous passage on distraction in prayer. The contrast is marked when we look at Herbert's representation of the clergy donning Aaron's robes, bearing the awesome responsibility to be windows of God's word, speaking truth to power when minstering to a noble household or stooping low to enter a noisome peasant hovel.[5]

Still, the idea of an anointed caste of insiders, allowed special access to mysteries barred to ordinary men, did exercise power over Donne's imagination. It occurs at the beginning of the *Essayes*. Donne starts with

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[3]Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 122.

[4]*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 4:112–113; a sermon of commemoration for the Lady Danvers (1 July 1627), 8:70; and a sermon preached 22 November 1629, 9:122.

[5]In fact, where Donne does employ the distinction between laity and priest, it is in his secular love poetry, where his lovers stand apart from the laity as participants in the mysteries of love. And there, the lovers are not necessarily priests but initiates, while Donne's metaphors bear resonances of idolatrous or Roman Catholic worship, with saints, shrines, relics, hermitages, giving an ironic edge to his religion of love.

a claim to entitlement: "I do not therefore sit at the door, and meditate upon the threshold, because I may not enter further" for (quoting Revelation 3:7), God has "*set before thee an open door*."[6] Developing the image of Scripture as a "well provided Castle," though, Donne seems to be establishing his deference to the clergy (p. 7). He explains his choice to sit at the door: to "strangers" such castles "open but a litle wicket, and he that will enter must stoop and humble himselfe," although to "reverend Divines" who are "Officers and Commissioners from God" the main doors are open (p. 7). "Let me with *Lazarus* lie at the threshold," Donne continues, "and beg their crums" (p. 7, italics in original). But then Donne drops the idea of the priestly crumbs—it is the idea of humility that engages him. Christ had said "*Learn of me*," and Donne quotes St. Augustine's interpretation: "learn to be humble" (p. 7, italics in original). The idea that draws Donne is the paradox that while Christ's humility was "a Dejection," ours, "to be like him, is our chiefest exaltation" (p. 7). This is not a "groveling, frozen, and stupid Humility, as should quench the activity of our understanding, or make us neglect the Search of those Secrets of God, which are accessible" (p. 7). What fascinates Donne is the glorious humility that makes him like Christ and able to search God's secrets. The humble posture that we initially take to signal the deference of the layman turns out to be part of a confident explication of the right approach to Scripture: "Humility, and Studiousnesse, (as it is opposed to curiosity, and transgresses not her bounds) are so near of kin, that they are both agreed to be limbes and members of one vertue" (pp. 7–8). Perhaps—it is hard to say—Donne sees the ordained clergy as exempt from this humility, walking boldly through the "great doors." But I would argue that the status of the clergy does not really engage him, and the idea that does (that Christians must stoop through "a litle wicket") aligns him with Augustine, suggesting that Donne identifies with a world of scholars and exegetes who stand on an equal footing. Ordination within the Church of England is not the issue.

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[6]Donne, *Essayes in Divinity: Being Several Disquisitions Interwoven with Meditations and Prayers*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), p. 7, italics in original. All future quotations from *Essayes in Divinity* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

What, then, might it mean to Donne to be a layman writing in divinity? The practice of devotional exchange was common in the gentry circles in which Donne moved, and writing meditations was hardly an anomolous choice for a lay gentleman. Features of the *Essayes* that might seem to reflect Donne's idiosyncracies, such as the use of the language of politics, the quasi-sermonic form, and the exploration of arcane theological points, turn out to typify the sort of meditations written by Donne's peers. Michael Hall and Jeffrey Johnson have already situated the work in relation to the emergent genre of essay, which allows them to illuminate Donne's style and insistence on "continuing exploration and re-consideration rather than emphatic closure."[7] This essay will situate the *Essayes* in the context of devotional writing by other lay gentlemen.[8] To place Donne's *Essayes* in this context is not to call into question that he was contemplating the ministry. It does, though, show that however distinctive the workings of his mind and pen, Donne's pre-ordination interest in religious topics fits established patterns, and his decision about a church career reflects a mix of pragmatism and religious commitment that was not unusual among gentlemen who negotiated the demands of secular and sacred in early Stuart London. At the same time, Donne created a distinctive lay voice, defining a position for himself that claimed the authority not of the insider, whether clergy or lay, but of one who speaks, like the apostle Paul, with the authority of personal study and hard-won experience.

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Sir John Hayward, Sir John Bennet, Sir James Perrot, Sir Henry Finch, Sir Humphrey Lynde, Sir Henry Hastings, Sir William Austin,

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[7]Johnson, "An Essay on *Essayes*," in *Oxford Handbook of John Donne Studies*, ed. Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Michael Hall, "Searching and not Finding: the Experience of Donne's *Essays in Divinity*," *Genre* 14 (1981): 423–440. I am grateful to Jeff Johnson for sharing his article in draft.

[8]I am considering the *Essayes* as religious meditations because their combination of exegetical exploration, theological discussion, application to the self, and prayer, as well as their kinship to the sermon, align them with that genre even while they share general features of the essay as it was then developing.

Sir Richard Baker. The title pages of lay religious works read like a roll call of the better sort—members of the inns of court, men holding public offices, property-holders.[9] At least forty-four Protestant laymen published original works relating to religion between 1570 and 1642—and that figure excludes psalm translations and works by women.[10] This literature could seem to trespass on clerical turf, so what motivated and licensed these ventures? Lay elites circulated Scriptural devotions within their social networks, in some cases seeking patronage, in others restoral of fortune, in others, confirming a position among the prominent godly, and in most cases also gripped by interest in the way devotion helped to map the human condition. Marotti has offered a political explanation, arguing that, with James I's accession to the throne, religious poetry was a means to patronage as a genre favored by the king, in a court that took a new interest in religion.[11] His theory is persuasive as a partial explanation, especially of the increase in religious verse, yet gentlemen were writing in divinity well before 1603, and much of the activity centered on Parliament and the Inns of Court, not simply on Whitehall. In those circles as well, devotional publication could be both an act of piety and the site of social negotiation, and it was rooted in two further historical factors: first, the remarkable extent to which lay and clergy shared a common education, and second, the rise of household devotions and voluntaristic lay piety.

Elite laymen received a foundation in religious learning both in grammar school and university, and they subsequently assumed considerable authority in religious affairs. This was the culture that

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[9]Ian Green notes that the "reading habits and cultural horizons" of the gentry were "easily the widest of all the readerships" he considers, and that their "strategies for categorizing and interpreting" the world were correspondingly complex; see *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 34.

[10]Initially, under Elizabeth, printers and an emerging cadre of hack writers took advantage of the market for religious texts. Increasingly, though, gentlemen published "in divinity." See Alexandra Walsham, "'A Glose of Godliness': Philip Stubbes, Elizabethan Grub Street and the Invention of Puritanism," in *Belief and Practice in Reformation England: A Tribute to Patrick Collinson from his Students*, ed. Susan Wabuda and Caroline Litzenberger (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 1998), p. 187.

[11]Marotti, pp. 77–78.

produced George Herbert and John Milton: who was educated for the church and who for a secular career? Other laymen entered orders after seeking secular office. Besides William Trussell, ordained alongside Donne, there was Donne's friend Henry Wotton, who, having burned any number of bridges in his ambassadorial career, was ultimately ordained deacon in order to take up the financially secure provostship of Eton. Conversely, Sir Humphrey Lynde was at first destined for the ministry, chose law instead when a relative left him an estate, but nonetheless published religious polemics. Sir James Perrot's maiden speech in Parliament was described as "a long and learned discourse touching matters of religion," while Sir John Hayward, according to Anthony à Wood, was "accounted a learned and godly man, being better read in theological authors than in those belonging to his own profession."[12]

Two passages from Donne's pre-ordination writing suggest how theologically literate lay people such as these regarded their ventures into divinity. Donne was quite conscious of being a layman when he wrote his "Litany." In 1608, he wrote to Henry Goodyer that he had found a precedent for his choice of title: "I have met two Letanies in Latin verse," he reports, "which . . . give me a defence, if any man, to a Lay man, and a private, impute it as a fault, to take such divine and publique names, to his own little thoughts."[13] Private (in the sense of without public office), personal ("his own") and little—that is how Donne at least felt obliged to refer to his poem, even as he wrote it in a mode shaped by congregational worship. A more satirical consciousness appears in his *Paradoxes and Problems*, where he plays with the question "*Why doe young Laymen so much study Divinity?*"[14] From the start he offers both a cynical and an idealistic explanation: "Is it," he speculated, "because others, tending busily Church preferment, neglect the study? Or had the church of Rome shutt up all our wayes till the Lutherans broke downe theyr

[12]Wood, *Ath. Oxon.: Fasti*, 1.368; quoted in the "Sir John Hayward" entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[13]Donne, *Selected Letters*, ed. P. M. Oliver (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 38.

[14]Donne, *Paradoxes and Problems*, ed. Helen Peters (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 27–28. All future quotations from *Paradoxes and Problems* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

uttermost stubborne dores and the Calvinists pick'd theyr inwardest and subtillest locks?" (p. 27). Despite his humorous caricature of Lutheran and Calvinist writers, his approval of the phenomenon is implied as he dismisses the idea that the Devil hopes to "make this study contemptible by making it common" (p. 27). Nor, he argues, is there a danger that "wee by providing everyones selfe divinity enough for his owne use, should neglect our teachers and fathers" (p. 27). It certainly cannot be that the Devil could "hope for better Heresyes then hee hath had, nor was his kingdome ever so much advanced by debating religion (though with some Aspersions of Errour) as by a dull and stupid security in which many grosse things are swallowed" (p. 27). Thus far, in rejecting the notion that laymen's interest is the Devil's work, Donne seems to endorse lay study of divinity. But then, he continues, maybe the answer lies with less-than-admirable human motivations: "Possibly out of such an Ambition as wee now have to speake playnly and fellowly of Lords and Kings wee think also to acquaynt our selves with Gods secrets" (p. 28). Or, he concludes wryly, "perchance when wee study it by mingling humane respects, it is not divinity" (p. 28). Donne's conclusion ironically reverses direction. We have been led to expect a celebration of Protestant inquiry over the "dull and stupid security" of Rome, and yet the motives of those Protestant laymen turn out, perchance, to be all too human. And still, that "perchance" leaves open the possibility that when laymen do not mingle human respects, it is divinity. It is telling that Donne rejects the idea that there is religious danger, rather than mere human ambition, in the exercise.

Despite their teasing equivocation, Donne's thoughts point to the complex features of what it meant to be a well-educated and well-born layman: such a man might well have a learned acquaintance with religious matters; that interest might derive from piety but might also have secular motives; such a person was technically a private man, with no public standing to speak; but he might well be more learned (and better born) than his parish minister. The elite male addressee of Herbert's "The Church Porch" who finds the sermon lacking and has "to pick out treasures from an earthen pot,"[15] nonetheless had no license to

[15]Herbert, "The Church Porch," in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), line 427.

offer superior goods. Even so, prominent lay men found ways to justify excursions into divinity.

It is not necessary to rehearse how a grammar school and university education would have provided young men with with rhetorical skills and with a strong theological foundation. The penning of religious works was hardly a clerical mystery. Lay elites frequently used exegetical processes similar to those used by the clergy, if with less system and scholarly rigor. Sir John Bennet wrote his meditations on Psalm 51 "upon perusall of the Psalme, and some few Expositors thereof."[16] George Strode wrote to his fellow barristers that, through "constant and diligent hearing of godly sermons" and "by addition of some things . . . collected out of my readings" he had "gathered such store of Divine notes" as made him able to write his meditations.[17] A number of writers adopted the sermon form for their meditations, while Sir Edward Onslow actually delivered sermons at the family estate of Cranleigh where there was no preaching minister.[18] In addition, gentlemen would have been accustomed to leading religious exercises in the household. William Perkins stated the basic expectation: the head of the household was "to be the principall agent, director and furtherer of the worship of God within his familie." This leadership was to include prayer and "instructing them in the holy scriptures and in the grounds of religion."[19] While most attention has been paid to the puritan gentry, household prayer seems to have a been a widespread practice among conformists as well. Manuscript notebooks

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[16]Bennet, *The Psalme of Mercie* (London, 1625). All future quotations from *The Psalme of Mercie* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[17]Strode, *The Anatomie of Mortalitie* (London, 1618), sig. A3v. All future quotations from *The Anatomie of Mortalitie* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[18]J. T. Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 34. A remarkable case of an elite lay man giving sermons is that of Bulstrode Whitelock, who preached regularly to his family and left manuscript volumes of his sermons to his family.

[19]Perkins, *The Workes*, 3:698, quoted in Cliffe, p. 30. See also Richard Bernard, *Josuahs Resolution for the Well Ordering of his Household* (London, 1629). For a discussion of the convergence between humanist and puritan ideas of the household, see Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

also reflect a commitment to solitary reading and meditation, testifying to hours spent copying extracts from theological books, gathering Scripture verses, and writing meditations and prayers.[20] Repeatedly, published devotions by members of the Inns of Court or of Parliament explain that their meditations were first written for private use. Certainly, Donne fretted at his enforced lack of employment, but he was not the only one to fill empty hours with reading theology, taking notes, and assembling his thoughts in writing.

Leadership of household worship reminds us of the shared or communal nature of much "private" devotion, a term that covered any exercises outside of officially instituted public worship.[21] Beyond the household, lay gentlemen circulated their devotional writings among friends or potential patrons. One writer dedicated his manuscript of private exercises "culled from the meditations of Granada" to "G. S. Esquire."[22] Sir James Perrot addresses his work to his "honourable friends" in Parliament, while Sir Humphrey Lynde, who wrote a refutation of the Jesuit John Fisher, was part of a circle that included

[20]Sir Robert Heath, for instance, who became an utter-barrister of the Inner Temple in 1603 and attorney general in 1625, left a notebook that contains essays developed using biblical laws, nearly fifty pages of prayers, and meditations on several Psalms and passages from the New Testament (BL Egerton 2982). Sir Edward Rodeney left a manuscript that contains a family history, religious meditations, and excerpts from controversial works (BL Sloane 34239). Sir Henry Hastings left "A short meditation upon the ill newes of a tollera[tion]—this 22th of August 1622" and a prayer for the parliament (Huntington Library Hastings Religious Box 1, folder 9), while Sir John Pettus left a "litle parcell of paper" that was "filld with Meditations, Considerations, Contemplations, Cogitations, and Ejaculations, words which are much used in expressing our pious thoughts about Divine matters" (Bodleian MS Rawl. C 927). Religious notebooks survive for Sir Thomas Fairfax, Thomas Chaffin of Wiltshire, and Lord Chancellor Ellesmere (in a secretary's hand), and there is in the Devon Record Office a notebook doubtfully attributed to Sir Walter Ralegh.

[21]Erica Longfellow has pointed out that an area such as religion had "communal resonances" that made it "much more than the business of the individual"; see "Public, Private, and the Household in Early Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 45 (2006): 313. As she notes, as a "little commonwealth," the household practiced devotion that was in a mutually reinforcing relationship with public worship (319).

[22]NRO FH 242.

both lay and clergy opponents of Laud such as Daniel Featley and Sir Henry Hastings. The Inns of Court seem to have fostered circles for sharing devotion. Michelle O'Callaghan has found that the Inns stressed "the fraternal obligations of friendship, of voluntarily seeking out the companionship of others, and sharing each others' society over time."[23] We find George Strode, an utter-barrister at the Middle Temple, for instance, referring to himself as "Foster-brother" to his fellow barristers (sig. A3r). Sir William Austin, a prominent member of Lincoln's Inn, seems to have belonged to an informal devotional society. He refers in one meditation to the "consanguinity" or society of family and friends with whom he gathers, defending the legitimacy of this sort of gathering: let no one, he insists, "that shall see some few honest men draw together . . . for the stirring up of Charitie and Devotion, (two principall ends of Societie) thinke them proud Separatists" for such societies are "Under-schooles; wherein good-men, doe but practice, and exercise (in private) that Love, which they owe" to the church in general.[24] Austin's participation in this society is also witness by the wide manuscript circulation enjoyed by his poems on the Passion and Nativity. It is possible to see the final three prayers that conclude the second of Donne's *Essayes* as intended for such a private devotional circle, since the second prayer petitions God to "behold us, O God, here gathered together . . . in confidence of thy promise, that where two or three are gathered together in thy name, thou wilt be in the midst of them" (p. 98).

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[23]O'Callaghan, *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 18.

[24]Austin, *Devotionis Augustinianae Flamma, or, Certaine Devout, Godly, and Learned Meditations* (London, 1635), pp. 226, 231. All future quotations from *Devotionis Augustinianae Flamma* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. Patrick Collinson, in *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), notes the similar case of London solicitor Roger Quartermayne who defended his private gatherings from the criticisms of Archbishop Laud, arguing that "the private meetings in which he had taken part were not conventicles, and that 'godly conference' was not the same thing as preaching. 'I did always thinke that publike duties did not make voyde private, but that both might stand with a Christian'" (p. 276).

Given the communal nature of much private devotion, the sincerity of the prayers and meditations these men shared was not seen to be compromised by its circulation among friends. It was, in fact, usual to hope that one's devotions could aid others. Donne himself, while still a layman, refers in a letter to meditations that he has written and notes that this sort of work has seemed more fitting than to "spend my little stock of knowledge upon matter of delight" (p. 82). He chooses "rather to build in this poor fashion some spittles and hospitals where the poor and impotent sinner may find some relief, or at least understanding of his infirmity" (p. 82). Donne's sentiment accords with the most often repeated justification by lay writers for seeking print, that it is good for lay people to edify one another. Sir William Leighton, in *The teares, or lamentations of a sorrowful soule*, insists that he has published his work "not in vaine affectation or ostentation of my owne skill . . . but onely in an unfeigned affection and earnest desire that the humbled hearts (together with mine) may reap profit and consolation" by them.[25] R. M. declares in the epistle prefacing *A Profitable Dialogue for a perverted papist* that he willingly allows that "it is unmeet for any Lay man, although never so great a scholer, to take to himselfe the office of ministery in the Church, or to climbe up to the Pulpit." However, he insists, "for Lay men decently to instruct and admonish one another, it is no novelty, but a thing allowable in the Church many yeeres since."[26] Elite lay males recognized that they were not licensed within the institutional church, but they found other ways to take the lead in the community's religious life. Without quite climbing up to the pulpit, these men did emerge well beyond the prayer closet.

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In several basic ways, Donne's *Essayes in Divinity* fits comfortably within the literary culture of the lay gentleman, participating in shared conventions of genre, method, topic, and voice. The term "divinity" was used generally for religious topics, and did not connote issues or writing

[25]Leighton, *The teares, or lamentations of a sorrowful soule* (London, 1613), n. p. All future quotations from *The teares, or lamentations* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[26]*A Profitable Dialogue for a perverted papist* (London, 1609), sig. A2v.

specific to the clergy.[27] Laymen primarily wrote meditations on Scripture (particularly on the Psalms and on the Lord's Prayer), treatises on prayer or basic doctrine, collections of prayer and meditation, and meditations (often in verse) on mortality, the vanity of the world, affliction, Creation, or the Passion. As is typical of early Stuart devotional literature, there is hybridization of forms. Sir Richard Baker joined meditation and treatise in *A Soliloquy of the Soule: Or, A Pillar of Thoughts. With reasons proving the immortality of the soule* (London, 1641), while *The afflicted Mans Vow: with his Meditations, and Prayers* (London, 1609), by John Mabb ("of the Inner Temple, gent."), starts with treatise on affliction and then offers prayers and meditations. Donne's mixing of modes in the *Essayes*, easily combining Scriptural commentary, meditation, and prayer, is typical of this sort of work. Also typical is the presence of sermonic elements. In what may be a reference to the *Essayes*, Donne noted in a letter from around 1614 that he has "digested some meditations of mine, and apparelled them (as I use) in the form of a sermon" (p. 82). Other gentlemen did the same. Sir John Bourchier and Sir William Austin begin their meditations by giving the Scripture text (for Austin, in both Latin and English, in parallel columns), and like Donne, they open with a preface and division.[28] Such authors use the method of collation, or comparing Scripture passages, and Donne too stresses the value of the method more than once in the *Essayes*. We see him using the method when at one point he concludes that "I am taught by collation of many

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[27]According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, divinity is "The science of divine things . . . theology" (s. v. "divinity," 4a). This definition is noted as being "the earliest sense in English." Besides Donne's reference to young laymen studying "divinity," there is Sir Richard Baker's *Apology for Lay-mens Writing in Divinity* (London, 1641).

[28]It is quite possible that Austin's meditations were influenced by Donne's preaching. Austin, a member of Lincoln's Inn, was close friends with Edward Alleyn, who married Donne's daughter Constance in 1623. His meditation on the coincidence of the Annunciation and Good Friday, 1621, was perhaps inspired by Donne's poem on the coincidence of the Annunciation and Passion, 1608, and his verse meditation on his own death resembles Donne's preaching of his own funeral sermon. See Narveson, "William Austin, poet of Anglianism," in *Discovering and Recovering the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, ed. Eugene Cunnar and Jeffrey Johnson (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001), pp. 140–163.

places in the Scripture, that [this term] is a mere Idiotism" (p. 26), and he states at another point that we need to "accustome ourselves, to that best way of expounding Scriptures, by comparing one place with another" (p. 57).

As a method of invention, Donne's learned references in the *Essayes* might be expected to set him apart from others, but most authors do to a greater or lesser extent display their immersion in learned expositors. Sir John Bennet quotes Aristotle, Augustine, Bernard, Cyril, Gregory, and Tertullian, and William Bloys, a country squire formerly of Gray's Inn, cites Pliny, Justus Lipsius, one of the Scaligers, and Andrea Alciatus just in the first few pages of his meditations.[29] Austin takes an interest in geography and chronology, etymology and politics, and he cites authorities both ancient (Augustine, Athanasius, Chrysostum, Chrysologus, Basil, Gregory, Jerome) and modern (Isaac Casaubin, Christianus Adrichomius, Alonso Tostado, Juan Maldonado, Johann Thomas Frigius). This learning, however, is not deployed for scholarly ends. Austin, for instance, pauses in a meditation on the Nativity to consider the time of Christ's birth and reviews some rather abstruse calculations. However, like Donne in the *Essayes*, Austin concludes such passages by stressing what is useful and certain: "*More* certainely, and more *materially*, (to leave *incertaine Traditions*), it is collected, he was born *in quadragesimo secundo* of *Augustus*" (p. 41). Donne similarly rejects the contentious and irresolvable. For instance, he reviews a number of theories about how the world can be eternal, only to conclude that "all which can be said hereof is cloudy, and therefore apt to be mis-imagined, and ill interpreted," and he instead "will turn to certain and evident things" (p. 30). He regularly shows impatience with theories he finds over-curious, uncertain, doubtful, or conjectural (e. g., pp. 19, 59, 94). Both men instead wear their learning lightly. Although Austin intersperses Latin phrases liberally into his text, he does not load it with citations, nor does he take pains to work out a point with scholarly rigor or thoroughness. In the same discussion of the nativity, he cites Aquinas for a neat distinction: other men "are borne *subjecti necessitati Temporis*; but Christ (as *Lord*, and *Maker of Time*) *elegit sibi Tempus, in quo*

[29]Bennet, *The Psalme of Mercie*. Bloys, *Adam in his innocencie* (London, 1638). All future quotations from *Adam in his innocencie* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

nasceretur: was not borne by *chance*, but *chose his owne Time*" (p. 42). But Austin is not interested in the weight of theological ratiocination in which Aquinas's idea is embedded. He instead draws attention to "somewhat *observable*" that the idea leads him to—Christ must have chosen to come at a time of peace and of political unity.[30] This amateur lightness of touch also characterizes Donne's *Essayes*, a fact that can be obscured by modern scholarly editions. Raspa's edition, while a remarkable guide to the Latin sources and learned debates that lie behind Donne's references, risks through the weight of the notes giving the misleading impression that Donne was engaged in a work of research and argumentation. In fact, while Donne draws on a wide range of authorities, he provides marginal citations for only some of them so that the breadth and weight of his sources does not impose itself on the reader.[31] Further, like Austin, Donne rehearses scholarly arguments without feeling a need to present a thesis of his own, or stating only which seems likeliest to him, noting, for instance, "I encline to think" (p. 84) or "this in my understanding may safelyer be admitted" (p. 59). Some range of learned reference is part of the literary equipment of elite laymen, but it is closer to a cabinet of curiosities than an arsenal for winning disputes.

Donne's style also links him to other well-educated lay writers. He is frequently colloquial, as when he speaks of a debate as "now upon the anvile, and every body is beating and hammering upon it" (p. 25). His transitions are conversational. "I have adventured in his Name, upon his Name," he notes, so "Our next consideration must be his most glorious worke" (p. 17). Bloys is similarly conversational when he opens his meditation by observing "I have heretofore engaged my selfe to shew,

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[30]That Austin had spent considerable time studying modern commentaries on theological issues is witness by an appendix that he supplies to his meditation on Epiphany, in which he surveys learned opinion on the nature of the star that guided the Magi (pp. 87–95).

[31]Johnson notes that behind Donne's alignment of the *Essayes* with sermons lies a sense of the distinction between a lecture and a sermon, the former of which focuses on doctrinal points, the latter less so. See Johnson, "'One, Four, and Infinite': John Donne, Thomas Harriot, and *Essayes in Divinity*," *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 128. The second essay begins with a consideration of names and numbers that tends toward the abstruse, but the longer second half is a non-technical discussion of God's mercy and justice.

how, those places that in themselves are most delightfull, may by our good improvement become most profitable." Now, "this being the time wherin I see every thing put forth, I am admonished to doe likewise" (pp. 1–2). Like Donne, Bloys addresses his audience in the first-person plural, discusses his steps as he goes, and develops his ideas with graceful wit. Thus, having finished his prologue, he sets up the treatise proper: "And now, speaking of the earth, I am come to the foundation upon which I must erect my future discourse; desiring to have the soile well prepared, that so there may arise the more fruit" (p. 12). This style suits an informal sermon delivered to an audience of those who share one's intellectual horizons as well as one's religious interests, in loose-jointed Senecan sentences and a leisurely additive development.[32]

Donne's *Essayes* is also typical of this sort of work in the kinds of topics he ranges through. Some topics feature regularly in religious manuscripts. A discussion of the name of God such as Donne gives in the first essay appears in the introduction to Sir John Hayward's meditation on Psalm 51, *Davids teares*. Donne's interest in the shortcomings of language and in human reason's incapacity to know God fully is shared by the creator of Folger MS V.a.281, who like Donne draws on a range of Latin sources, writing

> It onely belongs to God to know himselfe, and interpret his owne workes; and in our tongues he doth it improperly, to descend and come down to us, that are, and lye groveling on the ground. Immortalia mortali sermone notentes, Who with termes of mortality Note things of immortality. Melius scitur Deus nesciendo. God is better knowne by our not knowing him. Saith S. Augustine: And Tacitus, Sanctius est ac reventius de actis deorum credere quam scire: It is a course of more holiness and reverence, to hold beliefe, then to have knowledge of Gods actions.[33]

Notebooks also frequently contain proofs for the authority of scripture and discussions of providence, such as an essay "upon divine providence

[32]See also Hall's useful discussion of the way Donne's voice "blur[s] the distinction between the private world of meditation and the public world of the author and reader" (p. 437).

[33]Folger MS V.a.281, sig. 23v.

made by Sir Edwarde Rodeney" (BL Sloane MS 34239) and a list of points about the nature of providence (Folger MS V.a.3). A list of Scripture proofs compiled by Gilbert Freville sums up common topics:

> "to prove the sufficiency of the Scriptures./2.Tim.3.chap: 16 & 17 verses.
> To prove that God is one and only God./. Math: chap.19./ verses.16.17.18.19.20.21./.
> To prove the godhead of the three persons./.John. chap: 14./.verses.15.16.17.18.19.20.21./
> To prove the omnipotent power and proportion [?] of God./.. Rom: chap: ii./.verses.33.34.35.36./.
> To prove the creation of the world. Heb: chap.ii./.vers.3./."[34]

Donne touches on most of these in the *Essayes*.[35]

Another feature of the works written by elite lay males is a tendency to use the terms of the profession or social world in which they move to develop religious insights. George Strode, the utter-barrister, for instance, cast his discussion in the language of the law. He takes Hebrews 9:27 as "the Statute which I have chosen to read upon" and refers to his "reading upon this Statute" in order "for the better apprehension of the Law-makers meaning" (p. 1). The London merchants who submitted proposals to the Court of Aldermen to "to

[34]Freville, BL Egerton MS 2877.

[35]Many of these topics are included in the tradition of "hexapla," or commentaries on the books of Moses, and at least one manuscript shares Donne's interest in that tradition. Sir Bulstrode Whitelock, in a sermonic meditation, considers creation: "we are taught from hence, that the world was made by the Counsell, and free will of God, and not by (f. 9r) necessity of nature, that none can believe, the world was made casually, butt by a most wise workeman, and highest counsell, the Creator wherof is God. The signification of the mistery of the Trinity, by the plurall number, for the word God, is not admitted by some expositors, butt all agree, that by the plurall number, Moses seems to expresse, the power and greatnes of the Creator. [margin: Calvinus, Peresius, Cornelius a Lapide] The Hebrew word heere used for God, signifies also a Governor or Judge, and teacheth us, that as the world was created by God, so it shall be governed by him, and that is the Eternall Judge of it." See Whitelock, BL Add MS 31984, fol. 9v. For Donne's participation in the hexapla tradition, see Raspa, xxiv–xxv.

remedy abuses arising from the use of false weights and measures" in 1623 prefaced their proposals with a prayer, which refers to God "whoe hath disposed all thinges in number weight and measure."[36] Marotti adduces Donne's use of political terms to support his claim that the *Essayes* bespeak Donne's frustrated ambition. Yet Donne's political figures primarily appear when he develops the *contemptus mundi* trope. Reflecting on the commonplace that death levels all, Donne asks, "If he [a king] be a butterfly, the son of a Silkworm, and I a Scarab, the seed of durt; If he go to the execution in a Chariot, and I in a Cart or by foot, where is the glorious advantage?" (p. 36). Marotti concludes from this sort of political reflection that "because of yet-unrenounced political ambitions" Donne's satire "clearly expresses envy toward the politically successful," and "bespeak a bitter personal disillusionment, if not a pained cynicism."[37] Yet the claim seems overstated when we realize how normal it was to use the language of one's world in developing points about the spiritual realm. George Strode reminds his reader that "as much weaknes and feebleness in birth by nature is incident to a Prince, as to a peasant," and advises his reader to let the rich and poor but lie in the grave a while, "then open and looke among dead bones, who was rich, and who was poore" (50–51). He likens life to a game of chess, where some have more power and respect, but "when the Check-mate is given, & play ended, then the men are tumbled together, and put up into the bag . . . and the lesser men uppermost many times" (p. 52). Or, as Austin put it in an "epicedium written upon him selfe,"

> Will *Beautie* go? Will *Strength*, in *Death* appeare?
> Will *Honour*, or proud-*Riches* tarry *there*?
> *They All* say *No*, for let *grim-Death* draw neare,
> *Beautie* looks pale, and *Strength* doth *faint* for feare.
> There's little *Wealth*, or *pride* in naked-*Bones*,
> And *Honour* sits on *Cushions*, not *Cold-Stones*.
> (p. 288)

In his desire to make clear the ultimate vanity of earthly things, it seems hard to argue that Donne is any more motivated by envy or disappointment than others of these genteel commentators. And it is not

[36]Guildhall MS 22208, fol. 1r.
[37]Marotti, pp. 92–95.

clear that Donne's reflections on the vanity of kingly power are any more driven by personal disillusionment than his satire of another Stuart type, the antiquarian, when he comments on how the opacity of Scripture invites the attention of keen intellects, since such men naturally "affect the reading of obscure books . . . digg and thresh out the words of unlegible hands, resuscitate and bring to life again the mangled, and lame fragmentary images and characters in Marbles and Medals" (p. 56). Donne similarly satirizes lawyers who "have ever been Tyrants over words" (p. 27) and other contemporary scholarly types such as the "enormous pretending Wit of our nation and age" who sought to create an Adamic language (p. 23). Such details make the work a clear product of the intellectual and social world of the urban gentleman—a man who might appreciate another of Donne's satirical comments, that "many among us study even the Scriptures only for ornament" (p. 40).

* * * *

Even while the *Essayes in Divinity* shares many of the general characteristics of elite lay religious publication, such works vary considerably in stance and in motivation for seeking a public platform. There are confident works by men establishing their place as pillars of the church, works by those seeking to gain advancement, and works fashioning responses to sin, failure, and ill fortune. If the *Essayes* is not primarily an exercise preparatory to entering the ministry, where among the types of lay writing does Donne's work stand?

Publications by men of substance and public prominence indicate the extent to which lay elites could identify with the challenge of ordering and overseeing a godly society. Writers such as Hayward, Bennet, Perrot, Finch, Lynde, Baker, and Austin were all knighted and were substantial landholders, prominent at the Inns of Court, active as members of Parliament or influential judges. Most had court connections or close friendships with noblemen. They strongly identified with the church as established and took an active part in parish affairs, often leaving substantial bequests. In their case, writing "in divinity" seems to have been seen as a natural activity, supporting the institutional church's work of promoting public piety. At the same time lay publications by prominent men often insist on their standing apart from institutional concerns, dedicated to friends or colleagues. We see in these works a

sense of both contributing to public edification and standing outside of the church's institutionalized work, at once of the center and of the margin.[38] Sir James Perrot's work maintains a balance between his sense of entitlement to contribute to the cause of godliness and his appreciation of his lay status. A prominent member of parliament, celebrated as an eloquent speaker and a fervent anti-Catholic, Perrot wrote *An invitation unto prayer, and the practise of piety, directing the way to true happinesse*, and *Certaine short prayers and meditations upon the Lords prayer and the Ten commandments*.[39] His prefaces employ standard humility topoi: his prayer treatise was written for private use, and "of late finding it unlooked for, I shewed it to some of my private Friends, whose desires were, it should be made publike." Thus he offers it as the widow did her mite, dedicating it to his "Friends in Parliament." His second treatise acknowledges that it may seem strange to some "that I, being no professed divine; should presume to present unto the view and verdict of curious Censurers, a Treatise of praiers" (sig. A2v), but, he insists, he intends it not for the judicious but "for the use of them that are as weake in Judgement, as I am" (sig. A3r–v). Despite the prefatory disclaimers, Perrot's tone indicates the degree of authority that a well-placed lay man

[38]Contributions to devotional practice, whether treatises or meditations, are not surprising, but some laymen took their identification with the institutional church further and ventured into doctrinal writing and theological controversy. Sir Francis Hastings debated in print with Robert Parsons in the 1590s. Sir Henry Finch, who was remembered as "excellently lerned in the lawes of the realme, and a great linguist and generall scholer" (see the "Henry Finch" entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*), composed a Ramist exposition of Calvinist theology first published anonymously in 1590, then as *The Sacred Doctrine of Divinitie* in 1613. As a member of Parliament in 1625, Sir Humphrey Lynde took an active interest in religious affairs and served on the committee that condemned Richard Montagu's Arminian writings. He also published two works, *Via tuta* and *Via devia*, the former of which saw five editions between 1628 and 1630, and even a nineteenth-century edition in response to the Oxford movement.

[39]Perrot, *An invitation unto prayer, and the practise of piety, directing the way to true happinesse* (London, 1624), and *Certaine short prayers and meditations upon the Lords prayer and the Ten commandments* (London, 1630). All quotations from *Invitation unto prayer* and *Certaine short prayers and meditations* are from these editions and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

could arrogate to himself. In *Certaine short prayers and meditations* Perrot asserts his learning by using Latin throughout the prefatory letter to the reader. The *Invitation unto prayer* is concise and systematic, and Perrot presents his pronouncements as general truths, warning, for instance, that "God will not bee worshipped in words onely, without the inward affection of the hart. . . . They which pray without faith and without fervency, performe no more than plants which growe without feeling" (p. 32).

A similar sense of entitlement and confidence is evinced in Sir John Bourchier's *Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Judaeorum*, a work that hybridizes sermon form with affectionate meditation. Bourchier begins with a survey of his topic and a division: "In this Title wee are to consider two things: The Manner, and the Matter." Then his consideration becomes a preaching to his soul: "Stand, O my Soule! and with admiration, blesse the Author of all Blessednesse, Christ, who to prevent thy shame, sustained shame."[40] But while for the most part addressing himself, Bourchier also appends prayers "in the behalfe of the Church, and all the Members thereof" (sig. K8v). In the prefatory material to collections of meditations, these prominent writers often established their ease with humane letters and the world of the gentleman. In his meditations on Psalm 51, Sir John Bennet, who had a highly successful career as a judge in the court of high commission and master in chancery, is relatively unapologetic as he acknowledges his temerity as a lay person. He uses language similar to Perrot in his self-justfication: "If you mervaile, that I being no Divine should adventure the conceiving, much more the publishing, of a Meditation of this nature: My answere is briefely; That the subject of it belongs to the art of Christianity (which every man is bound to know) and not onely to the profession of Divinity." Like Perrot, he writes for his fellow laymen, who may learn better from him, as "one scholler now and then teacheth another" (sig. A7v). But even as he establishes his spiritual credentials he also implies his familiarity with the sophisticated world of the theater-going gentleman: until misfortune struck, he had read the Psalms but "with a kind of pitiful delight, and

[40]Bourchier, *Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Judaeorum. Or, a tract concerning the inscription fastned by Pilates command* (London, 1637), p. 20. All future quotations from *Jesus Nazarenus* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

pleasing regret, as men behold tragedies on a Stage, and reade lamentable stories" (sig. A4r). These volumes witness the degree to which prominent lay gentlemen could feel at home in a public mode, laymen yet members of the learned, governing class, called to share in the work of spreading a godly order.

In comparison, Donne's work does not exhibit the confidence of a right and even duty to promote public piety that we see in judges and utter-barristers. There were, though, other works by less prominent gentry that indicate that religious publication could be implicated in the patronage system. Men seeking office, whether secular or clerical, tended to dedicate their devotional writing to those who might advance their careers. A. H. Frowicke gave a fair copy of Sir James Perrot's *Certaine short prayers and meditations upon the Lords prayer and the Ten commandments* to Sir John Ferrers in 1628, two years before it saw print publication, while Ralph Crane gave his beautifully copied collection of poems by Austin and others to the Earl of Bridgewater in 1631.[41] Thomas Eyre gave a copy of his own treatise to his father-in-law, Sir Allen Cotton, as a new year's gift in 1625.[42] George Dichante "Gent." ends *An Epitome of the worlds woe*, a poem on the vanity of the world, with a boldfaced appeal for patronage. While he excoriates the flattery of "men of noble partes / Indu'd with many Sciences and Arts" who "basely thus can crouch unto a Knave," not ten lines later he digresses to tell his "Mistress" that it is different in the case of her husband, a nobleman who "harbor'd honesty" and who was "the guide of godliness, the Man of Men / Whose glories, had I but a golden pen, / I would record."[43] The desperation of "John Hagthorpe, Gent." shows through in his dedicatory epistle to James I when he writes "having no Friend in Court, I thought a Petition might miscarry" and therefore he offers his meditations directly to James, hoping for his aid, else his debts "compell mee to transport my selfe and Familie into Virginia."[44] Sir William Leighton, in financial difficulty, dedicated his *Teares, or lamentations* to Prince Charles, and

[41]For Frowicke, see BL Add MS 10397; for Crane, see Huntington MS EL 6870, a copy of *The Faultie Favorite: A Theologicall, Usefull & Applicable Exposition, or Meditation, upon the 2. Verse of the 7th Chapter of the.2.booke of Kings*.

[42]BL MS Stowe 983.

[43]Dichante, *An Epitome of the worlds woe* (London, 1630).

[44]Hagthorpe, *Divine Meditations and Elegies* (1622), sig. A3v.

promised that if they met with approval, "I shall all waies vowe my future services unto your Highnes" (sig. *1v). In many of these works, the chosen topic is at odds with the desire for patronage. Contemplation of the vanity of the world, for instance, allowed writers to express a *contemptus mundi* or mine a satiric vein, surveying the peccadillos of the estates and professions, but it sat uneasily with a bid for advancement. This does not quite seem the context in which to see Donne's pre-ordination religious writing—young petitioners writing in unimpeachably pious genres but with one eye to the career ladder.

One other context and motivation emerges when one looks at the background and personal circumstances of a number of lay devotional writers. A whole sub-genre of meditations were written in response to ill-fortune, worldly disgrace, and imprisonment. I have already noted the meditations by John Hagthorpe, who was impoverished by lawsuits. Precedent for such work existed in the Psalm translations of Wyatt and Surrey, while Sir John Hayward was one of the first to write penitential prose meditations, publishing *The Sanctuarie of a troubled soule* after the Essex rebellion while under scrutiny for potentially seditious implications in his recently published history of Henry IV. Sir William Leighton was a gentleman pensioner at court but fell into financial difficulties and was imprisoned for debt by 1610. Sir John Bennet fell from favor in 1621, charged with corruption worse than that of Sir Francis Bacon, and published penitential meditations in 1625.[45] In the *Afflicted mans vow*, John Mabb writes "in his perplexity and penitencie"—he provides no biographical information save that he is "of the Inner Temple, Gent" and has enjoyed the support of Sir John Egerton.[46] Sir Richard Baker stood surety for his father-in-law's debt, lost everything, and lived the final years of his life in the Fleet, where he published several volumes of meditations on the Psalms.

Many of these works perform a ritual self-abasement as a proper mode of responding to, and recuperating, ill fortune. Sir William Leighton writes in his letter to the reader that he has decided "to make knowne the least part of my unfained and true, repentance, and mine

[45]Daniel Hahn, "Sir William Leighton" entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; Sheila Doyle, "Sir John Bennet" entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[46]Mabb, *Afflicted mans vow* (London, 1609), p. 3.

experience, of afflictions" even though it will "lay open the plaine demonstrations of my weakenes," because afflictions are for our instruction (sigs. **r–*3r). Others invoke David as penitent. In his prefatory epistle, Sir John Bennet admits that he did not appreciate David's penitential psalms "until I had by personall experience, felt in some proportion David his perplexed and wounded spirit" (sig. A4r). "Astonished" by his tribulations, Bennet explains that he chose to write on Psalm 51 as "a lively Character of a true Mourner, though shaped to the particular condition of David, yet fitting every penitent sinner" (sigs. A4v–5r). There is a strong element of performance in these works, the writers rehearsing a conventional script: their fall has opened their eyes to the vanity of the world and brought them true, lasting goods. This is self-fashioning of a particularly powerful kind because the writer is able to discount the details of events that brought about his fall—Leighton and Bennet make no mention of the corruption and unwise financial decisions that caused their change in fortune. The narrative of sin and penitence, mirroring the posture of David, powerfully takes over, and the writer becomes an everyman, the sinner kneeling contritely before a just but merciful God.

We might expect that Donne would draw on this mode in the *Essayes*, given his experience of disgrace. Yet by the time he wrote the *Essayes*, his was not a simple narrative of rise and fall. He does not model his stance on David as penitent or dwell on what he has learned from affliction. Nor does he show off his fitness for employment by rehearsing the tropes of the vanity of world, larded with classical allusion and learned quotation. And he is also not like Perrot or Hayward, men of substance and self-importance, contributing confidently to the edification of the church. Donne had to make his own path. In the context of other lay writing in divinity, the originality of the *Essayes* emerges: its claims on the reader paradoxically rest on Donne's position on the margins of both elite and clerical cultures. He is not a layman of substance and position and yet he knows and participates in the intellectual interests of the elite lay gentleman. He can offer that audience stylish and well-informed but non-specialist accounts of matters they find interesting. At the same time, he is venturing further into specialized theological questions than other lay gentlemen tended to go.

This venture stands, Janus-like, between his layman's study at Mitcham and his potential new professional territory.

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Because it has been well documented how Donne's *Essayes* gaze forward, anticipating the ethos and themes of his sermons, it is worth insisting as well on how the work might be seen if we could read without hindsight. We would notice that Donne's self-positioning and implied sense of the status of his work can be seen equally well to reflect a negotiation of his own mode of participation in the culture of devotional writing practiced by elite London laymen. Donne refers to his *Essayes* as like sermons, but, as we have seen, other laymen fell easily into meditations as a kind of private sermon as well. And Donne adds that his are "unvocall preaching" (p. 47) and "lack thus much of Sermons, that they have no Auditory" (p. 48). On the other hand, "*Scriptor manu praedicat*" [the writer preaches with his hand], and to write such books is "honorable to the Church" (p. 47). Donne's representation of his work here exhibits the ambivalence typical of lay writers, both asserting the value of writing and conceding their extra-institutional footing, the lack of auditory for his "solitary Meditations" (p. 41). Yet he (apparently) left a fair copy of the work, indicating that he intended it for an audience of readers if not of hearers. Given the lack of factual information about when and for whom Donne wrote, it seems significant of Donne's sense of purpose and audience that he represents himself much as Austin or Strode do, as one who is not professionally licensed or committed to Scriptural exposition, noting that such men as he "are but Interlopers, not staple Merchants, or of the company, nor within the commission of Expositors of the Scriptures" (p. 38). But while not within the commission of expositors, Donne is not deferential. He is also like Austin or Strode in the confidence his education and identification with the gentry allows *vis-à-vis* the academic world. He knows his ability to understand and assess the work of learned expositors, and to note where they too are subject to human flaws, in particular "the disease of *Meum et Tuum*" since they are delighted "in having their spirituall Meditations and inventions knowne to be theirs" (p. 32). Like other gentlemen meditators, then, Donne crafts a persona that is comfortable in the world

of learning, happy to acknowledge that he is not a full participant, but also not at all overawed by the heavy fruits of scholarly labor.[47]

Donne's persona, though, has trouble establishing a secure relationship to his audience. Marotti has characterized the implied audience as a "coterie" of "men of fashion" whom Donne addresses as theological equals, a "witty readership," making it appear that Donne is speaking to an exclusive audience of men who pride themselves on their great wits.[48] Yet Marotti seriously distorts Donne's point. He quotes misleadingly to support his claim that Donne "is writing 'a Meta-theology, and super-divinity . . . but to my equals,'" the elision implying that Donne is giving a description of his own writing and audience. Yet in context, Donne is stating that "a Meta-theology, and super-divinity" are needed "in them, who must fight against Philosophers and Jews"—a sort of task that he states he is *not* engaging in. In fact, he is claiming that his "equals" are quite the opposite of the men who engage in "meta-theology." Such "overcurious and Mysterious considerations . . . be too Cabalistick and Pythagorick," and because he is "in low degree, of the first and vulgar rank, and write but to my equals, I will forbear it, as mis-interpretable" (p. 59). Donne's self-positioning here is less egocentric than Marotti represents it, though still interestingly fraught. Donne as layman describes himself as "in low degree," in a position to share his ideas only with his peers, privately—"but to my equals." At the same time, he is also alert to the over-curious nature of much theology to any but controversialists. This stance, as we have seen, was common among lay authors; it oscillates between deference to the professional clergy and a more perfunctory deployment of the humility topos. Donne's stance also reflects the tension between his interest in the convolutions of theological debate and his competing sense that for most people, including himself, it is better ultimately to set such issues aside as being of questionable value, "since to some palates [overcurious matters such as numerology] may taste of Ostentation; but to some, of distraction from better contemplations, and of superstition to others" (p. 60). Jeffrey Johnson usefully characterizes this stance as a "hermeneutics of dilation," a belief that "a wide range of learning is preferable in explicating the

[47]Johnson's discussion of the essayist as amateur is useful in this regard ("Essay," pp. 7–9).

[48]Marotti, p. 94.

scriptures because no single person and no single exegetical practice can fully account for the complexities of the text." Johnson associates this stance with Donne's dislike of "sectarian divisiveness" and desire for "the intercourse of charitable practices."[49] I would add that on another level, we can account for Donne's intellectual style as that of the layman who "affects the study of divinity"—a style developed as much out of a consciousness of the complex, marginal status of lay writing in divinity as out of a ideal of ecclesiological irenicism. Just as Donne's later commitment to discretion as a preacher has been seen as at once pragmatic and principled, so in the *Essayes*, his commitment to what Johnson aptly calls "a hermeneutic of exploration and inquiry rather than a hermeneutic of resolution and conclusion" reflects both principle and an astute sense of appropriate self-presentation.

The *Essayes in Divinity* could, then, seem liminal, from one perspective the work of a lay gentleman, from another showing us Donne poised to cross into the ministry. Johnson sees in them the latter, Donne discussing the issues that "register his concern for the Church."[50] Yet do the *Essayes* represent an unequivocal resolve to enter the Church? Donne nowhere in the *Essayes* directly deliberates about his own clerical vocation. He says of Christians that "we have here two employments," the one "to conserve this world" and the other "to increase Gods Kingdome" (p. 70). Just as everyone has a duty to tend to his own health, "yet it is fit that some sepose all their study, and be able to instruct and reform others," so while every person should "serve God in his vocation" yet there should be some who make it their whole vocation to serve God" (p. 71). That is a very general observation. Did we not know of Donne's imminent ordination, the work could as easily be seen as the scriptural expositions of a gentleman amateur.

The more essayistic, gentlemanly side of Donne comes to the fore especially in the second half of the essay on Exodus, when he turns to God's attibutes of mercy, power, justice, and power. The opening discussion considers God's mercy in general and is balanced by a discussion of human mercy, understood as charity to those in need and addressed to the perspective not of the nobility but of the well-off, those who must know how to extend mercy aright. Merely giving out of

[49]Johnson, "Essay," p. 12.
[50]Johnson, "One, Four, and Infinite," p. 142.

"sadnesse, and sorrow for anothers misery," he advises, is insufficient; they must show "Alacrity, and Chearfulnesse to help" (p. 71). They might not be cedars "to help towards a palace" but they can be "a shrub to shelter a lambe" (p. 73). Donne's exploration draws together curious information about the Roman Empire and moral wisdom about liberality, and only after a general discussion does he turn specifically to God's mercy to the Israelites. But here too the development is far less technical than in the opening of the meditation with its investigation of names and numbers. His account of the nature of famine culls information from classical sources as much as biblical, from general morality rather than learned expositors—indeed, he quotes Scripture for its proverbs on the human condition and not to resolve the reading of a difficult verse, as in the first part. As a concomittant of this change in focus, Donne's voice is also more confident, not merely surveying the views of others but exhorting his audience—"Let no smalnesse retard thee" (p. 73) and "give as thou wouldst receive" (p. 74).

To see the work as the work of a gentleman amateur, though, is not to call into doubt the sincerity of its piety or its concern with God's nature and with how to understand the human as creatures made and led by that sort of being. In fact, there are moments when Donne becomes caught up with an issue because it engages immediate concerns that he seems to find personally challenging and important. Above all, the challenge of maintaining a proper attitude toward the world provokes discussion. Donne's work is unusual not for reflecting frustrated ambition but for suggesting honest struggle with the tensions that works in the *contemptus mundi* mode usually treat in conventional terms. What are one's responsibilities to others, above all one's family? If one gives oneself to contemplation of the next world, who will see to the mundane tasks of life? In the prayer that concludes Book 1, Donne asks that God help him to avoid "a misdevout consideration of the next life, stupidly and trecherously negligent of the offices and duties which thou enjoynest amongst us in this life" even while helping him also to avoid being "so anxious in these, that the other (which is our better business, though this also must be attended) be the less endeavoured" (p. 37). Donne's convolutions are telling—he attempts to create a "harmony" between earthly and spiritual duties such as God created between heaven and earth, but the difficulty in striking the right balance manifests itself in qualifications and parentheses. At first, the danger of overmuch

contemplation of the hereafter and the neglect of one's offices and duties are couched in the terms of anti-papist polemic—"misdevotion," "trecherously negligent." Donne wants to call the counterbalancing duty of contemplation "our better business," yet immediately reasserts the duty of attending to earthly offices once again. Tellingly, he then drops the question of how to balance spiritual contemplation and mundane duty, diverted by the need to articulate another balance, the balance he should seek, in attending to his earthly duties, between valuation and contempt of earthly goods. He develops the point with a metaphor: we cannot go immediately to heaven but must walk the streets of life in order to pass from the "prison" of the womb to God's palace. This metaphor allows him to develop further the need to attend to earthly duties. He must walk "in that pace whereto thou hast enabled us," a phrase that balances his initiative and God's. And since his body is "made of pre-ordained matter, and instruments" he prays for help that he "neither neglect the seeking, nor grudge the missing of the Conveniencies of this life" and that he may find the proper mean between esteeming and despising the opinion of others. Ultimately, he seems to arrive at a satisfactory formulation by contrasting his "Exterior and morall conversation" wherein he has a duty to "give them satisfaction with whom I am mingled" to his "faith" whose first duty is to God. Though this resolution potentially evades the problem of arbitrating the claims of God and the world, it is striking that Donne works so hard to weigh and define those relative claims.

For all its esoteric apparatus, then, the *Essayes* finally explores how a Christian is to understand human life, as creature and as possessed by sin, *coram Deo*. Donne writes as one who is in the world, his rejection of the world's ultimate value tempered by the realism of his sense of the claims that finding a way to provide for daily life make on him. Johnson suggests that Donne is ultimately concerned with an "ecclesiological" sort of virtue, how the Church should propagate good words and deeds. Yet in his concluding prayers Donne applies his ideas not to the Church but to the individual believer. Johnson claims that Donne prays "that his soul 'produce Creatures, thoughts, words, and deeds agreeable to thee,' but only, he adds, 'within the pale of thy Church.'"[51] But in fact, Donne is not praying that he produce those creatures within the pale of the

[51]Johnson, "One, Four, and Infinite," p. 142.

Church. He is asking that he "not produce them, O God, out of any contemplation, or (I cannot say Idaea, but) Chimera of my worthiness, either because I am a man and no worme, and within the pale of thy Church, and not in the wilde forrest, and enlightned with some glimerings of Naturall knowledge; but meerely out of Nothing" (p. 43). Shaky syntax aside, it seems fairly clear that Donne explicitly denies that he can base any presumption of the worthiness of his deeds on the fact of his membership in the Church (it is a "Chimera" to think his deeds worthy because he is "within the pale"). Indeed, as a whole, the *Essayes* show little interest in the institutional church. The work closes with four prayers. In the final three, Donne speaks for a group of individuals, asking that God "shut out none of us" but be "with as many of us, as begin their conversion and newness of life, this minute" (p. 98). In the first prayer, he speaks as an individual, confessing to God that although God has begotten "reverent devotions, and pious affections towards thee," his own corruption has "smothered and strangled them," and yet acknowledging that "hourly thou rectifiest my lameness, hourly thou restorest my sight," until the effects of God's power are not miracles simply because they are so ordinary and frequent (p. 96). None of these prayers is situated in the context of public, liturgical worship.

But while the final prayers are not focused on the Church as institution, we might nonetheless see Donne's self-presentation as, at its heart, conforming to a narrative of spiritual leadership that is even more basic than the story of vocation to the ministry. His self-fashioning in the first of the final prayers is that of Paul. Like Paul, he has received special education: he confesses that he does not lack knowledge—indeed, "thou hast given mee a desire of knowledg, and some meanes to it, and some possession of it." Yet, like Paul, he has "arm'd my self with thy weapons against thee." Therefore, Donne prays, "let me, in despite of Me, be of so much use to thy glory, that by thy mercy to my sin, other sinners may see how much sin thou canst pardon" (p. 97). Donne here presents himself as chief of sinners. Whether or not he was using the *Essayes* to explore his vocation for ministry in the institutional church, then, Donne does finally imagine himself into a sort of role that transcends the lay/clerical distinction, thereby offering an original, ingenious solution to the problem of the status of lay meditations. As a Paul, he is one who has known the outside as well as the inside. He is an intellectual, he transcends sectarian interests of Jew or Gentile, and yet

he can hold up his experience as an ordinary Christian who knows the futility of knowledge in the face of possession by sin. And he is thereby aligning himself with the man who figured most centrally in the Augustinian strand of Christian history that Donne embraced. Whether or not Donne seeks to be "within the commission," he imagines himself central to the spiritual narrative nonetheless.

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