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More Signs of Donne

Signs, voiceprints, echoes. . . . Donne persists, turning up sometimes as bidden guest in direct address or as a character in a fiction, sometimes as line or phrase in poem or prose. Whether as quotation or provocation, as iconic figure signifying soul stress or more carnal matters, Donne remains an ongoing presence in the literary imagination. We hope to highlight such sightings and soundings—like those discussed in the following essays—in future volumes of *John Donne Journal*.

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Donne and Company on Stage

Alison Knight

"This is nature's nest of boxes," opens Jonathan Holmes's new play about John Donne, *Into Thy Hands*, performed at London's Wilton's Music Hall, 31 May to 2 July 2011; the play's script, with introductory materials, has been published by Methuen Drama (London, 2011). Like the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, quoted here and throughout, the play is concerned with connections: between people, between body and soul, and between human beings and God.

Holmes, who has a PhD from the Shakespeare Institute at Stratford and until 2007 was a senior lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London, is to be commended for his efforts to bring Donne into modern theater. The play is both intellectual and accessible, charting Donne and

his contemporaries' attempts to navigate clashes of conscience, church, and court. Set primarily in December 1610, the play centers on the translation of the King James Bible, especially *Song of Solomon*, and Donne's potential entry into the Church. It is a play of relationships rather than of events, with Donne's marriage at its core, but including his interaction with Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford; Magdalene Herbert, Lady Danvers; Sir Henry Wotton; Lancelot Andrewes; clergyman and King James Bible translator John Layfield; and James I. The play is divided into two acts: the first witnesses Donne contributing to the translation of the King James Bible, flirting with patronesses, debating Galileo, writing, and avoiding the Church; the second allows the characters to unravel in the face of the demands of religion and court, as Lucy, Countess of Bedford, struggles with her paralyzed husband, and Donne faces the death of Anne.

Despite the play's passionate and engaging writing, its relationship to history is often troubling—at best distracting, at worst sloppy and misleading. In his repetition of John Carey's and R. C. Bald's portraits of Donne's closeted Catholicism, reluctance to enter the Church, and rampant patronage-grubbing, Holmes proves himself out of touch with the current state of Donne scholarship. This, however, is a minor issue in comparison to Holmes's tendency to allow creative speculation—and downright error—to masquerade as fact. The central premise that Donne contributed to the King James Bible's *Song of Solomon* is patently at odds with what is known of the translation process, yet in publicity materials and in the introductory materials to the printed script, Donne is termed, without caveat, "accomplice in the translation of the *Song of Solomon*" (p. 2). Similarly, he is described as the first English translator of Galileo's *Siderius Nuncius*, which was in fact Edward Stafford Carlos (although Donne was an early reader). Further factual errors abound, such as the statement that Donne was Sir Thomas More's grandson (2.4, p. 70), or that Donne was employed as "Lady" Anne More's tutor.

Scholarly accuracy is not, perhaps, to be required of a creative work, even from a former scholar. Yet Holmes is so concerned with presenting his play as historical—expressed in the distractingly frequent name-dropping of contemporary events and individuals—that his misrepresentation of history ultimately becomes distasteful. The most flagrant examples are Holmes's characterization of Lucy, Countess of Bedford, and Lancelot Andrewes. Holmes uses both as representative

figures of sorts, Bedford as women and Andrewes as the Church, rather than as accurate portrayals.

Stephanie Langton's performance as Bedford was beautifully erratic, alternately restrained and exploding with longing. Yet Holmes's characterization generally serves as a means of adding sexuality to the production (both in terms of adult content and gender issues). Throughout the first act, Bedford perpetually makes predatory sexual remarks and, in her role as a patron, seems solely interested in Donne as a gigolo rather than as a writer. Along with Lady Danvers, she is depicted as engaging in an ongoing sexual relationship with Donne, despite their respective marriages; she chides Donne for no longer sleeping with her as a result of her financial troubles, and smarmily adds, "the key is yours, John. . . . You need only turn the lock" (1.2, p. 14). She cattily responds to Anne's "I have not my husband's tongue" with "indeed, he is famous for it. I can testify personally to its efficacy" (1.4, p. 20). In a scene that serves no other apparent purpose than to add hollow steaminess, she quotes Donne's "Sappho to Philaenis" before kissing Anne in a sexually aggressive manner. Midway through the play, this behavior is re-cast as a response to her sense of gendered captivity within court and her marriage (her husband is represented as having been severely invalided by a stroke). Why her struggles are specifically female is not entirely clear; Bedford frequently exclaims, "spare me from men of the world!" (1.7, p. 51) and suchlike, but surely the pain of an unwell spouse is an ungendered experience. It is odd that Holmes invents her husband's catatonic state when a genuine tragedy in Bedford's life, the death of her infant daughter, occurred mere months before the date of the play's action.[1] In ignoring this and the ways in which female patrons fostered early modern artistry, Holmes not only presents an entirely unfair portrait of Bedford, but also loses the opportunity to explore the issues that interest him in a more nuanced manner.

As unfair and perplexing as this portrayal may be, Bedford is at least a compelling character. In comparison, Holmes's Lancelot Andrewes (while engagingly acted by Nicholas Rowe) provides an entirely unsubtle caricature of church repression. This Lancelot Andrewes has no

[1]Edward Russell, third Earl of Bedford—who is periodically misreferred to as "the Duke"—did suffer from a stroke but remained capable enough to hold offices, including the Keeper of the Rolls for Devonshire.

connection to the real figure, but is rather a mouthpiece through which Holmes can shout "filth!," "blasphemy!," "sin!" at regular intervals. It is jarring to hear the preacher that Peter McCullough rightly describes as possessing a "character marked by charity . . . [and] selflessness," who was "instinctively eirenic"[2] described as a "peevish little pedant" (2.3, p. 69). Considering the emphasis the play places on the King James Bible translation, it is surprising that Holmes, who erroneously states that Andrewes was "in charge of the translation of the Bible" (p. 5), did not choose to investigate the cleric's actual role (he was chairman of the first Westminster committee). Instead, Holmes represents him as perpetually bowdlerizing *Song of Solomon* (which he did not have a role in translating), arguing that biblical accuracy is subordinate to propriety, and disdaining literary ingenuity. In response to a speech of Donne's that reworks "Elegy 6," Andrewes exclaims, "clarity is what we need, not sophistication!" (1.6, pp. 42–43). Tellingly, while Holmes beautifully weaves elements of Donne's works into many of the play's speeches, he abandons this practice with Andrewes and composes an original mini-sermon for him to deliver on Christmas Day. In this, Holmes's lack of understanding of the subtleties of early modern religion, in evidence throughout the play, becomes starkly apparent. The sermon does little but rail against the flesh—including, shockingly, the flesh of Christ. It is ironic that the character who screams "heresy!" throughout the play is the only one who says anything that would genuinely have taken on shades of heresy in the period; his statement that Christ's "bodily existence was but an instant . . . a tiny discord" (2.1, p. 50) not only denies the Resurrection and the Ascension, but also potentially denies the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The play works best when Holmes invokes history to communicate something perennial and perhaps harder to express in a modern context. This is particularly true of the play's exploration of the relationships between human beings and God. The Song of Solomon is a beautiful choice in this regard, as it allows Holmes to explore the ways in which God is tangled within human relationships. The language of longing and touch that the book offers, verses of which Holmes provides in various translations that alternately obscure and emphasize human sexuality,

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[2]McCullough, "Lancelot Andrewes," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>.

allows Holmes to trace God's seeming absence. For Donne, God's absence is felt in his lack of calling; he will not take orders without hearing "the voice of God reaching into the innermost crevice of [his] being" (1.4, p. 25). Yet with Anne, he recognizes that love works "in a voice . . . in a shapeless flame" (1.5, p. 33)[3] or, as Lady Danvers says, God "enters the silences of our mind, where we hear him not" (1.1, p. 11). For Bedford and Anne, God's absence is made acute through human love; in act 1, Bedford crumbles to the floor, asking,

> Why do you never answer? Why? Do I not suffer enough for you? Must there be more? I grieve 'til my heart breaks for the world as it might have been and never could be, and yet I remain wedded to this ruin, never able to leave. How can it be too much and yet not enough, all at the same time? How? Answer me, please!
>
> (1.7, p. 49)

In performance, this speech assumed a gasping, disconnected desperation that is re-invoked when Bedford makes a similar cry to her catatonic husband (1.7, p. 53). Anne's final speech, hauntingly acted by Jess Murphy, wonders at God's capacity to witness her family's suffering, and concludes that

> Either you feel everything, or you feel nothing. And if you feel everything, why do you not stop the pain, as a good God would? No response. But if you feel nothing, you are either indifferent or it is as if you do not exist. Which amounts to the same thing. So those are the alternatives: a cruel god or a non-existent god. Which is it? Whose hands am I placed in?
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> (2.6, p. 82)

These moments transcend history, calling for God and love to respond, in flesh and blood and embrace.

Langton's and Murphy's excellent performances were not alone; other strong performances included Bob Cryer's sinisterly gay James I. Zubin Varla's Donne was intense and heartfelt, yet he lacked softness and charisma. Rather, he seemed at times overly manic, almost deranged.

[3]Here quoting, of course, from line 3 of "Air and Angels."

The clash between sacred and profane that the play sought to dramatize was perfectly expressed by the play's venue, Wilton's Music Hall. Opened in 1858, the building operated as a music hall for only twenty years, after which it was taken over by a Methodist mission. While it is disappointing that the building was recently denied funding for a necessary restoration project, its crumbling patina (coupled with the smell of incense drifting from hanging censers) created a compelling atmosphere.

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