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"the office of a man and wife" in John Donne's Marriage Sermons

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John Donne's three sermons preached at marriages enjoyed a brief flurry of critical attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s from scholars who were part of the new vogue for gender criticism.[1] Mary Beth Rose considered the sermons an example of Donne's "unmitigated misogyny," Heather Dubrow judged their theology of marriage contradictory, and Lindsay A. Mann disagreed with both his predecessors and concluded that the sermons consistently celebrated married love.[2] It seems that Donne's sermons, like his poetry, could inspire diametrically opposed readings even among critics consciously attending to the same aspect of the text, that is, to nuances of gender.

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[1]A version of this paper was first delivered at the Regional and Parochial Preaching Colloquium, University of Birmingham, 2 April 2009. The author is indebted to those at the Colloquium who commented on the paper, as well as to Peter McCullough for his helpful advice. All references to Donne's sermons are from George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962). The marriage sermons are 2:17 (Nethersole-Goodyere), 3:11 (Sandys-Washington), 8:3 (Herbert-Egerton). Hereafter cited in the text by volume and sermon number, with page numbers from the online facsimile of this edition, *John Donne Sermons* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2006), <http://www.lib.byu.edu/dlib/donne/>, accessed 14 May 2009.

[2]Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 101; Dubrow, *A Happier Eden: The Politics of Marriage in the Stuart Epithalamium* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 20–21; Mann, "Misogyny and Libertinism: Donne's Marriage Sermons," *John Donne Journal* 11.1–2 (1992): 111–132.

These three critical readings do, however, have something in common: in keeping with the critical tradition of the time, they each read the sermons primarily to cast light on other texts, particularly Donne's own poetry. Mann, the only scholar to give these particular sermons a lengthy and nuanced treatment, aims to demonstrate "a consistency of principles in Donne's works," and that "Donne's mature prose develops the arguments of the earlier love poems."[3] In the two decades since Rose's book appeared, sermon scholarship has emerged as a fully fledged discipline. Yet, perhaps because of the early attentions paid by critics interested in gender, subsequent scholars have not turned sustained attention on Donne's marriage sermons as sermons, following the call of recent scholars to see sermons "as both texts *and* events."[4]

Scholarship on these marriage sermons has tended to be guided by very modern assumptions about what a marriage sermon should be: that it should praise the couple and should praise marriage itself, particularly companionate marriage. Mary Beth Rose, for example, is puzzled by the way one sermon dwelt on the role of marriage as a physic, as a cure for inordinate lust, since this metaphor seems to Rose to depict marriage as "a lesser evil," a device unlikely to encourage a new couple to value their married relationship.[5] Jeanne Shami does not treat the marriage sermons at length in her exhaustive and invaluable study of Donne's "pulpit voice," but does note with surprise that Donne preached "a biting sermon *against* marriage at the marriage of these dear friends," Lucy Goodyear and Sir Francis Nethersole.[6] Much more recently, Ramie Targoff has commented on Donne's "almost comically inappropriate" choice of text for another sermon, "For, in the resurrection, they neither mary nor are given in mariage, but are as the angels of God in heaven" (Matthew 22:30), noting that "Donne begins this joyful occasion not by celebrating

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[3]Mann, p. 111.

[4]Mary Morrissey, "Interdisciplinarity and the Study of Early Modern Sermons," *The Historical Journal* 42.4 (1999): 1111–1123, quotation from p. 1111. See also Jeanne Shami, *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003).

[5]Rose, p. 103. The comment refers to sermon 8:3 in Potter and Simpson. Dubrow discusses the ambivalent attitudes toward both marriage and celibacy in England in this period.

[6]Shami, pp. 12, 41.

the earthly union consecrated by the marriage, but by affirming the certainty of our eventual resurrection."[7]

In fact, evidence from the time suggests that celebrating marriage was not the preacher's primary aim at an early seventeenth-century wedding. The marriage service in the *Book of Common Prayer* instructs that couples should hear a sermon "wherein ordinarily (so oft as there is any marriage) the office of a man and wife shall be declared, according to Holy Scripture." If no preacher was available, the minister was to read the rather stark official homily, which repeated scripture texts on "the duty of husbands toward their wives, and wives toward their husbands." Men were to love their wives "and be not bitter unto them" and women to "be in subjection unto their own husbands in all things" and to avoid "gorgeous apparel," using their "chaste conversation coupled with fear" to convert their husbands to godliness.[8] Marriage sermons, it seems, were perceived to be instruction rather than praise and celebration, and a number of sermons from the period suggest that preachers took this injunction to declare "the office of a man and wife" quite seriously. William Whately's *A bride-bvsh* (1617) bears the subtitle "Compendiously describing the duties of Married Persons: By performing whereof, Marriage shall be to them a great Helpe, which now finde it a little Hell."[9] Thomas Grantham's *A marriage sermon* (1641) is touted on its title page as "A Sermon accused for Railing against Women," as if that fact imparted additional value for the book-buying public.[10] In his exhaustive *Of domesticall dvties* (1622), William Gouge had to include an apology to his congregation who had thought him "*an hater of women*" when the sermons were originally preached.[11] An anonymous marriage sermon from the "Merton" manuscript that

[7]Targoff, *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 167, 168.

[8]John E. Booty, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), pp. 297, 298. The homily quotes from Ephesians 5:22–33, Colossians 3:18–19, and 1 Peter 3:1–7.

[9]Whately, *A bride-bvsh, or a wedding sermon* (London: William Jaggard for Nicholas Bourne, 1617).

[10]Grantham, *A marriage sermon* (London: 1641).

[11]Gouge, *Of domesticall dvties eight treatises* (London: John Haviland for William Bladen, 1622), sig. ¶4r.

includes several Donne sermons concludes with a stern warning against "*whoremongers & Adulterers*," building up to a wonderful crescendo:

> let them take heed for God hath sealed wth his seale, that he will iudge them Albeit they lye vpon soft Bedds of downe, and carrowse wine in Bowles, and singe vpo[n] y^{e} viole and Harpe, If God will deale wth them as he did wth *Iesable* taking there pleasures fro[m] them and cast them vpon a bed of sorrowe *for whoremongers & Adulterers god will Iudge*, And thus much let it suffice to be spoken at this tyme out of my Texte.[12]

It is easy to imagine this anonymous preacher thumping the pulpit, and even for a seventeenth-century audience his timing and pastoral sensitivity perhaps leave something to be desired. Yet, even if this ranting climax feels overly strident as a preacher's last words to the couple, the words themselves do not stray far from the commonplaces of marriage sermons, which usually include some allusion to the dangers of sexual misconduct.[13]

By contrast, Donne is relatively mild in his orthodox reminders that marriage is a remedy against burning, and that celibacy is, for the rare few, a positive choice equal in value to married life. Donne does include the usual misogynist clichés about the woman being a helper rather than a head and about Eve being responsible for the fall, and even one rather

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[12]Bodleian Library MS Eng TH. c71, fol. 37v. The manuscript contains copies of several of Donne's sermons, including those preached at the Nethersole and Washington marriages (fols. 146r–149v and 150r–155v).

[13]See Whately, p. 3. Thomas Gataker, *Marriage dvties briefely covched togither* ([London: William Jones for William Bladen, 1620], p. 37); this text is a guide to marriage that Gataker derived from 'raw notes of a Sermon long since made' at a wedding (sig. A3v). See also Gataker's warning to parents that idle daughters will become wanton wives (*A mariage praier* [London: John Haviland for Fulke Clifton and James Bowler, 1624], p. 19). Grantham cautions men against being deceived by a wife who appears "thrifty, honest, faire, and she proves a painted whorish, liquorish slut" (p. 3). In a sermon preached at the marriage of a fellow minister, Thomas Taylor attacks the "Sodomiticall sincke" of Roman Catholic priests who refuse wives but indulge their lusts, thus reminding his listeners that one of the purposes of marriage is to avoid "burning concupiscence and vnnaturall filthinesse" (*A good husband and a good wife* [London: for William Sheppard, 1625], p. 7).

mean aside that admits that women have souls but implies that those souls must be less pure than men's because they are not suited for priestly service (3:11.2). But I do not intend here to revisit the potentially unending debate about whether Donne was exceedingly misogynist, misogynist in particular and peculiar ways, or simply as misogynist as the next early modern preacher. The sheer variety of Donne's oeuvre renders that question almost unanswerable, and in any case the attempt to answer it has become unhelpfully entangled with Donne's personal circumstances.[14] What I rather wish to do here, in the interest of continuing more recent scholars' work of treating Donne's sermons as sermons, rather than as a repository for the poetry, is to consider them in the light of what might be called the occasional conundrum: how did a preacher set out to preach on a particular text, with a particular remit, to a particular audience? How did he declare "the office of a man and wife," using a Biblical text, to a couple who were also his friends and fellow clients of his carefully cultivated patrons, patrons who might well be listening with baited breath to see if he was too soft on "*whoremongers & Adulterers*," or, heaven forbid, revealed himself to be "*an hater of women*"? The following analysis attempts to answer those questions by paying close attention to the context of the sermons, considering the sermon as a text that existed first in the pulpit, as a performance that interacted with a particular audience.[15] It thus focuses not only on literary analysis and theological sources, but on what might be called preacherly techniques that are only realized in the interaction between a preacher and his auditory, in the space of performance, as it were. In particular, it argues that injecting humor into these sermons enables Donne to pass off otherwise objectionable arguments, and to equivocate over aspects of marriage doctrine likely to anger his auditory. Humor and equivocation and other performance effects are, of course, frustratingly difficult to recover, particularly in the case of Donne, who "wrote up" his sermons

[14]To take only one example, Shami notes briefly that Donne used the Nethersole marriage sermon "to realign his personal values in the face of his wife's death" (p. 41). This lapse into biographical argument is typical of scholarly readings of Donne's understanding of women, but does not reflect Shami's otherwise careful contextualization of Donne's preaching.

[15]Morrissey, p. 1116.

from notes long after they were preached.[16] Nevertheless, for these particular sermons we have sufficient knowledge of the occasion and the auditory to permit a little speculation about that unrecoverable moment of performance. Such speculation may tell us little, in the end, about Donne as a thinker or as a political animal, but it can tell us something about Donne as a preacher, as a clever negotiator of the demands of audiences and occasions through the medium of humor.

Donne's extant sermons include three preached at marriages, all grouped together at the beginning of *Fifty sermons preached by that learned and reverend divine, John Donne* (1649), one of the posthumous editions produced by Donne's son.[17] *Fifty sermons* records the venue and occasion for only one of the three marriages, on 19 November 1627 at Bridgewater House in London at the marriage of Mary, daughter of the Earl of Bridgewater and therefore granddaughter of Thomas Egerton, Donne's first employer. The groom was the eldest son of Donne's correspondent Edward, Lord Herbert of Castle-Island, and therefore the grandson of Donne's patron Magdalen Herbert. John Donne the Younger does not name the other two couples, whose connections were perhaps less advantageous in 1649. He advertises these sermons merely as "Preached at a Mariage," but the details of the occasions are recorded in multiple manuscript copies.[18] The earliest was preached in February

[16]On Donne's method of sermon preparation, see John Sparrow, "John Donne and Contemporary Preachers: Their Preparation of Sermons for Delivery and for Publication," *Essays and Studies* 16 (1931): 144–178.

[17]John Donne, *Fifty sermons preached by that learned and reverend divine, John Donne* (London: J. Flesher for M. Marriot and R. Royston, 1649), pp. 1–22. See note 1 above for modern edition.

[18]Copies of both sermons are in the "Merton" manuscript, Bodleian Library MS Eng TH. c71, fols. 146r–149v and 150r–155v, with the couples' names noted at the end, although the second sermon is erroneously described as for the marriage of "M^{r} Washington"; and British Library Harley Manuscript 6946 (H1), fols. 12r–22v and 23r–34v, with names omitted. An additional copy of 3:11, similarly described as for the marriage of a Mr. Washington, is in St. Paul's Cathedral Library MS 52 D. 14, 77r–103r; further copies, listing only the scriptural text, are in the "Ellesmere" manuscript, Cambridge University Library MS Additional 8469; and as the third of *Six sermons upon severall occasions* (Cambridge: Printers to the University, for Nicholas Fussell and Humphrey Mosley, 1634), each sermon separately paginated.

1620 at the marriage of Sir Francis Nethersole to Lucy Goodyear. Nethersole had been secretary to the Doncaster embassy of which Donne had been the chaplain, and his bride was the daughter of Donne's friend Sir Henry Goodyear and also god-daughter to Donne's patron Lucy, Countess of Bedford, who had to make up the marriage portion as a favor to the perennially overstretched Sir Henry.[19] Just over a year later, on 30 May 1621, Donne preached at the marriage of Robert Sandys to Margaret Washington, who had served in Lady Doncaster's household. As Mann notes, in the two later sermons he refers to the previous sermon, and the congregation must have been much the same on each occasion.[20] It is particularly key that on each of these occasions the women in the auditory were significant to Donne's career. Not only does Donne have a connection to each of the brides—and so much more to Margaret Washington, rather than her groom, that two manuscripts mistakenly list this as a sermon at the marriage of a *Mr.* Washington—but in each case at least one of the couple was closely connected to Donne's key women patrons.[21] How, then, to preach in an orthodox fashion of "the office of a man and wife," without angering those influential women? We must not, of course, assume that powerful women were necessarily proto-feminist, but the rebellion among the fashionable godly types who accused William Gouge of being "*an hater of women*" provides evidence that there was a limit to the degree of misogyny that influential women would tolerate.

One simple technique for negotiating such tricky situations is to evade any difficult questions, and this is in part Donne's strategy in these sermons. The last third of the Sandys-Washington marriage sermon is about mystical marriage, not human marriage, and the Herbert-Egerton sermon concerns as much the theology of the resurrection as the theology of marriage. When he does discuss "the office of a man and wife," Donne avoids any specific reference to the newly married Nethersoles or Sandys,

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[19]B. C. Pursell, "Nethersole, Sir Francis (*bap.* 1587, *d.* 1659)," and John Considine, "Goodere, Sir Henry (*bap.* 1571, *d.* 1627)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), online ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19906> and <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11003>, accessed 14 May 2009.

[20]Mann, p. 112.

[21]See note 18 above.

and when he comes to the issue of the "*Spirituall fitnesse*" of the former couple, he dismisses it as "too mis-interpretable, and unseasonable to admit an enlarging in at this time" (2:17.13), a comment that probably glances at royal attempts to suppress sermons on that spectacularly spiritually unfit couple, Charles and the Spanish Infanta, rather than any dissimilarity in Sir Francis Nethersole's and Lucy Goodyear's religion.[22] Interestingly, then, in the end of this sermon Donne reminds his audience of both a challenging point of doctrine—the need for likemindedness of faith in married couples—and an ongoing political controversy, the Spanish Match, and then pointedly refuses to discuss either. Such a conclusion represents an unusual strategy for Donne, who usually preferred the "active discretion" of reframing a question to avoiding it outright, as Jeanne Shami has shown.[23] By the time he preached his last marriage sermon, Donne had perfected such evasive maneuvers. He opens by acknowledging his auditory's expectation that marriage sermons are directed "especially upon the *parties* that are to be united; and upon the congregation, but by reflexion" (8:3.2), but then promptly excuses himself from the task by pointing out that the couple have two perfectly fine sets of parents who can serve them as examples of honorable married life. Deferring to "the usefull, as the powerfull example of *Parents*," for the couple's instruction, Donne begs leave "to extend my selfe upon considerations more general" (8:3.3), and proceeds to do so. Donne thus manages to flatter the couple and their parents without the need to impart any personal instruction on "mis-interpretable" subjects.

Donne may be able to avoid referring specifically to the couple and their situation, but he cannot avoid the contentious subject of "the office of a man and wife" altogether. Donne devotes the whole of his first marriage sermon and lengthy sections of the others to this topic, and yet it remains curiously difficult to determine exactly what he felt about gender roles in marriage. The ongoing scholarly debates about the degree of Donne's misogyny may suggest that the marriage sermons are deliberately ambiguous, designed to send the wedding guests home arguing about whether the preacher really was "*an hater of women*," rather

[22]On royal attempts to suppress sermons on the Spanish match see Shami, pp. 39–40, 42–45.

[23]Shami, p. 111; see also pp. 112–116, 273.

than certain that he was. The Nethersole marriage sermon illustrates this ambiguity most clearly. Several scholars place this sermon among those preached in obedience to the king's "express commaundment" that London clergy "inveigh vehemently and bitterly in theyre sermons against the insolencie of our women," a command that Chamberlain said made London "pulpits ring continually" with misogynist rhetoric.[24] Shami speculates that Donne was "perhaps chafing at the demand for pulpit declamations against women" when he preached this "biting sermon *against* marriage."[25] It does seem doubtful that Donne would be so socially inept as to "inveigh vehemently and bitterly" against women at a society wedding, but nevertheless it is true that this sermon includes more misogynist commonplace than the others. The choice of text, Genesis 2:18, is indicative: "And the Lord God said, it is not good, that the man should be alone; I will make him a helpe, meet for him." Perhaps inevitably, Donne's discussion of these last words at the end of the sermon focuses on circumscribing the woman's role in marriage, urging her to be merely "A Helper; for, for that she was made" (2:17.11). Donne's words seem to put woman in her place, as a helper to her husband and no more, but he repeatedly introduces qualifications that soften this prescription. Many women, he acknowledges, are "stronger in fortune, and in counsell too, then they to whom God hath given them"; they must still submit in appearance and in spirit, but Donne acknowledges their superiority (2:17.12). Similarly, Donne warns that a good helper needs only common virtues, such as "*chastity, sobriety, taciturnity, verity*," and is "never the fitter" for possessing the intellectual virtues of "*wit, learning, eloquence, musick, memory, cunning*" (2:17.12). Shami wonders if this remark is meant to be ironic, since it seems unlikely that Donne would have disparaged Lucy Goodyere's "*wit, learning, eloquence, musick, memory, cunning*"; but Donne has no need for irony because he has carefully described these as "such vertues as may be

[24]Shami, pp. 40–41; Mann, p. 113; and Potter and Simpson, vol. 2, Introduction, p. 44. The command, issued through the Bishop of London, is recorded only in letters from John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, dated 25 January 1619/20 and 12 February 1619/20 (*The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman Egbert McClure [Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939], 2:286, 289). No official reference survives.

[25]Shami, p. 41.

had, and yet the possessor not the better for them" (2:17.12).[26] The intellectual accomplishments that society values in both sexes are not spiritually necessary for either; the target here would appear to be the tendency to view a woman's intellect as a desirable social ornament, not female intellect itself.

Not all of Donne's exhortations in this sermon are directed at the bride. At times he implies that it is the groom who is more likely to be at fault when marriage deviates from its divine origins. Donne opens the sermon with the observation that, even before the fall marriage was conceived as a limitation of male sexual desire. God allowed male animals to "take the *Female* when and where their naturall desire provoked them," but when it came to the first marriage, God brought the woman to the man and thus limited his expression of sexuality to one woman (2:17.1, 2). After the fall, the sinful excess of male desire comes into conflict with this divinely ordained union, as Donne explains in a passage in another sermon. *Fifty sermons* describes this sermon as "Preached at a Christning," but the text was the mystical marriage scripture, Ephesians 5:25–27, "Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church."[27] Donne repeats the theme of marriage as a limitation of male desire, so "burdenous" that both Church and state have to create incentives for men to marry (5:5.4). Curiously, though, Donne does not view sex within marriage as one of those incentives. Instead, married sexuality is a treatment for this disease of uncontrollable desire; Donne references both the Prayer Book marriage service and St. Paul when he describes the marriage bed as "for physick, *to avoid burning*, to avoid fornication" (5:5.8).[28] As such, it should only be taken as needed to quench desire. Excessive married sex is as sinful as fornication: "A Man may be a drunkard at home, with his *own wine*, and never goe out to Taverns; A man may be an *adulterer* in his wives bosome, though he seek not strange women" (5:5.8). These are common enough warnings; Gouge laments, with surprising candor, that "Many husbands and wiues are much oppressed by their bedfellowes vnsatiablenesse in this kinde." But even Gouge asserts that one of the functions of the marriage bed is

[26]Shami, p. 41 n. 27.
[27]Donne, *Fifty sermons*, p. 31; see sermon 5:5 in Potter and Simpson.
[28]Booty, ed., p. 290; 1 Corinthians 7:9.

"linking the affections of the maried couple more firmely together."[29] Donne, in contrast, divorces this "physick" from affection. "[D]oth any Man love *Physick*?" he asks. "[H]e takes it for necessity; but does he love it?" The question may seem ironic, but Donne's answer is serious and unequivocal: "that's not the subject of our love, our love is not to be placed upon that; for so it is a love, *Quia mulier*, because she is a woman, and not *Quia uxor*, because she is my wife" (5:5.8). In marked contrast to his contemporaries and St. Paul, who considered married sexuality as a duty owed by, and required by, both husband and wife, Donne has nothing to say about female desire.[30] It is the excesses of male sexual desire that alone have the potential to distort the holy nature of marriage.

In the Nethersole marriage sermon, humorous warnings about a man's uncontrollable desires serve to temper and unbalance the misogynistic commonplace. Uxoriousness, Donne acknowledges wryly, may need "no great disswasion" in current times, but nevertheless it remains a dangerous sin. Donne paraphrases St. Augustine:

> a righteous man desires *to be dissolved and to be with Christ*, and yet this righteous man dines, and sups, takes ordinary refections and ordinary recreations: So, for marriage, says he, in temperate men, *officiosum, non libidinosum*, it is to pay a debt, not to satisfie appetite; lest otherwise she prove *in Ruinam*, who was given *in Adjutorium*, and he be put to the first mans plea, *Mulier quam dedisti, The woman whom thou gavest me, gave me my death*.
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> (2:17.11)[31]

Donne ends this passage with one of the most misogynistic verses in the Bible—Adam shifting the blame for the fall to Eve, and ultimately to God for giving him Eve—but Donne's use of the verse is a reminder of

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[29]Gouge, pp. 223, 222.

[30]See Gouge, pp. 221–222; 1 Corinthians 7:3–4.

[31]Augustine of Hippo, *De bono coniugali*, in *Sancti Aureli Augustini*, ed. Joseph Zycha, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 41 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1900), p. 210; the treatise is in English translation in Charles T. Wilcox, "The Good of Marriage," in *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1955), pp. 31–32.

how revealing those words are in their original context.[32] For if a wife does prove a ruin rather than a help, "*in Ruinam*" rather than "*in Adjutorium*," Donne implies here that the fault lies entirely with her husband's inability to rein in his desire for her. This section comes, not coincidentally, immediately after a passage in which Donne discusses patristic views of Adam and Eve's relative culpability for the fall, and concludes, "Take it any way, and [the deception of Eve] implies a weaknesse in the woman, and an occasion of soupling[33] her to that just estimation of her self, *That she will be content to learn in silence with all subjection*" (2:17.11). The statement seems to put woman firmly in her place, but it is undermined a few minutes later when Donne subtly reminds his listeners that Adam's complaint about Eve was hardly an example of superior Christian manliness.

In addition to evading the question, equivocating, and blaming the man, Donne uses one final technique to moderate the tone of his marriage sermons: humor. Of course decoding humor in an oral genre such as the sermon is a perilous task; not only is it difficult to be certain of the intended tone of the oral original, but it is impossible to know whether the joke was successful in the moment of performance. For a preacher, as for any performer, the remarks that are intended as jokes often bear little relation to when the congregation laughs. Jeanne Shami, with characteristic scholarly reserve, describes the passage about necessary virtues in the Nethersole marriage sermon as "part of the sermon's performance that remains unrecoverable."[34] Nevertheless, there are a few instances in each of these sermons when the context suggests that Donne aimed for a laugh, and one or two where he might have been hoping for one. Humor is one of the most formidable weapons in a preacher's arsenal, and these instances warrant our attention even if we can never make a case with certainty.

There is only one line in all three sermons that is obviously trawling for a laugh, the comment in the first sermon that "Few strive, few *fast*, few *pray* for the gift of continency; few are content with that

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[32]Genesis 3:12.

[33]According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* ([Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], <http:dictionary.oed.com>, accessed 14 May 2009), "To make pliant, flexible, or smooth; also, to tone down, modify" (s. v. "supple," v. 6).

[34]Shami, p. 41 n. 27.

incontinency which they have, but are sorry they can expresse no more incontinency" (2:17.5). With a rhetorical flourish, Donne acknowledges that the church's celebration of sexual restraint can seem quite alien to the human experience of overwhelming sexual desire. He is probably also echoing one of the earliest and most famous Christian jokes on the subject, St. Augustine's prayer, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet."[35] Donne's comment sets the tone for the following passage, much debated among critics, in which he asserts that, contrary to Roman Catholic propaganda, the English Church does not prefer marriage to virginity, but rather recognizes that both states are good, although the latter is an option only for the few who possess the (unsought) gift of continency.[36]

There are several other passages that seem likely to raise a laugh if spoken in the right tone of dry irony, such as the aside in the Washington sermon that "a clandestine mariage is a good mariage" (3:11.13), which could so easily be self-deprecating; the wry prayer, "*God help that man*" whose wife "thinks her husband owes her all his fortune, all his discretion, all his reputation" (2:17.12); and the comment—deeply ironic?—that uxoriousness "needs no great disswasion" in present times (2:17.11). Other passages are perhaps wry and ironic rather than laugh-out-loud funny. Donne's remark that when God brought Eve to Adam "man got not so much by the bargaine, (especially if we consider how that wife carried her selfe towards him)" (2:17.5), seems to come, along with many of the misogynistic commonplaces in the Nethersole sermon, from the *Querrelle des Femmes* tradition of witty debates about women's status that informed Donne's poetry and some of his minor prose.[37] The odd assertion in the Washington sermon that "no woman had occasion to curse" the Virgin Mary because she never attempted to steal another

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[35]Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, translated F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed., ed. Michael P. Foley (Cambridge: Hackett, 2006), 8:7.152.

[36]Dubrow, pp. 20–21; Rose, pp. 99–101.

[37]See John Considine, "The Invention of the Literary Circle of Sir Thomas Overbury," in *Literary Circles and Cultural Communities in Renaissance England*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 59–74; and Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540 to 1620* (Champagne-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). On the general manipulation of rhetorical "commonplaces" in sermons, see Morrissey, p. 1117.

woman's husband (3:11.9), may draw on the same rhetorical tradition, and seems likely to raise an uncomfortable giggle in the implication that the opposite of Mary's pious virginity is not matrimony but whoredom.

Two examples from the Bridgewater sermon seem to me to be similarly playful interactions with his auditory. The first is a brief, witty dialogue with a worm, that illustrates the depth of human self-delusion:

> we doe so little know our selves, as that if my soule could aske one of those *Wormes* which my dead body shall produce, Will you change with me? that worme would say, No; for you are like to live eternally in torment; for my part, I can live no longer, then the putrid moisture of your body will give me leave, and therefore I will not change; nay, would the *Devill* himselfe change with a damned soule?
>
> (8:3.13–14)

This little exchange might have been delivered straight, and as an image it remains powerful whether it is humorous or not, but a slight change of tone for the worm's response could make the passage much more striking for Donne's listeners. The second example clearly draws on Donne's familiarity with the couple:

> no two can be so made one in this world, but that that unity may be, though not *Dissolved*, no nor *Rent*, no nor *Endangered*, yet *shaked* sometimes by domestique occasions, by Matrimoniall encumbrances, by perversenesse of *servants*, by impertinencies of *Children*, by private whisperings, and calumnies of *Strangers*. And therefore, to speak not *Prophetically*, that any such thing shall fall, but *Provisionally*, if any such thing should fall, my love, and my duty, and my Text, bids me tell you, that perfect happinesse is to be staid for, till you be *as the Angels of God in heaven*; here, it is a faire portion of that Angelicall happinesse, if you be alwaies ready to support, and supply one another in any such occasionall weaknesses.
>
> (8:3.16)

There is the potential for much irony in Donne's assertion that he cannot possibly think of any defects that might need supporting in this couple, and for knowing smiles as he warns of "Matrimoniall encumbrances,"

"perversenesse of *servants,*" "impertinencies of *Children*," and for a droll tone as Donne emphasizes that he speaks "not *Prophetically*, that any such thing shall fall, but *Provisionally*," in case it might, which of course it will not, not for this couple.

There is no better way to ruin a joke than to explicate it, so I will not expend any further effort dissecting Donne's humor. And the point is not so much that I think there is humor in these sermons as to underline the specific moments when Donne chose to lighten the tone. Several of these wry asides come at moments of potential tension between Donne's relationship with his auditory and his duty to declare "the office of a man and wife." The passage about strife in marriage at the end of the Bridgewater sermon provides a beautiful example of advice delivered with a flattering wink, another instance of Donne exercising "active discretion" to remind his auditory of a difficult truth, that earthly marriage is a flawed and temporary union that will be eclipsed by the "perfect happinesse" of the resurrection. The comments about Adam and Eve in the Nethersole sermon, coming as they do from a recognizable tradition of misogynist commonplace, dare Donne's listeners not to take this harsh image of woman entirely seriously, and may have helped appease the anger of the bride and Lady Doncaster and other female guests. In the same sermon, the joke about continency and the aside about uxoriousness, and even the odd line about the Virgin Mary in the Washington sermon, all come at tense moments when Donne is prescribing limitations to male sexual desire, which may have been a sensitive issue for a young couple anticipating their wedding night. More importantly, the implication that male desire is at fault also runs contrary to the prevailing anti-feminist tone of these sermons and others like them. One can joke openly about blaming the woman, because everyone did anyway, but blaming the man required a delicate touch. It is perhaps telling that even modern scholars read these sermons, with their sharp view of the dangerous excess of the male libido, as sermons against marriage.[38]

Jeanne Shami has written at length about the methodological difficulties of using sermons as evidence, and "particularly those of a preacher so resistant to labelling as Donne." When such a large body of literature, written and delivered over many years, is reduced to the few

[38]Shami, p. 41; Rose, p. 103.

select quotations that can fit in a journal article, the effect is inevitably distorting, and Shami underlines this point by admitting candidly that her own quotation of Donne's sermons and biography has privileged one portrait of Donne over another.[39] I would suggest that these three sermons are especially problematic as evidence that Donne held a particular, coherent theology of marriage in the 1620s. These sermons have their origins in specific occasions; they were preached as a favor to significant patrons, and they were preserved and ultimately printed not because they were sermons about marriage but because they were sermons by John Donne. In significant ways these sermons are not typical of printed marriage sermons of the period. The latter two have little to say about "the office of a man and wife," and the first presents a model of marital duties that is more concerned about a man's insatiable desire than it is about the usual balance of men loving their wives and women submitting to their husbands. Closer attention to the occasional nature of these sermons can illuminate why they seem to work against the norm. If we remember that Donne's words existed not only on the page but as a complex interaction with his auditory, we may be able to overhear the laughter that bound together preacher and congregation, and enabled Donne to use humor to mitigate or negotiate the seemingly strict gender roles of the period.

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[39]Shami, pp. 12, 10.