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Donne's Sermons Back in Fashion?

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Jeanne Shami, *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit,* Studies in Renaissance Literature, Volume 13, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003 x + 318 pp.

Unlikely as it seems, sermons are now back in the center of that business we refer to, alternatively, as "literary studies," "early modern studies" or "the seventeenth century." Signs of this new focus of interest were two books of 1998, Peter McCullough's *Sermons at Court: Politics and Religion in Elizabeth and Jacobean Preaching* (Cambridge University Press) and Lori Anne Ferrell, *Government by Polemic: James I, the King's Preachers, and the Rhetorics of Conformity 1603-1625* (Stanford University Press). These two, coming respectively from literary studies and religious studies, subsequently banded together and produced, at the turn of the century, a collection of essays boldly entitled *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History 1600-1750* (Manchester University Press, 2000), putting us on notice that something new was afoot. What was now new, according to McCullough and Ferrell in their role as editors, was the perspective afforded by British *historical* revisionism and its consequences; that is to say, the school of thought that disposed of the concept, "Puritan Revolution" and its ideological entailments in left-wing thought, but found that it still had to deal with Puritanism—"a Puritanism revised, stripped of its association with revolution but not of its power to spark conflict in English society"

(p. 13). Thus religious dispute was reinscribed as a major issue, especially in the 1620s and 1630s.

Hence, as the editors saw it, two new schools of inquiry, the one headed by Patrick Collinson's work on Puritanism, the other by Nicholas Tyacke's focus on the anti-Calvinists or Arminians who became a force under William Laud. Tyacke's challenge to orthodoxy "ushered in a period of feverish writing on the English church," in which Peter Lake, the Princeton historian, became a constantly provocative figure, always revisionary in his own manner. It was Lake's innovative 1991 essay, "Lancelot Andrewes, John Buckeridge, and *Avant-garde* Conformity at the Jacobean Court," published in Linda Levy Peck's *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court,* that began the interesting and intense focus both on the idea of "conformity" in Jacobean sermons and how that, or its opposite, moderate non-conformity, could be detected. How could it be detected? By close reading the sermons, a literary strategy if there ever was one; but also by placing sermons in their context, here defined as the moment at which they were preached, a moment which was often the *occasion* for their being preached in that way, on that text, with those inflections. Thus was opened up a new territory for the collaboration, or the rivalry, of literary scholars and historians.

It is both fitting and ironic that Jeanne Shami's major book on Jacobean sermons in general and those of John Donne in particular should have appeared in the same turn-of-the-century year as McCullough and Ferrell's collection of essays, with its tone of manifesto. For they complain in their introduction that hitherto Donne has been unfairly privileged in sermon scholarship. This, they maintain, has been partly because his sermons were made available to modern readers in the great, if now inadequate, California edition; that this occurred only because he was the "poetic pin-up boy" for a generation of literary scholars; and that "Donne's near hegemony over what sermon criticism there is" is part of the "moribund" aspect of the discipline(s). These are unpleasant intimations. In fact, in a slightly embarrassed way, they

print an essay by Shami, "Anti-Catholicism in the sermons of John Donne," as a reply to Debora Shuger's "Absolutist theology: the sermons of John Donne," reprinted from Shuger's ten-year-old *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance.* This alone suggests that Donne really is at the heart of the conformity issue. And Peter McCullough himself has not been able to resist writing on Donne's sermons subsequently; witness the brilliant article in David Colclough's *John Donne's Professional Lives* (2003), which should spur us all to new efforts to improve on the assumptions of Potter and Simpson.

To return to the Shuger/Shami debate for a moment (since it is symptomatic of much of the debate about Donne's thought) Shuger believes in—and continues to argue for—a maximum of pious consensus and barely a minimum of religious dissent in the Jacobean era. Shami believes—and continues to argue for—a considerable range of opinion in Jacobean religious thought and in the development of tactics for the expression of dissent that might sometimes be hard (unless one reads very widely and looks very closely) to distinguish from principled conformism. Shami believes there was a good deal of censorship of the Jacobean pulpit. Shuger does not believe there was censorship, or if there was, it was well deserved. The book that Shami has now produced, however, presents so nuanced and well-documented a position that it may very well render the contest otiose. The Donne of the sermons that she now offers us is perhaps more of a conformist than even she expected.

Shami began as a scholar of Donne's sermons a long time ago (well before this new "revisionist" enterprise) and has a baker's dozen of articles on individual sermons, as well as on the principles by which they should be read. *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit*, however, is far more broadly situated. Though the project of understanding where Donne "really" stood on the issues contested in the Jacobean era—where the English church stood or should stand doctrinally and liturgically—is at the heart of her mission, she has clearly come to believe that the only

way to understand Donne is by way of extensive comparison of his sermons with those of his contemporaries. For this project she not only read all of Donne's sermons as represented in the ten-volume edition by Potter and Simpson (an achievement that few Donne scholars can claim), but also the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes, Adoniram Byfield, Edward Chaloner, John Denison, Daniel Featley, Thomas Gataker, Edward Gee, Joseph Hall, Barten Holyday, John Knight, William Loe, Thomas Myriell, John Preston, John Prideaux, Thomas Scott, John Stoughton, James Ussher, Samuel Ward, William Whateley, John Wing, and the aptly named William Worship; and that is only a selection of the 99 preachers whose published sermons she lists. The way to test where Donne "stood," Shami decided, was to place each of his most important sermons within a cluster of sermons preached almost at the same time by others.

Thus the well-known sermon that Donne was ordered to preach in September 1622 in order to explain and defend King James's Directions to Preachers is placed in a rather large cluster intending to show how exercised the pulpit was in the matter of the impending Spanish marriage, and the relaxation of penal laws against Catholics—two days before the Directions were issued James ordered that all Jesuits, priests, and refusers of the Oath of Allegiance be liberated from prison (p. 106). Shami presents, as comparisons to Donne's all-too-often-mentioned sermon the otherwise unknown productions by William Laud, Walter Curll, Christopher White and Richard Gardiner. All of these were to some extent responding to the furor caused by a sermon no longer extant, that preached on 14 April 1622 by John Knight of Oxford, who made the mistake of saying that "yf kings grow unruly and tyrannical they may be corrected and brought into order by theire subjects." Knight was imprisoned for two years, and the sermon disappeared from the records. Unsurprisingly, Laud, Curll, White and Gardiner made a point of preaching peace and quiet and obedience to rulers, and their sermons were consequently printed. Brief summaries of the texts they used and the way they handled

them make it possible for Shami to show that Donne, though nowhere near as pugnacious as Knight, used his sermon and his odd text ("The stars in their order fought against Sisera") as a defence *both* of James's motives in restricting what could be said in the pulpit *and* of the pulpit itself as a legitimate site of confessional warfare.

This—the initial test of Donne's public role in the Jacobean church—establishes Shami's position about where Donne "stood" now and throughout his career—in the middle position. She believes he was chosen for the job of defending the Directions precisely because of his amphibian state:

> Papists were well aware that Donne's mother, an elderly woman and a devout Catholic, was living with her son.... To the more zealous Puritan reformers, Donne's status as Dean [of St. Paul's] would have made him acceptable, since he was untainted by the prelatical ambitions that rendered the words of James's bishops suspect. (p. 107)

But in dozens of the Donne sermons that Shami examines she is able to find the same principles, the careful exposition, often expressed as stylistic balance, of a tolerance based on the avoidance of extremes. This was the position marked out for Donne earlier by Joshua Scodell, though primarily in relation to *Satyre III*, and it works even better for the sermons. While his king liked to be thought of as the Peacemaker, Donne in his sermons shows how argument and style can illustrate peacemaking and compromise in practice. To some of us this conclusion will seem rather flat, but it is Shami's strongest defence against the charge that Donne was any of the things he has been charged with: an unprincipled careerist (Bald and Carey); a royalist absolutist (Shuger and Goldberg); an Arminian on the side of Montagu and Laud at least as concerns universal salvation (Shami thinks this is McCullough's view); a paranoid anti-Catholic (Marotti); or a closet dissenter and political

critic writing between the lines while toeing the line (Patterson parodying herself).

Clustering sermons around events provides, of course, the "contextual" basis for interpretation, and allows Shami to move through the late years of the reign with some sense of purpose. After the Directions in the fall of 1622 comes the Spanish Marriage crisis proper of 1623, when Buckingham and Prince Charles went to Spain to woo the infanta, a period on which Thomas Cogswell's *The Blessed Revolution* is invaluable. This is followed by the period of rejoicing when Charles returns home safe and unmarried in October 1623, an event that preachers could represent as providentialism, as they could also do with the collapse of the Blackfriars theater during the celebration of a mass. Then there was the turn against Spain of English foreign policy, the possibility of war, the Petition on Religion of 23 April 1624, the development of a "patriot coalition" of strongly Protestant nobles, and the belligerent parliament of that year. And then, of course, the end of an era. "On 27 March [1625] the entire equilibrium of the Church of England was altered irrevocably by the death of King James" (p. 263). But Shami continues the story, briefly, into the reign of Charles, in order to make the case that the role of peacemaker was, if anything, only more necessary at the time of the York House debates on Arminianism in 1626. But in naming these moments, I have made them seem more prominent than they are in Shami's book, where they tend to float in the background of the parade of sermons, by no means all of which were "occasional" in the strong sense. Personally, I would have liked a few more dates, and a clearer calendar. (And a little less rote repetition of the phrase, "the public sphere," which has pretty much served its turn.)

But for those, like me, greedy for new historical information there is a wealth of this in the details, especially of what happened to preachers who broke the rules. We go from the imprisonment of John Knight in 1622 to the wonderful anecdote reported by Joseph Mead to Martin Stuteville, about the Bishop of London asking a

preacher for a copy of his sermon *before* it was preached (the equivalent of pre-publication licensing), then threatening to break the preacher's back and neck if he preached on Galatians 1:6-7, a text that speaks of some "that would pervert the gospel of Christ." The preacher refused to change his text or to allow a substitute preacher, and instead reported the whole series of threats to his congregation before beginning his sermon. In fact, the contents of the sermon were irreproachable, but the preacher concluded by saying that he would pass up the application to the times, since "he was not ambitious of lying in prison." Then there were the interesting cases of Dr. Whiting, who was forced to give the king a copy of a printed sermon complained about by the Spanish ambassador, because its text, "Remember Lot's wife" was provocative in the Spanish Marriage context, and of Joseph Hall, who preached on 21 September 1623 directly against the Spanish match, dedicating the sermon to William, earl of Pembroke. Both Whiting and Hall were imprisoned, and Shami repeats McCullough's suggestion that this occurred not only because of the substance of their sermons but because their patron, Prince Charles, was abroad. There is clear evidence of what Shami aptly calls James's personal micromanagement of the press and the pulpit at this point in time. Archbishop George Abbot emerges as a figure closer to Donne than we knew. Those who know of Samuel Harsnett only through Shakespeare studies will be pleased to learn of his role as the Arminian bishop of Norwich, called to account before the House of Lords, no less, on the grounds that he had inhibited preaching in his diocese and restricted the exercise of catechizing to yes or no terms, with as little interpretive latitude as possible. On this last issue he was questioned in the Lords by Prince Charles himself.

It is impossible to read *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis* without learning much, much more than these delightful snippets. However, one must read long and patiently to get the benefits of Shami's work, her exemplary command over the religious thought and expression of an entire culture during the 1620s, the decade

that McCullough and Ferrell identify in their introduction as the acid test of post-revisionist historical methodology. It is not easy to find one's way around in the book *after* one has read it. The more carefully sermons are distinguished from each other, the more alike they tend to seem. And because Shami is devoted to establishing Donne's middle position, the sheer originality of his sermons *when compared to those of his contemporaries*, the verbal surprises and fireworks, even the humor, are barely mentioned, let alone illustrated. One way that we could both respond to the charge that Donne has been unjustly privileged in sermon scholarship, and build on what Shami has shown us, is to make the case that Donne's sermons *deserve* their preeminence in our educational system because they can teach students what a truly smart and passionate person can do with words.

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