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# Donne's Coterie Sermon

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Starting from the identification (apparently unnoticed in Donne criticism) of an early reference to Donne's preaching in a stressful and oblique letter by the imprisoned Robert Carr (Somerset) addressed to King James, this essay is an attempt to identify that particular sermon and then to explore the possibility that the particular application Somerset made of Donne's passage to his own case was virtually suggested by Donne when he preached this sermon. That the sermon might have some political implication has been suspected by Potter and Simpson, Donne's editors, although they were unable to identify it. My reading leads to the definition of what for the lack of a better word (and in analogy to Arthur Marotti's term "coterie poet" applied to Donne) I would like to call "coterie sermon," a descriptive and non-evaluative term describing a sermon hovering in the elusive space between political allegory, moral application, and edification. The words "space between" are used deliberately and guardedly, for Donne's sermon is not political allegory. My reading remains tentative for two reasons: my inability to date Somerset's letter and my inability to prove beyond doubt that Somerset was referring to this specific sermon (or, since he was writing from the Tower, that he even could have known it).

Potter and Simpson call No. 7 "the least eloquent and effective sermon of the nine in the present volume" (*Sermons*, Vol. I, "Introductions," p. 141). In their minds the sermon is a failure, best explained by Donne's unwillingness or inability to drop the sermon as planned and start all over again: "It would seem that Donne in planning his sermon for this occasion hit upon what seemed a good way of attracting the attention of his auditors, that of bringing out the interest and significance in a strange and seemingly unpromising text, but that his inspiration failed him and he either did not sense its temporary failure or had no time to start all over again" (p. 142). I cannot argue with the sense of boredom that this particular sermon elicited for its editors—when they leave it, they add: "It is a relief to turn from a comparatively uninteresting sermon like No. 7 to the two sermons . . . Nos. 8 and 9"—but No. 7 may not have been an instance of temporary failure of Donne's imagination. We do not know enough about "this occasion," and there is a possibility that when the sermon was preached it had considerable political resonance for the Whitehall

congregation and a few others who might have heard of its content. This possibility would have been a certainty for one of the formerly highest lords of the realm, namely Somerset, as I will try to show. Potter and Simpson say that "we do not know whether the king was in attendance, though he was at least in town at the time" (p. 141). I can't be sure about his presence either, though my argument will make it seem most likely that he was there. The editors say, understandably, about Donne's scripture choice, "The text is most curious; it is part of the story of Jacob, *Genesis* 32.10: 'I am not worthy of the least of thy mercies, and of all the truth which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this *Jordan*, and now I am become two lands.'" For Potter and Simpson, "Donne's unusual choice of text is probably the most interesting point about the sermon." They point to the similarity of the names Jacob and Jacobus/James and suggest that the "two bands" might be the two nations England and Scotland, which James united by becoming king—readings "obvious enough to make one wonder whether Donne may have had such an application in mind when he chose it." And they conclude, "If, however, there be any political implication beneath Donne's exposition of the text, it is buried so deep as to be invisible to the naked eye" (I: 141).

While the editors' thoughts about suggested applications are correct in a general sense, they do not take account of the fact that Donne's text is about division rather than unity, for Jacob in his distress has divided the people with whom he came into two bands in order to survive (Gen. 32.7). It is true that the general context of Donne's text is of extremely limited relevance to his exposition, but in this case the "two bands" are in the text itself and call for attention. The sermon does not become any less puzzling but certainly more interesting if we realize that it was preached at a moment when the greatest royal favorite and willing (though, if we believe Walton, sometimes ineffective) spokesman for Donne had been found guilty of murder. In Donne's discourse, behind Jacob's experience there is almost always King James's, and at this point James, the unifier of the two realms, has been divided from the Scot Carr. But even more importantly, the "obscure" application of the text is to this very Carr, who has caused division and can be imagined to plead: "I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies, and of all the truth which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this *Jordan*, and now I am become two bands."

It seems highly likely that Somerset is referring to a section of this sermon (Vol. I, No. 7, p. 274) when he writes a letter to King James pleading for a pardon. Like Donne's sermon, the letter with its veiled reference to Prince Henry may be an instance of the iceberg theory of meaning—T. B. Howell, who published it, calls it "obscure," but Somerset's purpose in citing Donne is clear enough:

> Kings themselves are protected from the breach of law, by being favorites and God's anointed; which gives your majesty like privilege over yours, as I took from Dr. Donne his sermon, That the goodness of God is not so much acknowledged by us in being our Creator, as in being our Redeemer: nor in that he hath chosen us, as that nothing can take us out of his hand; which in your majesty's remembrance let me challenge and hope for. . . . (*State Trials*, ed. T. B. Howell [London, 1806], II, cols. 1003-04)

In a long paragraph on God's mercy (margin: *miserationis*), Donne presents a complicated theological argument for calling the creation of man (but not the work of creation) a work of mercy, and he compares this act with the even greater act of mercy in electing only certain people:

> So that of this mercy to man, of being dignified above all other creatures, in the contributing to the glory of the Creator, but especially of that mercy of electing certain men, in whom he would preserve that dignity, which others would forfeit, of this general mercy, mankind was not worthy. (Vol. I, No. 7, p. 274)

But according to Donne, if God shows mercy in creating man, it is even more compelling for our understanding of the goodness of God to consider how mercifully God relieves the sinner in his terror. Finally Donne adds another comparison which may be implied in Somerset's citation (in the sentence before the one I quoted, Somerset had called himself the King's creation or "creature"): "God dispatches faster in his building, and reparation, than in his ruin and distruction" (I: 275).

Before returning to a reading of the sermon, which was preached at Whitehall, April 12, 1618, I need to address in detail some of the difficulties of the linkage I am suggesting. With this date, the sermon may seem too late for Somerset to refer to it. Somerset and his wife, Lady Frances, had been convicted for murdering Overbury in the Tower in a celebrated trial in 1616. (The poisoning had taken place in 1613, a year before their marriage.) Both were then committed to the Tower themselves, where Somerset remained, as Samuel Gardiner put it, "with the judgement which had been pronounced against him hanging over his head until January 1622."[1] That year the king by order of Council granted them the liberty of retiring to a country house. Finally, in 1624, a few months before the King's death, they obtained their pardons.

The problem is, then, whether Somerset's "obscure" letter could be as late as 1618.[2] This at first seemed to me particularly problematic since Andrew Amos in his *Great Oyer of Poisoning: The Trial of the Earl of Somerset* had

said that Somerset "shortly after his trial addressed a mysterious letter to the King."[3] But Amos, primarily a lawyer, is not always reliable as a historian.[4] Since the letter is undated, I consulted the historian Roger Lockyer on this question, who in a generously detailed response calls the letter "virtually impossible to date accurately."[5] Lockyer points out that in his letter Somerset

> refers to the King's restitution of the property of "Elwis"—i.e. Sir Gervase Helwys, Lieutenant of the Tower, who was hanged on 20 November 1615 for his role in Overbury's murder. . . . In the *Calendar of the State Papers Domestic*, there is an entry at March 1617 of a grant to lady Helwys and Sir William Helwys of the lands and goods of Sir Gervase. On the other hand, James Howell, in his *Ho-Elianae or Familiar Letters*, declares, in a letter dated March 1, 1618 that the King had granted Helwys's estate to the Earl of Pembroke, who generously restored it to Helwys's widow and children. Howell is notoriously unreliable, but his dating would tie in with the Donne sermon. However, it seems more likely that the King had already made plain his intention to give back Elwys's property and that the March 1617 grant merely put this into effect. In other words, Somerset would have known about the King's intention early in 1617, which means that the letter could have been written at any time after that.[6]

In fact, the reference to Elwys's property, the recognition of which I owe to Lockyer, shows that Amos was wrong and that Somerset's letter could not have been written exactly "shortly after his trial." The reading of the reference as a *terminus post quem* thus makes my argument possible.

At first glance it may seem equally problematic to explain how Somerset, incarcerated possibly in the same cell in which Overbury had been poisoned, could have access to a sermon of John Donne. That he does cite John Donne's sermon is beyond doubt, but the question is whether Somerset is citing, perhaps from memory, an earlier sermon than the one I am singling out, one he might have heard before his conviction in May 1616. But Donne was ordained only in 1615 (January 23, 1615),[7] i.e., 1614/1615, and although many of his early sermons are not recorded, he could not have preached all that many times before Somerset and the King—if we consider that the force of Somerset's reference to Donne would be the stronger (his plea for the King's mercy the more powerful) if the King himself had heard the sermon.[8] Certainly no early sermon with an argument resembling the one Somerset is citing has come down to us.

But someone, particularly Donne himself, could have sent Somerset a copy of the sermon after it was delivered at Whitehall in April 1618. From the existence of manuscripts of sermons in Donne's handwriting or in the hand of

a professional copier, we know that some of his sermons circulated in restricted circles before publication. Thus Wilfred Merton says in her preface in her facsimile edition of one of Donne's sermons: "It [i.e. the sermon she is publishing for the first time] is a good example of the form in which most of Donne's works and those of his contemporaries were circulated prior to publication. . . . The neat Italian hand . . . is the work of a professional calligrapher."[9]

Did Donne know Somerset well enough that we can surmise he might have sent him a copy of his sermon? He unquestionably did. Although there is not on Somerset a work of the scope and authority of Roger Lockyer's book on Buckingham,[10] Donne's relationship to Somerset has been discussed so many times that I have space here to summarize only the highlights. Most often retold has been the anecdote (presumably dated 1613) given by Isaak Walton of King James being asked to appoint Donne Clerk of the Council—an attempt at securing Donne secular employment that failed because the King, according to this account, had made up his mind to prefer Donne only in the service of the church."[11] The person pleading for Donne, according to Walton, was Somerset. Whether the story is true or invented (Bald doubts that in early 1613 Donne was known to Somerset or to Viscount Rochester, as then he was), it is certain that Donne soon became Somerset's protege and supporter—if he had not already become such with the letter that he had Lord Hay deliver to Rochester/ Somerset in 1612.[12] Thus we have a letter from Donne to Somerset (from about March 1614, according to Bald [p. 290]) asking to be considered for the ambassadorship to Venice,[13] and another of the same year reminding Somerset that he had set aside his intention of entering the Church at Somerset's request, but that he was still without a proper position (Bald, p. 291; Gosse, II, 41-42). We learn from one of Donne's letters to his friend Henry Goodyer that Donne intended to publish a collection of poems and dedicate them to Somerset. It might even be more accurate to say that he intended to publish them in order to be able to dedicate them to his patron: "It is that I am brought to a necessity of printing my poems, and addressing them to my lord Chamberlain [i.e., Somerset]."[14] Although the publication did not materialize (possibly because of Somerset's fall), Donne's turn of phrase shows how far he was willing to go in order to win Somerset's favor. Edmund Gosse expressed his disgust for Donne's alleged role in the divorce suit that Lady Essex brought against her husband so that she could marry Robert Carr, made "Somerset" for that occasion. That Gosse based his view and feeling partly on mistaken evidence (confusion of John Donne with Sir Daniel Dunne or Donne, one of the referees in the "nullitie" suit)[15] does not invalidate Gosse's point, namely that Donne seems to have been so solidly in Somerset's camp as to support the divorce suit (opposed by the courageous Archbishop Abbot); not only did Donne write an epithalamion for the marriage between Somerset and Lady Frances (which

seems to have been commissioned by Somerset), but in a letter to G. K. (Gosse, II, 24-25), he mentions in somewhat veiled terms the rumor that a treatise concerning the "nullity" is to be issued ostensibly in Geneva but most likely at home; and he adds: "My poor study having lain that way, it may prove possible that my weak assistance may be of use in this matter in a more serious fashion than an epithalamion."[16]

Of course all of this is before Somerset's conviction for murder. R. C. Bald points out how close Donne was to confidential information in this case: "He had himself been a dependent of Somerset at the time of Overbury; his father-in-law (More) had had surveillance of the prisoners; and two of his closest friends at Court had carried messages back and forth between the King and Somerset"(Bald, p. 314), but for Donne's reaction Bald is uncharacteristically conjectural: "Donne must have followed these events with horror and with shocked disbelief. . . . He must have been morally as well as prudentially relieved that he had not unwittingly become involved in the criminal activities of his former patron and the ruthless countess" (Bald, p. 314).

Somerset's citation of Donne is a key, and an important one, to rereading the sermon. "As I took from Dr. Donne his sermon" seems to refer to a specific sermon the addressee is assumed to know, possibly a sermon of shared experience, and suggests that the King was present when it was preached. In this sermon Donne accomplishes the linguistic balancing act of speaking often (but not always) on two levels at the same time, the homiletic and the political (pleading for James's compassion for the man he has made); or, more precisely, of speaking consistently theologically, but sometimes making specific applications possible (for "allegory" would be indecorous and thus counterproductive). The particular speaking situations demanded that this tropological sense be the responsibility of the highly restricted audience who is defined by the shared experience of being "in the know," defined in fact by being able to make the particular application that is only veiledly and obliquely suggested by the preacher. On the other hand, although the language of Somerset's letter is in some respects similar (the pervasive analogy between James and God, his objectifying speaking of "Somerset" as the King's "creature," the "redemption" he seeks), Somerset's epistolary language is closer to the allegorical mode. In its obliqueness, which is not allegorical, the sermon is thus an example of a special genre, which I would like to call "coterie sermon," in analogy to Marotti's consideration of Donne as "coterie poet." The term is intended to be descriptive, for I am not suggesting Donne was a mere "timeserver" (to use Shakespeare's expression), although one may easily exaggerate the risk Donne may have run in making possible this particular application (to show mercy to Somerset): after all the king, while dreading the political abyss of being implicated with Somerset, remained strongly attracted to him. He ultimately reneged on his promise never to pardon the murderers of

Overbury and apparently corresponded with Somerset regularly: as Sir Anthony Weldon has claimed, who however is not always reliable, "for he ever courted *Somerset* to his dying day."[17]

From one perspective, we just have an unsuccessful sermon and possibly a reference to it, from another a sermon in an unusual and very specific mode. From Donne's point of view, the sermon may have been quite "successful," since it may have contributed to gaining Somerset's freedom, saving his property and perhaps even his life. But since by the nature of the coterie sermon what I am trying to show may be beyond conventional demonstration, we may have to re-define what in this mode may constitute "proving" my reading.

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Notes

[1] Gardiner, *History of England*, 10 vols. (London: Longmans, 1883-86), II, 363. According to *State Trials*, II, col. 1004, he was "enlarged" in 1621.

[2] The import of the letter, printed in *State Trials*, II, cols. 998-1003, is discussed by S. R. Gardiner, II, 361-63.

[3] The *Great Oyer* (London, 1846), p. 476.

[4] See James Spedding's critique of the book in his *Letters and Life of Francis Bacon* (London: Longmans, 1869), V, 343-46.

[5] Letter to the author, dated June 30, 1990.

[6] Finally, Lockyer summarizes his view: "My impression is that the fate of Somerset's property was decided in the opening of 1617, and that this letter, which forms part of the negotiating process, is most likely to date from that period." But then he concedes: "Yet Somerset, as you know, remained in prison until 1622 and wasn't pardoned until 1624, so it could have been written much later."

[7] See Potter and Simpson, I, 109 note; and William R. Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 24.

[8] On Donne's early sermons at court, see R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 312-13.

[9] John Donne, *A Sermon upon the ninth verse of the 38th Psalm* (London: privately printed, 1921).

[10] *Buckingham: The Life and Political Career of George Villiers. First Duke of Buckingham, 1592-1628* (London: Longmans, 1981); on Somerset, see P. R. Seddon, "Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 14 (1970), 48-68.

[11] R. C. Bald discusses the questionable historicity of this event in *John Donne: A Life*, pp. 289-90.

[12] See Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne* (London: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1899), II, 20-21.

[13] Gosse, *Life and Letters*, II, 40-41.

[14] Quoted from Gosse, II, 68, who dates the letter Dec. 20, 1614; Bald, p. 296.

[15] As Evelyn Simpson mentions, the error was pointed out in a review of Gosse's book, but has been frequently repeated (*A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne*, 2nd ed. [Oxford, 1948], pp. 29-30).

[16] Gosse, II, 25. The letter is dated only Jan. 19; to which Gosse adds 1613.

[17] See *State Trials*, vol. 2, col. 1005, note: "At the time when his prosecution was first set on foot, the king gave a strict charge to the judges to make a diligent search and inquiry into the truth, and told them, if ever he spared any that were guilty, he wished the curse of God might light on him, and his posterity" (Sir Anthony Weldon, *The Court and Character of King James* [London, 1650], p. 121).