

## Donne's Political Casuistry: An Introduction

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Brown, Meg Lota. *Donne and the Politics of Conscience in Early Modern England*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995. Pp. ix, 159.

The purpose of Brown's study is to situate Donne in the debate about authority and interpretation current in England and on the continent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and to use her findings to illuminate the epistemological and rhetorical complexities of Donne's early poetry and prose. Brown places Donne in the context of both Protestant and Catholic casuistical debates about the limitations of knowledge, the cultural construction of authority, and the grounds of right action and ethical choice. In so doing, she demonstrates how pervasive casuistical habits of thought were to Donne's prose as well as to his poetry, and initiates discussion of the political valences registered by Donne's casuistical discourse. Her findings also suggest that this is a book which is concerned more with intellectual history than with political or material culture.

Grounded in a familiarity with a wide range of casuistical treatises (both English and continental), penitentials, and legal precedents, Brown's discussion of casuistry outlines the broad parameters of the religious culture within which Donne wrote. Her first two chapters locate Donne in early modern debate about the limits of reason and the relativity of law and ethics, focusing especially on the Renaissance debate about valid criteria for judgment. In these chapters, Brown effectively clarifies several issues raised by casuistry, and analyzes the narrative procedures and logical distinctions which characterized this discourse.

In her third chapter, Brown considers how Donne addresses problems of moral decision and action, and problems of knowledge and definition in three casuistical prose texts: *Biathanatos*, *Pseudo-Martyr*, and the sermon on Esther 4.16. Her concern in this chapter is more with casuistry as a process of problem-solving and ethical adjustment, than with casuistry as a specific response to particular historical circumstances. Such an approach is effective in persuading readers of the casuistical bases of Donne's politics. However, it is precisely the historical circumstances of the "political" texts Brown cites that need to be identified and applied, if readers are to approach Donne's "politics of conscience" in these prose works. Brown argues that Donne's politics were "inconsistent — at times apparently absolutist and at times apparently subversive — because they were typically casuistical" (12). To support this claim, she cites two apparently contradictory statements from sermons preached approximately ten years from one another, concluding that "it is the circumstances of the specific cases under consideration that shape the politics of each sermon" (12). Certainly, the casuistical habit of mind is recognizable in each of the sermons Brown cites, but the "circumstances" affecting each sermon's politics are not clear and would indeed, if known, begin to explain the nature and degree of the differences between the political positions articulated in these two sermons, as well as the motivations behind them.

As it is, we cannot even be sure of the dates on which the two sermons in question were preached. Potter and Simpson date the sermon on Esther 4.16 in 1615, in part because "in the first few years of Donne's ministry the sermon could have been preached without offense" (5.16), although after the question of the Spanish Match had become topical "it would almost certainly have been interpreted as an encouragement to those preachers and pamphleteers who were opposing the King's policy as an outrage against the Protestant faith" (5.16). Unless we assume that Donne would never give "offense," however, such an assumption about an early date is false, and certainly unreliable as a methodology for dating a sermon. The contrasting quotation, taken from Donne's Fifth Prebend sermon, has been dated November

or December 1627 by Potter and Simpson, and more recently in May or June 1627 by Janel Mueller. The more precisely the sermons can be dated, of course, the easier it is to determine which historical circumstances can be brought to bear on the politics of the sermons. As Potter and Simpson realized, dating the Esther sermon from the early 1620s rather than from 1615 would lead to radically different conclusions about Donne's politics. True, Donne's focus on the process by which moral choices can be adjudicated remains consistently casuistical, but it is casuistry informed by shifting historical circumstances which still remain to be determined.

An important aspect of Brown's study is her articulation of the distinctions between Reformed and Catholic casuistry which were emerging in the late sixteenth century, and which were the two strands of casuistical tradition available to Donne. Although Brown allies Donne clearly with Reformed casuistry in its rejection of external authorities and its emphasis on the process of adjudication, however, her own citations from Donne suggest what is more probably the case: that Donne rejected the Jesuit *abuses* of casuistry, particularly the practices of equivocation and mental reservation, and the doctrine of probablism, but that he relied heavily on the early Church Fathers, especially Augustine and Aquinas, to inform his processes of moral decision-making. Brown's characterization of all Catholic casuistry as "authoritarian" (31) because of its reliance on external authorities perhaps describes much Jesuit casuistry, but may not do justice to Catholic treatises on the subject as a whole, or to their influence on Donne. It may even establish a false dichotomy between Reformed "responsibility" (31) and Catholic "legalism" (25) which does not represent fully the positions of many of the casuists she cites. But in establishing the broad outlines of the debate, Brown's work opens the way for further analysis of Donne's debt to Azpilcueta, whom Donne cites, or to Erasmus, for example, as much as to Hall, Ames, or Perkins (whom Donne never explicitly mentions, although he may certainly have been influenced by them).

These first chapters on the discourse of casuistry and its political resonance in Donne clearly extend our understanding of Donne's

relations to conscience, authority, and interpretation in his works. Brown's fourth chapter, on the *Songs and Sonets*, is especially provocative, and justifies the work on casuistical principles which informs it. In this chapter, Brown argues that Donne's poems are casuistical insofar as they are concerned with the justification of doubtful actions, with the relation of the individual to general law or convention, and with the conflict between public code and private conduct (5). She argues persuasively that Donne's misappropriation of casuistical principles compounds the conflicts in his verse, while his witty distortion of casuistry contributes to its humour and complexity (138). Clearly, her understanding of casuistry informs a new and complex reading of Donne's *Songs and Sonets*. And her insistence that Donne's engagement with the motives and recommendations of casuistry signals a pervasive concern throughout his career counters the persistent separation of Donne's poetry from his prose among scholars.

An impressive feature of this book is the clarity and economy of its style. In presenting her arguments, Brown is expository and analytical rather than polemical. The force of the argument, however, (and our appreciation for the space that Brown has cleared for her own work) would benefit from even more engagement with other scholars who have written on these subjects. In particular, I note that while Brown cites Shuger's chapter on Donne's absolutist politics as an "important" study (11-12, n.25), she does not address Shuger's specific claims regarding Donne's "absolutist theology". In fact, it is unclear from her citation whether she agrees or disagrees with Shuger's analysis of Donne's politics, or whether she can accommodate Shuger's arguments to her own sense of Donne's politics of conscience. Nor does she specify the nature of her debts to as well as her departures from critics such as Slights, Flynn, and Sherwood, all of whom have written on topics pertinent to her discussion, and who are listed in her bibliography. How are the ironic readings of *Biathanatos* offered by Slights and Flynn, for example, connected to the casuistical discourse she describes? Can there be an ironic dimension to casuistry, for example, and, if so, how does it operate? The exception to this

observation is Brown's detailed treatment of Cathcart's work on the *Songs and Sonets*.

In recent years, there have been few full-length studies of Donne, in part, perhaps, because the challenge to historicize his works has seemed too daunting a task. In enriching our knowledge of the complex cultural networks which inform Donne's work, therefore, *Donne and the Politics of Conscience in Early Modern England* is a major study. This book takes on the challenge of history by alerting us to Donne's immersion in an epistemological and literary matrix that informed his own processes of moral decision-making and that marks him as a major participant in contemporary debates about issues of authority and interpretation. Brown's study of the casuistical bases of Donne's works clearly points the way to further consideration of Donne's politics in relation to the historical circumstances which rendered his divinity "practical."

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