

Recovering Donne's Sermons

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Jeanne Shami, ed. *John Donne's 1622 Gunpowder Plot Sermon: A Parallel-Text Edition*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1996. Pp. xii + 200.

In 1992, Jeanne Shami brought to light three previously unrecognized manuscript sources of Donne's sermons, all in the British Library. Of these three collections, one contains five sermons by Donne, two of which exist in no other known manuscript; another collection provides two sermons which do appear in other manuscripts—on Ecclesiastes 12.1 and Matthew 21.44. A further sermon, on Lamentations 4.20, the sermon of 1622 in commemoration of the Gunpowder Plot, is the subject of this volume. Not only is there no other known manuscript source for this sermon, but also this scribal copy contains corrections in Donne's own hand. Thus Shami's discovery raises to nineteen the total number of Donne's sermons for which we now possess manuscript sources, but only the Gunpowder Plot sermon shows evidence of Donne's autograph intervention.

Shami is concerned only to describe the manuscript sermon with Donne's corrections, MS Royal 17.B.XX, which she transcribes, giving also photographic reproductions on opposite (that is, verso) pages. She tells us nothing of the other two manuscript collections, not even disclosing their particular location in the British Library, but assures us that she is currently examining them. The sermon under present consideration is obviously of special interest because of Donne's corrections to its manuscript

copy and also because the printed text in the 1649 folio is somewhat different, mainly on account of the slight expansion of a number of points. In MS Royal, Shami identifies thirty-six corrections definitely in Donne's hand, nine that are probably Donne's, and seventeen that are possibly Donne's. These corrections—even those that are certainly by Donne—are mostly of a word or extremely brief phrase, and they are, I think, of slender consequence. But Donne's corrections obviously show his concern for the minutiae of the scribal copy of his sermon, which he was preparing at the King's request, soon after he gave the sermon on the 5th of November 1622.

This manuscript of the Gunpowder Plot sermon is not, however, the source of the printed text, the Fifty Sermons of 1649, which apparently derives from a different revised holograph; or else the present MS Royal and the folio text are independent witnesses of a common holograph source, written soon after the delivery of the sermon. Shami's scrupulous transcription of MS Royal 17.B.XX gives at the bottom of each page the variants of the 1649 folio so that one may see the differences. These variants are of interest, Shami believes, because they show that Donne develops or adapts what he says in response to changed circumstances—though we cannot know for certain the date of the scribal version that formed the basis of the 1649 text: Shami assumes that it must have been later than 1622, but we can only speculate on how much later. Indeed, could this second copy have been made immediately after the first one or even concurrently with it?

Shami would of course answer in the negative by showing how the 1649 text is different from the MS Royal in several ways. The printed text contains "The Prayer Before the Sermon," and several expansions which may (or, I think, may not necessarily) reflect more mature judgments or opinions, notably a passage in the manuscript that appears to excuse princes from evil actions, but in the printed text seems to hold them responsible for countenancing evil actions. MS Royal, lines 913-14 reads:

but princes do not so much as worke therein, and therefore are excusable.

And Fifty Sermons, lines 477-80, reads:

but Princes doe not so much as worke therein, and so may bee excusable; at least, for any cooperation in the evill of the action, though not for countenancing, and auhorising an evill instrument; but that is another case.

(Shami, 31; and see *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959], 4:253, lines 591-9.)

Here there may be a veiled reference to Buckingham, whose influence over Charles was much criticized in the late 1620s. Shami believes that this passage reveals the careful discriminations that Donne made in revising his sermons. But in order to agree, one must be convinced that the source of the printed text was made before 1628 when Buckingham died and also that it really does have a particular political reference.

In her introduction, Shami raises a number of questions about the nature of Donne's sermon composition, which she believes her discovery of MS Royal helps to illuminate. By comparing the manuscript with the printed text, we may better understand that Donne was continuing to revise his work, and that the earlier manuscript may, as much as the printed text, reveal his true "intentions." There is, then, no ultimately "valid," "intentional," or final text:

The two states of the sermon . . . suggest that Donne changed his sermons not only for stylistic or rhetorical reasons, but also for political ones (and probably for many others we cannot determine); however, both versions of the sermon speak for their time and place. This means that the question of determining which text is closest to Donne's intentions, either verbally or politically, is perhaps the wrong question A comparison of the two versions

reinforces the sense that Donne is concerned with authorized means of criticism, but that in 1622 he was wary of criticizing the King [James] as openly as he did in the revised version [during Charles's reign]. (36)

Shami's general principle seems appropriate and sound, and it is much in accord with contemporary textual and critical theory that urges the preeminency of the "social character" of literary production. Changing authorial intention may be particularly relevant in our estimation of Donne's homiletic composition, for what he preached and what he later wrote down for publication illustrate a continuing, vital process. At the same time, the scribal manuscript of the Gunpowder Plot sermon, with its few corrections in Donne's hand, is less revealing of Donne's mode of composition than Shami (and others) may want to believe. It offers a rather limited though undoubtedly fascinating view of Donne at work.

We are surely fortunate to have MS Royal 17.B.XX so well reproduced and carefully transcribed, and as well accompanied by the variants of the printed text of 1649 (Shami should have mentioned that Potter and Simpson give the best modern edition of this text in volume 4 of the *Sermons*, pp. 235-63). The pages of the manuscript are clear and the whole volume handsomely printed. The transcription is very accurate, and one soon becomes used to the practice of underlining all words for which a variant is given, and also to the bold font that signals Donne's autograph. I have noticed in my preliminary study few likely errors: line 56 (p. 49) curiously reads "Se: Hiero:". The scribe has in fact written "S:"—the majuscule has an extra loop that is easy to misread; but line 123 (p. 57), where the scribe also writes "S:", is properly transcribed. Moreover, at line 257 (p. 69), the manuscript reads "This" and not "his." Finally, I am not convinced that the conventional symbol for the terminal "es" should have been ignored, nor do I believe that it is so difficult to distinguish between the majuscule and minuscule form of "L"—but these are quibbles that are not meant to reflect on the general excellence of Shami's work. Donne

scholars and students of the period are much in her debt and await further reports of her industry and scholarship.

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