

An Answer to Edmund Miller and Anita Gilman Sherman*

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I am honoured that my paper, "Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word," has been met by two such insightful responses by Edmund Miller and Anita Gilman Sherman. The following constitutes an answer to the points raised in those papers.

Turning first to Miller's response, I am sorry that my assumption of sermons and plays both taking place on Sundays, and possibly even at parallel times, seems to be mistaken, as Miller's close reading of the *Declaration of Sports* suggests. Apart from that, however, I could not agree more with Miller's insistence on Donne's inherent affinity and indebtedness to the theatre. When I argued that Donne may have been careful not to directly allude to the theatre, because of its "dubious moral status" (cf. Miller 9), it was far from me to imply that Donne himself would have shied away from situations of moral ambiguity, nor that he would needs have shared the misgivings some of his preacher colleagues may have had with regard to drama and plays. What I did mean to draw attention to—and I do not believe Miller contradicts me on that count—was the fact that, in his function as a preacher, Donne may have been careful not to make his appreciation of theatrical technique, and possibly the dramatic medium in general, too obvious, in order to avoid offending the taste and moral expecta-

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfetzer01701.htm>>.

tions of those who took a more critical stance towards plays and play-acting than he may have done. Indeed, the argument of my book *John Donne's Performances: Sermons, Poems, Letters and Devotions* relies precisely upon the recognition that Donne's affinities to early modern theatre and drama cannot be overestimated and have so far been notoriously neglected by Donne criticism. In the chapter on Donne's sermons, I pay attention to various extracts from his sermons which use vocabulary and metaphors from theatrical contexts in order to illuminate their homiletic arguments, and it certainly would have been useful to include the valuable sermon quotations made by Miller which would have further supported my argument. I share Miller's judgement, that, in his sermons, and even as regards his oeuvre as a whole, Donne never articulated any whole-sale toleration of the theatre, nor did he anywhere actively encourage theatre and dramatic technique. But whether consciously or not, he did, and here again I believe myself in agreement with Miller, acknowledge the dramatic medium as an influential discourse and source of metaphor for his contemporaries and himself.

Anita Gilman Sherman draws attention to the altogether different atmospheres of church as opposed to theatre—certainly a point well worth considering and probably too little elaborated in my essay. However, I wonder if we should accept Calvinist doctrines of predestination as unquestionably for Donne's sermons as Sherman seems to do. Admittedly, there can be little doubt that, for many of Donne's listeners, the idea of being consigned to either salvation or eternal death and damnation would have constituted an undisputable dogma of their faith. Donne's sermons, by contrast, as I argue in greater detail in *John Donne's Performances*, repeatedly present man's union with God as the result of a mutual process and herein combine Roman Catholic and reformed approaches to salvation.

If, as I suggest, God's promise of salvation is performed in the preacher's invitations to identify with the sermon, then Donne's sermons appear to attribute too much agency to the individual's free will and actions to be subsumed under Calvinist doctrines of predestina-

tion and the irresistibility of grace. In one of his earliest sermons, for example, Donne describes the relation between God and man with reference to Rev. 3:20: "Christ promises to come to the door, and to knock at the door, and to stand at the door, and to enter if any man open; but he does not say, he will break open the door: it was not his pleasure to express such an earnestness, such an Irresistibility in his grace, so" (1.6: 255-56). At this time, man has not yet opened his door to God and, unless he does so, he will not be able to be reconciled to Him. God's knocking and calling must be heard, man's union with Christ cannot be effected by Christ's agency alone but relies on the individual's adequate response: it is the result of a reciprocal process, and one is not surprised to find that this should be so, for, if God was happy to redeem man even without his consent, preaching, the act of encouraging people to consent voluntarily to be united with God, would be rather futile. Such a view of the relationship between God and man accounts for Donne's reluctance to get too involved with Calvinist theories of predestination (Ferrell 61), as the passage very literally distances itself from the Calvinist doctrine of the "irresistibility of grace" (cf. Cummings 389) which essentially complements the doctrine of predestination.

Nor would Donne have been alone in eschewing the rigour of Calvinist doctrine: even the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563), as Cressy and Ferrell remark in their introductory note, "present the Calvinist doctrine of predestination in such a way as to render it practicably ambiguous" (59). Article 17, for example, explicitly warns against too exaggerated a contemplation of this doctrine: whereas it may have a positive effect on godly people, for "curious and carnal persons," it constitutes "a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation" (Cressy and Ferrell 64). This does not mean that the "take-up" expected from the audience is but a matter of course: after all, there are, as we know from Austin, many ways in which performatives may misfire, and Donne likewise explores how his sermons can miss their point, for example if

hearers fail to recognise themselves in the examples he offers to them, fail, in Sherman's words perhaps, to recognise themselves as "providentially interpellated" (Sherman 18). To illustrate this difficulty, I would like to repeat a quotation given in my article: "It is a fearful obduration, to be Sermon-prooffe, or not to take knowledge, that a judgement is denounced against him, because he is not named in the denouncing of that judgement" (6.10: 219). Indeed, "the challenge is to interpret take-up" (Sherman 16)—it poses itself for each and every listener of Donne's, and certainly, as I hope to have made clear in my essay, was not always successfully responded to.

I appreciate the distinction Sherman draws between exemplarity and typology, yet I doubt that these two terms either were or are commonly considered as clearly distinct from one another as Sherman suggests. In the course of writing on Donne at least, my reading of secondary literature has taught me otherwise. "Example" and "type" are often used interchangeably, and while one possibility to deal with this unclarity would have been to provide unambiguous definitions of my own, I have chosen a different strategy. As Sherman points out, "the typological imagination [...] has more force—and is ultimately more dangerous" (Sherman 19)—while this may be so, it does not seem to me that Donne was any better at distinguishing example and typology from one another than many of his twentieth-century critics.

To act by way of example is all very well, and certainly both useful and inevitable for one's conversion to God. But the risk of "presuming of mercy by example" (6.10: 209), which I have mentioned but in passing, is lurking everywhere: to consider oneself, in a positive sense "providentially interpellated" may be dangerously arrogant, as Donne makes most explicit in one of his sermons on the Conversion of St Paul: "Now, Beloved, wilt thou make this perverse use of this proceeding, God is rich in Mercy, Therefore I cannot misse Mercy?" (6.10: 207). The speaker warns his listeners of being "[s]o ill a Historian as to say, God hath called *Saul*, a Persecutor, then when he breathed threatenings and slaughter, then when he sued to the State for a Commission to persecute Christ" (6.10: 208), and hence permit themselves to be

deluded to believe that they will likewise be spared by God. "God forbid. It is not safe concluding out of single Instances" (6.10: 208). The sermon explicitly addresses the practice of 'inserting' oneself into examples offered by the Bible or the sermon—but not without drawing attention to the dangers inherent in doing so. On the one hand, sermons have to rely on example and exemplification to involve their listeners in their discourse—on the other, wherever one appropriates for oneself too grand and positive a Biblical figure, wherever what Sherman calls being "providentially interpellated" is, however unnoticed, driven by an individual's wishful thinking, theatrical identification and exemplification becomes dangerous.

I am grateful to Anita Gilman Sherman for drawing my attention to Gina Bloom's *Voice in Motion*: for the ambiguous stance which Donne's sermons take towards the merits and dangers of re-enacting Biblical example is mirrored and deepened by Bloom's insight that, "while sermons propose that receptive hearing is the mark of a good Christian, they simultaneously warn about the dangers of the ears being too impressionable" (Bloom 133). Since positively inspiring and seductively presumptuous examples may offer themselves simultaneously, each listener indeed better "take heed *what* [he] hear" (7.16: 405; cf. Bloom 113, cf. Sherman 19), for hearing, no less than theatrical re-enactment of homiletic examples constitutes not only "a multivalent," but also an ambivalent, "transformative practice" (Bloom 113).

Donne does not seem to accept unquestionably the doctrine of predestination, which typically manifests itself in the conviction of being "providentially interpellated"—for how am I to know if, in believing myself to be predestined for salvation, or typologically prefigured in St Paul or Christ, my own wish rather than God's election, may be father to this thought? "The belief that the long arm of God has reached down and singled out an individual, tapping him on the shoulder and knocking on his heart, differs from the bashful experience of identification occasioned by a dynamic preacher" (Sherman 18). True enough, but subjective interpretation and wishful thinking, Donne's sermons seem to suggest, may play a role in either case. The

danger consists precisely in the fact that there is a continuum between exemplarity and typology, a danger to which even the preacher himself may not be wholly immune: for, within the space of only eight pages, the speaker of the above-mentioned sermon, who had begun by admonishing his listeners to beware of identifying with the prominent example of St Paul's conversion, concludes by aspiring to identify with the figure of Christ Himself.

To conclude: Sherman may be right in wondering if my emphasis on the indebtedness of Donne's sermons to strategies of theatrical re-enactment and exemplification is not too strong. Her argument, however, seems to presuppose that Donne accepted Calvinism whole-sale whereas I would contend that both his concept of conversion, as well as his awareness of the dangers of typology and (theatrical) exemplification (cf. 6.10: 209), demonstrate how uncomfortable he was with some of its doctrines. I am aware that there is a trend in recent Donne criticism (Sherman mentions Stachniewski) to view him as unambiguously Protestant or even, more specifically, Calvinist—Mary Papazian's 2003 publication on *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives* would be another example of that tendency. In the 1980s, by contrast, John Carey viewed Donne as crypto-Catholic, and P. M. Oliver's 1997 publication *John Donne's Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion* to some extent followed suit. My own article is part of the larger project of *John Donne's Performances*, in which I aim to read Donne's oeuvre not within the context of a specific religious denomination and instead hope to show how the discourse and communicative system of early modern drama have shaped his writing to a hitherto unrecognised extent.

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