

A Response to Margret Fetzer's "Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word"*

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In discussing the theatricality of John Donne's sermons, Margret Fetzer cites a competition between the sermon and the play for an audience at the beginning of the seventeenth century (11n1). But she suggests that Donne may have been unwilling to make direct allusions to the theater because of its "dubious moral status" (11n3). Donne, however, published an epithalamion on the marriage of Sir Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, to the divorced Countess of Essex, a lady notorious quite apart from the peculiar details of the divorce case, including the murder of a witness. So Donne was not shy of association with situations of moral ambiguity. Indeed, Donne also wrote a prose defense of the divorce although it was not published.

In addition, Donne would have been familiar with theatrical performances from his time at the Inns of Court, where pageants were common. As a royal chaplain early in his ecclesiastical career, he would have been aware of masques performed at court and probably in attendance at some of them. And the Somerset wedding celebration was accompanied by the performance of two masques by Thomas Campion and another two by Ben Jonson over the course of several days. It is hard to believe that the author of one of the entertainments was not present for the performances of some of the others and impossible to believe that he was unaware of their subject matter and their use of mechanical devices, lavish costumes, choreography, and poetic language.

*Reference: Margret Fetzer, "Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word," *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 1-13.

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

Whatever the views of his parishioners, he cannot have had been ignorant of stagecraft (like the controversialist William Prynne) or opposed to it in principle (like the anti-Catholic polemicist J. Rainsford cited by Fetzner). As Fetzner points out, Donne does not denounce the theater as many Puritan preachers and lecturers did (1).

In addition, Donne had a number of very personal connections to the public theater. He was the grandson of the playwright John Heywood (c. 1497-c. 1580). And Donne had an actor for a son-in-law. Donne seems to have known the actor Edward (or Ned) Alleyn (1566-1626) as early as the 1590s. At least, a letter of Alleyn's preserved in manuscript at Dulwich College (founded by Alleyn) refers to an acquaintance dating back to that period (Bald 74). An entry in Alleyn's diary shows that he dined with Donne on one occasion in 1620 (Bald 367). And in 1623 Alleyn certainly married as his second wife Donne's daughter Constance, and this involved marriage settlements¹ suggesting approval of the father of the bride (Donne's own marriage had, of course, not had such approval). Although—according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*—Alleyn's last recorded stage performance was in 1604, he was a very active theater manager, starting as partner of his first wife's step-father, Philip Henslowe. After Henslowe's death in 1616, Alleyn continued this work at least until a few years before his own death in 1626. Apart from buying scripts, he was a patron of writers like Thomas Dekker and John Taylor. With an acquaintance like Alleyn, who later even became a member of the family, it seems likely that Donne would have had inside knowledge of the theatrical practices of his day even if he had never attended a performance. And his daughter's marriage with his full consent would have been widely known and seen by everyone as tacit approval of the theater as a profession.

Donne's great theme in *The Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* is that all of God's creation is interconnected. He is famous for his refusal to compartmentalize life. Fetzner is quite right that Donne "did not leave behind his erotic passions when approaching God in his divine poetry" (1). But not only are his religious poems full of erotic imagery, his

love poems are full of religious imagery. In the sermons themselves, he cuts a wide swathe through imagery drawn from the unsavory elements of life without worrying that he might be inciting his listeners to vice. For example, in the sermon "Preached at White-Hall, March 8. 1621 [1621/2]," he explicates a biblical story of a famine as follows:

It brought Mothers to eat their Children of a span long; that is, as some Expositors take it, to take medicines to procure abortions, to cast their Children, that they might have Children to eate. (4.1: 50)

If Donne excludes theatrical imagery from his sermons it cannot be a consequence of unfamiliarity. Nor does it seem likely that he thought his listeners would have found such imagery inappropriate on Sabbatarian grounds. His patron King James promulgated a *Declaration of Sports*, authorizing the playing of games and dancing on Sunday although it disallowed "[i]nterludes" (107). Plays may have competed with sermons as public entertainment but not on the same day.

At any rate, Donne does, in fact, make use of theatrical imagery in his sermons. His sermons may not make specific allusions to particular plays or theatrical details, but they do make theatrical allusions of a more general kind. In an interesting passage in a sermon "Preached at S. Pauls in the Evening, Upon the day of S. Pauls Conversion. 1628. [1628/9]," Donne actually cites in parallel the possible bad effects of theater and sermon:

If I should aske thee at a Tragedy, where thou shouldest see him that had drawne blood, lie weltring, and surrounded in his owne blood, Is there a God now? If thou couldst answer me, No, These are but Inventions, and Representations of men, and I beleeeve a God never the more for this; If I should ask thee at a Sermon, where thou shouldest heare the Judgements of God formerly denounced, and executed, re-denounced, and applied to present occasions, Is there a God now? If thou couldest answer me, No These are but Inventions of State, to souple and regulate Congregations, and keep people in order, and I beleeeve a God never the more for this; [...]. (8.14: 332)

Even if "Tragedy" here means tragedy in the real world, there is no mistaking the theatrical origin of the image of a murderer later falling

dead himself. The ironic epistrophe “Is there a God now?” (repeated throughout a longer passage of which this is a part) emphatically makes the point that the listener must never answer “No” because God is not answerable to interpretation of happenings in the fallen world:

And though in the excesse of such outward declarations, S. *Chrysostome* complain of them, *Non Theatrum Ecclesia*, My masters, what mean you, the Church is not a Theater, *Quae mihi istorum plausuum utilitas?* what get I by these plaudites, and acclamations? (8.5: 149)

And the following passage applies theatrical images describing Job to the suggestion that listeners think of their lives as a performance before God as audience:

Make account that this world is your Scene, your Theater, and that God himself sits to see the combat, the wrestling. *Vetuit Deus mortem Job*; Job was Gods Champion, and God forbad Satan the taking away of *Jobs* life; for, if he die, (sayes God in the mouth of that Father) *Theatrum nobis non amplius plaudetur*, My theater will ring with no more *Plaudites*, I shall bee no more glorified in the valour and constancy of my Saints, my Champions. God delights in the constant and valiant man, and therefore a various, a timorous man frustrates, disappoints God. (6.4: 108)

Anticipating that his seventeenth-century listeners will make applications to their own lives, the following passage is particularly interesting for bringing together several theatrical terms, although “amphitheater” suggests that a classical theater and not a seventeenth-century playhouse is what these listeners are to envision:

He that relyes upon his *Plaudo domi*, Though the world hisse, I give my selfe a Plaudite at home, I have him at my Table, and her in my bed, whom I would have, and I care not for rumor; he that rests in such a Plaudite, prepares for a Tragedy, a Tragedy in the Amphitheater, the double Theater, this world, and the next too. (9.13: 309)

The following passage makes an interesting contrast between comedy and tragedy—in an emphatically contemporary context:

Because I am weary of solitarinesse, I will seeke company, and my company shall be, to make my body the body of a harlot: Because I am drousie, I will

be kept awake, with the obscenitie and scurrilities of a Comedy, or the drums and ejaculations of a Tragedy: I will smother and suffocate sorrow, with hill upon hill, course after course at a voluptuous feast, and drown sorrow in excesses of Wine, and call that sickness health; [...] . (3.12: 271-72)

The theatrical allusions in Donne's sermons do not suggest advocacy of the theater. They do not even plead tolerance and sometimes occur in contexts describing disreputable behavior. But these theatrical allusions do indicate an expectation on his part that his listeners would be familiar with the theater and understand allusive images drawn from it.

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NOTE

¹There was some confusion about the value of dower property not settled until 1624, after Donne had recovered from the serious illness that led to the writing of *The Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. The property settlement is alluded to in Izaak Walton's "Life of Dr John Donne" (57-59) and discussed in detail in Bald (399).

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