I shall give for the sole purpose of doing what ought to be done. But “ought” means choice; and what sort of choice, you may ask, shall I make.

(Seneca 281)

EXAMINING the “choices” available to the giver of a gift, Seneca highlights how giving might be a voluntary act, at the same time as it is partially induced by social convention. The pressure of what “ought to be done” and the “choice” or will to do it converge in the act itself, making each impulse indistinguishable from the other. Thomas Hobbes reconsidered the problem in Leviathan, arguing that the “Gift is Voluntary,” “For no man giveth but with the intention of Good to himselfe” (209). Hobbes’s work, however, also admits that the gift is vital for the forging of mutually beneficial bonds, for reconciliation, and to the condition of peace. In this regard, his gift bears an element of social responsibility and depends upon the individual choice to abide by conventions of reciprocity: as Aristotle reminds us, “proportional requital . . . holds the state together” (183). In the eclogue to Donne’s Epithalamion for the Somerset wedding, the speaker Idios is quick to claim that he does not give “this nuptiall song” in order “Either the Court or mens hearts to invade” (99–100); or, in Hobbesian terminology, “with the intention of Good to himselfe.” As Arthur Marotti has observed, “Donne contradicitorily defined the self as both autonomous and socially dependent as he depicted the object of praise
contradictorily as inherently good and as valuable only because of contingent social circumstances" (Coterie Poet 207). The gift that Donne offers to the King and his favorite, on the occasion of Robert Carr's marriage to the controversially divorced Frances Howard, is thus framed by a common debate about gift-giving, choice, and self-interest. Though the giver has chosen to give and thus exercises a free choice, his choice is shaped by the social politics of circumstance and occasion.

In a struggle to extract the gift from ethical categories, John Frow has concluded that the gift “is an ambivalent category, oscillating between the poles of generosity and calculation, but these are still ethical terms” (124). Until recently the epithalamium for the Somerset wedding, along with Donne's motivations in presenting it, have been judged in ethical terms; the poem derided as sycophantic and simpering. More recently, critics have sought to revise this judgment and reposition the epithalamium within the Donne canon. Despite these attempts to vindicate Donne of a venal involvement in the Somerset wedding, however, criticism of the poem has yet to explore fully the oppositions Donne sets up between the voices of Idios and Allophanes, and how these might relate to the contradictions inherent within the act of giving a patronage poem. Through the divided consciousness of Idios and Allophanes, the Epithalamion plays on the antithesis between the voluntary gift and the gift demanded by court and king, between the denial of self-interest and the desire of reward, and between the attempt to withdraw from a morally dubious occasion and the political implications of being seen not to celebrate it. We might well say, as many critics of the poem have, that Donne chose poorly when he offered this gift in the hope of obtaining a reward from a powerful man, by whom he had apparently been bought. Nonetheless, if we refuse to acknowledge the contradictions and aberrations revealed and negotiated in the epithalamium, particularly the tensions between individual choice and social obligation, then we fail to comprehend the political and rhetorical complexity of his gift. Though he chose to give to Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset on the occasion of his marriage, it is my argument that Donne fashioned that gift “for the . . . purpose of doing what ought to be done,” within the context of Jacobean patronage (Seneca 281). The difficulties and demands of exchanging gifts within that context and, particularly,