Holy Fear: The Battle for Holiness and Wholeness in John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*

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Introduction

The last word of John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* is “fear.” Throughout the sonnet sequence, we see a speaker whose emotions struggle against his intellect and, in the process, define his relationship with God and, because of this, with himself. In the final three lines of the final sonnet of the “Westmoreland Sequence”—in the final moment of these nineteen sonnets—the speaker concludes, “So my devout fits come and go away / Like a fantastique Ague: Save that here / Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare” (“Oh to Vex Me” 12-14). At the end of his struggle between his emotions and his intellect, he lands on fear, a primal, uncontrollable emotional state that is his defining posture before God, and himself. Finally, after many poetic performances, the speaker recognizes the way that fear humbles him before God, giving him a tentative sense of unity and wholeness, which he previously lacked. At long last, he has found “devout fits” that reconcile his performative “suits” and stances in a stabilizing pun—“fear”-fits, as it were. Throughout the sequence, we see the speaker attempting to alleviate his fear by asserting linguistic and performative control. In this final sonnet, however, he is paralyzed by his fear of God, and in this paradoxical moment, he finds relief. In spite of his constant efforts to assert control over his emotions, in “Oh to Vex Me,” the speaker takes comfort in an emotion that is outside of his control. This comfort is a long-time coming.

Throughout the nineteen sonnets, we see a speaker who experiences fear and desire, which create a split between the speaker’s emotional and intellectual lives. Donne’s speaker desires wholeness, as defined by the Augustinian hierarchy between his intellect and emotions, both of which should be subject to God. While his intellect seeks
to honor God through adherence to orthodox doctrine, his emotional experience creates a sense of division that the speaker seeks to resolve by means of the sonnet form. The speaker attempts to resolve his unruly desires and fears by performing appropriate emotional responses within the controlled and structured sonnet form, which gives him formal closure and therefore the illusion of resolution with the closure of the sonnet sequence. The speaker longs for his mind to control his emotions, but his emotions constantly subvert his intellect’s control. This forces the speaker to create a model for obedience to God that includes and validates emotion, as we see in the last line of the sequence.

Although the speaker’s internal dichotomy could be named a thousand different ways (e.g., “body and soul,” “mind and matter,” “psychomachia”), my focus is on examining the position of tension that this generalized dichotomy causes in the speaker and the way the speaker attempts to resolve this tension. T.S. Eliot, who brought Donne back into the consciousness of modern scholars, discussed metaphysical poetry as that in which “thought is brought within the grasp of feeling” (220). My project seeks to build upon Eliot’s distinction between thought and feeling by examining the way in which the speaker of The Holy Sonnets seeks to bring his own feelings within the grasp of his thoughts, thus asserting control over them. Furthermore, because of the performative nature of much of Donne’s work and the explicitly performative language present in several of the sonnets, I include a discussion of Donne’s speaker’s attempt to create unity by performing it.

My understanding of The Holy Sonnets depends upon the assumption that the speaker of the sonnets stays consistent throughout the sequence. Beginning with
Petrarch’s sonnets to Laura, the sonnet sequence has largely been understood as a narrative developed throughout the sonnets involving a single subject and often a consistent object. Although recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that the identity of Donne’s speaker remains constant throughout *The Holy Sonnets*, the consistency of the speaker’s perceived tension between emotion and intellect leads me to read *The Holy Sonnets* as a sonnet sequence with a single narrator who develops and changes. Similarly, understanding the speaker as a single narrator who deals with the same tension that permeates a variety of specific issues allows me to examine sonnets in pairs and triplets to trace the speaker’s development—and backsliding.

Understanding the textuality of *The Holy Sonnets* is crucial because it allows us to understand the speaker, who uses language to constitute himself as a subject. He is always an “I” speaking to a “you,” and that “you” is alternatively his body, his soul, or his God (Benveniste 224-5). All of these “objects” of the speaker’s language also have the potential to become subjects. The speaker is always addressing a “you” that has the potential to speak back, and it frequently does. *The Holy Sonnets* are an ongoing conversation among the speaker, his divided self, and God. The speaker must reckon with the subjectivity of the other “parts” of himself. In doing so, he is eventually persuaded to accept aspects of seeing himself that he had tried to ignore and thus master. He becomes whole and holy by recognizing the role that his emotions play in shaping a smooth relationship of the “I” with God. We can get a holistic perspective of the poetic drama if we also glimpse its textual drama.
Textual History

When reading *The Holy Sonnets*, one must reckon with a complex textual history. *The Holy Sonnets* were first published in a sequence of twelve poems in 1633 in *Poems, by J.D. with Elegies on the Authors Death* (Stringer L). After this,

the surviving materials for constructing a text of Donne’s poems are nonetheless numerous and diverse. In addition to the seven collected printings issued between 1633 and 1669, they include 239 manuscript sources…; 3 inscriptions on monuments; over 200 seventeenth-century books that collectively contain over 700 copies of individual Donne poems or excerpts…; and over 20 historically significant editions of all or of parts of the canon from the eighteenth century to the present. (Stringer L)

This description of the complexity and diversity of the source material for *The Holy Sonnets* captures the difficulty of deciding with edition of *The Holy Sonnets* to use and which order they should be in. Within all of these varied publications, however, a few major editions stand out. In 1635, a sequence was published with some sonnets added and the order revised (Young 221). The editors of *The Variorum Edition of the Holy Sonnets* argue that this 1635 edition is an attempt to reconcile the 1633 edition with an earlier, unknown edition from which the 1633 sequence was built (Young 221). The “Westmoreland Sequence,” which I have chosen to use, includes three poems not included in any other of the major sequences and inscribed by Donne’s friend Rowland Woodward (Young 221). These sonnets were probably written ten years later than the other sonnets, and scholars speculate that neither Donne nor Woodward wanted these personal poems to circulate, as they did not appear until Edmund Gosse published them in the 1890’s (Young 221, 219). I have chosen to use the “Westmoreland Sequence” because it includes sonnets that the other sequences do not which are important to our current popular understanding of Donne. There are, of course, pitfalls to using this
sequence, in that some sonnets were written much later than the others and were perhaps not intended to be published, but the inscription of the three additional sonnets in Rowland Woodward’s hand implies that Donne himself may have authorized this revision.

Twentieth century scholars have debated how to interpret the sequencing of the sonnets. Herbert Grierson’s 1912 edition of John Donne’s poetry began the process of working from multiple manuscripts to publish an authoritative edition, but he relied on the 1633 sequence as authoritative and used it as a standard to make most editorial choices (Crowley 34). In 1952, Helen Gardner recognized the validity of the 1633 sequence while also finding a place for the additional sonnets. She treated the 1633 sequence as its own sequence, with the additional 1635 poems standing as an extra group and the additional Westmoreland poems as individual sonnets standing alone (Young 220). She made this choice largely to interpret these poems as two sets of linked Ignatian meditation practices. She argues, “The first are quite clearly a short sequence on one of the most familiar themes for a meditation: death and judgement, or the Last Things…. The last six sonnets do not form a sequence, but they are on two aspects of a single theme, love” (Young 220). Although these interpretations are valuable in identifying themes within The Holy Sonnets, they largely overlook the concerns that occupy the speaker throughout the sequence—the disconnection between his intellect and emotions. Looking at The Holy Sonnets as a continuous sequence allows for more places of connection and comparison than when the sonnets are divided. This divide creates an artificial separation that can prevent an understanding of the speaker’s consistently tense posture.
The Variorum Edition, which I am using, undertook the project of going through the multiplicity of textual sources described above to create an edition of The Holy Sonnets that deals directly with questions of textual authority. Instead of choosing a sequence as the most authoritative one or combining the sequences to make one complete sequence, The Variorum Edition provides each sequence individually, which would allow readers interested in textual history to trace differences among word choice and punctuation among the sonnets as they exist in the different sequences. Within The Variorum Edition, I am working with the “Westmoreland Sequence,” which allows me to include the sonnets Woodward added to the sequence later.¹

The Divided Self

The primary conflict for the speaker of The Holy Sonnets lies in the tension between intellectual knowledge and emotional experience. The influence of Augustinian thinking on The Holy Sonnets is also apparent because the speaker of the sonnets operates under Augustinian assumptions regarding the relationship between the mind and passions—or, for our purposes, emotions. Izaak Walton famously called Donne “our Augustine,” and much work has been done on Augustinian resonances within Donne’s prose works. Augustine saw the proper relationship between the mind and the passions as one in which the mind was subject to God, and the passions were subject to the mind. In City of God, Augustine writes that “the mind is subject to God to be ruled and aided while the passions are subject to the mind to be tempered, tamed, and turned to the uses of righteousness” (178). The intellect should serve God and therefore be aligned with right belief. Emotions should follow and be ruled by the intellect. Unfortunately for

¹ Throughout this essay, I will refer to the sonnets, found in the “Westmoreland Sequence” in the Variorum Edition of the Holy Sonnets, by the title used in common parlance.
Donne’s speaker in *The Holy Sonnets*, emotions often run counter to the intellect. Throughout *The Holy Sonnets*, Donne’s speaker longs for Augustinian unity. His doctrinal knowledge is orthodox, but his fears and desires lead him to a place of tension between the two parts of his soul, the rational and the emotional, the so-called higher and lower.

Often, the speaker’s unruly emotions revolve around his fear for the state of his body. When the speaker’s body does not obey the demands or knowledge of his mind, the speaker faces tension. In “Thou Hast Made Me,” the speaker attempts to reconcile his impending death with the immortality implied by his status as the creation of God:

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Thou hast made me, and shall thy worke decay?
Repaire me now, for now myne end do’th hast.
I run to death, and death meets me as fast,
And all my pleasures are like yesterday.
I dare not moue my dimme eyes any way,
Dispaire behind, and death before doth cast
Such terror, and my febled fleshe doth wast
By Sin in it, which towards hell doth weigh.
Only thou art above; and when towards thee
By thy leaue I can looke, I rise agayne.
But our old subtile foe so tempteth mee
That not one hower I can my selfe sustayne.
Thy grace may winge me, to preuent his art
And though like Adamant, draw myne Iron hart.
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In attempting to reconcile impending death, the speaker begins with a direct challenge to God: “Thou has made me, and shall thy worke decay?” (1). The speaker uses established doctrinal knowledge—that God created man—to shed light on his earthly experience of decaying flesh. Because God created him, the speaker expects God to maintain him. His outrage at his impending death implies an expectation of immortality, even though the speaker also rationally knows that his earthly body must die. The middle of the poem is dominated by the speaker’s emotions, rather than by a grounding
knowledge of God’s creation. The speaker places himself in the middle of a directional scheme largely dominated by negative forces: “Despaire behind,” “Death before,” and Hell below (6,8). He leaves God out of this mapping of power because his emotional experience excludes the hope that God provides. Because the speaker’s experience of fleshly decay contradicts his expectation of immortality, he emphasizes both death and hell, forces that oppose God. He also gives body and space to his own emotional experience, giving it spatial power and thus realizing the power that the passions have over the mind.

The poem turns when the speaker addresses God with the recognition that “only thou art aboue,” a recognition of the doctrinal truth that God has defeated both death and despair through the cross (9). Even so, this recognition does not lend the speaker certainty. Rather, comfort is dependent on a firm knowledge of God’s mercy that the speaker does not possess. He addresses God, perhaps pleading, “By thy leaue I can looke, I rise againe” (10). The speaker raises the possibility that God will allow him to rise, instead of sinking into Hell, but only if God gives his leave. The speaker immediately undercut this possibility, however, with the threat of the devil: “But our old suttle foe soe tempteth me, / That not one houre I can my selfe sustaine” (11-12). These lines serve a double purpose. In one sense, the “but” at the beginning of the phrase implies a contrast between Satan’s interference and the possibility of God’s empowerment. In another sense, it could serve to emphasize the speaker’s human helplessness and reliance on God. It places the speaker at the complete mercy of God, since he cannot resist Satan without God’s direct intervention.
The latter purpose serves to heighten the uncertainty established in the final two lines of the poem. While it may seem at first that the speaker finds resolution, any resolution present in the final lines of the sonnet is tentative at best and is grounded in uncertainty. The speaker tells God that his “grace may winge [him] to prevent his Art” (13). The speaker can only overcome Satan if God pulls through, but his use of the word “may” as opposed to the definitive “will” implies that he is not sure that God will indeed protect him from Satan’s cunning. While the last line may seem to give some certainty, this certainty is undercut when the line is read in conjunction with “may” from the prior line as “And thou, like Adamant, [may] drawe mine yron heart” (14). Ultimately, the speaker’s hope is founded in a doctrinal knowledge of God’s saving power, but this hope is undermined by a lack of experiential proof. While God may in the future allow the speaker to rise above his despair, He has not done so yet, leaving the speaker to only speculate regarding God’s saving power. If the speaker’s heart represents his emotional experience, by the end of the poem, God has not yet brought the speaker’s emotions into alignment with his intellectual knowledge.

The struggle between emotion and intellect evident in “Thou Hast Made Me” is tied up in the speaker’s desire for the union of body and spirit in eternality. In her book *John Donne: Body and Soul*, Ramie Targoff writes of Donne, “He was a dualist, but he was a dualist who rejected the hierarchy of the soul over the body, a dualist who longed above all for the union, not the separation, of his two parts” (22). Targoff argues that Donne observes a separation between his “two parts,” but that he wants to eliminate that separation in order to bring body and soul together. In *The Holy Sonnets*, the speaker wants the body and the soul to be one after death, but he is also taken aback by the
influence that his emotional and bodily experience has on his intellect during life. Donne’s speaker is disturbed by an uncomfortable sense that his mind is more open to his emotions than he thinks. Rather than seeking to eliminate hierarchy, he idealizes an Augustinian hierarchy of mind over passions as a way to control his emotional experience, bringing it into conformity with the will of God. While the speaker of The Holy Sonnets hopes for a perfected Augustinian hierarchy in the future, his present experience of the conflict between his mind and his passions is more Aristotelian than Augustinian. He hopes for the perfect control of mind over passions because this will allow him to most fully obey God, but he cannot let go of the influence of his passions on his intellect. In “Thou Hast Made Me,” Donne’s speaker explores the way that his bodily state impacts his intellectual life. The divide between the mortality of his body and the immortality of his soul creates an even larger divide between his emotional experience and intellectual knowledge.

**Desire and Division**

While fear and a lack of mourning are a source of division for Donne’s speaker, so is desire. In his book Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation, Ben Saunders challenges the tension I am tracing in The Holy Sonnets between intellect and emotion. He points out “the obvious association between desire and emotion, which, since the Middle Ages (at least), we have been inclined to see as antithetical to reasoned thought: traditionally, and commonsensically, reason opposes emotion. Desiring Donne questions this commonsense opposition, blurring the boundary between reason and emotion” (6). In Saunders’s rejection of the dichotomy between intellect and emotion, I see Donne’s speaker’s longing for wholeness. At the same time, Donne’s speaker does not operate
within that wholeness, as, even if his emotions are forms of thought, his emotions disrupt what he thinks he should be thinking. Desire is a source of division for the speaker of *The Holy Sonnets*. While Donne’s speaker wants to be a whole and integrated self, his unruly desires divide him against himself. Saunders writes, “Desire divides the self from itself through the agency of language but is also imagined as that which can reintegrate the self through the possession of a desired object…” (9). In *The Holy Sonnets*, desire acts as a source of division, pitting emotion against doctrinal truth. Simultaneously, however, it also promises the wholeness of the self once desires are achieved. Unfortunately for Donne’s speaker, *The Holy Sonnets* never delivers on desire’s promise of eventual wholeness.

Two sonnets, in particular, deal with unruly desires and the division or double-ness of self that they create. “As Due by Many Titles” expresses a tension that “Part of His Double Interest” attempts to resolve. “As Due By Many Titles” begins with an assertion of doctrinal truth: “As due by many titles I resigne / My selfe to thee (O God): first I was made / By thee, and for thee, and when I was decayed / Thy blood bought that, the which before was thyne” (1-4). Using legal language, the speaker establishes his resignation of himself to God as what is “due by many titles” (1). Similarly, the speaker discusses his redemption by Christ’s blood as a commercial exchange, in which Christ’s “blood bought that, the which was before was [his]” (4). The speaker uses the way that he owes God to begin to shift to the ways that God owes him. God’s claim on the speaker gives him an obligation toward the speaker. The speaker calls himself “thy Sonne,” “Thy Servant,” “Thy Sheepe,” “thyne Image,” and “(till I betrayde / My self) a Temple of thy Spirit divine” (5, 6, 7-8). The self-betrayal the speaker cites creates a sense of a self
divided by desire. The speaker’s divided desires led him to betray the part of him that
desired for his body to be a temple of God.

Instead of dealing with these divided desires, the speaker places blame outward,
on both the devil and God. He challenges:

Why doth the deuill then vsurpe in mee?
Why doth he steale, nay ravish that’s thy right?
Except thou rise, and for thyne owne worke fight
O I shall soone dispayre, when I do see
That thou lov’st Mankind well, yet wilt not choose mee,
And Satan hates me yet is loth to loose mee. (9-14)

Because the speaker cannot reconcile his divided desires on his own, because his
intellectual knowledge that he should desire God enough to obey cannot override his
baser desires, which corrupt his “Temple,’’ the speaker must blame his divided desires on
the devil. In doing so, he challenges God to intervene and to fulfill his obligation to him
by claiming “that’s [his] right” (10). Even so, he quickly backs away from this challenge
and ends on a point of despair, rather than resolution. His divided desires lead him to
conclude that God has abandoned him. His desires lead him to feel that he is an exception
to the love that he knows God has for humanity.

In “Part of His Double Interest,” the speaker continues to use legal language to try
to negotiate his relationship with God. In this sonnet, he does so by competing with
Christ for God’s affection:

Father, part of his double interest
Vnto thy kingdome thy Sonne giues to mee;
His ioynture in the knotty trinitee
He keepes, and giues me his deaths Conquest.
This Lambe whose death whith life the world hath blest
Was from the Worlds beginning slayne, and hee
Hath made two Wills, which with the Legacee
Of his, and thy kingdome, doth thy Sonnes invest.
Yet such are thy Laws, that Men argue yet
Whether a man those Statutes can fulfill.
None doth; but all-healing Grace and Spiritt
Revive and quicken what Law and Letter kill.
Thy Lawes abridgement, and thy last Command
Is all but Love; Oh let that last Will stand.

This sonnet is filled with language of double-ness—double interest, two wills, and two sons. The speaker’s description of himself in “As Due by Many Titles” as God’s “Sonne made with thy selfe to shyne” (5) makes him parallel to God’s “Sonne” Christ in “Part of His Double Interest” (2). Although the speaker acknowledges the significance of Christ’s sacrifice in bringing life to the world, he also emphasizes the part of Christ’s “double interest” that he holds back (1). Christ mediates between the speaker and God, as Christ is the highest son, investing the other sons of God with the gift of God’s kingdom (8).

The speaker’s desire to be the primary Son of God creates tension within this sonnet as he praises the work of Christ but also bypasses Christ to appeal to God directly. The speaker ends, not by accepting the gifts of God through Christ, but by appealing to God’s “will,” rather than either of Christ’s two wills. It is to this “will” of God that the speaker appeals for love. The speaker’s jealousy of Christ and desire to connect with God directly creates a division within the speaker but also between the speaker and Christ. The speaker acts out against Christ by using as the sonnet as a medium to “tattle” to God, usurping Christ’s authority as the anointed Son of God in order to speak to God directly.

**Bridging the Divide**

The speaker of *The Holy Sonnets* uses language of performance within the sonnet sequence, acting out his attempt to unite his emotional experience and intellectual knowledge. For instance, in “This Is My Play’s Last Scene,” the speaker’s orthodox beliefs should reassure him that his body and his soul will be reunited and his soul will be
blissful in heaven in the meantime, but his fear creates division between his intellect and his emotional experience. The speaker attempts to resolve his fear through performance.

The speaker imagines his life as a play:

This is my Playes last Scene, here heauens appoint
My Pilgrimages last Mile, and my race,
Idely, yet quickly run, hath this last pace
My Spanns last inche; my Minutes last pointe.
And gluttonous death will instantly vnioynt
My body and Soule, and I shall sleepe a space,
Or presently, I know not, see that face
Whose feare already shakes my euery ioynt.
Then as my Soule, to’ heauen her first Seate takes flight,
And earthborne body in the earth shall dwell,
So fall my Sins, that all may haue their right,
To where they’are bred, and would presse me, to hell;
Impute me righteous thus purg’d of euill,
For thus I leaue the world, the flesh, and dewill.

The speaker uses the sonnet to describe his life as a play and a pilgrimage, which also has performative power as a ritual. The speaker performs both fear of death and fear of God. He fears the way that “gluttonous death will instantly vnioynt” his soul and body, and he claims that his fear of God “already shakes [his] euery ioynt” (5, 8). It is significant that Donne uses the word “joint” in describing both the speaker’s fear of death and his fear of God. The speaker’s fear of God is connected to his fear of death. Death will completely disconnect body and soul, but the fear of God begins shaking the joint of body and soul, threatening to unhinge them. The speaker fears God, not out of reverence, but because he is afraid of what God will do to him after death. In this sonnet, the face of God is really the most intense representation of death, in which body and soul will be unjointed, and this strikes anticipatory fear in the speaker.

The sonnet becomes a medium of performance for the speaker. It allows him to enact the emotional experience that he desires in hope that, as Margret Fetzer articulates
in her book *John Donne's Performances*, “saying makes it so” (9). By performing emotional experiences, the speaker of *The Holy Sonnets* attempts to bring his emotions under the control of the demands of his intellect, as shaped by his doctrinal knowledge. As Fetzer describes the perceived power of performance for Donne and his contemporaries, “Even though one’s inner state might not correspond with the external actions one is undertaking, the mere participation in them could nevertheless affect also the inner man or woman” (9). Performance has power, not just to affect change in the perception of the external audience, but also to change the internal self.

According to Fetzer, performance theory operates under the Enlightenment understanding of the self as consisting of two clearly divided parts, external and internal, body and soul (4). In *The Holy Sonnets*, however, the apparent distinction between internal and external is problematic. The speaker wants to bring the internal self into accordance with the external performance in order to make his performance “sincere” (Fetzer 4). The intellectual self controls the external performance, but the internal emotional experience remains beyond the reach of performance. The speaker’s implied distinction between internal and external in *The Holy Sonnets* is not purely between body and soul. While the body is often the imagined medium of performance, it represents the fruit of the intellect. Donne’s speaker’s body performs that which his mind commands. Furthermore, writing itself is the overall means of performance within *The Holy Sonnets*, and writing is an exercise that, although it may express emotions, is mediated by the intellect. Although the speaker’s performance both through writing and bodily display looks like emotion, it is distinct from the sincere emotion that the speaker seeks to evoke with himself.
The speaker of *The Holy Sonnets* performs excessive emotion, which is a convention of love poetry, to convince both God and himself of the sincerity of his emotional performance. Fetzer describes, “Although love is determined by a certain code, its distinguishing mark is excess, an outgrowing of all convention” (21). Fetzer acknowledges “the paradox of such systematic violation of a code” within Donne’s poetry (21). By breaking convention so regularly, Donne operates within a new convention of excessive expression of love. This excess of emotional expression must be understood differently depending on the audience. By performing an excess of emotion—often repentance for sins or love of God—the speaker attempts to convince both God and his intellect that this experience is real. Fetzer challenges readers of *The Holy Sonnets* to consider poems’ audience(s). Often Donne’s speaker appears to be speaking directly to his own soul but is also performing for God, or vice versa. Understanding the speaker’s audience is of the utmost importance because it helps the reader to understand the illocutionary force behind the speaker’s language. While the speaker may appear to be speaking to God and pleading for grace, his performance of excess may also be intended to affect internal emotional change.

**Desire for Mourning**

In *The Holy Sonnets*, the speaker’s bodily and emotional experiences are tied together, and both operate outside of the control of the mind. In “O Might Those Sighs and Tears,” the speaker begins by pleading, “O might those sighes and tears returne again / Into my brest and eyes, which I have spent; / That I might in this holy discontent / Mourne with some fruite as I haue mournd in vaine” (1-4). The speaker seeks “sighes and tears” as a sign of mourning, an emotional experience that he does not currently possess.
Intellectually, he knows that he should be mourning, but he cannot. In “O Might Those Sighs and Tears,” the speaker works to bring his feeling within the grasp of his thought, to be controlled by his intellect. He knows that he should mourn, so he demands that his emotions and body feel grief.

The speaker fails in bringing his emotional experience under the control of his mind. The poem continues:

In my Idolatry what showrs of raine
Myne eyes did wast? What griefes my hart did rent?
That sufferance was my Sin, now I repent;
Because I did suffer, I must suffer paine.
Th’Hydroptique dronkerd, and night-scowting theefe,
The itchy Leacher, and selfe-tickling proud,
Haue the remembrance of past ioyes for reliefe
Of coming ills; to poore me is allowd
No ease; for long yet vehement griefe hath bee
The effect and cause; the punishment and Sinne. (5-14)

The poem ends with the assertion, “[F]or long yet vehement griefe hath bee / The effect and cause; the punishment and Sinne” (13-14). The role of grief here is fascinating. While Donne refers to grief as a singular entity in the concluding lines of the sonnet, he seems to be dealing with three separate types of grief. The first is grief as performance, which the speaker says he engaged in during his “Idolatry” (5). Perhaps, as Fetzer implies, this grief may have been “in vaine” because of God’s skepticism of performance (4). God’s omniscience allows him to see the insincerity behind performance—the ways in which the performed self may not match the internal, emotional state of the performer. Donne’s speaker’s performed grief has been ineffective, and yet he still yearns for his body to perform his grief now as proof that it is genuine.

This is where things begin to seem muddy. Donne’s speaker asserts that grief is both “the punishment and Sinne” (14). The “Sinne” may be the insincere performance of
grief, but grief as punishment seems strange, as the speaker laments his current inability to “mourne with some fruite” (4). It at first appears contradictory that grief should be the punishment when it also represents the speaker’s unattainable desire. Donne’s speaker desires a genuine emotional experience of grief, rather than a calculated performance. The grief with which the speaker is punished is an entirely different beast. It is a grief of thought, rather than of feeling. It is the grief that comes from the intellectual recognition of a lack of appropriate feeling, and it is punitively intense because it perpetuates and emphasizes the gap between the speaker’s thought and feeling. The speaker needs emotive grief to heal him, and his punishment is that he receives the wrong kind of grief.

The speaker also intellectually desires an emotional state that he does not feel in “Oh My Black Soul.” Donne writes, “Yet grace, if though repent thou canst not lacke. / But who shall giue thee that grace to begin?” (9-10). The speaker recognizes the doctrine of God’s grace as a remedy for the repentant sinner, but he lacks the mechanism to access that grace because he is not able “to begin” to repent on his own. Within the Christian tradition, true repentance requires the mourning the speaker lacks in “O Might Those Sighs and Tears.” Again, then, this is a situation in which Donne’s speaker desires an emotion that he does not have. This is odd because desire, itself, is most often conceived as an emotion. Since desire and grief are both emotions that find their locus in the individual, the speaker’s desire for grief should produce grief. Something within the speaker is broken. His thoughts tell him that he should repent, as he knows that repentance is necessary to attain salvation. His feeling, however, is not following the direction of his thought. He needs emotion to beget more emotion, and he lacks the emotion—or the “grace”—to begin.
The final lines of the sonnet emphasize this quandary. After invoking God peripherally through the rhetorical question, “But who shall give thee that grace to begin?”, the speaker returns his attention to his own soul (10). He enjoins, “Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning black, / And red with blusinge as thou art with Sin. / Or washe thee in Christs blood, which hath this might/ That being red, it dyes red Soules to whight” (11-14). In making this injunction, the speaker performs the function of his own intellect. The mind speaks to a soul as if it were embodied and capable of blushing, but ultimately we know that it is his soul that he is speaking to because he says that the blood the addressee should bathe in “dyes red Soules to whight” (14). The mind speaks to the soul, the place where true repentance takes place. Instead of asking the soul to feel repentant, however, the speaker asks the soul to perform repentance, especially through the ritual washing in Christ’s blood. The speaker moves away from emotive experience that springs from the self and switches his focus to an external savior, Christ. He recognizes his inability to produce appropriate feeling, but he does not openly acknowledge this inability to the reader. Rather, he retreats into his intellectual knowledge of Christ’s salvation without resolving the disconnect between his thought and his feeling. This is emphasized by the conjunction he uses: “or”. He does not recommend Christ’s salvation in addition to personal repentance but instead of it. Christ’s blood offers the speaker the chance to neutralize issues of emotional response because Christ’s blood dyes both the blackness of mourning and the redness of shame white.

In “If Poisonous Minerals,” we see that bodily experience on its own cannot completely alleviate the tension between emotion and intellect. The speaker pleads with God,
O of thyno worthy blood
And my teares make a heauenly Lethean flood
And drowne in it, my Sins blacke memoree.
That thou remember them, Some clayme as dett,
I thinke it Mercy if thou wilt forget. (10-14)

In these lines, we see something we have not seen before. The speaker seems to take for
granted that he will have tears to contribute to the flood. In this sonnet, he has overcome
the gap between his thought and his feeling, and he has learned to grieve for his sins, as
he knew that he should. Even with this conflict resolved, however, the speaker is not at
peace because he has not resolved a larger issue in his thought—his doubt. He thinks it
mercy “if” God will forget (14). Intellectually, the speaker knows that God will forgive
his sins, and he has the tears that he needs to participate in the process of repentance and
forgiveness. Even so, the speaker’s use of “if” indicates that he is not convinced of God’s
mercy. The speaker displays the proper bodily sign of repentance, and his description of
the process of repentance and forgiveness demonstrates his intellectual doctrinal
knowledge. The speaker still does not achieve resolution, however, because he is
preoccupied by fear that overrides both his intellectual knowledge and his bodily
experience. The body can be controlled, especially through performance, but the passions
are more unruly, and they must be genuine for the speaker to attain a true Augustinian
hierarchy.

**Fear of Death**

Donne’s speaker’s desire for a sincere adherence to the Augustinian hierarchy is
made more urgent by his fear of death. In “Oh My Black Soul,” the speaker performs the
purging of his sins as an answer to his fear. After discussing his fear of God and death he
moves on to a performance of his soul’s ascension into heaven, his body’s rest in the
earth, and the fall of his sin’s to hell, where they can no longer influence his soul. At the end of the sonnet, the speaker asserts this falling of sins to hell as the way he can “leaue the world, the fleshe, and the deuill,” the three sources of sin (14). The speaker uses his imagination, a product of his intellect, to perform this scene in which he is “impute[d] righteous thus purg’d of euill,” but he never moves beyond his performance (13). Perhaps we are to read the final line of this sonnet as an assertion of certainty, but it seems suspiciously like an attempt to play it to make it so. Because the speaker does not revisit his emotional state at the end of the sonnet, we are left wondering whether the performance was effective in eliminating fear. Since this performance does not include repentance, which is necessary for the forgiveness of sins and which the speaker often lacks, it seems unlikely that this poem gives the speaker meaningful resolution for his fear regarding his fate after death.

The speaker also grapples with fear regarding the state of his body after death in “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners.” In this sonnet, the speaker begins by “playing” out the resurrection of the dead. As he does so, he asserts control over the scene. He commands, “At the round Earths imagind corners blow / Your trumpets Angels, and Arise Arise / From Death you numberless infinites / Of Soules and to your scattered bodyes go” (1-4). The speaker is not a part of this scene, but he brings it into being with the power of his imagination, a facet of his intellect. Furthermore, he speaks directly into this scene that he has constructed. His speech is an act, causing angels to blow their trumpets and souls to rise from the dead to perform the end of the world.

Rather than giving the speaker the control he performs, this sonnet emphasizes the gap between the speaker’s intellect and his unruly emotions. After enjoining angels to
trumpet and the dead to rise, the speaker launches into a litany of different ways that the
dead could have died: “All whom the Flood did and fyre shall overthrow / All whom
Warr, dearth, age, agues, tyrannyes, / Dispayre, Law, Chance, hath slayne, and you
whose eyes / Shall behold God, and never tast deaths wo” (4-8). Donne’s speaker moves
from the space of his imagination, which his intellect controls, into reflection on real
earthly experiences that the speaker would have observed, rather than performed. These
experiences are outside of the control of the speaker’s intellect, so he retreats.

The poem turns when the speaker moves his focus from the grand narrative
prophesied by scripture to his own temporal concerns. The earthly experiences of
suffering that he describes remind him of the emotions his intellect cannot control, so the
final sestet is consumed with issues of thought and emotion. The speaker asks of God,
“But let them sleepe, Lord, and me mourne a space, / For if above all these my Sins
abound / This late to aske abundance of thy grace / When we are there” (9-12). The
speaker wants God to postpone the resurrection of the dead so that he will have time to
mourn. This request is odd, though, because it hinges on the assumption that the speaker
is not mourning now. He knows intellectually that he needs to mourn now, in temporal
space, rather than once the resurrection has begun, but as before, his emotions do not
follow his thoughts. Instead of doing what he knows he should, he asks God for more
time. In lieu of controlling his own emotional experience, the speaker attempts to control
God.

In addition to asking for more time, the speaker asks God to help him bridge the
gap between his thought and feeling. He begs, “here on this lowly ground / Teach me
how to repent” (12-13). The speaker asks God to give him the emotional knowledge and
ability that he lacks. The speaker continues, “…[F]or that’s as good / As if thou hadst Seald my pardon with thy blood” (13-14). The “if” in Donne’s conclusion leads the reader to believe that the speaker has doubt as to whether Christ really did seal his pardon with His blood. He evokes his intellectual knowledge of Christ’s redemption of humanity but subtly calls it into question. He links his doubt regarding his own “pardon” with his inability to repent. Even so, it is difficult for him to imagine a complete unity of his intellect and his emotions because he discusses the emotional experience of repentance as a replacement for Christ’s pardon. His lack of repentance is dangerous, but so is his emotional experience of despair. His despair over his own sinful and unrepentant heart is so powerful that it subverts the hierarchy of intellect over emotion, allowing emotion to influence intellect.

**Fear of God**

“Oh to Vex Me” concludes the “Westmoreland Sequence.” It brings the vexation of the divided self to the forefront of the reader’s attention:

Oh, to vex me, contraries meete in one:  
Inconstancy vnnaturally hath begot  
A constant habit; that when I would not  
I change in vowes, and in devotione.  
As humorous is my contritione  
As my prophane love, and as soone forgot:  
As ridlingly distempered, cold and hott,  
As raying, as mute; as infinite, as none.  
I durst not view heauen yesterday; and to day  
In prayers, and flattering Speaches I court God:  
To morrow I quake with true feare of his rod.  
So my devout fitts come and go away  
Like a fantastique Ague: Save that here  
Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare.

“Oh to Vex Me” gives the reader an emotional experience of resolution, but this experience does not ring true with the logical process of the speaker in the poem. The
speaker begins by discussing his divided self, the ways that “contraryes meete in one” in him (1). He traces his emotions as “cold and hott” and the ways that his contrition is “soone forgot” (6, 5). His emotional experiences fluctuate, and he links the intellectual act of remembering with the emotional experience of contrition. This link is broken, as he cannot remember his contrition for long.

Furthermore, the speaker acknowledges the limited nature of his performances to God. He tells us, “[T]o day / In prayers, and flattering Speaches I court God: / To morrow I quake with true feare of his rod” (9-11). The speaker emphasizes the insincere and performative nature of his prayers, and one can imagine his sonnets being included in his category of “flattering Speaches.” He contrasts these performances with the genuine emotional experience of fear. This fear is what he uses to reach the resolution of the sonnet: “So my deuout fitts come and go away / Like a fantastique Ague: Save that here / Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare” (12-14). The speaker compares even his most devout emotions to illness, with the exception of fear. Although fear regarding the state of his body in the afterlife disconnects the speaker from God, fear of God in the present centers the speaker’s emotional experience on God and allows his performance to be sincere. In describing this kind of fear, which breaks the paradigm the speaker uses throughout the sonnets, Donne employs a format that breaks structural norms for sonnets. The last two lines of the sonnet are a couplet, but the couplet cannot stand on its own, as couplets usually do. Rather, the couplet is incomplete without the line before it. Donne employs a three-line set that is distinct from the sestets, octaves, and couplets that usually populate sonnets, just as his speaker embraces an emotional experience that is distinct from the one he battles throughout The Holy Sonnets. The speaker attains a sense of
resolution through the invocation of an emotion that subjects the speaker to God, thereby stripping from him the control that he has sought throughout the sonnet sequence. The speaker is powerless to maintain the fear that is essential to his connection with God. He is able to subject himself to God only by surrendering the control that his mind has sought, skipping a step in the Augustinian hierarchy.

In the last line of the sonnet, the speaker is at peace because his emotions are in appropriate relationship to God. Even so, he has not resolved the tension between intellect and emotion that has plagued him throughout the sonnet sequence. This resolution is not for all time; rather, it just works on the speaker’s “best dayes” (14). The speaker’s intellect cannot control either the arrival or departure of these days of genuine fear, so the speaker will be left at the mercy of his emotions, which obey God sometimes but never obey his intellect. The speaker’s connection with God is as inconstant as his emotions, but on his “best dayes,” it seems to be enough.

**Conclusion**

The speaker of *The Holy Sonnets* struggles with all of his might to overcome and control his emotions. He performs and pleads to both himself and God to resolve the tensions that his feelings raise. By the end of the sonnet sequence, however, he has realized that this war is at “best” futile and probably, mostly, human. His feelings continue to vex him constantly with their contrary desires, as they have throughout the sequence. The speaker uses the forms of both the individual sonnet and the sonnet sequence to attempt to find resolution. Each sonnet ends without a release of the speaker’s tension between intellect and emotion. As the end of the sequence approaches, so does the end of his opportunity to make peace within himself.
Rather than leaving the conflict unresolved, the speaker institutes a kind of treaty with his emotions. Though they vex him, he can finally recognize their essential role in the relationship between the speaker’s self and his God. The speaker’s emotions not only distract him from God but also, paradoxically, can focus his attention on God. This is important. When fear is directed properly, it allows Donne’s speaker to find peace with God in a way that he never has before. The speaker’s fickle feelings, rather than his mind, end the sonnet sequence with a sense of tentative resolution. Donne’s speaker has not achieved the Augustinian hierarchy that he wanted because he is forced to recognize the continuing impact of his inconstant emotions. At the same time, his fear allows him to connect with God outside of the Augustinian hierarchy. The speaker is able to achieve the wholeness and peace that he seeks—however temporary—only when he surrenders his need for control and embraces fear, which, by definition, makes him out-of-control.


