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(True) Grief: Filial and Penitent Mourning in "If faithful souls"

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Donne's Holy Sonnets or Divine Meditations place a premium on mourning for sin. In "O might those sighs," the speaker longs to replace the tears shed for a Petrarchan mistress with a "holy discontent"—to "Mourne with some fruite, as I haue mourn'd in vaine" (3–4).[1] Another sonnet presents penitent tears as a co-ingredient with Christ's blood: "of thy only worthy bloud, / And my teares make a heav'nly Lethean floud" ("If poisonous minerals," 10–11). "At the round earth's imagined corners" separates blood and tears, and shockingly seems to give them equal weight: "But let them sleepe, Lord, and me mourne a space / . . . / Teach me howe to repent, for thats as good / As yf th' hadst seal'd my pardon with thy bloud" (9, 13–14).[2] Of course, not all of the poems participate in this penitential mode. Nevertheless, an urgent pursuit of "holy mourninge" ("O my black soul," 11) pervades each of the Holy Sonnet sequences discerned by the *Variorum* editors.[3]

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[1]References to the Holy Sonnets are from the *Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 1: The Holy Sonnets*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005). Unless otherwise specified, I cite from the "Original Sequence," pp. 5–10.

[2]Helen Wilcox makes a similar observation: "There is . . . a startling assumption in the last lines that the very idea of redemption by the blood of Christ shed on the cross is an optional alternative . . . to the personal attention demanded by the speaker from God" ("Devotional Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], p. 154).

[3]See *Variorum* 7.1, especially pp. LX–LXXI, for the evolution of the Holy Sonnets. The editors also persuasively refute Helen Gardner's claim that Donne

Two sonnets, however, involve some form of mourning for another person. Most famously, in "Since she whom I loved," Donne responds to the death of his wife Anne. For the widower, painful loss yields a possible spiritual benefit: "Since she whome I lovd, hath payd her last debt / . . . / Wholy in heauenly things my Mind is sett" (1, 4).[4] And yet, according to Theresa M. DiPasquale, Donne fails to achieve this new focus: "Donne's diction throughout shows how much he still clings to a husband's role, which he must abandon in order to become a bride in the heavenly wedding feast."[5] He is beset with ongoing desire, and a sense of resentment darkens his depiction of God. The sonnet extends the larger project of "holy mourninge" to include human bereavement (and not just penitential sorrow). Such anguish proves difficult to accommodate, however; the poem is shot through with the ambivalence DiPasquale describes.

The Holy Sonnet that invokes Donne's departed father, "If faithful souls," has attracted less critical attention. The comparative neglect is understandable. The sonnet lacks the palpable emotion which renders "Since she whom I loved" so compelling, even if problematic. After all, Donne's father died long before, when the future poet was three years old. Not even couched as a lament, the poem wraps Donne's father inside a scholastic conundrum. What kind of knowledge characterizes souls in heaven? Is it that of the angels, who can (at least according to this poem) "see / . . . / . . . immediately" ("If faithful souls," 1, 7)[6] into our minds?

> Yf faithful Soules be alike glorified
> As Angels, then my fathers soule doth see

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wrote a 4-poem set of penitential sonnets. The penitential impulse, I would argue, is far more widespread than her account suggests.

[4]The "Westmoreland Sequence," p. 19.

[5]DiPasquale, *Refiguring the Sacred Feminine: The Poems of John Donne, Aemilia Lanyer, and John Milton* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2008), p. 50. DiPasquale's discussion of this poem appeared previously as "Ambivalent Mourning: Sacramentality, Idolatry, and Gender in 'Since she whome I loved hath paid her last debt,'" *John Donne Journal* 10 (1991): 45–56.

[6]For reasons which I discuss below, I quote the version of "If faithful souls" that appears in the "Westmoreland Sequence," p. 15.

> And ads this even to full felicitee,
> That valiantly'I hells wide mouth orestride.
> (1–4)

Alternatively, are our thoughts only visible to heavenly souls (as to everyone else) by "Circumstances, and by Signes that bee, / Apparent in us, *not* immediately?" (6–7, my emphasis). Posing this question, Donne passes over others that might seem more pressing. Given his Roman Catholic upbringing, the poet could wonder whether his father is in purgatory or in heaven. From a Protestant perspective, on the other hand, Donne could wonder what difference (if any) his father's probable allegiance to the Old Faith makes when it comes to salvation or damnation. Donne frames the issue, too, somewhat strangely—not least in applying the term "glorified" to disembodied souls when it is usually reserved for resurrected bodies. Any sorrow on the poet's part is filtered through this curious and abstract consideration.

Nevertheless, a very natural human impulse drives the sonnet. Underlying its scholastic question (how do heavenly souls see?) is a personal one: how well does my father, who I never knew, know me? While not an elegy, the poem subtly mourns the father's absence by asking whether he is proud. If faithful souls possess adequate powers of apprehension, then the father rejoices over his son's spiritual standing: "And ads this even to full felicitee, / That valiantly'I hells wide mouth orestride." If faithful souls lack the requisite powers, then the father has no means to distinguish his son's sincere piety from hypocrisy:

> But if our Minds to these Soules be discride
> By Circumstances, and by Signes that bee
> Apparant in vs, not immediatlee
> How shall my Minds whight truth to them be tride?
> They see Idolatrous Lover weepe and mourne
> And vile blasphemous Coniurers to call
> On Iesus Name, and pharasaicall
> Dissemblers feigne devotion. . . .
> (5–12)

Troubled by this less sanguine scenario, Donne directs his soul towards a different witness altogether: "then turne / O pensive Soule to God; for he knowes best / Thy true griefe, for he put it in my brest" (12–14). The

sonnet's literal *volta* enacts a turn to God, who—having bestowed authentic devotion on Donne—is a far more reliable audience for it than heavenly souls (including Donne's father) with uncertain powers of vision. Donne's need to be known, to be understood, can only be fulfilled by his divine Father.

The sonnet, I argue, pinpoints a complicating factor in filial mourning: the tendency to deify the departed parent. How is Donne to distinguish God from his *other* heavenly father? If resolved, this crisis of differentiation can lead the mourner towards spiritual maturity—towards a more solid sense of being simultaneously a child of God and an adult. While the poem reaches the appropriate distinction, affirming that God (and not father) knows best, it seems to arrive there through desperation rather than development.

Interestingly, the *Variorum* edition demonstrates that there are two distinct authorial versions of the unconvincing closing gesture. The familiar version is actually the later one, first appearing in the Westmoreland manuscript. In the original sequence, the final line reads "Thy greife, for he put it into my brest"[7] instead of "Thy true griefe, for he put it in my brest." The following essay explores the sonnet's depiction of (true) grief, taking this recent textual discovery into account. The revision, I propose, clarifies the logic by which Donne moves from idolizing his invisible father to repentance before God. This progress, however, still feels forced. As in "Since she whom I loved," the work of mourning traps Donne between human familial and spiritual identities.

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In the poem's opening, an "idolatrous" impulse seems to shape the question Donne asks about his father. Puzzlingly, he takes for granted matters on which he elsewhere expresses doubt, including the idea that angels (let alone heavenly souls) can see into minds. Donne's stance in the sonnet is all the more surprising given the probable influence of Aquinas. As Grierson and Gardner have persuasively argued, one model for Donne's inquiry appears in the *Summa Theologica* (Part I, Question

[7]The "Original Sequence," p. 9. When Donne revised the actual *sequence* of the Holy Sonnets, he left "If faithful souls" out entirely.

57, article 4): "Do angels know the secrets of the hearts?"[8] God alone, he concludes, possesses such knowledge: "What is proper to God, does not belong to angels. But to know the thoughts of the heart is proper to God . . . therefore angels do not know the secrets of the heart."[9] One of Donne's Candelmas sermons, perhaps preached in 1624, reflects his acquaintance with this article. Raising the same issue as Aquinas, Donne even cites the same biblical proof-text: "The heart is deceitfull above all things . . . who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, and I try the reines" (Jeremiah 17:9–10).[10]

The sonnet "If faithful souls," meanwhile, follows the *structure* of Aquinas's article fairly closely. St. Thomas asserts that "the thoughts of the heart can be known in two ways": "In one way, in their effects . . . in another way, [thoughts can be known] insofar as they are in the intellect and affections [can be known] as they are in the will." The second mode, direct apprehension of another's intellect and will, is properly divine. A person's thoughts involve the will ("it depends on will alone that someone should actually consider something"), and the will is subject to God: "the will of the rational creature is subject to God alone, and he alone can act on it, since he is its principal object and end."[11] God, therefore, knows what is inside the will of a person without having to infer from external effects. Donne's poem proceeds in similar fashion to the article. He proposes two alternatives—heavenly souls can either know "By Circumstances, and by Signs that bee / Apparent in vs" or they can know "immediatlee." His resolution, that God "best" knows thoughts and affections, resembles that of Aquinas. He even offers much the same reason. Donne's language may sound more Reformed than Aristotelian: God "knowes best / Thy true griefe, for he put it in my brest," not

[8]Herbert J. C. Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 2:34 and 2:232. Helen Gardner, ed., *John Donne: The Divine Poems*, reprint ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 77.

[9]For the *Summa Theologica* article, I quote from *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Ralph McInerny (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 394–396.

[10]*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 10:82. Further citations from the Sermons will be to this edition and will be cited in the text by volume and page number.

[11]McInerny, p. 395.

because the will naturally seeks God as its end. According to both the article and the poem, however, God can access the will because it is subject to His influence.

While critics are therefore right to suggest this source, they tend to downplay Donne's obvious point of departure. Aquinas decides that *angels* can only know through effects, while Donne decides that heavenly *souls* (probably) only know through effects—having already assumed that angels see "immediatlee."[12] Elsewhere, as in the aforementioned Candlemas sermon and as in "The Dreame," Donne sides with Aquinas on angelic knowledge: "Yet I thought thee / . . . an angel, at first sight, / But when I saw thou saw'st my heart, / And knew'st my thoughts, beyond an angel's art, / . . . it could not choose but be / Profane, to think thee anything but thee" (13–16, 19–20).[13] Grierson cites both of these examples and, apparently assuming that Donne must be consistent, misconstrues the Holy Sonnet: "What Donne says here is 'If our minds or thoughts are known to the saints in heaven as to angels, not immediately, but by circumstances and signs (such as blushing or a quickened pulsation) which are apparent in us, how shall the sincerity of my grief be known to them. . . ?'"[14] The poem, as opposed to Grierson's paraphrase, clearly states that saints in heaven only must rely on such signs if they are *not* "alike glorified / As Angels." In other places, then, Donne confesses himself "blind" in how angels "see" (*A Litany*, 6.54) or asserts the limitations of their mind-reading "art." In "If faithful souls," by contrast, he associates them with immediate vision.

In an Easter Monday sermon (1622), Donne comes closer to the position implied by "If faithful souls." This sermon, though, accentuates another of the sonnet's quirks: the notion that souls are "glorified" at all. Donne chooses not to define the angelic mode of knowledge, declaring only that it falls *somewhere* between *per essentiam* ("for whosoever knows so, as the Essence of the thing flows from him, knows all things and

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[12]Aquinas does, however, claim that angels are *better* at knowing through effects than humans are: "they examine more subtly the hidden bodily changes" (McInerny, p. 395).

[13]*John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 112. All citations from Donne's poems, except for the Holy Sonnets, are to this edition.

[14]Grierson, 2:232–233.

that's a knowledge proper to God only") and *per species* (by those resultances. . . , which rise from the Object, and pass through the sense to the Understanding"). The first mode is "too high" for angels, while the second is "too low": "for that's a deceivable way, both by the indisposition of the Organ, sometimes, and sometimes by the depravation of the Judgment" (4:127). Donne places angels above any reliance on "resultances," as in "If faithful souls," but he also leaves room for mystery. The mystery will be solved, however, on the day of Resurrection: "Our curiosity shall have this noble satisfaction, we shall know how the Angels know, by knowing as they know" (4:128). In this part of the sermon, Donne's larger topic is "our Glorification" (4:92): "this is the end of all, that man might come to this light, in that everlasting state, in the consummation of happiness in Soul, and body too" (4:125). It is in the body, after its reunion with the soul, that we will be "alike glorified / As angels."[15]

Indeed, as Ramie Targoff has recently underscored, Donne persistently anticipated the rejoining of body and soul—and greatly feared their separation during the interim between death and the resurrection.[16] Donne did not expect his dying moment to usher in "the consummation of happiness" that would only arrive on the last day.[17] In

[15]Paradoxically, then, humans become most angelic when they have bodies. Perhaps the opening lines of "If faithful souls" glance at a less paradoxical alternative: the possibility that disembodied souls, precisely because they are incorporeal, know in the same way that angels do. In the aforementioned Candelmas sermon, Donne refers to (without endorsing) the view of "Scotus and his Heard . . . that Angels, *and separate soules* have a natural power to understand thoughts" (10:82, my emphasis). Even so, Donne's speculation in "Faithful Souls" remains unusual. Not only is the word "glorified" normally reserved for bodies, but Donne usually imagines that the reunion of body and soul completes the human destiny—and therefore reduces (rather than increases) the disparity between human and angel.

[16]Ramie Targoff, *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), especially pp. 16–24 and pp. 154–183. See also Targoff's "Facing Death," in *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 217–231.

[17]A more recent Anglican minister, N. T. Wright, argues that the Church has often lost sight of this (biblical, in his view) distinction between "life after death" and "life after life after death" (*Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* [New York: HarperCollins, 2008], especially pp. 148–152). He briefly discusses Donne on pp. 14–15.

fact, the original versions of another Holy Sonnet—"This is My Play's Last Scene"—famously flirt with mortalism: the belief that our souls wait in a sleep-like state, a kind of death, until the body is raised.[18] Even when Donne insists that the soul is "euer wakeing" ("This is my play's last scene," Revised, 7), as is almost always the case, he stresses that it will not achieve ultimate fulfillment before the final trumpet sounds.

Why, then, does Donne even ask "If faythfull Soules be alike glorified / As Angels" before the Resurrection? Why does he suppose that his "fathers Soule," prior to this consummation, might already enjoy "full felicitee"? Donne practically bends over backwards, I argue, to render his father as godlike as possible. The sonnet first adopts a high view of angelic knowledge and then brings forward the time when his father will be (in the words of Mark 12:25) "as the angels which are in heauen."[19] The line between God and this father, unseen but practically all-seeing, is very thin.

While theologically awkward, the opening hypothesis makes a kind of psychological sense, given the death of Donne's father so many years before. Exalted by absence, he plays a semi-divine role in his son's spiritual imagination. (DiPasquale observes a similar dynamic in "Since she whom I loved:" in some ways, the danger that Donne will idolize his wife increases after her death. "As one of the 'Saints and Angels, things diuine [12],'" DiPasquale notes, "Anne looks all the more like the deity who is her rival for Donne's love."[20]) The first four lines of "If faithful souls" close the distance between divine and human fathers. The rest of the sonnet, however, insistently separates them. "If faithful souls," by turns, confuses and distinguishes father and God. Perhaps what drives

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[18]For the case against using Donne's supposed change of heart on this subject to date the Holy Sonnets, see *Variorum* 7.1, pp. XCVIII–XCIX. See also Donald M. Friedman, "Christ's Image and Likeness in Donne," *John Donne Journal* 10 (1996): 76–77.

[19]In a 1625 sermon, Donne distinguishes the ways in which humans will and will not share the same kind of existence as angels. "In that wherein we can be like [the angels], we shall be like them, in the exalting and refining of the faculties of our soules; But they shall never attaine to be like us in our *glorified bodies*" (6:297, my emphasis.) As in the 1622 Easter Monday sermon, becoming "like the angels" signifies an improvement that is different from becoming incorporeal.

[20]DiPasquale, p. 43.

the sonnet, for all of its curiosity about angels, souls, and glorification, is Donne's effort to sort out these paternal figures.

After his initial speculation, therefore, Donne rapidly reverses course, raising an alternative theory about heavenly souls that takes over the poem. "But if our minds to these soules, be descried" only through exterior "signs and circumstances," he starts to wonder, "how shall my mind's white truth to them be tried" (5–6, 8)? The use of the plural here (these Soules . . . to them be tride) fails to parallel the plural-to-singular movement (faithful souls . . . my father's soul) of the opening quatrain. Donne's father already seems to be disappearing from the poem and blending into the general cloud of witnesses. "They see" various immoral characters (lovers, blasphemers, dissemblers) engage in the same outward behavior as Donne (weeping, calling on Jesus, devotional exercises). It is as if Donne's ability to single out his father's soul depends on the father's ability to single him out from these impious types—to see him back with angelic clarity.

In the final turn, God replaces the father as audience and authenticator of the speaker's sincerity: "then turne / O pensive Soule to God; for he knowes best / Thy true griefe, for he put it in my brest" (12–14).[21] God perceives Donne's penitent grief "immediatlee," having given it to him in the first place—perhaps in the form of prevenient grace: "Yet grace yf thou repent, thou canst not lacke, / But who shall giue thee that grace to beginne? / O make thy selfe with holy mourninge blacke . . ." ("O my black soul," 9–11). He has fathered Donne's repentance. With this stroke, "If faithful souls" reaffirms the importance of "holy mourninge," a major concern in the Donne's Divine Meditations. The poem also contributes to another persistent motif in the Holy Sonnet sequences: that of sonship. In "As due by many titles," Donne reminds God "I am thy sonne, made with thy selfe to shine" (5). The opening of another sonnet specifies the way in which he is (and is not) God's son: "Father, part of his double Interest / Vnto thy kingdome, thy sonne giues to me; / His ioynture in the knotty Trinity / He keepes, and giues me his

[21]Gary Kuchar argues that these lines take a partial step out of the solipsism of "Oh might those sighs," which evades (even as it seems to court) genuine conversion. But the speaker of "If faithful souls" is not so much turning from self to God as from father to God ("Petrarchism and Repentance in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*," *Modern Philology* 105.3 [2008]: 557–558).

Death's conquest" ("Father part of his double interest," 1–4). In "If faithful souls," the speaker starts as primarily the son of his human father and finishes as primarily a son of God, seeking only His approval.

We might well ask whether this identity shift satisfies on a psychological and/or aesthetic level. How effectively does Donne dramatize the progression? If anything, the sonnet too strenuously asserts God's superiority ("he knowes best"), producing prevenient grace or possibly even Calvinist irresistible grace as a trump card. In retrospect, the preceding lines may even seem to set up Donne's father for this fall. As the speaker converts his devotional energies to God instead of father, we feel the effort. The change is sought but not convincingly shown. Donne appears stranded: he aspires to, without accomplishing, the transcendence of his filial attachment.

This is not to say, however, that the endeavor is inherently flawed. Filial mourning *can* lead to a real, more refined differentiation of parent and God. Arguably, the practice of praying for the dead facilitated this form of spiritual growth, in which mourning reconfigures the parent-child bond. Book 9 of Augustine's *Confessions* offers a famous and especially moving instance. Monica looms prominently in her son's autobiography; indeed, she serves as Augustine's mother in more senses than one. In book 3, her anxiety about Augustine's salvation pushes a hassled bishop to predict "it is impossible that the son of these tears should perish."[22] With her tearful prayers, she will give birth to him spiritually, just as she has already given birth to him physically. This second birth occurs in book 8, with Augustine's climactic conversion in the garden, but the autobiographical narrative does not rest there. Instead, book 9 records Monica's death and the consequent transformation of her son.

Augustine's filial mourning involves crying for his mother in two related but distinct ways. In a poignant moment, he finally succumbs to grief: "I no longer tried to check my tears, but let them flow as they would. . . . I wept for my mother, now dead and departed from my sight, who had wept so many years for me that I should live ever in Your sight."

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[22]Augustine, *Confessions*, 2nd ed., trans. F. J. Sheed, ed. Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis, IN; Cambridge: Hackett, 2006), p. 51. All subsequent citations are from this edition. Donne refers to this incident in his famous sermon on the short verse "Jesus Wept" (see *Sermons*, 4:343).

To fully repay her, though, he must also cry that *she* should live forever in God's sight. Suddenly speaking in the present tense, Augustine offers "tears of a very different sort": "Now that my heart is healed of that wound . . . I pour forth to you, O our God, tears of a very different sort for your handmaid—tears that flow from a spirit shaken by the thought of the perils there are for every soul that dies in Adam."[23] Augustine progresses from sorrow to intercession, in compliance with her dying request: "For on that day when her death was so close, she . . . only desired to be remembered at Thy altar."[24] In the last paragraph of book 9, Augustine invites his readers to join in this intercession:

> with loving mind remember these who were my parents in this transitory light, my brethren who serve Thee as our Father in our Catholic mother, and those who are to be fellow-citizens with me in the eternal Jerusalem. . . : so that what my mother at her end asked of me may be fulfilled more richly in the prayers of so many gained for her by my Confessions than by my prayers alone.[25]

As the retrospective portion of *The Confessions* comes to a close, Augustine closely associates his project with supplication for the dead. Through his own prayers for Monica and through the writing which multiplies them, Augustine has become his mother's sister, a fellow child of Father God and Mother Church.

This powerful account of the mourning process shares much in common with "If faithful souls." As Donne accepts his father's limitations, deciding that God "knows best" after all, so Augustine must acknowledge the shortcoming of his saintly mother: "leaving aside for this time her good deeds . . . I now pray to Thee for my mother's sins."[26] For both sons, too, confronting a parent's finitude brings the perfect Father more clearly into view. In Augustine's case, though, the "turne . . . to God" is not so thoroughly a turn *from* the departed parent. He approaches God on Monica's behalf: she "only desired to be remembered

[23]Augustine, p. 183.
[24]Augustine, p. 184.
[25]Augustine, p. 185.
[26]Augustine, p. 184.

at thy Altar, which she had served without missing so much as a day."[27] Since it is her place at the altar that he takes, moreover, he also identifies with her. This changing of the guard, after Monica's death, supplies a kind of origin story for the intimate, prayerful voice on display throughout *The Confessions*. Augustine, simultaneously, honors his mother and moves nearer to God.

In the Holy Sonnet, by contrast, Donne attempts to identify with his father before he resolves to pray. These stances are sequential rather than simultaneous. "If faythfull Soules be alike glorified / As Angels, then my fathers Soule doth see / And ads this even to full felicitee / That valiantly'I hells wide mouth orestride" (1–4): the valiant son takes the same long strides, presumably, as his faithful forerunner. In fact, although the father's soul is "glorified," the son somehow aims to enhance his condition. Shawcross and Booty gloss "even to full felicitee" as "to the extent of full felicity";[28] the phrase, however, could just as easily suggest a paradox whereby the paternal pride supplements this soul's already complete joy. In any case, the speaker's efforts for his father—to identify with him or to improve his state—precede the swing into prayer rather than coinciding with it.

Perhaps, in its cumulative effect, recent scholarship has excessively romanticized the purgatorial system (as if it were the *only* way of remembering the departed).[29] Nevertheless, it is hard to overstate the religious and psychological value of supplication for the dead, a significant feature of this system. By praying for a parent's soul, the mourner matures beyond spiritual childhood without simply abandoning

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[27]Augustine, p. 184.

[28]John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 348, and John Booty, ed., *John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Devotions, Sermons, and Prayers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 110.

[29]Several compelling and influential studies, taken together, have created this emphasis. See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis, "Ghosts, Kin, and Progeny: Some Features of Family Life in Early Modern France," *Daedalus* 106 (1977): 87–114; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Anthony Low, "*Hamlet* and the Ghost of Purgatory: Intimations of Killing the Father," *ELR* 29.3 (1999): 443–467; Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

that parent. According to Bruce Young, the ritual of parental blessing survived in England well after the Reformation, which suggests that mothers and fathers played a "quasi-priestly" role in their children's lives.[30] Before the Reformation, I would add, children returned the favor by interceding for their dead parents and thereby entering into a less mediated relationship with the divine. (Of course, the effect would be different if the bereaved child prayed *to* the dead parent or to a saint rather than directly to God.)

On the other hand, while Reformers generally discouraged prayers for the dead, such intercession was neither inseparable from the doctrine of purgatory nor necessarily inconsistent with Protestant belief. In *Essays in Divinity* (*c.* 1614), Donne himself recommends this practice in a non-purgatorial context. Characteristically, he observes that after death "we must pass . . . a disunion and divorce of our body and soul. . . ." It is this separation period, and not the duration of purgatory, that the prayers of the living can reduce: "the faithful and discreet prayers of them which stay behind, may much advantage and benefit us, and themselves, if therby God may be moved to hasten that judgment which shall set open Heavens greater gates, at which our Bodyes may enter, and to consummate and accomplish our salvation."[31] While death sends the soul

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[30]Bruce Young, "Ritual as an Instrument of Grace: Parental Blessings in *Richard III*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *The Winter's Tale*," in *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age*, ed. Edward Berry and Linda Woodbridge (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 171.

[31]John Donne, *Essays in Divinity*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson, reprint ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 76. See also *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), ed. Anthony Raspa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Prayer 18: "though men dispute, whether thy Saints in heaven doe know what we in earth in particular doe stand in need of, yet without all disputation, wee upon earth doe know what thy Saints in heaven lack yet, for the consummation of their happinesse; and therefore thou hast afforded us the dignitie, that wee may pray for them." Donne proceeds to pray for "the full consummation of all, in body and soule" (p. 96). In a polemical 1626 sermon, Donne supplies a history of, and sharply opposes, the practice of praying for the dead. On the one hand, he denies that Augustine's prayers for Monica implied a belief in purgatory; on the other hand, he argues that the laxity of the Church

straight to heaven, Donne indicates, heaven's gates will open wider at the Resurrection, enabling a reunion between soul and body. Neither Roman nor Reformed faith forbids prayer for the arrival of this Last Day.

Of course, this is precisely the distinction Donne blurred at the start of the sonnet: that between the heavenly life of souls and a later "consummation." The poem's beginning, then, precludes even non-purgatorial intercession for the dead. Because the father has already been "glorified," Donne can hardly turn to God with prayers for his (and everyone's) future glorification. He has so greatly inflated his father that there is no longer room for him in the sonnet—or, by extension, in Donne's overall project of holy mourning. "If faithful souls" does not chart a plausible progression from father to God, but instead veers abruptly from one to the other.[32] The dichotomy is overly stark, as if Donne has introduced his father only for the purpose of dismissing him.

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Unless, that is, the "pensive Soule" in line 13 is not Donne's own but rather his father's: "then turne / O pensive Soule to God. . . ." Although this reading was suggested to me by Barbara Estrin and Roger Kuin when I presented an earlier draft of this paper, I have never encountered it in print. It has much to recommend it. The complete disappearance of Donne's father, after the fourth line, is so glaring as to be suspicious. Elsewhere, moreover, the sonnet explicitly associates the living with "minds" and the dead with "souls": "But if our Minds to these Soules be descried. . ." (5). In other words, the only singular "soul" introduced

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Fathers towards this erroneous practice led to the doctrine of purgatory (*Sermons*, 6:168–176, 179–181).

[32]Richard Strier notes this unsteady quality, attributing it to the "unacknowledged tension" between Calvinist and Roman Catholic attitudes that (for Strier) characterize the Holy Sonnets in general. This sonnet shifts abruptly "from an assertive and positive sense of the self's status or agency . . . to a surprising sense of the self's dependence on God for the genuineness of its own contrition" (see "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608–10," *Modern Philology* 86.4 [1989]: 370). Perhaps the practice of praying for the dead, along with its other advantages, helps to reconcile the mourner's active and passive impulses. In prayer, the bereaved child actively assists the parent through passive submission to God.

before this point belonged to Donne's father and not to Donne himself. To be sure, as Mary Ann Radzinowicz has noted, Donne frequently speaks to his own soul in the Holy Sonnets—a device borrowed from the Psalms. In this sonnet, however, the pronouns in the final line prove slightly awkward if the speaker addresses himself. Even as Radzinowicz expounds the poem in relation to the *anima mea* tradition, she registers the difficulty: "The dialogic relationship between speaker and soul . . . is here *oddly* but interdependently reflected in the personal pronouns—thy grief and my breast."[33]

The recent findings of the *Variorum* editors pertain directly to this odd line. In the Group-III manuscripts, the first stage in the evolution of the Sonnets, the closing gesture reads "turne / (O pensiue soule) to God, for he knowes best / Thy greife, for he put it into my brest."[34] It is the Westmoreland version which includes the more familiar ending: "turne / O pensive Soule to God; for he knowes best / Thy true griefe, for he put it in my brest." According to the *Variorum* editors, some of the most influential modern editions dismiss the original line without good reason—either in an unexplained departure from stated practice (Grierson) or because of an implausible belief that scribal error accounts for the discrepancy (Gardner). Against Gardner, the *Variorum* editors argue that "Thy griefe . . . into" (as opposed to "True grief . . . in") reflects no mistake but rather "the first heat of Donne's inspiration"—even if a cooler Donne subsequently altered the line.[35]

In the earlier version of the sonnet, the parallel between "Thy greife" and "my brest" stands out more sharply, a strange effect if the grief and the breast belong to speaker and soul rather than to two different people. In other words, there is more of a likelihood that the "pensieve soul" of line 13 is Donne's father's than there is in the Westmoreland manuscript's authorial revision. The revision ("Thy true griefe, for he put it into my brest"), meanwhile, emphasizes the phrase "true grief" rather

[33]Mary Ann Radzinowicz, "'Anima Mea' Psalms and John Donne's Religious Poetry," in *"Bright Shootes of Everlastingnesse": The Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p. 52, my emphasis.

[34]The "Original Sequence," p. 9.

[35]*Variorum* 7.1, p. LXVI. See pp. LXXX–LXXXI for the discussion of Grierson and pp. LXXXIV–LXXXV (along with pp. 78–79) for the discussion of Gardner.

than the parallel between "thy" and "my." The speaker, in lines 5–12, worries that his external conduct will not establish his contrition. He cries over his sins, but this is an action that a man might play. Idolatrous lovers also "weep and mourne": who is to tell the difference, unless heavenly souls look "immediatlee" into our hearts? As in "O might those sighs," there is a troublesome resemblance between Petrarchan and penitent tears. Only God definitely discerns "that within,"[36] the "true griefe" of repentance, for such remorse is a divine gift in the first place.

It is most likely, in my view, that the Westmoreland version of the poem clarifies Donne's original intention rather than changing it. I suspect that he meant, from the beginning, for the "pensive soul" to be taken as his own (however awkward the claim that its grief lies in his breast). After all, the poem does not fully explain why a "faithful," let alone "glorified," soul in heaven would become "pensive" and grieved. One *could* argue, perhaps, that this heavenly soul frets for his son's salvation. If he cannot spy into minds, he cannot be sure that Donne is on the right track.[37] According to this reading, then, the speaker informs his concerned father that "God has given me a corresponding distress over our unreliable lines of communication." The living and the dead are concealed from one another, but at least they have that in common.

The sonnet's logic proves more intelligible, though, if Donne's is the pensive soul. The presence of God, presumably, ensures the father's felicity—even if knowing the son's status could (paradoxically) better such bliss. On this side of heaven, though, the son fears being misunderstood or misjudged. It is by "true griefe," the authorial revision specifies, that Donne strides over hell's wide mouth. God is the only guaranteed spectator for this proper, penitential mourning.

Still, some level of ambiguity on this point exists in both versions. The possibility that Donne's father's is the "pensive soul" cannot be

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[36] *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 1.2.86.

[37] At the same time, the father's soul possibly experiences grief over the existence of deception. The logic of lines 9–12 implies that heavenly souls view actions (weeping, invoking Jesus) without any way of assessing their sincerity. The phrasing of these lines, on the other hand, almost suggests that they see hypocrisy or blasphemy itself: "They see Idolatrous Lover weepe and mourne / And vile blasphemous Coniurers to call / On Iesus Name, and pharasaicall / Dissemblers feigne devotion."

entirely erased—and nor, therefore, can the father himself. Donne stages an unfair fight, using the departed as a foil for the divine, but the human father nevertheless manages to linger. The poet is not so firmly in control. In fact, the alternative reading accentuates something of our experience of the sonnet, regardless of whose soul we take to be pensive. Even if father and son do not both feel grief, they are both characterized by incapacity: the father may not be able to access the truth about his son, and the son cannot confidently describe the connection between them. This aura of uncertainty is what resonates most in the poem, more than the speaker's relief at being fully apprehended by God.

Given Donne's unsure hold on the material, does "If faithful souls" in fact merit more critical attention? In his discussion of the Holy Sonnets, Richard Strier cautions against taking "oddities" and "inconsistencies" as signs of successful (because complex) religious verse.[38] Still, this sonnet is remarkably suggestive, a little world made from some of the same elements and spirit as *Hamlet*: "an interrogative mood";[39] an obsessive concern with authenticity (particularly authentic grief); rapid, unexplained shifts between active and passive postures; a deceased father, blown into semi-divinity, who then suddenly drops out of focus. The poem has more power to haunt than we have allowed it.

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[38]Underlying this preference for inconsistency lurks the dubious assumption that "doctrinal coherence . . . must necessarily produce poetry that is dull, undramatic, and merely doctrinal" (Strier, pp. 359–361).

[39]Maynard Mack, "The World of *Hamlet*," *Yale Review* 41 (1952): 502–523, 504.