

Forms of Consolation in Early Modern English Poetry

by

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## Introduction

In her recent memoir, the British novelist Jeanette Winterson relates how the poetry collection in her small town's public library helped her survive a childhood of poverty and abuse. She insists:

When people say that poetry is a luxury, or an option, or for the educated middle classes, or that it shouldn't be read at school because it is irrelevant, or any of the strange and stupid things that are said about poetry and its place in our lives, I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers—a language powerful enough to say how it is.<sup>1</sup>

Winterson's memoir also describes the comfort she found in religion as a child. Church offered her a social community; the Bible assured her that God loved her continuously and unconditionally, even if her parents did not. Poetry, on the other hand, offered an entirely different type of consolation—"a tough language" that Winterson felt acknowledged her "tough life." In other words, poetry's power to console by "saying how it is" resides precisely in its difficulty and unfamiliarity. The traits that make poetry different from prose also make it a powerful tool for representing and working through one's emotional landscape. In this spirit, my dissertation seeks to understand how poetic forms and genres offered early modern readers

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Random House Group, 2011), 40.

unique and productive forms of consolation not readily available to them in their society's prose discourses of emotional management.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, emotions, or "passions," such as grief, anger, and erotic infatuation were considered dangerous conditions that could have drastically debilitating consequences for an individual's physical, mental, or spiritual health. Writers such as Timothy Bright and Robert Burton detail numerous symptoms of excessive or "melancholy" passions, ranging from constipation to hallucination to religious despair.<sup>2</sup> Early moderns assumed that melancholy individuals were at a high risk for committing suicide but also that they could simply die from grief—bills of mortality in the period often list grief as the sole cause of a person's death.<sup>3</sup> In addition to endangering an individual's health and sanity, melancholy also posed a threat to the wellbeing of the larger social community, as emotionally distressed people were thought more likely to display "disruptive political action" such as religious dissent.<sup>4</sup>

Yet while most early moderns agreed on the need to provide people with guidance for managing troubling emotions, there was little agreement on what constituted proper consolation. As literacy rose and books became increasingly cheap to produce, prose texts advertising their consolatory value poured from English presses. Philosophical, religious, and medical discourses jostled uncomfortably against each other as early modern writers negotiated the often conflicting goals of argumentative coherence and consolatory function. *Forms of Consolation in Early Modern English Poetry* argues that early modern poetry played a crucial role in this cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Bright, *A treatise of melancholy* (London, 1586) and Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1932).

<sup>3</sup> David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 393.

<sup>4</sup> Adam H. Kitzes, *The Politics of Melancholy from Spenser to Milton* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

preoccupation with reading as means of emotional management, using the formal possibilities of verse to create unique processes for working through difficult emotions.

Although recent scholarship on intellectual history and humoral theory has enlarged our understanding of early modern emotion, research on “consolation”—a common early modern term for emotional management—rarely encompasses poetic practice.<sup>5</sup> Existing studies of consolation in early modern literature focus instead on how closely authors adhere to the period’s Christian theology or reception of classical ideals. In his analysis of consolation in Shakespeare’s plays, for example, Brian Vickers provides a detailed account of early modern intellectual history, tracing discourses of consolation through the classical, early church, and medieval sources available to early modern thinkers.<sup>6</sup> Such studies offer useful historical background, but they often lack a close examination of the formal methods by which early modern literature endorses, rejects, or revises these received traditions. More specifically, they lack a nuanced sense of literature’s ability to simultaneously interrogate and participate in its society’s obsession with emotional management.

Other scholarship on early modern literature and emotional management tends to stress the ways in which early modern writers *resist* the modes of consolation found in their society’s religious and philosophical discourses.<sup>7</sup> Fred Tromly, for instance, argues that Shakespeare’s

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, eds., *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Angus Gowland, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Mary Ann Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England: Reading The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Brian Vickers, “Shakespearian Consolations,” in *The Proceedings of the British Academy* 82 (1993), 219-84. See also works such as Christopher Fitter, “‘Native Soil’: The Rhetoric of Exile Lament and Exile Consolation in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Studies* 20 (1984): 152-53.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Ann Lauinger, “‘It makes the father, lesse, to rue’: Resistance to Consolation in Jonson’s ‘On my first Daughter.’” *Studies in Philology* 86.2 (Spring 1989); Emily E. Stockard, “Patterns of Consolation in Shakespeare’s Sonnets 1-126.” *Studies in Philology* 94.4 (Autumn 1997): 465-93; Fred B. Tromly, “Grief, Authority and the Resistance to Consolation in Shakespeare,” in *Speaking Grief in English Literary Culture: Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Margo Swiss and David A. Kent (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 20-41; and David Thatcher, “‘Cold Comfort’: Resistance to Consolation in Shakespeare.” *Studia Neophilologica* 72.2 (2000).

plays expose early modern consolatory traditions as manipulative practices that reinforce existing social hierarchies. Work like Tromly's suggests that literary texts ideally function as full-blown critiques of a coercive consolatory discourse that aims "to overcome the subjectivity of sorrow through persuasions that insist on the claim of universal laws and the truth of collective experience."<sup>8</sup> *Forms of Consolation*, then, counters a scholarly tradition that has tended to view early modern poetry either as a container for existing ideology about consolation or as a commentary on the failures of consolatory practice. Instead, it argues that poetry produces models of consolation that are qualitatively different from those typically found in early modern prose discourses of emotional management.

At the same time, this dissertation rethinks a critical tendency to read early modern poetry, particularly lyric, as a genre primarily for and about the writerly self. Although Tromly writes about drama rather than poetry, his implication that "the subjectivity of sorrow" and "the truth of collective experience" are mutually exclusive concepts parallels a similar attitude in early modern lyric studies. Scholars like Joel Fineman and Helen Vendler have long championed the importance of the self and subjectivity as central terms for reading early modern poetry.<sup>9</sup> In this critical tradition, the poetic subject is often constructed in opposition to a larger social community that demands homogeneity and conformity. Even scholars who are deeply invested in reading early modern poetry within its historical and social contexts continue to find "self-fashioning" an essential concept for explaining the cultural function of early modern lyric.<sup>10</sup> Yet,

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<sup>8</sup> Tromly, "Grief, Authority and Resistance," 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); and Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

as I will argue in this dissertation, much of early modern poetry's consolatory power resides in its ability to bridge the idiosyncrasies of subjective experience without discounting the force of readers' individual emotions. That is, early modern poems often lead readers to see themselves as part of a larger community of people in need of consolation, but in stressing communal experience, they do not necessarily attempt "to depersonalize the grieving listener, to emphasize her or her generic identity rather than individuality."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, *Forms of Consolation* regards early modern poems not simply as means by which authors unburdened themselves and examined their emotional lives but also as crucial resources by which readers were encouraged to manage troubling emotions such as grief, anger, and frustration. Scholars of early modern emotion such as Daniel Gross have begun to critique psychological and philosophical models of emotion that focus only on the individual by thinking instead about how feeling circulates within a social "economy" of emotion.<sup>12</sup> In the 1940s, Kenneth Burke anticipated this socially-oriented approach in literary studies, claiming that literary forms offer readers unique "equipment for living" and "strategies for dealing with situations."<sup>13</sup> More recently, scholars of early modern religious poetry such as Ramie Targoff and Achsah Guibbory have illuminated how liturgical and ceremonial forms identify and construct religious communities.<sup>14</sup> I propose that we might fruitfully combine these approaches to explore how the "equipment" of poetic form—both in religious and secular contexts—addresses early modern communities' investment in the social project of consolation.

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<sup>11</sup> Tromly, "Grief, Authority and Resistance," 27.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 296.

<sup>14</sup> Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Achsah Guibbory, *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion, and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

### *An Overview of Early Modern Prose Consolation*

As I suggest above, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mark a period in England's history in which the act of reading became a newly important way to navigate emotional life. Women and the working classes were beginning to gain access to education, and developments in mechanical printing made books cheaper to buy. As literacy and books became more widespread, early modern authors and printers produced numerous prose texts that attempted to locate and articulate sources of consolation for emotionally troubled readers. These books spanned a variety of genres, including printed sermons, behavioral manuals, philosophical dialogues, biblical commentary, and medical treatises. This diverse body of texts drew on a variety of intellectual discourses—including philosophy, religion, and medicine—to educate readers about the best ways to manage emotions like grief and anger. It would, of course, be both reductive and impossible to neatly categorize prose texts of consolation into philosophical, religious, and medical works. Most of these texts negotiate multiple intellectual discourses in their efforts to console readers, displaying what Michael MacDonald terms a “therapeutic eclecticism.”<sup>15</sup> I briefly address these three broad categories, however, to provide an overview of the divergent strains of thought present in early modern prose writing about suffering and consolation.

One prominent strand of consolatory discourse looks back to classical Greece and Rome for philosophical models of consolation. Vickers suggests that early moderns were captivated by the classical *consolatio* tradition because it viewed consolation, not simply as the easing of pain,

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<sup>15</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 197.

but as a process of eliciting the correct ethical response to suffering.<sup>16</sup> Early moderns were particularly attracted to Stoic approaches that advocated freeing oneself from passions by focusing on inner tranquility and ignoring external irritants. Stoicism's popularity spawned numerous Neo-stoic texts in early modern Europe. These books ranged from treatises that primarily summarize Stoic thought, such as Guillaume du Vair's *The Moral Philosophy of the Stoicks*, to books that make a concerted effort to reconcile Stoicism's self-centered interiority with a Christian call to compassion, such as Justus Lipsius's *On Constancy*.<sup>17</sup> Works like *On Constancy* borrow strategies of mental discipline from Stoicism but urge readers to moderate their emotions rather than cultivate a stony indifference to suffering.<sup>18</sup>

While thinkers such as Lipsius attempted to fuse Stoic and Christian thought, other early modern writers adopted an approach to consolation in which religious teachings were more central. Thomas More's *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, for example, acknowledges the consolatory efforts of classical philosophers but labels their vision insufficient, arguing that the heavenly comforts of God are the best and only complete source of comfort.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to Neo-stoic texts that encourage readers to discount pain, religious consolation manuals often detail the spiritual benefits of emotional and physical pain, painting a picture of heavenly compensation for earthly suffering.<sup>20</sup> Texts like Thomas Becon's *The Sick Man's Salve* even go

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<sup>16</sup> Vickers, "Shakespearian Consolations," 223.

<sup>17</sup> Guillaume Du Vair, *The Moral Philosophie of the Stoicks*, trans. Thomas James, ed. Rudolf Kirk (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1951); Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, trans. John Stradling, ed. John Sellars (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006). James's and Stradling's English translations were originally published in 1598 and 1595, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of early modern attitudes toward Stoicism, see William J. Bouwsma, "The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought," in *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19-73.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, ed. Louis Martz and Frank Manley, vol. 12 of *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 9-12.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, John Norden, *A Poore Mans Rest: Founded upon Motives, Meditations, Prayers, and Expressing to the inward Man, true Consolation, In all Kinds and Times of Affliction* (London, 1620) and Robert Southwell, *The Triumphs over Death: or A Consolatorie Epistle, for afflicted minds, in the affects of dying friends*

so far as to suggest that if physical suffering is a sign of God's attention, health might be a sign of his neglect.<sup>21</sup> Some writers explicitly condemn non-scriptural sources of consolation, as when William Gilbert insists that "play bookes and fabulous stories" are like dry pits compared with the living water of scriptural consolation, or when Richard Sibbes warns of well-meaning, but erroneous comforters who show more "humanity" than "Christianity."<sup>22</sup> Still others, like Jeremy Taylor, pace readers through a series of devotional exercises meant to cultivate content in the face of physical or emotional hardship.<sup>23</sup>

While religious approaches often devalued or opposed physical comfort and secular recreation, early modern medical discourse endorsed these sources of comfort as crucial agents of consolation. Writers like Robert Burton and Timothy Bright stress the benefits of proper diet, physical exercise, light reading, and social interaction as activities that can relieve the mental distress of a melancholy humor.<sup>24</sup> Where More is equivocal about earthly comforts like drinking wine, Bright details exactly the kinds of alcohol one should consume to banish melancholy humors (red wine rather than white; beer with hops rather than ale).<sup>25</sup> Yet in spite of their emphasis on medical intervention as a means of consolation, both Bright and Burton devote entire sections of their books to theological arguments meant to salve afflicted consciences. Unlike Becon, who sets physical and spiritual health in opposition to each other, these writers view religion and medicine as disciplines that are fundamentally intertwined. Burton's three-volume tome, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, attempts to synthesize medical, religious, and

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(London, 1596). The Folger Shakespeare Library's record for this latter work indicates that 1596 is a false publication date and that the text was probably published closer to 1600.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Becon, *The Sycke Mans Salve* (London, 1561), 63-64.

<sup>22</sup> William Gilbert, *Architectonice consolationis, or the art of building comfort*, (London 1640), 27; Richard Sibbes, *The Soules Conflict with it self, and Victorie over it self by Faith* (London, 1635), 293.

<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, 2 vols., ed. P.G. Stanwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*; Bright, *Treatise of Melancholy*.

<sup>25</sup> More, *Dialogue of Comfort*, 82-84. Bright, *Treatise of Melancholy*, 250-257.

philosophical approaches to consolation, illustrating the vast scope of early modern debates about the nature and management of emotion.

### *Poetry as Consolation in Early Modern England*

In addition to producing an extensive body of consolatory literature in prose, early modern presses also printed collections of poetry framed as treatments for emotional maladies. These books advertised themselves as “Good for Melancholy Humors” and carried titles such as *An Antidote Against Melancholy: Made up in Pills. Compounded of Witty Ballads, Jovial Songs, and Merry Catches*.<sup>26</sup> By figuring poems as “pills” and drawing on the medical language of humoral theory, such collections implied that poetry had legitimate power to cure emotional ailments. In the process, they also created a publishing culture in which printers could market poems on the basis of their utility to readers, rather than on the reputations or identities of the authors being showcased.

While printers made money on poetry by connecting it to the booming business of prose consolation, early modern poets and theorists debated exactly how poetic consolation should work. In *The Art of English Poesy*, for example, Puttenham argues that poetry’s consolatory power depends on its formal ability to create a circumscribed space in which people can express and experience grief. Like Paracelsian medicine, Puttenham explains, verse cures a reader’s or listener’s grief by applying a controlled dose of passionate utterance that makes “one short sorrowing the remedy of a long and grievous sorrow.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, many early modern poets

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<sup>26</sup> *Recreation for Ingenious Head-peeeces. Or, a Pleasant Grove for their Wits to walke in* (London, 1645); *An Antidote Against Melancholy: Made up in Pills. Compounded of Witty Ballads, Jovial Songs, and Merry Catches* (London and Westminster, 1661).

<sup>27</sup> George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 136-37.

draw attention to the salutary emotional effects of poems' strict formal bounds, such as rhyme and meter. In "The Triple Fool," for example, John Donne figures metrical patterns as "fetters" that can "tame" grief and, by containing it, limit its power over an individual. George Herbert uses rhyme to signal emotional and spiritual resolution at the end of poems such as "Denial" and "A True Hymn," and Shakespeare uses the discrete rhyming units of the sonnet form to move his speaker from states of grief to joy in poems like Sonnet 29 ("When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes").

Yet while early modern poems often reflect on their own ability to formally mirror the moral goals of consolatory prose—that is, to limit and weaken the force of destructive passions—they just as frequently draw attention to the ways in which they perform a completely different kind of emotional work. As I have shown above, much of the period's consolatory writing rehearses religious ideology and classical philosophy that encourages readers to dampen, discount, or banish emotions that might stand in the way of spiritual reward or mental tranquility. Poetry, by contrast, tends to linger over descriptions of emotional suffering, bringing the individual grieving voice to the center of readers' attention and inviting them to seek consolation in a more thorough understanding of their emotions. Furthermore, many early modern poems display an unusual willingness to acknowledge the partial and experimental aspects of consolation that the prose tradition often attempts to obscure. Some poems illuminate the problems with using specific philosophical or religious teachings to eradicate feelings of loss or pain; others offer versions of consolation that stress emotional adjustment instead of total relief.

That is, rather than urge readers to "cure" themselves by following a specific set of instructions or meditative exercises, early modern poems often lead readers to understand consolation as an incremental, recursive, and continuous process. For example, while

Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 articulates the speaker's relatively straight-forward movement from despair to consolation, Sonnets 30 and 31 show the speaker circling back to a melancholy contemplation of similar issues. While individual lyrics sometimes present a crystallized expression of emotion, extended works of poetry, such as lyric sequences or epics, often work against this idea of the lyric as a neat container for emotion. When read as a whole, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* constitute a vast accumulation of contradicting emotional expression, not a neatly organized or unified utterance.

Even George Herbert, whose devotional poetry is famous for its technical restraint, questions poetic form's ability to contain passion for more than a brief moment. In poems such as "Grief," Herbert explicitly rejects the ordering qualities of verse, ending the poem with an exclamatory line that both visually and aurally disrupts the poem's metrical structure and rhyme scheme:

Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise  
For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumbe and mute,  
Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,  
And keep your measures for some lovers lute,  
Whose grief allows him musick and a ryme:  
For mine excludes both measure, tune, and time.

Alas, my God! ll. 13-19<sup>28</sup>

Using poetic form to illustrate and articulate poetry's limitations was, of course, a common trope in early modern England, as it still is today. Early modern scholarship often reads this trope in terms of how it constructs an author's subjectivity—as a Christian believer learning to value

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<sup>28</sup> Helen Wilcox, ed., *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2007.

grace over human effort, as a savvy artist demonstrating false humility in order to receive patronage, or as a tortured intellectual expressing self-doubt. Yet literary critics spend less time talking about what this simultaneous celebration and disavowal of poetry's ability to contain passion might have done for early modern readers. Unlike consolation manuals that attempt to offer a clear set of directions for managing emotion, early modern poetry often tells readers that literary art is both supremely adept at and devastatingly inadequate for the task of consolation.

As I suggest above, this central tension in early modern poetry creates a problem for scholars of emotion in early modern England. Depending on which poems are chosen to stand in as evidence, the same poet can be held up as a champion of Stoic fortitude or a critic of philosophy's emotional detachment. In some cases, scholars may even find evidence for both viewpoints in the same poem. In this project, I propose that these seemingly contradictory stances on emotional management distinguish poetic methods of consolation from other consolatory traditions in the early modern period. Poetry's ability to reflect critically on its own formal strategies of emotional management provides an especially powerful mode of consolation for readers—one that acknowledges the difficulties of working through troubling emotions, even as it affirms the necessity of doing so.

I have organized the dissertation around texts that are particularly well-poised to help us recover early moderns' own expanded sense of consolation as a project that addresses a broad range of emotions and misfortunes. A significant body of scholarship addresses how literary genres such as elegy represent severe loss or trauma, but less attention has been paid to poetry that participates in the more quotidian project of managing chronic emotional irritants such as sexual frustration, professional anxiety, and social obscurity.<sup>29</sup> In addition to choosing texts that

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the following studies: Andrea Brady, *English Funerary Elegy in the Seventeenth Century: Laws in Mourning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); G. W. Pigman III, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy*

address this broader sense of consolation, I have also chosen authors who display a diverse range of social, political, and religious commitments. Thus, I compare the sonnets of middle-class Shakespeare with those of the aristocratic Mary Wroth, and I consider the religious poetry of the Anglican priest George Herbert alongside that of the fiercely anti-clerical John Milton. Finally, I have chosen texts that display an acute sense of their ability to console readers, even as they exhibit profoundly individualized ways of thinking about consolation.

The first two chapters of *Forms of Consolation* explore the consolatory possibilities of poetic form in the highly codified genre of the early modern sonnet sequence. Early modern poetic theorists like Puttenham sometimes argue that poetry's strict formal characteristics allow it to contain, and thus weaken, the force of grief. Yet even as they work within extremely constrained formal conventions, early modern sonneteers often resist this formulation of poetic consolation. Lyric sequences such as Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (chapter 1) provide readers with endless permutations of the pain, anxiety, and betrayal attendant on erotic love. While the discrete unit of the sonnet does require Shakespeare to articulate emotion in a disciplined way, the repetitive qualities of an entire sonnet sequence work at odds with the limiting functions of a strictly bounded form.

Mary Wroth's sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (chapter 2) also shuns Puttenham's model of consolation, insisting that verse's formal containment actually concentrates and intensifies grief. Instead of positioning the sonnet as a tool for taming Pamphilia's personal grief, Wroth uses the sequence to collect articulations of erotic suffering from multiple speakers, constructing a vision of affective community that reaches across gender

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Dennis Kay, *Melodious Tears: The English Funeral Elegy from Spenser to Milton*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

and class boundaries. By using communal language and non-specific references, Wroth capitalizes on the liturgical potential of the sonnet sequence to suggest that readers experience erotic disappointment in larger social and aesthetic contexts.

*Form of Consolation*'s last two chapters examine formal strategies of consolation in devotional lyric and biblical epic. Rather than articulate a single coherent strategy for dealing with grief and anxiety, George Herbert's *The Temple* (chapter 3) uses the formal possibilities of the lyric sequence to model an experimental approach in which speakers try out and critique a variety of consolatory techniques. While individual poems often present traditional consolations of Stoic philosophy or Christian teaching, adjacent poems frequently acknowledge the factors that might render previous poems' consolations ineffective or incomplete. Rather than offer readers a teleological process for achieving consolation, Herbert offers a more complex and more forgiving understanding of emotional instability than is typical in early modern religious discourse.

In *Paradise Lost* (chapter 4), Milton expresses skepticism with his society's received intellectual modes of consolation, including both Satan's employment of Stoic philosophy and Michael's use of biblical narrative. In contrast, he constructs a new type of epic heroism, grounded in Adam and Eve's collaborative search for consolation in their newly fallen world. Instead of drawing on the consolatory methods set forth in philosophical and religious texts, Adam and Eve find consolation in their halting, but sincere, endeavors to engage in dialogue and repair their relationship. All of the chapters pay close attention to how poetry's formal aspects create unique processes for adjusting to loss or anxiety, considerably expanding our understanding of emotional experience in early modern England.

## Chapter 1

### Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and the Consolation of Being Unexceptional

I open this study with Shakespeare's *Sonnets* because both popular and academic discourses often use them to paint a suggestive picture of how poetic consolation works. Many of Shakespeare's most frequently anthologized sonnets, for instance, are those that offer triumphant, and presumably comforting, statements in the face of mortality, bad fortune, and erotic disappointment. Sonnet 29 suggests that love offers emotional wealth in exchange for poverty and social obscurity, while Sonnet 116 insists on love's power to withstand the ravages of time. Sonnets 18 and 55 champion poetry's ability to preserve an individual's memory (and a writer's reputation) after his death. When literary scholars focus on such sonnets, they often assume a particular model of poetic consolation in which Shakespeare's canonical fame is deeply implicated. That is, the *Sonnets* overcome the afflictions of mortality, erotic frustration, and social insignificance by presenting readers and writers with an inspirational picture of what exceptional individual talent can achieve. This line of reasoning has led multiple literary critics to attempt to identify exactly which qualities of Shakespeare's verse enable it to fulfill its self-prophecies of lasting fame—and, by extension, make it such a effective vehicle of humanist consolation.

Yet when the *Sonnets* are read continuously rather than in anthologized excerpts, the sequence reveals myriad poems detailing not only the pain and betrayal attendant on love but also serious anxieties about whether the poet's verse deserves attention from either present or future readers. Although readers and scholars linger over the sequence's moments of poetic

triumph, such bursts of confidence are actually quite brief. For every Sonnet 18 or 55 that takes comfort in the exceptional nature of the poet and his poetry, another muses on whether poetry can truly make up for the horrors of death or whether the poet is really a better writer than his rivals. In Sonnet 32, the poet worries that his verse will one day be regarded as old-fashioned and out of style; Sonnet 59 considers the possibility that the poet is simply rehashing themes that have been extant since antiquity; and Sonnet 79 acknowledges that the poet's rival might wield "a worthier pen" (l. 6).<sup>1</sup> How do *these* sonnets affect our understanding of the *Sonnets'* consolatory function?

As I state in the introduction, this study primarily focuses not simply on how early modern poets use the writing process to console themselves but also on how early modern poems presents themselves to readers as consolatory texts. If we look at Shakespeare's *Sonnets* with this critical commitment in mind, we might ask what early modern readers (who could not have predicted Shakespeare's present literary legacy) were supposed to make of a sonnet sequence that alternately offered them confident statements about the time-defying powers of its poetry and anxious musings about the transient, or even unexceptional, qualities of its verse? Did Shakespeare imagine that such contradictions could have been in any way consoling to an early modern reader who also suffered from worries about impending death, the lack of an heir, or erotic love gone awry? Ultimately, I argue that Shakespeare's sonnet sequence can and should be read within a consolatory context but that its methods of consolation are different than we might imagine, given the success story that infuses literary scholarship, pedagogical practice, and popular discourse about Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Burrow, ed., *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All future quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Recent scholars of Shakespeare's dramatic work, however, have been much more willing to question the aura of reverence that surrounds Shakespeare as the best-known author in the English literary canon. For a thoughtful

Looking at Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in terms of consolation reveals important aspects of the sequence that exist outside current critical strategies for reading lyric "speakers." Critical interest in individual subjectivity, self-fashioning, and verbal ingenuity has led scholars to value early modern poetry for its ability to articulate and preserve the emotions of a unique self—and nowhere is this critical phenomenon more prevalent than in Shakespeare studies.<sup>3</sup> But when scholars suggest that the *Sonnets*' literary value resides in Shakespeare's ability to articulate a unique, innovative form of subjectivity, they overlook the positive emotional functions of sonnets that stress common, unexceptional, and repetitive experiences of love. In Sonnet 85, for example, the poet describes himself assenting to others' praise of the beloved, like an "unlettered clerk" who simply recites prayers composed by literate clergy, and in Sonnet 108, he confesses that he has nothing new to say about his beloved (Sonnet 85, l. 6). While such sonnets can be read as displays of mock-humility or as evidence of the poet's anxiety about his work's literary value, they can also be read as poems meant to help readers cope with flagging desire, the frustrations of articulating emotion in a unique way, or the sense that one's experience of love is a tired cliché. As I think about the *Sonnets* in a consolatory context, then, I am also asking what aspects of Shakespeare's sonnets *besides* their linguistic dexterity and expressions of unique subjectivity might have been emotionally useful for early modern readers.

Unlike prose consolation manuals that instruct readers to ignore or moderate their grief, Shakespeare and many other early modern poets often encourage readers to articulate, examine,

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analysis and critique of this iconoclastic turn, see Jeffrey Knapp, *Shakespeare Only* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> As I will discuss in further detail below, literary critics have a strong desire to point out the ways in which Shakespeare's *Sonnets* outstrip common early modern habits of thought, displaying unprecedented expressions of individual subjectivity and formal innovation. Joel Fineman's incredibly influential study, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) is one of the best examples of this type of scholarship.

and ruminate on the emotions that trouble them.<sup>4</sup> While many of the period's religious and medical authorities warn of the dangers of such practices, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* explore their therapeutic possibilities, sometimes even going so far as to exacerbate anxiety before assuaging it. I propose that closer attention to such sonnets can inform our understanding of just how radically Shakespeare's *Sonnets* depart from the period's prose tradition in their attempts to treat emotional maladies. As I will discuss below, Shakespeare does occasionally appropriate rhetorical strategies of consolation from religious genres such as sermons, but he does not therefore create poetry that simply mirrors the period's religious culture of consolation. Rather, he uses these rhetorical strategies to conduct a rigorous investigation of both religious and aesthetic modes of consolation in the early modern period.

### *Planting Anxiety: The Birth of Consolation*

In contrast to the Petrarchan sonnet tradition, which might be broadly understood as a performance of self-consolation for the beloved's coldness, unavailability, or death, Shakespeare begins his sonnet sequence by constructing arguments meant to console an addressee rather than a writing self. While the addressee of the first twenty sonnets cannot be seen as a proxy for actual readers of the sequence, Shakespeare's rhetorical strategy of manipulating an addressee's feelings in order to prime him for a particular type of consolation does set a precedent for the modes of consolation readers can expect to encounter in the sequence. From its first sonnet, Shakespeare's sequence sets itself apart from contemporaneous sonnet sequences, not simply

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Guillaume Du Vair, *The Moral Philosophie of the Stoicks*, trans. Thomas James, ed. Rudolf Kirk (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1951). James's English translation was originally published in 1598; William Gilbert, *Architectonice consolationis, or the art of building comfort* (London, 1640), Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1932), and Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, 2 vols., ed. P.G. Stanwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

because it addresses a man rather than a woman, but because it begins without reference to its author's interior emotional state or identity as a poet. Unlike Philip Sidney's *Astrophil*, whose muse urges him to "look in thy heart and write," Shakespeare's poet begins with a lesson about procreation intended to persuade a young addressee to have children. While most Renaissance sonnet sequences assail their addressees with persuasive arguments, they do so in the context of the poet's self-professed desire for that person. Yet Shakespeare's poet does not even refer to himself as an individual until Sonnet 10, and he does not mention his poetic craft until Sonnet 15. Instead, these early sonnets focus entirely on manipulating the addressee's emotional state and not at all on describing the poet's. In the face of the young man's impending physical decay, social obscurity, and death, the poet offers the consolations of biological reproduction and poetic representation.

But while the procreation sonnets direct their consolation outward to an addressee rather than inward to a fictional speaker, their consolatory function is complicated by their obvious attempts to cultivate shame and anxiety in the addressee. Sonnet 2, for instance, offers a severe condemnation of the young man's failure to produce an heir. Rather than let the young man enjoy his current beauty and social popularity, the poet strips away these comforts and offers him a picture of life without them:

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,  
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,  
Thy youth's proud livery so gazed on now  
Will be a tattered weed of small worth held:  
Then, being asked where all thy beauty lies,  
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,

To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes

Were an all-eating shame, and thriftless praise. 1-8

The first quatrain of the sonnet asks the young man to look several years into the future, using metaphors of both military aggression and agricultural fallowness to describe what will happen to his beauty. The harshness of the poet's language—"dig deep trenches," "tattered weed," "besiege thy brow,"—conveys a sense of urgency about the young man's need to shore up something against this destruction. His beauty will not simply fade, leaving him with an unremarkable appearance, but it will depart with a vengeance, leaving him with deep wrinkles and sunken eyes. Not only does the poet predict how ugly the young man will be at forty, but he also emphasizes the social "shame" that will leave him without comfort for his lost beauty. By not investing his genetic wealth in a child, the young man leaves himself physiologically and morally bankrupt. Not only will others pity his unattractive appearance, but they will censure the profligate waste of virility that leaves no trace of his former beauty.

Only *after* attempting to create anxiety with these disturbing thoughts, does the poet step in with a ready consolation:

How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use

If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine

Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse',

Proving his beauty by succession thine.

This were to be new made when thou art old,

And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold. 9-14

Proper investment of one's beauty, the poet argues, will offset the dire picture painted above, offering both the young man himself and society at large proof of his previous beauty and social

responsibility. Shakespeare uses a financial metaphor to explain the proper use of beauty, but he still stresses the literal, visual properties of this consolation. Even when the young man inevitably *feels* old, he will still have access to a visual representation of his former youth. That which appears before his eyes will offer evidence against that which he feels in his bones.

As Sonnet 2 shows, the Shakespearean sonnet form easily lends itself to a model of consolation predicated on evoking anxiety and then extending comfort. With three distinct rhyming units (three quatrains and a couplet), the poet can use the sonnet's formal transitions and resolutions to heighten the effect of emotional transitions from anxiety to consolation. Although Sonnet 2 offers one of the sequence's harshest pictures of old age without an heir, the subsequent sonnets continue to offer more or less similar arguments about why life without children induces anxiety and why life *with* children offers myriad comforts. The poet appeals to the young man's vanity, warning him about how quickly his beauty will fade (Sonnets 5 and 7); he appeals to the young man's social standing, claiming that the public will forget or despise him if he does not reproduce (Sonnets 3 and 9); and he even appeals to the young man's moral character, charging him with selfishness and coldness toward a world that craves a legacy of his beauty (Sonnet 9).

These sonnets display the manipulative rhetoric and hierarchical social values Fred Tromly identifies as characteristic of early modern consolatory discourse—a discourse he claims Shakespeare's plays resist as hypocritical.<sup>5</sup> But even if Shakespeare's plays sometimes expose such consolatory conventions as empty rhetoric or political maneuvering—as when Claudio attempts to console Hamlet for his father's death—the *Sonnets* are deeply invested in using rhetoric to manipulate the emotions of their addressees. In this sense, Shakespeare's sonnets *do*

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<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Tromly, "Grief, Authority and the Resistance to Consolation in Shakespeare," in *Speaking Grief in English Literary Culture: Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Margo Swiss and David A. Kent (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 25-26.

operate in a similar fashion to emotionally manipulative sermons that detail the horrors of hell before offering congregants the consolations of heaven. Torquato Tasso offers a succinct illustration of this consolatory strategy at work in *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), when the hermit cures a grief-stricken Tancred by threatening him with visions of hell if he refuses to learn the lesson God is trying to teach him about the dangers of erotic attachment.<sup>6</sup> But where Tasso and early modern preachers use hell as an incentive for seeking the consolation of grace, Shakespeare's poet conjures up images of earthly suffering in order to convince his addressee that he is in need of the consolation children and poetry can provide.

At first, it seems as if the poet aims to unite readers in his rhetorical assault against the selfishly celibate addressee. He refers to the addressee's crimes against the "world," and uses the first person plural to draw readers into agreement with his arguments—"From fairest creatures we desire increase" (Sonnet 1, l. 1, 13-14, emphasis mine). Yet as I suggest above, Shakespeare's manipulative strategies for producing consolation would have been familiar to early modern readers used to being addressed in a similar fashion by preachers and other consolatory texts. Robert Southwell's treatise on coping with the death of friends, for example, claims that grieving excessively for a dead loved one displays both the sin of self-love and the social gaffe of discourtesy since the mourner is refusing to rejoice at the loved one's entrance to heaven.<sup>7</sup> While Shakespeare's poet berates the addressee for the sin of celibacy rather than excessive grief, he similarly uses the goads of self-love and discourtesy to reproach him.

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<sup>6</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Godfrey of Bulloigne: The Fairfax translation of Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata*, trans. Edward Fairfax, ed. Kathleen M. Lea and T. M. Gang (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). See Book 12, stanzas 86-88.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Southwell, *The Triumphs over Death: or A Consolatorie Epistle, for afflicted minds, in the affects of dying friends* (London 1596), B2r-v, Cr. The Folger Shakespeare Library catalogue record notes that the 1596 imprint date is false and that the book was probably published closer to 1600.

When the specific arguments about procreation drop away around Sonnet 20, the strategy of eliciting emotional distress in order to assuage it lingers in sonnets that address issues of reading, writing, and articulating emotional experience. Just as the poet attempts to convince the young man of children's consoling properties by making him anxious about his impending physiological decay, so the *Sonnets* provoke readers into dwelling on emotional suffering in order to prime them for the consolation poetry offers. In other words, we might think of the *Sonnets* as a set of poems that offers consolation not only to distressed readers but also to readers who don't yet know that they need to be consoled. This conception of consolation is consistent with prose tradition, as consolatory texts frequently encouraged readers who were not sick or suffering to digest them as a form of preventative maintenance so that they would be able to deal with affliction when it inevitably arrived.<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare's strategy of asking readers to consider instances of troubling emotion also bears some resemblance to Aristotelian catharsis, a process in which dramatic art stirs up fear and pity in its spectators, purging them of such emotions in a controlled environment. Yet while watching *Oedipus Rex* or *Medea* might evoke feelings of pity and fear, the outlandish events that befall the plays' royal characters events are unlikely to happen to the average audience member. In other words, Aristotelian catharsis depends on emotional identification that is simultaneously tempered by the knowledge that one's own life will almost certainly never resemble the action of the play. The same could be said for many of Shakespeare's own tragedies. In contrast to the fantastical events of stage tragedy, the *Sonnets* elicit negative emotions about events for which most readers will eventually require consolation in real life—mortality, aging, sexual frustration, and erotic betrayal. Of course, not every reader

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<sup>8</sup> See Robert Southwell, *Triumphs over Death* and John Norden, *A Poore Mans Rest: Founded upon Motives, Meditations, Prayers, and Expressing to the inward Man, true Consolation, In all Kinds and Times of Affliction* (London, 1620).

will relate to the events or emotions described in every sonnet, but the sheer number of sonnets makes it likely that many readers have experienced or will experience feelings similar to those described in at least some of the sonnets.

Furthermore, some important generic differences between poetry and drama move Shakespeare's sonnets out of the realm of Aristotelian catharsis. For one thing, the sequence does not offer clearly defined characters or plot lines, but in fact only hints at these, making them secondary to the emotional experiences articulated within the sonnets. Longstanding critical disagreement about the identities and qualities of the "characters" in the *Sonnets* only proves the difficulty of pinning down individual identities within the work. For another thing, unlike the spatially and temporally bounded environment of a theatrical performance, the *Sonnets'* textual nature offers them up to be consumed out of order or over and over at a reader's leisure. Rather than offer a limited space in which spectators can be "purged" of emotions and then return to daily life, a sonnet sequence offers readers a potentially excessive and repetitive space for processing emotional experience. In this sense, the *Sonnets* diverge from the early modern tradition of consolatory prose in that they encourage what many would deem dangerously excessive rumination.<sup>9</sup>

In the much-anthologized Sonnet 29 and in the two sonnets following it, Shakespeare's poet uses the repetitive potential of lyric sequence, not simply to "dwell" on his grief, but also to consider multiple models for the consolation of friendship. Sonnet 29 begins this mini-sequence by drawing attention to the complex combination of outside factors necessary to achieve the consolation it describes:

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<sup>9</sup> For warnings about rumination, see for example, Southwell, *Triumphs over Death* and Timothy Bright, *A treatise of melancholy* (London, 1586).

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state  
(Like to the lark at break of day arising)  
From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate.  
  
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

While this sonnet celebrates the consolatory power of connecting with another human being, it only does so after spending a majority of its lines chronicling the things for which the speaker needs consolation. The first octave formally demonstrates the scattered and unending nature of the speaker's complaints, starting as a subjunctive clause—"When in disgrace"—whose grammatical resolution is extended by numerous lines of text and then interrupted by another clause—"Yet in these thoughts"—that competes with the original clause for the resolution "I think on thee." Even this complicated and ambiguous resolution of the sonnet's grammar, however, does not allow readers to relax into the consolation the sonnet supposedly describes. Instead, consolation is marked as tenuous by the word "haply," which indicates the chance nature

of the thought rather than the speaker's deliberate progression from contemplating objects of suffering to contemplating an object of consolation.

Sonnets 30 and 31 enact this emotional repetition by offering different versions of Sonnet 29's argument. Directly after discovering the consolation he can gain by thinking about his friend, the poet returns to contemplating his grief in Sonnet 30, almost as if it will somehow heighten his enjoyment of the friend's consolation. This sonnet spends not eight but twelve lines recounting the poet's hardships, waiting until the final couplet to state: "But if the while I think on thee (dear friend) / All losses are restored, and sorrows end" (ll. 13-14). By protracting his grief in the first three quatrains and delaying consolation until the final couplet, the poet emphasizes his friendship's incredible power to effect a rapid emotional reversal from grief to joy. While Sonnet 30 waits until the final couplet to mention the friend, Sonnet 31 begins with him, presenting yet another version of how his friendship consoles: "Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts / Which I by lacking have supposed dead" (1-2). Rather than view the friend as a substitute who offers compensation for past losses, the poet describes him as a figure who absorbs the qualities of his lost lovers. A few centuries later, Elizabeth Barrett Browning would use the sonnet sequence to "count the ways" in which a poetic speaker can articulate love, but Shakespeare also uses the genre's repetitive potential to enumerate the ways in which another human being can offer consolation for emotional suffering.

Sonnet 29's notion of consolation as a chance thought that interrupts a detailed litany of one's woes locates many of the sonnets outside contemporaneous early modern theories about how poetic consolation works. Rather than move deliberately from meditation on his suffering to a measured contemplation of his blessings, Shakespeare's poet merely "happens" to think of a friendship that outweighs his grief. While poetic theorists like George Puttenham advocated the

consolatory effects of voicing grief in poetry, such models largely depend on poetry's ability to create a bounded, limited space in which to express and experience grief. Puttenham indicates that "one short sorrowing" in the form of poetic utterance should become the cure for a "long and grievous sorrow" in real life. Poetry and ritual, he explains, mark off specific places in which to grieve—at burials, at the one-month mark of a traumatic event, at the yearly anniversary of a death.<sup>10</sup> Like Paracelsian medicine, poetry heals by skillfully applying a precise amount of articulated grief to the emotional "wound."

The sonnet's strict, disciplined form holds great potential for this kind of precise poetic consolation, but Shakespeare's *Sonnets*' formal repetition and emotional proliferation work against the managing and limiting social functions Puttenham ascribes to poetic consolation.<sup>11</sup> As we see in Sonnet 29, even the grammar of a sonnet can disrupt the orderly articulation of emotion that Puttenham claims poetry should provide. Although Shakespeare frames consolation as a process that can be expedited by the provocation of anxiety, he does not attempt to preserve the appearance that the consolations he offers are infallible. Rather than speak from a stable position of authority, as a preacher might hope to do, Shakespeare also admits weaknesses within his own poems, raising questions about the various forms of consolation they endorse, such as friendship, biological reproduction, and poetic representation.

In Sonnet 15, the poet first alludes to the consolatory function of poetry when he speaks of reproducing the beloved by "engrafting," and in Sonnet 16 he initiates the sequence's first

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<sup>10</sup> George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 136-37.

<sup>11</sup> In a recent study of the *Sonnets*, Brian Boyd describes Shakespeare's proliferation of sonnets as a literary kaleidoscope that endlessly combines chips colored by various events, emotions, tones, and images—each sonnet is a different shake of the instrument. While Boyd is more concerned with the *Sonnets*' aesthetic luminosity than with their consolatory social function, his kaleidoscope metaphor aptly illustrates not only the multiplicity but also the randomness of the *Sonnets*' successive emotional articulations. Brian Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last: Evolution, Cognition, and Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 78-80.

explicit and extended musings on poetry's ability to offer consolation for time and mortality  
(Sonnet 15, l. 14):

But wherefore do not you a mightier way  
Make war upon this bloody tyrant Time,  
And fortify yourself in your decay  
With means more blessèd than my barren rhyme?  
Now stand you on the top of happy hours,  
And many maiden gardens, yet unset,  
With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers,  
Much liker than your painted counterfeit:  
So should the lines of life that life repair,  
Which this time's pencil or my pupil pen  
Neither in inward worth nor outward fair  
Can make you live yourself in eyes of men:  
To give away yourself keeps your self still,  
And you must live drawn by your own sweet skill.

While the poet is willing to memorialize the young man in rhyme, he worries about his ability to create a representation that could offer sufficient compensation for death or lost beauty. Unlike the young man's natural, virile "skill," the poet's rhyme is "barren" and cannot produce an adequate substitute for the young man's outer beauty or for his inner character. Shakespeare figures verse as a "painted counterfeit" and biological reproduction as the young man's more skillful "drawing"—while both are methods by which beauty may be captured and copied, he implies, the biological method is superior to the literary one. In other words, Sonnet 16 presents

poetry as a kind of “consolation prize”—something that is no one’s first choice but is better than nothing.

Sonnet 17 goes on to elaborate some of the problems with using poetry to preserve the young man’s beauty. As Sonnet 16 reminds us, the poet cannot restore the young man’s beauty but can only produce a flawed, sterile representation of it. Even if he could produce a perfect representation, Sonnet 17 tells us, there is no guarantee that his poetic depiction would deliver the social memory and respect that would mark it as a poem that successfully fulfills its consolatory function. No matter what the poet intends, future readers can choose not to believe the poet’s account of the young man’s beauty:

The age to come would say, ‘This poet lies:  
Such heavenly touches ne’er touched earthly faces.’  
So should my papers (yellowed with their age)  
Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,  
And your true rights be termed a poet’s rage,  
And stretchèd metre of an antique song. 7-12

Not only are poetry’s truth claims particularly liable to readers’ suspicion, but they are also susceptible to the entropy they attempt to forestall. When the poet describes his verses as “old men,” he acknowledges that they, like the beloved, will eventually decay with time. In the sequence’s last effort to convince the young man to procreate, the poet ends the sonnet: “But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme” (13-14). While the sonnet has hitherto presented poetry as a weaker form of representation than biological reproduction, here it hints that the young man’s child would provide useful supplementary evidence to substantiate his the poet’s literary accomplishment. This final couplet

attempts to salvage the consolatory value of poetry by viewing sonnets and biological descendants as supplements to rather than as substitutes for each other.

But while Shakespeare is more than willing to list the problems with using poetry as consolation, he glosses over parallel contingencies in the process of biological reproduction. In a culture where infant mortality was much more common than it is today, the promise that a father could rely on his son to survive him was anything but certain. In these “procreation sonnets,” then, Shakespeare exploits poetry’s shortcomings, not simply as a show of modesty or flattery, but also as a distraction from similar arguments that could be made about the limitations of biological consolation. Yet after Sonnet 17, Shakespeare conspicuously abandons biological reproduction as a possible source of consolation for age and mortality. While Sonnets 18 and 19 offer a brief respite from doubt in their soaring statements about how poetry will bring the young man eternal youth and glory, the *Sonnets* remain deeply concerned with the anxieties Sonnets 16 and 17 raise about the processes of consolation. Can biological reproduction or poetic representation offer adequate substitutions for fading beauty and imminent death? Do the accolades of future readers determine the consolatory value of erotic utterance, and if so, how is one to ensure their credulity and attention? And even if poetry could accomplish what Sonnets 18 and 19 briefly claim that it can, would its eternizing powers work on a person less extraordinary than the beautiful young man? That is, does poetic representation retain any consolation for readers of the sequence who do not occupy a subject position similar to either the talented writer or the beautiful, aristocratic young man?

After Sonnet 19, Shakespeare’s worries about reductive and instrumental accounts of biological reproduction as consolation are transferred to poetry. While Sonnets 18 and 19 offer an uncomplicated picture of poetry as the unassailable and eternal vessel of the beloved’s

memory, later sonnets, such as Sonnet 32, present a far different picture. Sonnet 18 ends with one of the sequence's best-known expressions of poetry's ability to preserve beauty against time and death, triumphantly claiming:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.  
So long as a men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. 9-14

In contradiction to Sonnet 18, Sonnet 32 displays a self-consciousness about the reader's role in literary posterity, anticipating a concern that later Renaissance sonnet sequences, such as Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, would communicate more openly:<sup>12</sup>

If thou survive my well-contented day,  
When that churl Death my bones with dust shall cover.  
And shalt by fortune once more resurvey  
These poor rude lines of thy deceased lover,  
Compare them with the bett'ring of the time,  
And, though they be outstripped by every pen,  
Reserve them for my love, not for their rhyme,  
Exceeded by the height of happier men.  
O then vouchsafe me but this loving thought:  
'Had my friend's Muse grown with this growing age,

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<sup>12</sup> As I will discuss in the next chapter, Wroth views her dependence on readers not simply as a liability but also as an opportunity to imagine and generate an affective community among her readers.

A dearer birth than this his love had brought,  
To march in ranks of better equipage:  
But since he died, and poets better prove,  
Theirs for their style I'll read, his for his love.'

While Sonnet 18 offers both poet and addressee a fairly straightforward gesture of consolation—the beloved's beauty will be preserved through the medium of verse even when his physical body decays—Sonnet 32 displays an acute awareness that the poet's verse might not be able to live up to this promise. Like the young man's physical body, the poet's "body of verse" is also subject to aging—his rhymes may be deemed old-fashioned or out of style. As in Sonnet 29, the poet emphasizes the chance nature of consolation—just as the poet "happens" to think on the friend, the young man may re-read these lines "by fortune." In fact, the beloved's chance encounter with the poet's verse *presupposes* a period of neglect that may or may not be followed by a rediscovery of the poems.

Even if the young man does preserve the poet's verses, Sonnet 32 implies that they may not circulate widely among other readers. If the poems' own addressee is no longer reading them on a regular basis, it is highly unlikely that anyone else is either. But unlike Mary Wroth, who worries about the fragile *materiality* of verse (paper can be destroyed, lost, or ignored), Shakespeare worries about his poetry's *style* taking it out of circulation. Future poets can "better" his rhyme and "outstrip" his "poor, rude lines." Although the poet asks the young man to read his verse for its content ("love") rather than for its form ("style"), the sonnet itself is still very concerned with issues of style and form. Rather than simply affirm the importance of content over form, as the period's Neoplatonic philosophers might have, the poet insists, in the hypothetical words of the young man, that if he had lived, he would have been able to keep up

with the times.<sup>13</sup> Here the poet echoes language from Sonnet 18, emphasizing not only the figure of “Death” looming over both sonnets, but also the language of growth. In Sonnet 18, the young man’s memory grows with time in the poet’s eternal lines of verse, but in Sonnet 32, poetry’s ability to grow with its time is stunted by its poet’s death. If both of these sonnets encourage readers to think about poetry as a growing plant, they also push them to think about what that living thing requires to keep growing. Does it require an author’s or editor’s revisions, a reader’s attention, a community’s interest?

Not only does Sonnet 32 present a striking critique of Sonnet 18’s version of poetic consolation, but it also values poetry for its ability to reproduce an emotional experience rather than a specific beloved person. Sonnet 32’s attempts to find alternatives to literary fame can inform our readings of several other sonnets that seem primarily concerned with the sequence’s literary quality. While Shakespeare’s sonnets about poetry certainly manifest the anxieties and ambitions of an authorial self, they also reflect the remarkably unexceptional nature of an individual’s desire to express and experience erotic desire in an exceptional way. In other words, the sonnets that express anxieties about poetry do not simply apply to Shakespeare’s poet or those in similar positions to him. Instead, they use poetry as a proxy to explore anxieties about erotic utterance, experience, and communication more broadly—emotional conflicts that could plague a reader as easily as a writer. This strategy, in turn, widens the consolatory strategies the *Sonnets* explore—when literary fame is not the only issue at stake, Shakespeare can also consider the consolatory possibilities latent in generalized or unexceptional utterance. In the following section, I examine several sonnets in which Shakespeare rejects the idea that literary

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<sup>13</sup> For a full discussion of the *Sonnets*’ rejection of Neoplatonic thought, see Douglas Trevor, “Shakespeare’s Love Objects,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 225-41.

innovation is a necessary component of poetic consolation. Instead, these sonnets search for consolation within familiar, even ritualized, forms and subject matter.

*The Emotional Power of Unexceptional Poetry*

In contrast to Sonnet 32, Sonnet 55 offers one of the sequence's most memorable defenses of poetry's ability to resist the ravages of time. Here the poet claims that his "pow'rful rhyme" will outlast physical monuments built to memorialize historical figures and events (l. 2). Unlike marble and stone, the "living record" of his beloved's "memory" will not be susceptible to the wear and tear of the elements (l. 8). Instead, the poet assures the young man that his memory will last until judgment day, when his resurrected body will obviate the need for a written record of his beauty. Scholars often read this sonnet's apparent concern for the beloved's memory as the poet's thinly veiled hopes for his own literary legacy.<sup>14</sup> Yet directly after this sonnet proclaiming eternal love and eternal memory, Sonnet 56 implies that 55's convictions are both exhausting and unsustainable, beginning:

Sweet love, renew thy force. Be it not said  
Thy edge should blunter be than appetite,  
Which but today by feeding is allayed,  
Tomorrow sharpened in his former might. 1-4

While the previous sonnet seems to conquer centuries with a few sweeps of the pen, this sonnet expresses the poet's struggle to maintain an emotional interest, not to mention a literary one, in the beloved from one day to the next.

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Burrow's note, "The poem also notably fails to record any of the friend's achievements or actions. It is the poem's tenacity of remembrance rather than the deeds of the friend which is celebrated." *Complete Poems and Sonnets*, 490.

What does such a direct and obvious juxtaposition of feeling mean for our understanding of the *Sonnets*' consolatory aims? Emily Stockard's study of consolation in the *Sonnets* reads such emotional inconsistencies as a rhetorical strategy Shakespeare employs to expose "the illusory or self-deceptive nature of consolatory thought." Because the sonnets contradict their own rhetorical arguments, as well as early modern philosophical conceptions of consolation, she argues, the sequence's attempts at consolation "ultimately fail."<sup>15</sup> Yet such an assessment of the sonnets' consolatory success or failure judges them according to the rhetorical standards by which one might assess a prose treatise's argumentative coherence rather than a lyric sequence's emotional import. While many of Shakespeare's sonnets do deliberately forestall and frustrate the kinds of poetic comfort Sonnet 55 holds out, they do not necessarily demonstrate the impossibility of achieving consolation altogether. Rather than negate the consolatory value of the sequence, the presence of sonnets that contradict 55's version of consolation suggests a wealth of alternative consolatory strategies largely ignored by scholars of the *Sonnets*.

As we have seen above, Sonnet 32 imagines the beloved treasuring the poet's old-fashioned sonnets for the memories of "love" they evoke rather than for their "style." But despite a few lingering scholarly arguments about how the sonnets' "characters" illuminate elements of Shakespeare's biography such as his sexuality, most literary critics currently value the *Sonnets* for their formal and stylistic innovations rather than for their biographical implications.<sup>16</sup> As I will discuss below, scholars of the *Sonnets* are deeply invested in justifying Shakespeare's

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<sup>15</sup> Emily E. Stockard, "Patterns of Consolation in Shakespeare's Sonnets 1-126." *Studies in Philology* 94.4 (Autumn 1997): 466-67. See also Katherine Duncan-Jones, who claims that the *Sonnets* hold out the promise of emotional escape only to plunge readers into a landscape of death. Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Playing Field or Killing Fields": Shakespeare's Poems and *Sonnets*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54.2 (Summer 2003): 133.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Stephen Booth's famous and oft-quoted rebuttal to biographically interested criticism: "William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter." Stephen Booth, ed. *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 548.

exceptional status in the Western canon by identifying the ways in which he is a particularly innovative poet. This endeavor sometimes leads scholars to assume that Shakespeare harbored a peculiarly proto-modernist desire to become famous by “making it new.”<sup>17</sup> Several of the sonnets, such as 55, do suggest that Shakespeare was interested in how poetry could produce consolation if it were deemed valuable by future generations of readers. Yet many of the sonnets also acknowledge that this may never happen, and they consider ways in which poetry might still work as consolation even if it is never judged to be exceptional, canonical, or worthy of preservation. As sonnets like 32 show, Shakespeare is also interested in the consolation that can be gained from poetry when it is *not* formally innovative, does *not* express emotion unique to one individual, or does *not* praise a remarkable beloved. Taking the sonnets’ arguments about unexceptional love objects and unexceptional emotional experiences seriously not only reveals unexplored modes of consolation in the *Sonnets*, but it also allows us to think about how the sequence aims to extend consolation to readers rather than simply to the writing self.

Because scholarship on the *Sonnets* so heavily emphasizes Shakespeare’s exceptional literary talent, our understanding of the sequence’s consolatory power has come to focus on Shakespeare’s unique ability to express the emotional experience of an individual “speaker.” This phenomenon encourages scholars to focus on the consolation literary creation brings to an author rather than to readers. The few existing studies of Shakespeare and consolation tend to emphasize the ways in which Shakespeare diverges from literary and consolatory conventions, signaling his difference from the majority of early modern culture. Scholarly work on consolation in the plays, for instance, almost always insists that Shakespeare interrogates early

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<sup>17</sup> Boyd, for instance, uses the sonnets’ historical success to assume that literary fame was Shakespeare’s primary concern when writing the sequence. He claims that Shakespeare *must* have turned to lyric because he savored the challenge of conquering a new literary form after mastering drama. Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last*, 91, 154.

modern consolatory conventions in order to expose their hypocritical or ineffectual nature.<sup>18</sup> This argument easily transfers to the sonnets, as when Helen Vendler claims:

The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets scorns the consolations of Christianity—an afterlife in heaven for himself, a Christian resurrection of his body after death—fully as he refuses (except in a few sonnets) the learned adornment of classical references—a staple of the continental sonnet. The sonnets stand as the record of a mind working out positions without the help of any pantheon or any systematic doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, Shakespeare is exceptional because he rejects his culture's typical beliefs about how one should respond to grief and pain. Implicit in this argument is the conviction that because Shakespeare is skeptical of religious and classical models of consolation, his work embodies an exceptionally modern understanding of grief.<sup>20</sup>

But even as critics claim that Shakespeare rejects conventional early modern modes of consolation, they suggest that he offers in exchange the (more modern) consolations of exceptional psychological insight, aesthetic originality, and unique expression of subjectivity.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Tromly, "Grief, Authority and Resistance"; David Thatcher, "'Cold Comfort': Resistance to Consolation in Shakespeare." *Studia Neophilologica* 72.2 (2000): 158-73; and Brian Vickers, "Shakespearean Consolations," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 82 (1993): 219-84.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Rorty, for example, claims that literature currently performs the consolatory cultural work that religion and philosophy performed in earlier eras. Rorty locates the seeds of this tradition of literary consolation in the work of early modern authors such as Shakespeare and Cervantes. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Vendler praises Shakespeare's powers of emotional articulation, averring that "No poet has ever found more linguistic forms by which to replicate human responses than Shakespeare in the *Sonnets*." Stephen Booth claims that Shakespeare comes closer than anyone to satisfying a human desire for art that subtly organizes the complexity of real life without appearing to impose an artificial order, while Boyd argues that the *Sonnets* have "lasted" in the Western canon because Shakespeare employs innovative linguistic patterns to describe emotional scenarios. See, respectively, Vendler, *Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 17; Stephen Booth, "The Value of the Sonnets," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 16; and Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last*, 29-30. Booth's essay is excerpted from Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

This version of consolation holds up Shakespeare's exceptional talent as emotional compensation for everything from erotic frustration to social obscurity, but it also requires that his authorial self be distinguished from other, less talented individuals. In Brian Boyd's model of poetic composition, informed by evolutionary psychology, poets "compete" for readers, who exist mainly to verify the exceptional talent of authors like Shakespeare. As critics anthologize and recapitulate Shakespeare's claims about his poetry's lasting power, they seem to be retroactively consoling Shakespeare, reassuring him that he succeeded in creating literary art that outlives "gilded monuments." Within this critical model, any sonnet that questions the poet's exceptional talent simply voices an anxiety that reinforces Shakespeare's commitment to innovation.

But while literary innovation is undoubtedly an important concern of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, many sonnets also explore the consolatory potential of unexceptional objects, emotions, and lyric utterances. Directly after twenty sonnets celebrating the exceptional beauty of the young man, the poet expands his field of address to a larger audience. Rather than continue to praise the young man's extraordinary features, Sonnet 21 offers a defense of the poet's decision to praise an *unexceptional* love object. After an octave describing the ludicrously exaggerated metaphors other poets use to describe their beloveds, Shakespeare's poet pleads:

O let me, true in love, but truly write,  
And then believe me, my love is as fair  
As any mother's child, though not so bright  
As those gold candles fixed in heaven's air. 9-12

Scholars and editors rightly interpret this sonnet as a rejection of the excessively ornamental language poets use to publically promote their verse, but they tend to ignore its secondary

implications about the beloved's lack of exceptional beauty.<sup>22</sup> In this supposed rejection of Petrarchan convention, the poet admits, not only that his love is not as fair as sun, moon, stars, and gems, but also that he is merely "as fair as any mother's child." If one interprets "mother's child" literally to mean "any person," the sonnet implies that the beloved is no more or less beautiful than the average person. Even if one reads the line to mean, "Just like a mother always thinks her own child is the most beautiful, so I think my beloved is the most beautiful," the sonnet leaves the impression that the beloved's beauty is the product of the lover's affection rather than its source. While Shakespeare makes this argument more explicitly in what are often termed the "dark lady" sonnets, particularly Sonnets 130 and 131, it is worth noting that he also repudiates the importance of an exceptional love object much earlier in the sequence, if more subtly.

Why, in this first sonnet addressed to a larger readership than the beloved, would the poet choose to undermine his previous praise of the young man's exceptional beauty? Sonnets 1-20 follow a trajectory that allows us to easily assume they are addressed to the same young man, whether real or fictional. Yet, as Burrow notes, Sonnet 21 changes its mode of address, setting itself apart from the sonnets that come before it.<sup>23</sup> It marks a pause after the previous sonnets' attempts to worry the young man into the consolation of children. What happens if we take seriously the poet's broadened address to a larger audience and consider its effect on the reader who has been following the previous sonnets' anxieties about dying childless and unbeautiful? While it is certainly possible to read this sonnet in the context of a poet's maneuver to emphasize

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, G. Blakemore Evans's notes in his edition of *The Sonnets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 134. Burrow notes yet other shade of ironic self-awareness: "The sonnet is aware that its protestations of plainness are themselves familiar tropes, and declares the fact in its consciously declamatory style." Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 422. For yet another similar explanation of the sonnet, see Carl D. Atkins, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets: With Three Hundred Years of Commentary* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), 74.

<sup>23</sup> Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 422.

his difference from other poets, this sonnet can also be read as a declaration that “true” love does not require an exceptional love object.

As I argue in the previous section of this chapter, the *Sonnets* work according to a model of consolation that arouses anxiety in order to prime a reader for the coming consolation. Within this framework, Sonnets 1-20 offer readers pictures of the issues for which they might need consolation, but Sonnet 21 reveals the errors in those previous patterns of thought. If one can accept that it is possible to be truly in love with someone who is only as beautiful as the next person, then the need to preserve that beauty for all time becomes less urgent. The reader may also be reminded that the most beautiful poetry and the most intensely felt emotion need not be linked to the most exceptional love object. Rather, each reader possesses the ability to feel such exalted desire for “any mother’s child.”

In Sonnet 59 the poet also expresses anxiety that the object of his love (and poetry) is an unexceptional person, but he again considers this idea’s potential for consolation. The sonnet opens with a philosophical quandary about whether anything truly exceptional can exist:

If there be nothing new, but that which is  
Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,  
Which, labouring for invention, bear amiss  
The second burden of a former child? 1-4

This initial question is phrased in the first-person plural, encompassing not simply the poet’s own love or his own writing, but also the love of all lovers and the inventions of all writers. The next two quatrains of the sonnet express a longing to establish once and for all whether the poet’s subject is or is not exceptional. The poet wants to scour the historical “record” for his beloved’s “image in some antique book,” in order to prove one of three possibilities about the “composed

wonder” of the beloved’s “frame”: “Whether we are mended, or whe’er better they, / Or whether revolution be the same” (5-12). The words “composèd” and “frame” draw attention to the formal, constructed nature of the texts in which poets claim to offer true pictures of their beloveds.

Rather than offer a definitive answer to the question of historical exceptionalism, Shakespeare phrases the sonnet’s conclusion in a way that allows readers to choose between two equally viable, yet opposite, interpretations: “O, sure I am the wits of former days / To subjects worse have given admiring praise” (13-14). The final couplet’s exclamation can be read either as an assertion of the beloved’s superiority—none of those praised in the historical record were as beautiful or as worthy as he—or as an admission of how ordinary it is for infatuated lovers to praise unworthy objects. The first interpretation consoles the poet by using the beloved’s exceptionality to justify the worth of his writing. Yet the second interpretation uses the beloved’s *unexceptionality* to offer the consolation that previous writers have praised even worse subjects. Here, the potential for logical contradiction does not indicate a failure to achieve consolation but rather a concerted effort to make multiple interpretive possibilities consoling.

Like Sonnet 59, Sonnet 76 articulates the poet’s anxieties about the difficulty of producing exceptional poetry about his beloved:

Why is my verse so barren of new pride,  
So far from variation or quick change?  
Why with the time do I not glance aside  
To new-found methods and to compounds strange?  
Why write I still all one, ever the same,  
And keep invention in a noted weed,

That every word doth almost tell my name,  
Showing their birth, and where they did proceed? 1-8

This sonnet laments the poet's plain, unornamented, and repetitive style, belying sonnet 32's assurance that he can keep up with the poetic fashions of the time as long as he is alive. Here death does not cause the poet's verse to become old-fashioned, but his own failure to innovate leaves him "barren." The poet's out-dated style makes his verse instantly recognizable as his, the sonnet argues, but in an infamous way—readers can easily identify the poet's verse because, like a commercial genre hack, his writing style never develops.

In the final sestet, however, the poet shifts the "blame" to his poetic object in a way that vindicates both beloved and poet:

O know, sweet love, I always write of you,  
And you and love are still my argument;  
So all my best is dressing old words new,  
Spending again what is already spent:  
For as the sun is daily new and old,  
So is my love, still telling what is told. 9-14

Rather focus on the beloved's unexceptional qualities, such as average beauty or mediocre moral character, the poet considers his static nature as subject for poetry. Yet as with Sonnets 21 and 59, Shakespeare turns this potentially troubling quality into a positive asset that presents the beloved's familiarity as a consoling feature rather than as a cloying one. By recasting the beloved's static nature as constancy, the poet sidesteps aesthetic pressure to articulate his emotions about the beloved in a new way. He also subtly conflates his verse's perfection with the beloved's, suggesting that his poetry, as well as its object, is so good it need not be improved

upon. The poet's language of "dressing" the beloved in his verse transforms line six's "noted weed" into a signifier of the beloved's constant grace. Rather than function as a last-season outfit, the poet's familiar verse stylistically mirrors his subject's unchanging perfection. Just as the sun rises anew every morning but is not itself a new phenomenon, so the poet bears a responsibility to produce "new" sonnets about the beloved even if they look much the same as yesterday's sonnets.

This metaphor of the sun illustrates a different conception of "newness" than the conventional claim that Shakespeare's throwback to a "retro" style is itself the innovation that vindicates the sonnet's early anxieties about unexceptional, repetitive verse.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the poet's use of this metaphor, along with multiple uses of the word "still," indicates constant devotion to a constant beloved, much as a priest might dedicate his life to praising a deity who is always the same. If no one expects a priest to say anything particularly new about God, the poet implies, why would readers expect him to come up with new things to say about his beloved? Believers do, however, expect priests to discharge their duties with faithful regularity. As we will see in sonnet 108, Shakespeare takes full advantage of this metaphor, explicitly figuring himself as a priest reciting an erotic liturgy.<sup>25</sup>

Sonnet 108 opens with several questions about whether writing exceptional poetry (or feeling exceptional emotion) is a sustainable endeavor:

What's in the brain that ink may character,

Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?

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<sup>24</sup> Burrow claims, "The triumphal image makes explicit what the linguistic innovations in the poem have already made implicit: that Shakespeare's professed old-fashionedness is novelty." Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 532.

<sup>25</sup> This term is taken from C. S. Lewis's description of sonnet sequences as "erotic liturgy." Quoted in Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 6. Originally published in C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

What's new to speak, what now to register,  
That may express my love, or thy dear merit? 1-4

At first, the problem with writing exceptional poetry seems to be a lack of exceptional material, either in the poet's love object, as I discuss above, or in the poet's own emotional experience. This lack of new material translates into a lack of innovative poetry. Indeed, these first two couplets' parallel syntax formally illustrates the difficulty of saying something new in poetry, as the poet essentially repeats his opening question. As the sonnet continues, the poet answers these lines' questions with an abrupt "nothing" in line 5, seeming to confirm the opening quatrain's anxieties about stale material.

Yet in the same line that confirms the unexceptional nature of his feelings and his words, the poet introduces a metaphor that elevates their emotional significance:

Nothing, sweet boy; but yet, like prayers divine,  
I must each day say o'er the very same,  
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,  
Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name. 5-8

Given a critical tradition that regards Shakespeare as skeptical of early modern religious institutions, we might be tempted to read the poet's prayer metaphor as proof of his disingenuous efforts to make a clever and ingratiating argument for his lack of inventive verse by comparing the beloved to God. We also might assume that Shakespeare unfavorably compares the poet's lack of inspiration to a dry, lifeless religious tradition of reciting prayers by rote.<sup>26</sup> But despite Shakespeare's intentions, which are impossible to fully ascertain, this metaphor of common prayer would have carried positive connotations to a large portion of Shakespeare's

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed summary and critique of this scholarly tradition, see Rhema Hokama, "Love's Rites: Performing Prayer in Shakespeare's Sonnets." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.2 (Summer 2012): 199-223.

contemporary readers. In the Anglican church of Shakespeare's time, common prayer provided members of the congregation an opportunity to praise and petition God as a community, an action some believed carried more spiritual force than private, free-form devotional utterances.<sup>27</sup> In the context of liturgical prayer, "counting no old thing old" would not be considered an act of self-deception but rather an act of placing the self within a historical and spiritual tradition. Even though the prayers they speak are "old," congregants can believe that these prayers still apply to their present and personal struggles.

When we read sonnet 108's second quatrain within the context of common prayer, the unexceptional and reiterative nature of the poet's verse becomes a comforting phenomenon rather than one that causes anxiety. While early modern erotic lyric often demands exceptional descriptions of a beloved even while worrying about the writer's ability to create anything exceptional, congregational prayer not only places less emphasis on authorial originality, but in fact often frowns upon it. By applying this sentiment to erotic lyric through the metaphor of prayer, Shakespeare resists a literary value system that equates good poetry with utterly unique and individualized content. Sonnet 108 also shifts its previous emphasis on the poet's particular beloved to an argument about universal and "eternal love" (l. 9). While previous sonnets, such as 55 and 81, explicitly claim that the beloved's memory will live on for future readers, Sonnet 108 reminds readers that the *Sonnets* are not simply a narrative of a single relationship but that they are also a lyric meditation about the general nature of love and its attendant emotions. Like the individual soul placing him or herself into a religious history, so individual readers can place themselves into an eternal erotic history in which love may be experienced in familiar terms without being robbed of its deeply personal significance.

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<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

But while the second quatrain of the sonnet figures love as a type of faithful religious utterance, the final sestet moves away from the metaphor of prayer to return to the questions of textual articulation posed in the first quatrain:

So that eternal love in love's fresh case  
Weighs not the dust and injury of age,  
Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,  
But makes antiquity for aye his page,

Finding the first conceit of love there bred,

Where time and outward form would show it dead. 9-14

By envisioning eternal love as something that can also be contained in a “case” rather than as something that is merely spoken, Shakespeare draws attention to the material and textual aspects of erotic poetry. The word “case” evokes the image of an enclosed box into which one might put relics or valuables in order to display them while also protecting them from the “weight” of dust or other destructive agents in the open air. As a linguistic container, the sonnet provides a safe enclosure for the beloved’s beautiful features, slowing their aging process. Burrow notes that “fresh case” could also mean new clothes, a particularly telling image that shifts from figuring the sonnet as a rigid container to conceptualizing it as a more flexible surface material that yields to the body’s movements.<sup>28</sup> For all its protestations of stale repetition, Sonnet 108 is, after all, a new sonnet within the sequence. Like a tailor creating a new outfit for a regular client, this new sonnet uses familiar measurements to produce fresh adornment for the beloved. Here the poet finds consolation for the staleness of his emotions and sonnets by refiguring them as material signs of his poetic generosity toward the beloved.

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<sup>28</sup> Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 596.

Yet even as Shakespeare vindicates his repeated use of a form that has proven itself to be a useful structure for praising the beloved, he also acknowledges the primacy of the body within the clothing—or the content within the form. After describing poetry in a material register, the poet returns to contemplating the space a text occupies between object and idea when he says that eternal love “makes antiquity for aye his page.” The poet refuses to attach importance to an old, wrinkled appearance of the beloved, suggesting that he will always treat the beloved like a good book whose content is more important than its worn cover. The poet goes on to claim that eternal love will find its first conception bred in the pages of antiquity, even if these old texts appear to be about people who are long dead. By locating his own love within an ancient tradition of eternal love, the poet must necessarily forgo the possibility that either his love or his poetry is completely exceptional. Yet in Sonnet 108, antiquity’s page contains the necessary content without which there would be no occasion for fresh sonnets.

In a recent article on poetry’s obsession with its exceptional power to preserve a person’s memory, Aaron Kunin suggests that if poetry were able to realize this fantasy, the result would be far from consoling. The kind of preservation Shakespeare’s sonnets offer is ethically complicated, he argues, both because it attempts to preserve the beloved in a form that he has not chosen and also because it requires the dissolution of lesser people and things in order to measure its success.<sup>29</sup> Yet in sonnets like 108, Shakespeare’s treatment of unexceptional poetry *does* allow him to consider models of preservation that rely on a continuous, living community rather than on a slew of dead bodies against which to compare the beloved’s successfully preserved memory. The *Sonnets* articulate the simultaneous ache of feeling certain that no one has ever loved this way before and the nagging suspicion that one’s love is merely a common

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<sup>29</sup> Aaron Kunin, “Shakespeare’s Preservation Fantasy.” *PLMA* 124.1 (Jan. 2009): 92-106.

instance of a ubiquitous human experience. By figuring individual human experiences of love as fresh instances of a universal truth, the *Sonnets* not only console a poet worried about his verse's literary quality, but they also attempt to console readers who worry about the hackneyed nature of their own erotic emotions.

*The Reader's Complaint: Moving Past the Authorial Self*

In a discussion of metrical psalms, Ramie Targoff critiques early modern literary studies' "critical assumption that formal excellence and private voice inevitably join" to create good poetry.<sup>30</sup> If such aesthetic bias inflects scholarship about devotional poetry, how much more does it govern discussions about Shakespeare's erotic verse! As I have shown above, literary critics have a strong desire to point out the ways in which Shakespeare's *Sonnets* outstrip common early modern habits of thought, displaying unprecedented expressions of individual subjectivity. Yet they also have a desire to explain Shakespeare's wide appeal to generations of readers, endowing him simultaneously with a firmly constructed authorial self and a vast negative capability.<sup>31</sup> But when scholars suggest that Shakespeare appeals to a wide audience *because* he is particularly successful at articulating an individual self, they ignore the emotional appeal of poems that emphasize community over self and tradition over innovation. If we consider this latter type of sonnet—those which stress generalized experience over idiosyncratic subjectivity—we can think in more detailed ways about how the sonnets extend consolation to readers who do not inhabit a subject position similar to the speaker's.

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<sup>30</sup> Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 78.

<sup>31</sup> Boyd, for instance, claims both that Shakespeare succeeds because he writes verse to which people can easily relate and that his exceptional talent is a selective trait that sets him apart from his sexual and poetic rivals. Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last*, 29-30, 62-63. (The latter point about sexual selection as a motivation for creating poetry comes dangerously close to reinforcing the notion that men write poetry while women simply inspire it.)

In this final section, I consider a few poems in which Shakespeare uses the concepts of universal experience and historical continuity as tools to reject conventional models of consolation for erotic suffering. This rejection, however, constitutes its own mode of consolation because it constructs a narrative of love that relieves individuals of the moral responsibility for “getting over” the pangs of erotic desire. Sonnets 153 and 154 and “A Lover’s Complaint” offer especially vivid pictures of Shakespeare’s willingness to consider universal models of emotion as well as individual experiences. Although they are spoken from differently gendered perspectives, both the sonnet pair and the complaint express the hopelessness of trying to escape from the emotional (and sometimes physical) pain love inflicts on people. The male speaker of sonnets 153 and 154 despairs of ever finding a “cure” for his inflammatory love, and the female speaker of “A Lover’s Complaint” laments the impossibility of resisting her lover’s seduction, even if she were given a second chance to do so. At first, these concluding poems seem to offer little in the way of consolation. Michael Schoenfeldt observes, “As we might expect, there are no happy endings in Shakespeare’s Sonnets—just a series of provisional and partial efforts to stave off in different media the tortuous temporality of existence through articulate expressions of the profundity of emotional attachment or through nervous assertions of the immortalizing power of poetry.”<sup>32</sup> But even if Shakespeare’s sequence does not offer particularly *happy* endings, it does reaffirm the consolatory value of articulating profound emotional attachment, even if such comfort can only ever be a “partial and provisional” salve for the pains of mortality and erotic desire.

While these poems convey a sense of entrapment and resignation, they also use narrative to offer a form of consolation precluded in sonnets that focus on the unique emotional

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare’s Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 108.

experiences of the writing self. For readers of the 1609 edition of the *Sonnets*, Sonnets 153 and 154 concluded the sequence, and “A Lover’s Complaint” followed it. We do not know whether Shakespeare intended these poems to conclude his sonnet sequence, but their presence at the end of the print text seems both conventionally benedictory—many contemporaneous sequences end with anacreontic sonnets—and oddly disconnected from the sonnets that precede them. Far from anticipating Sonnet 153 and 154’s allegorical explanation of erotic desire, Sonnet 152 concludes with a harsh indictment of the beloved’s character, expressing the poet’s deep regret about his attachment to such a flawed being:

For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,  
Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,  
And to enlighten thee gave eyes to blindness,  
Or made them swear against the thing they see.

For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye,  
To swear against the truth so foul a lie. 9-14<sup>33</sup>

The poet’s rigorous self-blame, brilliantly illustrated in his image of the “perjured eye” or “I,” threatens to end the sequence on a note of moral judgment that would have been familiar to early modern readers as a common religious take on lust, though less familiar as an appropriate ending to a Petrarchan sonnet sequence.

Sonnet 152’s thundering condemnation of erotic desire provides a stark point of contrast to the sequence’s subsequent poems, highlighting their difference from contemporary views that seek to cure “love melancholy” by eradicating the passions that cause it. After 152’s extensive soul-searching, Sonnet 153 shifts not only to a narrative mode, but also to a mythical setting:

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<sup>33</sup> Because this sonnet occurs after Sonnet 127, it is traditional to read it as one about the “dark lady,” but it is also worth noting that there are no gendered pronouns in the sonnet.

Cupid laid by his brand and fell asleep.  
A maid of Dian's this advantage found,  
And his love-kindling fire did quickly steep  
In a cold valley-fountain of that ground,  
Which borrowed from this holy fire of love  
A dateless lively heat, still to endure,  
And grew a seething bath, which yet men prove  
Against strange maladies a sovereign cure.  
But at my mistress' eye love's brand new fired,  
The boy for trial needs would touch my breast.  
I, sick withal, the help of bath desired,  
And thither hied, a sad distempered guest,  
But found no cure; the bath for my help lies  
Where Cupid got new fire: my mistress' eyes.

By telling his tale in the context of mythological figures such as Cupid and Dian's maid, the poet inserts himself into a larger tradition of the struggle between erotic desire and continence. By using words like "dateless" and "still," and claiming that "yet men prove" the bath's power, the poet emphasizes the generalized nature of the story he is telling in this sonnet. Because he explains his experience within this timeless context, the poet's "I" relinquishes historical specificity and offers a mythological explanation for emotional suffering that absolves readers of their responsibility to "conquer" their erotic passions.

Although allegory was often associated with moral instruction in the early modern period, Shakespeare employs it to construct a different model of emotion than the moralizing one

so often outlined in contemporaneous discourse about the passions. Shakespeare uses the language of humoral “distemper” or imbalance—a common diagnosis for “love melancholy”—but he resists the period’s insistence that such maladies can be cured by physical means or rhetorical arguments. In the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, for example, Robert Burton prescribes changes in diet, exercise, and scenery to alleviate a melancholy caused by excessive love. If these fail, Burton equips the reader with numerous rhetorical arguments and psychological manipulations to rid an afflicted friend of his obsession.<sup>34</sup> Other men cure their “strange maladies” in the bath, but the poet claims that his particular affliction can only be quenched by his mistress’s eyes—in other words, by *her* agency in deigning to look upon him. The poet’s contrast between himself and other men emphasizes the external, physical nature of their illness—perhaps venereal disease—while insisting on the interior nature of his own sickness. While the physical irritations of love can be treated by a soothing bath, the poet implies, his more vexing emotional inflammation cannot find relief in medical remedies. By creating a mythological narrative about love’s incurable nature, Shakespeare offers readers a model of erotic love that acknowledges its painful aspects without insisting that it must be cured.

At the same time, Shakespeare constructs an unconventional view of how poetry consoles readers. In *The Art of English Poesy*, George Puttenham claims that poetry should be used to console people for things they cannot control, such as death, war, and “true love lost or ill-bestowed.” Of love, he says, “There is no frailty in flesh and blood so excusable as it, no comfort or discomfort greater than the good and bad success thereof, nothing more natural to man, nothing of more force to vanquish his will and inveigle his judgment.”<sup>35</sup> Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*

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<sup>34</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*. For a text that offers similar remedies for love melancholy, see Jacques Ferrand, *Erotomania or A Treatise Discoursing the of the Essence, Causes, Symptomes, Prognosticks, and Cure of Love, or Erotique Melancholy*, trans. Edmund Chilmead (Oxford, 1640).

<sup>35</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 136.

technically fall into Puttenham's definition of noble consolatory poetry when they offer comfort for the sorrows of love. But in their descriptions of erotic suffering, the sonnets also implicate transient beauty, jealousy, professional misfortune, and lack of worldly goods—things Puttenham specifically deems *unworthy* of poetic consolation. Rather than offer a Petrarchan vision of courtly erotic suffering (which seems to be what Puttenham has in mind when he talks about “true love”), Shakespeare uses the sonnet sequence to offer readers a grittier but more realistic representation of the emotional irritants that accompany erotic desire. In these final sonnets, he absolves readers of the responsibility to purge themselves of emotions that Puttenham believes need no poetic consolation because they “might be refrained or helped by wisdom and the party's good endeavor.”<sup>36</sup> By insisting that the lover has no agency to separate “true love” from baser passions such as jealousy or sexual appetite, Shakespeare turns Puttenham's prescriptions on their head and expands the range of emotions for which poetry can provide consolation.

In addition to the narrative explanation of erotic suffering they put forth, these final poems also offer a formal illustration of love's persistent and repetitive nature. Just as the poet is doomed to repeat his emotional experience of love, so are his sonnets doomed to repeat the same basic narrative. Sonnet 154 relates the same tale that 153 did: Cupid falls asleep; a chaste maid steals his brand and attempts to quench it in a well; the heat warms the well and turns it into a bath that heals diseased men. Again, at the end of this story, the poet insists, “But I, my mistress' thrall, / Came there for cure, and this by that I prove: / Love's fire heats water; water cools not love” (12-14). Shakespeare's emphasis on “proving” in these final lines echoes similar language

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<sup>36</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 136.

in Sonnet 153 in which men “prove” the waters’ healing power and Cupid makes “trial” of his newly lighted brand.

The complaint following the sequence continues this pair of sonnets’ obsession with “proving” or verifying the repetitive and reiterative nature of erotic desire and suffering. “A Lover’s Complaint” broadens the Sonnets 153 and 154’s generalized description of love even further by giving voice to a female speaker. While several other early modern sonnet sequences end with complaints, Shakespeare’s offers readers something different from the naïve, victimized shepherdess they might expect. Rather than attempt to inhabit the emotions of a pitiable, “fallen” woman, “A Lover’s Complaint” includes women in the kinds of emotional turmoil the preceding sonnets seem to imply are exclusive to male sexuality. The female speaker of the complaint is certainly distressed, but nowhere does she make reference to her social disgrace, her financial ruin, or an unwanted pregnancy. Rather she mourns her lover’s lies and infidelity, the very attributes that wound the male poet in many of the “dark lady” sonnets. Like the speaker of sonnet 129, the female speaker of the complaint identifies her sexual appetite as a passion “past reason”: “O appetite from judgment stands aloof! / The one a palate hath that needs will taste, / Though reason weep and cry ‘It is thy last.’” (ll. 166-68). To emphasize this point, the speaker claims that she had plenty of evidence about her lover’s sexual behavior— she “knew the patterns of his foul beguiling”; she “heard” what he did to other women; and she “saw” him dissemble (170-72). Yet in spite of the experience and knowledge she claims, the maid still decides to sleep with the man.

In an echo of the sequence that precedes the complaint, the maid’s lover offers her “deep-brained sonnets” along with jewelry and gemstones in an attempt to woo her (209). Yet rather than write his own sonnets, the lover gives the maid sonnets his previous mistresses wrote for

him. The lover's belief that sonnets explicitly written to one person can be equally effective on another seems emotionally obtuse at first—who uses artifacts from previous relationships to court a new lover?— but it actually suggests that sonnets, like jewels, are easily transferrable commodities in the erotic market. The lover is able to recycle these sonnets because they articulate passions that many people experience. The same qualities of sonnets that make their erotic content so transferrable, however, also enable them to provide consolation to a much larger range of people than their original or assumed addressees. Like the young man's collection of sonnets, Shakespeare's sonnets offer their consolations to readers as well as to the poet and the young man, precisely because they are not too specific or exceptional.

But although much of the complaint is devoted to the maid's relation of her lover's rhetorical arguments, it is not finally his *words* that convince her to abandon her chastity but his *tears*. Despite the force of rhetorical persuasion, Shakespeare suggests, love is finally driven by less articulate forces. When the maid describes the man's physical display of affect, she affirms its powerful, contagious effect on her:

‘For lo, his passion, but an art of craft,  
Even then resolved my reason into tears.  
There my white stole of chastity I daffed,  
Shook off my sober guards and civil fears,  
Appear to him as he to me appears,  
All melting, though our drops this difference bore:  
His poisoned me, and mine did him restore.

‘In him a plenitude of subtle matter,

Applied to cautels, all strange forms receives,  
Or burning blushes, or of weeping water,  
Or sounding paleness: and he takes and leaves  
In either's aptness as it best deceives,  
To blush at speeches rank, to weep at woes,  
Or to turn white and sound at tragic shows;

That not a heart which in his level came  
Could 'scape the hail of his all-hurting aim.' 295-310

Even though she recognizes her lover's passion as a false performance rather than a display of true feeling, the maid ends her complaint with the declaration that she would probably repeat her actions if given a second chance.

As Shakespeare relates this story from a female perspective, he opens up the sonnet sequence to the emotional experiences of those who have little in common with the young man's social standing or the poet's literary anxieties but still share their feelings about love. Just like the poet, the maid in the complaint can know that a specific kind of love is bad for her and still feel compelled to engage it in anyway. Like him, she can be distraught over love's abstract emotions as well as its physical consequences. And like him, she can reject conventional wisdom about managing grief in favor of reiterating her emotional experience indefinitely. "A Lover's Complaint" lessens the perceived misogyny of the "dark lady sonnets," I argue—*not* because Shakespeare admits that men also lie to women in order to take advantage of them—but because he considers the possibility that women possess both commensurate sexual appetites and similarly rich emotional lives to men.

Just as sonnets 153 and 154 deny the efficacy of the early modern period's numerous medical and philosophical treatments for erotic suffering, so the speaker of the complaint exposes the impotence of experience and wisdom in the face of such violent passions. A "reverend man" approaches the maid and offers his help: "If that from him there may be aught applied / Which may her suffering ecstasy assuage, / 'Tis promised in the charity of age" (57, 68-70). But while the maid accepts the old man's invitation to tell her story, he quickly drops out of the poem, never to be heard from again. Most tellingly, he offers no response at the end of the complaint to the maid's insistence that she would repeat the entire experience over again. The old man's inability or unwillingness to offer the maid further comforting platitudes seems to indicate the superfluity of the advice he might have to offer.

The "promised charity" of the old father's age and wisdom offers the maid no comfort, but perhaps her own insistence that she would relive her sorrowful tale does. Like the speaker of sonnet 108 who justifies his decision to "each day say o'er the very same" praise of the beloved, the maid tells a narrative of emotion that justifies its persistent, repetitive nature. Not only is she willing to verbally repeat her story, but she is willing to physically re-enact it. Like the poet of the *Sonnets*, the maid enters into love in a state of madness and leaves it in a state of grief, but both poetic speakers continue to affirm and justify the emotional power love holds over their reason. Neither the speaker of the complaint nor the poet of Sonnets 153 and 154 seems to wish away this intense affective experience, and both attempt to capture its essence in poetic language, even while acknowledging its unexceptional nature. This is the consolation the *Sonnets* also extend to readers—the sense that no matter how much their erotic desire seems to mimic a tawdry cliché, it is worth experiencing and worth articulating, even if the words they choose sound very much like something they have heard before.

## Chapter 2

### The Poetics of Affective Community in Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* end with a brief foray into the communal nature of emotional utterance, but Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* pursues this idea with full force. Like *Sonnets* 153-154 and "A Lover's Complaint," Wroth's entire sonnet sequence makes extensive use of mythological figures and narratives to convey a generalized sense of shared emotion. While Shakespeare's sequence insists that "unexceptional" emotional utterance, as well as exceptional poetry, can offer consolation, it still expresses a great deal of anxiety about the afterlife of unexceptional poetry and its relevance to future readers. In contrast, Wroth embraces the idea of a sonnet sequence that articulates common affective experiences rather than memorializing a unique authorial self. That is, Wroth locates poetry's consolatory power in its ability to bridge the idiosyncratic nature of individuals' emotional experiences and foster affective community.

To the extent that scholarship on Wroth addresses emotional community, it does so mostly in the context of early modern gender identity and women's issues. Melissa Sanchez notes: "Attention to what is often treated as Wroth's nascent feminism has also had the less salutary effect of circumscribing her work to an almost exclusive focus on the status of women."<sup>1</sup>

While literary scholars have begun to regard Wroth's prose romance, *The Countess of*

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa E. Sanchez, "The Politics of Masochism in Mary Wroth's *Urania*," *English Literary History* 74.2 (Summer 2007): 449.

*Montgomery's Urania*, as a text that bears cultural significance beyond the fact of its female authorship, her sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, has largely resisted such critical interventions.<sup>2</sup> Although Wroth published the sonnets and the romance as a single book in 1621, scholars often treat *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* as a separate literary entity that articulates the interests of a private female self rather than those of early modern society at large.<sup>3</sup> I believe this phenomenon reflects a critical tendency to regard early modern lyric, particularly the erotic sonnet sequence, as a literary mode reserved for exploring individual subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> This interest in subjectivity, along with feminist studies, has focused critical discussion about *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* on Wroth's marginal identity as a female writer and on the versions of female selfhood her poems construct in opposition to male subjectivities.<sup>5</sup>

While such readings draw attention to Wroth's exceptional accomplishments and to the restrictive social contexts in which she worked, their exclusive focus on gender overshadows Wroth's other important contributions to early modern literary culture and discourses of emotion. Wroth's articulation of female desire in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* certainly challenges a male-dominated genre's tendency to explore male subjectivity by objectifying and silencing women;

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<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Smith's work on *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and radical Protestant Spenserian politics is a notable exception. Rosalind Smith, *Sonnets and the English Woman Writer, 1560-1621: The Politics of Absence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 109.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Christina Luckyj, "The Politics of Genre in Early Women's Writing: The Case of Lady Mary Wroth." *English Studies in Canada* 27 (2001): 253-82 and Jeffrey Masten, "'Shall I turne blabb?': Circulation, Gender, and Subjectivity in Wroth's Sonnets," in *Reading Mary Wroth: Representing Alternatives in Early Modern England*, ed. Naomi J. Miller and Gary Waller (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 67-87.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Naomi Miller's claim that "women poets such as Mary Wroth, Aemilia Lanyer, and even Elizabeth I voice the ambivalence and alienation of writing against cultural discourses that have constructed women's selves as dual, duplicitous, and ever other. At the same time, they themselves work to represent conventional metaphors in unconventional contexts or voices and strive to change the subject of the metaphors by claiming subjectivity for themselves." Naomi J. Miller, "Lady Mary Wroth and Women's Love Poetry," in *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, ed. Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield, and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 199-200. See also Nona Fienberg, "Mary Wroth and the Invention of Female Poetic Subjectivity," in *Reading Mary Wroth*, 174-190.

however, it also challenges a modern critical framework that reads early modern sonnet sequences as if the fashioning of an individual subjectivity is always their primary social function. Helen Vendler, for instance, argues that feminist critiques of sonnet sequences fundamentally mistake the lyric for a “social genre”: “Since the person uttering a lyric is always alone with his thoughts, his imagined addressee can by definition never be present.”<sup>6</sup> But while Amphilanthus is rarely “present” in Wroth’s sonnet sequence, other speakers and readers are. In this essay, I argue that Wroth does not merely invert the gendered power dynamics of the early modern sonnet sequence, but that she also expands the kinds of cultural work the genre performs in early modern society. Instead of seeking artistic self-promotion through prolific praise of a beloved, Wroth develops the sonnet sequence’s potential to extend consolation to a larger community of readers who also suffer the agonies of frustrated or disappointed love.

Wroth employs the erotic sonnet sequence as a social genre in two important ways. First, she alters its traditional content both by inviting diverse voices into the sequence and by explicitly acknowledging that her work’s significance depends upon the existence of sympathetic readers. This focus on interpretive community over individual subjectivity may limit the sonnets’ ability to console their author or speaker, but it holds out hope that the poems will help readers understand and work through their own emotional suffering. Second, Wroth revises the formal conventions of the sonnet sequence to underscore her vision of the genre as an powerful tool for building affective community and extending consolation to readers. In the first section of this chapter, I argue that Wroth imagines an ideal community of readers founded on shared affect rather than status markers such as class or gender, and in the latter sections, I show how she uses poetic and ritual forms to expand the consolatory functions of the early modern sonnet sequence.

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<sup>6</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 19.

### *Constructing Emotional Community*

Like many early modern sonnet sequences, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* articulates its eponymous character's suffering for the cause of love. Unlike many sequences, however, it also consciously presents itself as a text addressed to a larger group of readers that includes both men and women. Although the consequences of erotic expression are nearly always inflected by gender politics in the early modern period, Wroth's work suggests that both genders suffer and enjoy many of the same emotions regarding love—both can chafe against the frustration of unrequited love; both can be crushed by a lover's infidelity; and both can mourn the transient nature of erotic pleasure. *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* ostensibly focuses on a male beloved's unfaithfulness and lack of interest, but it also creates an inclusive affective community based on shared emotional suffering rather than on gender or class identity.

Wroth's emphasis on affective community is often obscured by critical characterizations of her poetry as vague and abstract, and therefore private. Unlike her uncle Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, for instance, Wroth's sonnets contain few puns, inside jokes, or explicit references to people and places.<sup>7</sup> In one of the most influential articles on the sequence, Jeffrey Masten proposes that *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*'s lack of concrete reference can be read as a female author's determination to protect her private expression from the objectification of male

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<sup>7</sup> Gavin Alexander and Margaret Hannay offer detailed explorations of Wroth's literary debts to her uncle Philip Sidney and her aunt Mary Sidney. While the collaborative atmosphere of the prolific Sidney family may in part account for Wroth's deep interests in the consolations of literary community, her sonnets imagine a more expansive network of literary exchange and continuation than that represented in the Sidney circle. In particular, Wroth's refusal to specify status-based conditions for participation in her sonnets' affective community indicates something more than a desire to engage in familial literary exchange. (Obviously, literacy and access to the text are still requirements for belonging to a literary community. Thus, while Wroth expands the class boundaries of her sequence's imagined audience, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* cannot be accessible to every social class in early modern society.) See Gavin Alexander, *Writing After Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney, 1586-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Margaret P. Hannay, "'Your Vertuous and Learned Aunt': The Countess of Pembroke as a Mentor to Mary Wroth," in *Reading Mary Wroth*, 15-34.

circulation and readership.<sup>8</sup> Christina Luckyj offers a less charitable explanation for the sequence's enigmatic qualities, claiming that the *Urania* portrays women's poems, and thus Wroth's own sonnets, as "private lyrical effusions" that are not as "actively devoted to shaping and influencing early modern culture" as other types of female writing are.<sup>9</sup>

Such statements sit uneasily with the fact that Wroth actively circulated her poems within a broad network of male and female readers. Although the *Urania* and *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* were published in 1621, Roberts estimates that Wroth's poetry was circulating in manuscript as early as 1613.<sup>10</sup> As evidence for this date, she assembles a multitude of contemporary references and poems dedicated to Wroth by people such as Ben Jonson, Edward Herbert of Cherbury, William Drummond, George Wither, and numerous anonymous writers. While some of these dedicatory poems simply praise Wroth for her patronage, many also recognize her talent for writing verse. Despite Wroth's eventual attempts to withdraw the *Urania* from publication after it caused offense to many members of James and Anne's court, it is clear that she was accustomed to belonging to a community of readers and writers who carefully read and circulated each other's poetry.<sup>11</sup>

Ben Jonson, for example, sustained multiple literary engagements with Wroth throughout her career. Wroth acted in Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* in 1605; he dedicated *The Alchemist* to

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<sup>8</sup> Masten, "Shall I turne blabbe?" 67. Although see Daniel Juan Gil, who argues that "Wroth seeks to constitute herself as the poetic, literary and public currency from which the eyes of a contemporary readership cannot turn away." Daniel Juan Gil, "The Currency of the Beloved and the Authority of Lady Mary Wroth." *Modern Language Studies* 29.2 (Autumn 1999): 73-92.

<sup>9</sup> Luckyj, "Politics of Genre," 275.

<sup>10</sup> Josephine Roberts, ed., *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 4, 19. Margaret Hannay suggests 1611 as a possible date for the earliest circulation of Wroth's poetry. Margaret Hannay, *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 155.

<sup>11</sup> Critics usually consider Wroth's later claim that she never meant to publish *Urania* and her subsequent attempts to withdraw it from publication disingenuous. Roberts, for instance, notes that the existence of a print version carefully corrected in Wroth's own hand implies a continued investment in the romance and poems as literary projects. Mary Wroth, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, vol. 1, ed. Josephine Roberts (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995), cxvii-viii.

her in 1612; and he wrote several poems about her, which appeared in *Underwood* in 1640.<sup>12</sup> One of these poems, “A Sonnet, to the Noble Lady, the Lady Mary Wroth,” reads as follows:

I that have been a lover, and could show it,  
    Though not in these, in rhymes not wholly dumb,  
    Since I exscribe your sonnets, am become  
A better lover, and much better poet.  
Nor is my muse, or I ashamed to owe it  
    To those true numerous graces; whereof some  
    But charm the senses, others overcome  
Both brains and hearts; and mine now best do know it:  
For in your verse all Cupid’s armory,  
    His flames, his shafts, his quiver, and his bow,  
    His very eyes are yours to overthrow.  
But then his mother’s sweets you so apply,  
    Her joys, her smiles, her loves, as readers take  
    For Venus’ ceston, every line you make.<sup>13</sup>

To one who has read Wroth’s poetry, Jonson’s description seems to ignore much of its substance, focusing on the pleasurable, seductive qualities of her poetry without noting the ways in which it also represents the suffering associated with desire. Yet rather than dismiss Jonson’s

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<sup>12</sup> For a sustained chronicle of Jonson’s and Wroth’s literary interaction, see Michael G. Brennan, “‘A SYDNEY, though un-named’: Ben Jonson’s Influence in the Manuscript and Print Circulation of Lady Mary Wroth’s Writings,” *The Sidney Journal* 17.1 (Jan. 1999): 31-52.

<sup>13</sup> George Parfitt, ed., *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems* (New York, Penguin Books, 1996). Although this poem did not appear in print until 1640, it may well have been written much earlier, perhaps even before Wroth published *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* in 1621. While it is clear that Jonson reacts to Wroth’s verse, he is not necessarily responding to the published text of her poems but may in fact be referring to poems he read in manuscript, many of which eventually found their way into *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*.

reading as idiosyncratic, we might more profitably note that it emphasizes the efficacy of Wroth's poetry within a literary community. Despite his dubious interpretation of how her verse represents amorous emotion, Jonson offers an important clue about how early modern readers might have expected Wroth's poetry to operate. That is, he recognizes Wroth's verse as a socially productive force that has the power to develop readers' emotional and artistic capacities.

Interestingly, Jonson does not merely state that he has read Wroth's verses but that he has "exscribed" (or transcribed) them. Although it is likely that Jonson refers to the practice of recording verses in a commonplace book, his mention of writing out the poems also implies a process of learning that involves copying a text in order to better absorb its message. By simulating Wroth's writing process through a physical transcription of the lines, he both recreates an active version of her poetic craft and further cements the semantic content of the poems in his brain.<sup>14</sup> Just as a beginning artist might trace another picture to master the process involved in sketching, Jonson's experience of reading and transcribing Wroth's poems allows him to "practice" his skills as a writer.

But if copying out Wroth's verses allows Jonson to hone his poetic skills, the act of inhabiting the speaker's subject position also develops his emotional skills of identification. As Jonson places himself in both the female poet's position and in the male reader's position, he privileges shared affective experience rather than gendered distinctions between male and female desire. Yet as he places himself in the speaker's position by reading Wroth's poetry, he also taps into an affective community that shares certain emotional experiences. Of course, what Jonson means when he claims that Wroth's poetry makes him a better lover remains vague—it does not

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<sup>14</sup> This practice lingers among poetry readers today. Helen Vendler, for instance, claims: "For better or worse, I read under the same compulsion to 'feel along the line' with the composing hand; in fact, I know no greater help to understanding a poem than writing it out in longhand with the illusion that one is composing it." Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 3.

necessarily mean that he transcends erotic gender conventions to be more attentive to the workings of female desire (like Pamphilia wishes Amphilanthus would), nor does it indicate that he learns to practice an increased constancy in the face of unrequited love (like Pamphilia does). It does imply, however, that Jonson feels he has things to learn from Wroth's erotic poetry and that he privileges shared emotional affect over gender as the primary catalyst of literary community.

While Jonson claims that Wroth's poetry personally benefits him in emotional and artistic ways, the publisher James Smith makes similar claims for its value to a larger readership. In 1645, James Smith published a slightly edited version of Wroth's song, "All night I weepe, all day I cry, Ay mee" (P14) in *Recreation for ingenious head-peeeces. Or, A pleasant grove for their wits to walke in of epigrams*. Smith does not cite Wroth's name, but it is clear that he thought her poetry appropriate for a book whose title page advertises it as "Good for Melancholy Humors."<sup>15</sup> Without much regard to genre or subject matter, Smith's anthology collects a diverse array of poems he deems useful for treating melancholy. This diverse subject matter reflects Smith's belief that his readership comes to the text with vastly different experiences and dispositions. The miscellany's prefatory material emphasizes the care the publisher has taken to offer a variety of poems and leaves final responsibility for the book's usefulness with the reader. An opening injunction to the reader compares the book to a feast and encourages readers to select those "dishes" that best suit their needs, without taking offense to those that prove useless to them. Smith's expectation that readers treat his anthology as a buffet suggests a wider practice of approaching other collections of poems in the same way.

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<sup>15</sup> *Recreation for ingenious head-peeeces. Or, A pleasant grove for their wits to walke in of epigrams* (London, 1645).

If Smith saw *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* as a text from which he could selectively pick out and adapt poems that might be useful for treating melancholy, it is likely that individual readers as well as publishers approached even carefully constructed texts, such as sonnet sequences, in a similar manner. Archival collections of early modern commonplace books show that individual readers frequently excerpted fragments of poetry and other texts for their personal reference, but Smith's example further institutionalizes this cultural practice of culling (and sometimes even revising) memorable or useful bits of lyric sequences.

I propose that Wroth was aware of such reading practices and that rather than attempt to resist them, she actively anticipates this selectiveness and writes her sequence in a way that accommodates it. As I will argue below, rather than force readers to follow the narrative of a single speaking voice, Wroth constructs *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* in a way that presents a variety of viewpoints from which readers may consider the pains (and joys) of love. These various utterances of emotion, articulated from different subject positions, create a larger sense of community that moves beyond a lyric portrait of the character Pamphilia's subjectivity.

While a gendered reading of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*'s "absence of social particularity" might seem to suggest that Wroth operates under a cultural expectation of modesty from female poets, Elizabeth Hanson reminds us that such reticence about particulars is decidedly *not* a feature of Wroth's prose romance that precedes the sonnets in the 1621 publication.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Wroth's decision to omit social particularity from *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* suggests a calculated revision to the conventions of the genre. Many early modern sonnet sequences require an inside knowledge of an elite social circle's scandals and gossip to fully grasp the meaning of the poetry, but *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*'s generalized, non-specific

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Hanson, "Boredom and Whoredom: Reading Renaissance Women's Sonnet Sequences." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 10.1 (Spring 1997): 177.

language works as a rhetorical leveling feature, making the sequence's subject matter accessible to a larger number of readers. Wroth's emphasis on affective experience over social detail both allows and encourages readers of different social identities to map their own experiences of love onto Pamphilia's utterances. In other words, these stylistic features imagine an audience composed of diverse social classes, as well as both genders.

In addition to leaving out concrete social references, Wroth also bars Pamphilia from speaking Amphilanthus's name anywhere in the text of the sequence. The sonnets' reticence about their purported addressee mutes the sequence's narrative aspects, prompting some critics, as we have seen above, to paint Wroth's style as deliberately cryptic and even solipsistic. But if Wroth's style frustrates readers' narrative curiosity about Amphilanthus, it also invites them into the sequence, allowing them to mold the poetry's inclusive utterances to fit their particular emotional experiences, regardless of gender. Instead of revealing information about Amphilanthus, Pamphilia recognizes nameless speakers and auditors throughout the sequence, offering readers diverse, but anonymous, viewpoints from which they can think about love.

Sonnet P27 ("Once did I heere an aged father say"), for instance, records a father's advice to his son:

Love once I did, and like thee fear'd my love,  
Led by the hatefull thread of Jelousy,  
Striving to keepe, I lost my liberty,  
And gain'd my grieffe which still my sorrowes move,

In time shun this; to love is noe offence

But doubt in youth, in age breeds penitence. 9-14<sup>17</sup>

The presence of an older man's voice in a sequence purportedly about female desire suggests that Wroth sees affective experience as a closer social bond than age, class, or gender.<sup>18</sup> While the father's warning is a lesson Pamphilia could illustrate with a particular example from her own experience, she chooses to expand the sequence's treatment of jealousy to include male perspectives and even to consider how those perspectives change with age. This allows Wroth to offer her readers a sonnet sequence that surveys a larger scope of emotional experience than can be found in the story of Pamphilia's disappointed love. Wroth's decision to include speakers such as this man reminds readers that the sequence's concept of love is compiled from many particular experiences of passion rather than from a single individual experience.<sup>19</sup>

In the song P7 ("The spring now come att last"), Wroth introduces another speaker, this time, a young shepherdess. As in the sonnet discussed above, Wroth gives voice to a speaker other than Pamphilia (and from a lower social class), but she also uses the song to theorize the interpretive exchange between reader and writer that is necessary for literary production to occur. In the first two stanzas, the speaker expresses her feelings' refusal to align with the natural world—although it is spring, she feels cold; although the sun shines, the world is dark to her. Yet in the third stanza, a narrative voice enters the poem, and readers realize for the first time that they have not been listening to Pamphilia but to another character's voice:

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<sup>17</sup> Roberts, *Poems*. All future quotations of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* are taken from this edition. Roberts's notation "P27" indicates an editorial numbering system that accounts for the unnumbered songs that occur within the numbered sonnet sequence. To avoid confusion, I refer to all poems both by Roberts's notation method and by their first line.

<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Miller argues that it is not only the "similitude of passions [that] creates communities but that it is in the nature of passions—in particular their mimetic properties and their transferability—to create similitude." Jacqueline Miller, "The Passion Signified: Imitation and the Construction of Emotions in Sidney and Wroth," *Criticism* 43.4 (Fall 2001): 417.

<sup>19</sup> J. Miller also remarks that early modern experiences of inner passion "may not so much identify the distinctive self but the common copy." J. Miller, "Passion Signified," 417.

A sheapherdes thus sayd  
Who was with grieffe oprest  
For truest love beetraid  
Bard her from quiett rest  
And weeping thus sayd she  
My end approacheth neere  
Now willow must I weare  
My fortune soe will bee. 17-24<sup>20</sup>

After the narrator's interjection, the remainder of the poem returns to the shepherdess's voice. As the shepherdess anticipates her death in the primitive forest surroundings, she vows to commit her story to writing:

This barck my booke shall bee  
Wher dayly I will wright  
This tale of hapless mee  
True slave to fortunes spight. 33-36

She also writes a provisional epitaph for her grave:

And these lines I will leave  
If some such lover come  
Who may them right conseave,  
And place them on my tombe:  
She who still constant lov'd  
Now dead with cruell care

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<sup>20</sup> Wroth's sparse punctuation makes it nearly impossible to anticipate this narrative interjection before the reader arrives at it.

Kil'd with unkind dispaire,  
And change, her end here prov'd. 41-48

Believing that she will die soon, the shepherdess sees her verses as part of the remains she will leave behind. Yet rather than triumphantly trust in her writing's power to preserve her memory, the shepherdess highlights the tentative nature of such a possibility—"if" a lover finds the bark, he or she "may" understand the verses and so will be able to place them on her grave as a monument. Not only will someone have to do the physical work of finding the shepherdess's corpse and verses in the middle of the forest, but this individual will have to be a certain kind of reader to correctly grasp the lines' purpose as an epitaph for her tomb.

The shepherdess identifies her ideal reader as another lover—someone who can relate to her experience of love. In other words, for the lines to serve their purpose, the reader has to bring a certain understanding to the text. Many early modern thinkers concurred with this reading model, although they disagreed on what exactly a reader needed to bring to a text in order to elicit proper interpretation. Twenty-three years later, John Milton, for instance, would claim that a text's danger or usefulness depends almost entirely on readers' abilities to make virtuous moral judgments about the ideas they encounter in a book.<sup>21</sup> But instead of requiring a sharp intellect or a strong moral constitution, the shepherdess desires a reader who will "conserve" her verse rightly by consulting his or her own emotional experience of love. The shepherdess's song describes a model of interpretation in which readers' shared affective experiences, rather than shared education or shared moral convictions, constitute literary community.

Wroth's model of literary exchange—with the reader acting as a crucial agent of artistic production—stands in striking contrast to other early modern sonnet sequences'

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<sup>21</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica: A Speech of Mr. John Milton, For the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, To the Parliament of England* (London, 1644).

disproportionate focus on the author. Earlier English sonneteers seek consolation for their personal suffering in the creation of beautiful art that will preserve their literary talent. Edmund Spenser, for example, promises his beloved that his verse will “eternize” her “virtues rare,” yet his claim also shows that he is confident his poetry will be preserved, whether by publishers, copyists, or memory (Sonnet 75, l. 11).<sup>22</sup> Samuel Daniel similarly figures his verse as a “lasting monument” to his beloved that will exist long after both of them are dead (Sonnet 34, l. 9).<sup>23</sup> While Spenser and Daniel veil their regard for personal fame in an expressed desire to preserve the beloved’s memory, Michael Drayton explicitly acknowledges that his sonnets exist to preserve the memory of his *own* talent:

Ensuing Ages yet my Rimes shall cherish,  
Where I, intomb’d, my better part shall save;  
And though this Earthly Body fade and die,  
My Name shall mount upon Eternitie. Sonnet 44, ll. 11-14<sup>24</sup>

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Shakespeare’s sonnets exhibit a more complicated awareness of their readers, occasionally musing on the possibility that their style will one day be considered old-fashioned. Yet in many other places, they assume a long and appreciative readership, repeating the monument imagery of Sonnet 55 and assuring the beloved that the poet’s “eternal lines” will exist “so long as men can breathe or eyes can see” (Sonnet 18, ll.12-13).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Shepherd’s Calendar and Other Poems*, ed. Philip Henderson (New York: Dutton, 1962).

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Daniel, *Delia: Contayning certayne Sonnets: with the complaint of Rosamond* (London, 1592).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Drayton, *Idea: In Sixtie Three Sonnets* (London, 1619).

<sup>25</sup> Colin Burrow, *The Oxford Shakespeare: Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All future quotations from Shakespeare’s poems are taken from this edition.

The above examples demonstrate their authors' conviction that the sonnet sequence is an excellent space in which to memorialize what Shakespeare terms their "pow'rful rhyme," which cannot be destroyed by the beloved's neglect or by natural forces of decay (Sonnet 55, l. 2). But by imagining a situation in which literary posterity is uncertain, Wroth shows the limitations of this genre's ability to sublimate frustrated desire into a lasting work of art. Rather than take comfort in her singular talent as a writer, Pamphilia both acknowledges the necessary role readers play in her project and makes them the primary object of her consolatory efforts.

### *The Sonnet Form and Interpretive Community*

As I have argued above, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* is clearly invested in offering emotional consolation to a diverse community of readers. Yet Wroth's decision to append this sequence to a prose romance that already relates the adventures of the characters Pamphilia and Amphilanthus raises questions about what kind of consolatory work the sonnet sequence performs that the romance does not or cannot. Some critics markedly prefer the *Urania*'s generic possibilities for imagining community and performing cultural work within early modern society. Luckyj, for example, claims that Wroth uses the romance "to illuminate the impotence and stasis of the lyric mode, and thus represents a significant reassessment of her own literary career." Pointing to scenes of solitary female poetic composition in the *Urania*, Luckyj suggests that, for Wroth, the genre of romance offers the "outward-directed flexibility of prose" while the sonnet form affords only a "solipsistic rigidity" that cannot effect real social change.<sup>26</sup> But in

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<sup>26</sup> Luckyj, "Politics of Genre," 274-75. Even if the argument that Wroth "turned" from lyric to the more socially productive genre of romance were an accurate chronological assessment of her literary activity, such a professional shift would not have been apparent to readers who encountered the sonnets and the *Urania* simultaneously in the 1621 print text. Furthermore, the textual placement of the sonnets *after* the romance does not encourage readers to consider the idea that Wroth abandons poetry for prose but could, in fact, suggest the opposite. Finally, because a 1836 fire at Loughton Hall destroyed most of Wroth's personal papers and reading library, there is no way of knowing what kinds of unpublished manuscripts she may have kept in her possession. Thus, the claim that Wroth

order to accurately assess Wroth's understanding of poetry's social function, it is just as important to look at instances of characters *reading* poetry in the romance. While it is certainly true that many characters retreat to forests or bedchambers to compose poetry in solitude, the *Urania* also contains numerous scenes of characters sharing their writing, reading poems, and encountering poetic texts in communal settings.

The opening episode of the *Urania*, in fact, describes a situation in which poems and letters constitute sites for building community between individuals. When Urania discovers that her parenthood is unknown, she retreats to a solitary cave to mourn. In the cave, she encounters a sonnet replete with expressions of woe, with which she instantly identifies, exclaiming, "How well doe these words, this place, and all agree with thy fortune? sure poore soule thou wert here appointed to spend thy daies, and these rooms ordain'd to keepe thy tortures in; none being assuredly so matchlessly unfortunate."<sup>27</sup> Urania does not ask how the sonnet came to the cave but instead acts as if it has always existed there, waiting for her to find it. Urania's consuming sorrow initially makes her a poor reader both of her surroundings and of the sonnet itself. In her grief, she reads with no regard for context—if anything about poetry is solipsistic in the *Urania*, it is this method of *reading* rather than the act of writing.

Once Urania notices Perissus, the miserable author of the sonnet, lying in a corner of the cave, she is able to revise her understanding of the sonnet by listening to his story. In turn, Urania helps Perissus understand a letter from his lover by offering an alternative perspective on Limena's stated intentions. This encounter establishes early in the romance that community is central to the process of productively interpreting texts. No matter how many times Perissus

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abandoned lyric for prose is speculative at best, as it can only be based on those few papers of Wroth's that survived in other locations. See Hannay, *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth*, 309-313.

<sup>27</sup> Wroth, *Urania*, 3.

rereads Limena's letter, he cannot leave the cave until he hears a new interpretation that allows him to take action. And until Urania is confronted by Perissus's company, she cannot conceive of poetry as a window into another person's suffering. Perissus's tale both distracts Urania from her own suffering and reveals the unproductive nature of purely identificatory reading. As Urania and Perissus urge each other to actions that will solve their respective problems, Wroth presents a model of consolation that depends on interpretive community.<sup>28</sup> In the *Urania*, grieving people cannot help themselves without a larger community, but their grief does not impede them from comforting others. This scene suggests both that listening to another person's expression of suffering can help people manage their own grief and that articulating one's own grief might help alleviate other people's suffering. For Wroth, the genre of the sonnet sequence offers an ideal context for such communal engagement, even in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

While the *Urania* shows how interpretive community prompts productive reading, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* meditates on how a particular literary form can foster such affective community. In addition to acknowledging readers' interpretive importance to the sonnet sequence, Wroth reshapes the genre's formal conventions to accommodate communal utterance. As we have seen above, poets like Spenser and Drayton treat the sonnet sequence as an instrument that primarily consoles writers, but Wroth recognizes the genre's potential to console readers by drawing them into the sequence as participants rather than spectators. Early in the sequence, Pamphilia raises and rejects the idea of curing her own pain through poetic form, insisting, "I seeke for some smale ease by lines, which bought / Increase the pain; grieffe is not

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<sup>28</sup> This model offers a significant contrast to Fred Tromly's claim that most instances of early modern consolation involve an imbalance of power, with the consoler holding a socially superior position in gender, if not in class. It is worth noting that here Urania and Perissus mutually console each other, despite Urania's lower social status as a woman and a shepherdess. See "Grief, Authority and the Resistance to Consolation in Shakespeare," in *Speaking Grief in English Literary Culture: Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Margo Swiss and David A. Kent (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 20-41.

cur'd by art" (P9, "Led by the power of grieffe, to wailings brought," 3-4). Forcing grief into "lines" "increases" or concentrates its power rather than limiting it, making the passion even more harmful than before. Pamphilia's claim that art cannot cure her grief suggests that she sees another purpose for her writing than self-reflection or self-directed therapy.

Pamphilia's claim that formal poetry concentrates her emotional pain stands in stark contrast to prevailing early modern conceptions of poetic form as an instrument for controlling and treating the passions.<sup>29</sup> John Donne's poem "The Triple Fool" offers one of the most well-known articulations (and critiques) of this attitude. In this poem, Donne suggests that writing formal verse is an excellent way to deal with grief—until an audience arrives:

I thought, if I could draw my pains  
Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay.  
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,  
For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

But when I have done so,  
Some man, his art and voice to show,  
Doth set and sing my pain,  
And, by delighting many, frees again  
Grief, which verse did restrain. 8-16<sup>30</sup>

Donne imagines form as a way to force his pain into narrow strictures, which will then contain and limit its power. Yet Donne's second stanza complicates this model of consolation by

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<sup>29</sup> See for instance, George Puttenham's claim that poets should use their rhetorical talents as a "medicine" for the sickness of grief. George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Wingham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 135.

<sup>30</sup> A. J. Smith, ed., *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, (New York: Penguin, 1996).

reflecting on the disadvantages of putting emotion into a poetic form suitable for musical setting, which broadens its audience and allows for its public performance. If an audience is Wroth's shepherdess's last hope, it is Donne's speaker's worst fear. By sharing the poem's painful experiences with others, a musician releases the passions the speaker sought to contain. Not only does this negate the poet's feat of containing his grief, but it also risks spreading the emotion to others like a contagious disease.

Donne's speaker goes on to insist that one *should* write poetry about suffering but that such verse should not "please" readers or listeners:

To love and grief tribute of verse belongs,  
But not of such as pleases when 'tis read,  
Both are increased by such songs:

For both their triumphs so are published. 17-20

When others are "delighted" by the verse, the speaker argues, love and grief's powers are increased by being praised. It is unclear whether "delight" in this context indicates a reader's perverse pleasure in another's pain, aesthetic appreciation for the sounds and rhythms of the poem, or emotional identification with the experience described in the poem. What kind of verse would offer tribute to love and grief without "pleasing" readers? By resenting the "delight" others take in his verse, while simultaneously refusing to define what constitutes that pleasure, Donne's speaker presents an argument for private composition similar to that Masten claims for Wroth's poetry.

In contrast to Donne's speaker, Pamphilia is eager for her verse to be read by others, suggesting that she considers shared emotion a salutary rather than corrupting force. But if poetic form amplifies her emotional pain, why does she employ a form as intricate and demanding as

the sonnet? Like Donne's speaker, Pamphilia envisions poems in spatial terms, but not as a container for personal grief. Instead, Pamphilia uses the formal properties of the sonnet to create the sense of an intricately constructed communal space, where readers can imagine themselves to be in the company of others who share their affective experiences.

In P37, Pamphilia uses the image of a beehive to invite connections between the constructed nature of both architectural and aesthetic spaces:

How fast thou fliest, O Time, on loves swift wings

To hopes of joy, that flatters our desire

Which to a lover, still, contentment brings!

Yett, when wee should injoy thou dost retire,

Thou stay'st thy pace faulse time from our desire,

When to our ill thou hast'st with Eagles wings,

Slowe, only to make us see thy retire

Was for dispayre, and harme, which sorrowe brings;

O! slacke thy pase, and milder pass to love;

Bee like the Bee, whose wings she doth butt use

To bring home profitt, masters good to prove

Laden, and weary, yett againe pursues,

Soe lade thy self with honnye of sweet joye,

And doe nott mee the Hive of love destroy.

This sonnet uses a number of formal and rhetorical strategies to construct a sense of interpretive community. Pamphilia's beehive metaphor evokes a collaborative space in which many workers build an elaborate dwelling out of wax and industriously stock it with food for the group.

Pamphilia also draws readers into the sonnet by using plural rather than singular first-person pronouns. A close look reveals five such pronouns in the opening octave of the sonnet. By accusing Time of flattering "our" desire rather than "my" desire, the speaker incorporates a larger group of people who have similar complaints against Time. Time does not cheat her alone of enjoying her beloved, but it also cheats many lovers of this pleasure.

As the sonnet moves into the final sestet, Pamphilia shifts from describing Time's wrongs to requesting that Time change its actions. Because she has spent the former two quatrains establishing that Time afflicts many lovers in the same way, her concluding plea gathers these numerous experiences into a united supplication. Speaking for the group, Pamphilia begs Time to slow down and bring joy to them. As Pamphilia acknowledges an entire community of lovers who suffer from Time's pace, she emphasizes not the unique, particular pain of one individual but rather a common factor in many unhappy lovers' experiences. In turn, as readers of the sonnet recognize their own experiences of disappointed love and transient pleasure, they can also come to understand that others suffer from similar feelings of distress. Even if readers do not have physical access to companions who share their experiences of love, Wroth's sonnets offer them a place to be in the presence of such a community.

Yet as Wroth illustrates in the *Urania*, social interaction often lies counter to the instincts of suffering people. Dejected lovers in the romance frequently avoid the community that could provide this moment of recognition, begging to be left alone so that they may contemplate their grief free from external irritants. While Wroth certainly recognizes both the initial urge to flee

community when one experiences unrequited love and the difficulty of obtaining consolation for amorous suffering even within community, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* offers the alternative possibility of repairing to an aesthetic structure that houses other people's voices and experiences. As a poet, Pamphilia provides a literary space in which readers can imagine an ideal community of people who identify and sympathize with their emotions.

Both sonnets and beehives are intricate structures, whose production requires complicated craftsmanship. In the case of the beehive, the structure is built by collaborative effort rather than by a single architect.<sup>31</sup> If Pamphilia imagines her sonnet as a beehive, she suggests that others have a share in her writings because their emotions and interpretations contribute to the meaning of the sequence.<sup>32</sup> Pamphilia extends the metaphor even further by claiming that she herself is the hive of love, not simply one of its busy inhabitants. When Pamphilia imagines herself as a storehouse for the treasures of love, she conceptualizes the poet not simply as one who provides a literary space to collect shared feelings but also as one who collects and synthesizes the emotions of many other people.

### *Ritual Language, Communal Utterance, and Symbolic Orders*

While the spatial properties of the sonnet form allow Wroth to imagine a venue in which an ideal community of lovers meet and console each other, the ritual possibilities of lyric form allow her to use the sonnet sequence to collect numerous voices in service of a unified project.

While a prose romance like the *Urania* includes many diverse points of view, characters' voices

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<sup>31</sup> Bees are also a common early modern trope for gathering "flowers of rhetoric," further supporting this sonnet's implication that poetic interpretation is a communal activity.

<sup>32</sup> I do not intend to claim that Wroth fully embraces the pervasive late twentieth-century idea of "reader as author," but I do suggest that her acknowledgment of the reader's important role in literary production anticipates this concept to a greater extent than earlier Renaissance sonnet sequences do.

are markedly separate—consider, for instance, Urania’s and Pamphilia’s radically different definitions of constancy in romantic love. A lyric poem, on the other hand, may employ a number of different formal strategies that allow a reader to “speak” the words of the poem along with a larger group. *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*’s subsequence of fourteen sonnets entitled “A Crown of Sonetts dedicated to Love” offers Wroth’s most explicit illustration of poetic form’s ability to simultaneously create an affective community of readers and extend consolation to them. The crown presents a virtuosic display of formal ability, surprising for a writer who claims that poetic form increases rather than alleviates her suffering. I argue that that the sonnet crown’s highly formalized structure, as well as its emphasis on communal affect, consoles by constructing what Clifford Geertz terms a “symbolic order” that contextualizes and explains a community’s suffering.<sup>33</sup>

Although *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*’s subject matter is erotic desire, the sonnets contain many formal qualities that literary scholars usually associate with devotional lyric. Roland Greene identifies *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* as a “nominative” lyric sequence, “in which there is likely room for only one speaking voice.” But as we have already seen, Wroth’s sonnets are unusually open to the presence of other speaking voices. I would argue that Greene’s term “ritual sequence,” usually reserved for non-erotic, religious sequences, more aptly describes *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*.<sup>34</sup> While Greene claims that erotic sequences mostly emphasize the fictional and that devotional sequences emphasize the ritual, his own description of lyric’s ritual elements draws on a quotation by C.S. Lewis about erotic sonnets:

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<sup>33</sup> See Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973), 87-125.

<sup>34</sup> Asserting that the Petrarchan sequence is “lyric fiction” (the generic intersection of lyric and fiction), Greene theorizes it as a dialectic between fictional and ritual phenomena. Fictional elements include events and characters, while ritual components of lyric resemble a script or directions for performance. While fiction requires readers to consider an alternative world, ritual lyric invites them to overlay their own experiences onto an utterance that is “a real-life element of the empirical world.” Greene, *Post-Petrarchism*, 3, 5, 11, 14.

A good sonnet (*mutatis mutandis* and *salve reverentia*) was like a good public prayer: the test is whether the congregation can “join” and make it their own. . . . [In] this respect the Elizabethan sonnet is comparable to the Elizabethan song. It does not matter who is speaking to whom in “Since there’s no helpe” any more than in “Oh mistress mine.” . . . The whole body of sonnet sequences is much more like an erotic liturgy than a series of erotic confidences.<sup>35</sup>

According to this model of lyric, the abstract and non-specific style of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* constitutes not an inscrutable privacy, but a formal attempt to create a “liturgy” that other lovers might follow.

In a study of early modern liturgical forms, Ramie Targoff emphasizes the pervasiveness of public devotional utterance in the period and illuminates its influence on early modern devotional poetry. Both common prayer and liturgy provide forms that allow a community to voice shared convictions confirming the group’s beliefs or shared supplications to a higher power. The “higher power” of Wroth’s sonnet crown is Love rather than the Christian God, but the crown’s rhetorical forms of address are strikingly similar to the liturgical forms Targoff describes:

The particular properties of common prayer—its emphasis upon premeditation rather than spontaneity; its insistence upon the interchangeability of first-person singular and plural pronouns; its preference for simultaneously eloquent and reiterable texts over complex and difficult models of language—played an

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Greene, *Post-Petrarchism*, 6. The ellipses are his, not mine. Originally published in C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

important role, I argue, in determining the poetic forms that seemed most effective for acts of personal as well as collective expression.<sup>36</sup>

While Targoff claims that the cultural phenomenon of common prayer greatly influenced the poetics of early modern devotional verse, her assessment of this influence is also a remarkably accurate list of the formal characteristics present in Wroth's sonnet crown.

I do not intend to suggest that *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*'s sonnet crown constitutes religious allegory or even that Wroth consciously used the liturgy as a formal model for her sonnet sequence.<sup>37</sup> Instead, I argue that her use of formal strategies literary scholars usually associate with liturgy disrupt neat critical categorizations that link particular poetic forms to particular types of content. Targoff expertly illustrates how early modern liturgy constructs religious community through linguistic form, but *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* shows us that poets are capable of using those same linguistic forms to construct others kinds of communities. The sonnet crown's formal similarity to liturgy is interesting, not because it shows erotic verse borrowing religious imagery—countless early modern erotic poems do this—but because it belies a critical assumption that “secular” sonnet sequences must be concerned primarily with the self and its idiosyncratic interior narrative. *Pamphila to Amphilanthus*'s refusal to align with such a project expands our understanding of ways in which the early modern sonnet sequence can build a sense of social community rather than simply distinguish an individual from his rival poets and lovers. Like the liturgy, “A Crown of Sonetts dedicated to Love” offers readers a script to inhabit as their own utterance, implying that this act of communal reading provides more

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<sup>36</sup> Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> Donne's *La Corona* offers a famous example of how the structural form of the sonnet crown *can* be used for devotional purposes. Since Donne's devotional verse was published posthumously, however, it is unlikely Wroth would have read *La Corona* by 1621 unless she had access to a circulating manuscript of it.

effective consolation than the third-person perspective of a prose romance or the unguided words of a private prayer to love.<sup>38</sup>

Despite its focus on erotic love rather than divine worship, Wroth's sonnet crown employs many of the strategies Targoff describes as characteristic of common prayer—the interlocking first and last lines of each consecutive sonnet reiterate previously expressed ideas and literally link the sonnets together, formally representing their intended social function of building a congregation of lovers. These poems also shift easily between singular and plural pronouns, further solidifying this idea of poetic community. While the crown begins with singular personal pronouns—“In this strang labourinth how shall I turne?” (P77, l. 1)—the second sonnet leaves behind this first-person mode of address, slipping into plural pronouns: “When chaste thoughts guide us, then ovr minds are bent / To take that good which ill from us remove” (P78, “Is to leave all, and take the thread of love,” 5-6). Like churchgoers, readers enter the crown as individuals but shortly become subsumed into the communal identity of a larger group of lovers. Throughout the sequence, Pamphilia continues to use the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our,” emphasizing unified utterance rather than distinct individual voices. Instead of characterizing erotic love as an emotional relationship between two individuals, Wroth's sonnet crown emphasizes the emotional bonds that might be forged among a collection of people who share the experience of desiring another individual.

Since the crown expresses loyalty to Love rather than merely narrating Pamphilia's individual experiences, these plural pronouns further invite readers to speak the sonnets' words

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<sup>38</sup> Such an attitude is also consistent with late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Anglican stances on common prayer. Targoff notes, “Far from imagining liturgical spontaneity as a liberation, [Richard] Hooker offers a novel account of devotional freedom as an enormous burden upon the individual's psychic well-being; formalized language becomes in this account a crucial safeguard against the natural weaknesses of human devotion.” Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 6.

along with the poet. Thus, readers may communally praise and supplicate Love, mirroring the way a religious congregation addresses God. The speaker's "strang labourinth" unfolds as an endeavor she shares with her readers rather than as a devotional exercise she must navigate in solitude. Wroth's sonnets are not the private exercises in grief management that "The Triple Fool"'s speaker wishes poems to be; instead, they seek out community as an essential means of working through grief. The sonnet form provides a space that helps others gather their thoughts and feelings into a mutually understandable form. Like P37 ("How fast thou fliest, O Time, on loves swift wings"), the crown offers the consolation that readers' emotions are valid because they are shared by a large community of people. Wroth's sonnet crown extends the collaborative implications of the hive even further to suggest that a shared literary space can allow communal utterance as well as affective exchange.

If the sonnet crown offers consolation by constructing a horizontal relationship between afflicted lovers, it also consoles readers by uniting them in vertical address to a more powerful entity. When Pamphilia addresses this group of sonnets to Love rather than to a specific beloved, she is able to sidestep the troubling power imbalance of human erotic relationships in favor of a more abstract hierarchy of humans and passions. That is, she remains faithful to an ideal rather than to an unfaithful, imperfect human being. In this formulation, the specific object of her love becomes irrelevant while the affective experience of love assumes the central focal point of the sequence.

At first, the crown's penultimate sonnet's (P89, "Free from all fogs butt shining faire, and cleere") return to a single voice seems to signify Pamphilia's successful application of this communal "liturgy" to her particular experience:

To thee then lord commander of all harts,

Ruller of ovr affections kinde, and just  
Great King of Love, my soule from fained smarts  
Or thought of change I offer to your trust

This crowne, my self, and all that I have more  
Except my hart which you beestow'd before. 9-14

In the shift from “ovr” to “my”—the first use of a singular first-person pronoun since the opening sonnet of the crown—Pamphilia seems to resolve the conflict with which the crown began. After reaffirming her loyalty to Love and the value of serving him, she makes an “offering” to the poem’s deity—“dedicating” herself, her possessions, and this particular sequence to Love. By acknowledging Love’s power over all human souls, Pamphilia reaches the conclusion that she should submit her individual will to the power of Love.

A closer examination of this power hierarchy, however, shows Love to be an unpredictable master, revealing the limitations of such a consolatory strategy. Although lovers can now locate the cause of their pain in the will of a higher deity rather than in the pique of a disdainful beloved, such an explanation does not actually relieve Pamphilia or readers of their pain. Despite Pamphilia’s efforts to embody her passion in a deity, the final sonnet of the crown (P90, “Except my hart which you beestow’d before”) loops back to the sequence’s initial doubts, both formally and ideologically. The final sestet confirms the dilemma of her situation:

Yett other mischiefs faile nott to attend,  
As enimies to you, my foes must bee;  
Curst jealousie doth all her forces bend  
To my undoing; thus my harmes I see.

Soe though in Love I fervently doe burne,

In this strange labourinth how shall I turne? 9-14

Despite her declaration of loyalty to Love, all is not well. The speaker recognizes in the octave that her heart *should* be free of “envyes sore,” yet in the sestet, she laments the return of jealousy. As much as she might like to serve Love in an emotional state free from jealousy, lust, or other negative passions, by the end of the crown, Pamphilia has not yet discovered how to execute such a course of action. The final sonnet of the crown ends with the question that opened the first sonnet: “In this strange labourinth how shall I turne?”

But even if the sonnet crown does not provide a curative model of consolation, its cyclical form offers an explanatory one that can help readers make sense of their emotional pain. Geertz’s analysis of religious explanations for suffering shares surprising resonances both with Wroth’s sonnet crown and with *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* as a whole:

The strange opacity of certain empirical events, the dumb senselessness of intense or inexorable pain, and the enigmatic unaccountability of gross iniquity all raise the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world, and hence man’s life in the world, has no genuine order at all—no empirical regularity, no emotional form, no moral coherence. And the religious response to this suspicion is in each case the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 108.

In Geertz's model of consolation, religions do not try to eradicate suffering, but they do attempt to give it comprehensible shape and meaning. While religious and symbolic orders may draw on a variety of means to accomplish this goal, language remains one of their most important tools for illuminating the purposes of human suffering. As a series of poems, Wroth's sonnet crown endeavors to provide a symbolic, if not religious, order that explains erotic suffering. The subsequence offers a formal, linguistic structure that both physically and symbolically outlines the shape of love—it is a labyrinth, a cycle, something from which one cannot escape. Yet within this structure, one can find smaller ways of dealing with disappointment, such as knowing that others understand one's pain or recognizing that the affective experience of love is worthwhile even if the object of one's desire is unworthy or unattainable. Additionally, if love is truly a closed labyrinth, one need not blame his or her moral deficiencies for the inability to "get over it." Various individuals may have better or worse fortunes in love, depending on how Love chooses to deal with their hearts, but this is something they cannot control and thus something for which they cannot be faulted.

Because the sonnet form relies so heavily on symbolic language and artistic construction, it is an especially suitable tool for imagining a "genuine order" that would explain why humans experience disappointment in love, how they might make meaning of such an experience, and how they can profit from that experience in the future. I propose that Wroth's sonnet crown participates in a similar kind of social project to the one Geertz identifies in religion—it offers comfort by contextualizing human suffering in a larger symbolic order. The consolation of form in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* does not come from its containing power but rather from its ability to give coherent shape to a variety of passionate experiences and to offer recognizable spaces in which readers may hear and voice these shared experiences.

As I have argued above, Wroth's focus on the reader is one of her largest innovations to the early modern sonnet sequence. Because her sequence is more concerned with affective literary community than with individual subjectivity, its conclusion also necessarily breaks with generic convention. Other early modern sonnet sequences struggle to offer emotional or aesthetic resolution because they celebrate an individual subjectivity constituted by the speaker's continuous desire for the beloved. Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, ends on a note of futility, comparing the speaker's endless cycle of delight and despair to a bird whose wings are clipped whenever they grow long enough to enable flight. Drayton's sonnet sequence, *Idea*, concludes with a stalemate between love and the poet.<sup>40</sup> In the final sonnet of Shakespeare's sequence, the poet claims that his endeavors to escape love are never successful: "But I, my mistress' thrall, / Came there for cure, and this by that I prove: / Love's fire heats water; water cools not love" (Sonnet 154, ll. 12-14).<sup>41</sup> These lyric sequences cannot offer concrete endings because they memorialize the writing self through the medium of his or her persistent desire. If this desire subsides, the sequence is only a relic of dead love rather than a monument to eternal love.

*Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* does not end easily or tidily, but Wroth's focus on the sequence's readers allows her to achieve some aesthetic closure without disavowing Pamphilia's passion for Amphilanthus. Wroth plays on the convention of the impossible-to-end sequence by offering three possible endings before bringing the sonnets to a full halt. Her first "ending" attempts to conclude the sequence with a meditation on love's eternal power, and her second seeks to compare her passions to the natural world, but, for Wroth, neither of these conventional

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<sup>40</sup> Spenser's *Amoretti*, which concludes in marriage, is a notable exception.

<sup>41</sup> "A Lover's Complaint," appended to the first edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, expresses a similar sentiment from a female point of view—despite the speaker's recognition of her beloved's falseness, all of his wiles "would yet again betray the fore-betrayed, / And new pervert a reconciled maid" (ll. 328-29).

sonnets offers convincing closure.<sup>42</sup> Pamphilia's final sonnet allows for consolation because it rejects solitary attempts to deal with erotic desire and reiterates the interpretive community necessary for deriving comfort from literature. Thus, instead of breaking off the sequence at an arbitrary point, this last sonnet reminds readers that the literary community will continue to grapple with the problems of love long after Pamphilia has stopped writing. Pamphilia's real legacy is not a literary monument to her love for Amphilanthus but rather her readers' identifications with, revisions to, and adaptations of her expressions of love.

The final sonnet reads:

My muse, now hapy, lay thy self to rest,  
Sleepe in the quiett of a faithfull love,  
Write you noe more, butt let thes phant'sies move  
Some other harts, wake not to new unrest,

Butt if you study, bee those thoughts adrest  
To truth, which shall eternall goodness prove;  
Injoying of true joye, the most, and best,  
The endless gaine which never will remove;

Leave the discourse of Venus, and her sunn  
To young beeginers, and theyr brains inspire  
With storys of great love, and from that fire  
Gett heat to write the fortunes they have wunn,

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<sup>42</sup> See, respectively, sonnets P101 ("No time, noe roome, no thought, or writing can") and P102 ("How gloewoorme like the sunn doth now appeere)."

And thus leave off, what's past shows you can love,

Now let your constancy your honor prove,

Pamphilia.

While Pamphilia does not forsake her erotic feelings at the end of this sonnet, she is able to end the written sequence by reiterating its cultural project. As she has ideologically and formally implied throughout the sequence, Pamphilia now explicitly states her intention to foster further literary discourse about erotic love. Rather than claim that her verse memorializes her beloved or her unique experience of love, Pamphilia bequeaths her writing to other lovers—hoping its “phant’sies” will move readers to record their own experiences. Realizing that she has had her say in the larger discourse of amorous expression, Pamphilia can make a conscious choice to stop speaking because she knows that her literary monument to Love will be continued by her readers. Pamphilia does imply that “if” her muse continues to “study,” she intends to contemplate absolutes such as “truth” and “eternall goodness.” But even if Pamphilia moves on to the study of philosophy or divinity, she does not negate the importance of her past writing. Instead, she imagines her “storys of great love” inspiring younger lovers to respond to her writing and to add their own innovations to the “discourse of Venus.”

A copy of the *Urania* held by the Charles E. Young Research Library at the University of California in Los Angeles shows that at least one reader literally took up his or her pen to continue Wroth’s project. In response to the printed text of the *Urania*, which breaks off in mid-sentence, a seventeenth-century reader has penned an ending.<sup>43</sup> This literal continuation of

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<sup>43</sup> For further details, see Susan Light, “Reading Romances: The Handwritten Ending of Mary Wroth’s *Urania* in the UCLA Library Copy,” *Sidney Newsletter and Journal* 14.1 (1996): 66-72.

Wroth's romance offers an apt metaphor for the kind of affective and literary work *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* encourages its readers to perform. While the sonnet sequence does not give the appearance of being literally incomplete as the first part of the *Urania* does, it similarly invites other voices to continue the sequence's affective discourse, perhaps in their own sonnets. Although the conclusion of the sequence does not cure or satisfy Pamphilia's love, it shifts its emotional burden from the speaker to the readers. Where Pamphilia "leaves off," another reader may pick up a pen. This invitation to participate in an ongoing project of emotional expression does not completely cure readers' pain, but it privileges literary discourse as a comforting space in which they can both access the "symbolic orders" others use to explain their affective experiences and create new orders of their own. Read in this light, the end of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* is simply a brief pause between speakers in a widespread and continuous conversation about how to manage erotic desire.

### Chapter 3

#### Lyric Sequence and Emotional Life in George Herbert's *The Temple*

At a young age, George Herbert defined himself as a poet of religious verse in opposition to his era's craze for erotic sonnets like those by Shakespeare and Wroth. In a sonnet written for Herbert's mother but addressed to God, the poet asks:

... Doth Poetry

Wear *Venus* livery? only serve her turn?

Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? and layes

Upon thine altar burnt? Cannot thy love

Heighten a spirit to sound out thy praise

As well as any she? Cannot thy *Dove*

Out-strip their *Cupid* easily in flight?

Or, since thy wayes are deep, and still the same,

Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name!<sup>1</sup> ll. 3-11

Herbert's discomfort with erotic love as a subject for poetry suggests that he would not have viewed poems like Shakespeare's or Wroth's as useful models for ethically managing emotions like despair, anxiety, and frustration. Yet while Herbert's poems extol God rather than a human beloved and worry over unanswered prayer rather than erotic rejection, like sonnet sequences,

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Wilcox, ed., *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). All future quotations of Herbert's poetry are taken from this edition.

they capitalize on the formal properties of the lyric sequence both to articulate emotional distress and to offer readers consolation for it. If Wroth employs liturgical language to console her readers for erotic suffering, Herbert imports the language of erotic poetry into his devotional sequence to console readers of *The Temple* for religious concerns.<sup>2</sup> And like Shakespeare, Herbert uses poetry to illustrate the tenacity of emotion and to comfort readers who feel alone in their inability to “get over” troubling emotions.

Much critical work on Herbert explores the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of addressing poetic utterance to God, but few studies consider in depth how *The Temple* envisions an emotional relationship between a devotional poet and his human readers.<sup>3</sup> Yet recent work on early modern emotion suggests that this topic is just as important as a devotional poet’s relationship to God. Richard Strier, for example, examines the ways in which early moderns considered living an ethical life to be an affective endeavor, rather than merely a rational one.<sup>4</sup> His work suggests that early modern poems with religious and ethical functions operate, not simply by appealing to readers’ intellect or doctrinal knowledge, but also by encouraging them to think explicitly about their emotional lives. Attention to *The Temple*’s unique lyric strategies for managing emotion allows us to read it, not merely as script for expressing devotion to God, but also as a vehicle for extending consolation to readers. This chapter argues that Herbert uses the nonlinear and recursive properties of the lyric sequence to illustrate the aesthetic and ethical value of emotional instability—particularly a believer’s inability to maintain a stable sense of joy, assurance, or devotion. While Herbert is always aware of the ways in which humans fail to

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<sup>2</sup> For an extensive discussion of Herbert’s erotic and courtly language, see Michael Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954); Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); and Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Strier, *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 24.

measure up to God's goodness, many of his poems suggest that anxiety, grief, and other mood fluctuations offer believers the opportunity to know God more closely. In contrast to much of the period's religious prose discourse—which read emotions like despair as a sign of sin or damnation—*The Temple* uses the creative properties of poetry to construct more lenient interpretations of emotional changeability.

In “The Church-porch,” the first poem of *The Temple*, Herbert writes:

Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance  
Ryme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.  
A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies,  
And turn delight into a sacrifice. 3-6

These pithy lines make a bold claim for poetry's superior ability to capture the attention of its readers and listeners. Unlike most early modern sermons, most early modern poems rhyme, producing formal pleasure and delight—in other words, readers who would normally ignore the moral content of a sermon can be “caught” with the pleasing sounds and rhythms of poetry. This argument for the moral value of poetic pleasure is, of course, similar to Philip Sidney's famous claim that poetry can offer a clearer picture of virtue than a dry, philosophical text can. Just as Herbert contrasts the genres of the poem and the sermon in “The Church Porch,” Sidney points out that those who read moral philosophy usually already have a well-developed sense of ethics since they willingly seek out difficult reading material on the subject. Poetry, on the other hand, contains aesthetic pleasures that can draw in readers who are not necessarily seeking moral guidance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poesy*, in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 238.

But despite our familiarity with Sidney's defense of poetic pleasure, published nearly thirty years before *The Temple*, the fact that George Herbert regards poetry, rather than sermons, theology, or scriptural commentary, as the most effective genre for disseminating moral advice is a stranger phenomenon than we might initially assume. Today we primarily engage with Herbert as a poet, but during his lifetime he was best known, if at all, as an Anglican priest in the rural parish of Bemerton. In this capacity, Herbert regularly delivered sermons and even wrote an entire prose manual detailing how a "country parson" should craft his sermons and conduct his ministry.<sup>6</sup> Many of his colleagues published sermons and prose manuals explicitly devoted to religious methods of seeking consolation. Why would an Anglican priest so concerned with the details of preaching and serving his parish readily assert poetry's advantage over the sermon, a prose genre his vocation required him to master?

This question is further complicated by the fact that most of *The Temple* does not simply package didactic advice in pleasurable rhymes as "The Church-porch" seems to promise that it will. The "Superliminare" that bridges "The Church-porch" and "The Church" sections of *The Temple*, implies that "The Church-porch" has prepared the reader for the devotional exercises to come—the advice about church behavior, clothing, alcohol consumption, and money management grooms believers' exteriors to prepare them for the "mysticall repast" that will shape their interior selves (4):

Thou, whom the former precepts have  
Sprinkled and taught, how to behave  
Thy self in church; approach, and taste  
The churches mysticall repast.

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<sup>6</sup> As if history were determined to bear out "The Church-porch"'s claim, we have access to scores of editions of Herbert's poetry, but we do not possess an extant copy of a single one of his sermons.

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Avoid profaneness; come not here:

Nothing but holy, pure, and cleare,

Or that which groneth to be so,

May at his perill further go.

While we might expect the poems in “The Church” to continue “The Church Porch’s” orderly instructions for those who desire to live a holy life, the spiritual resources *The Temple* offers are not neatly organized and do not lead readers through a clearly delineated process that would help them conquer grief, temptation, or emotional instability. As readers enter the “The Church,” they find poems peopled with selves that are anything but “holy, pure, and cleare.” Instead, the section that comprises the bulk of *The Temple* is littered with hard hearts, disfigured souls, weak minds, and rebellious wills. The parenthetical condition that things which “groan” to be holy may also enter the church opens up the lyric sequence to a slew of contradictory images, attitudes, and arguments pertaining to the Christian life.

For almost any poem in *The Temple* that offers a model for managing grief, another rigorously critiques that very strategy, insisting that grief cannot be governed or assuaged. Where one poem celebrates consolation, another chronicles its swift departure. “Confession,” for example, describes how unlocking one’s heart to God banishes grief, but only two poems away, “The bunch of grapes” reverses the metaphor, admitting that joy has escaped its locked rooms, bringing the speaker back to his original grief. “Prayer (II)” insists that humans have consistent “easie quick accesse” to God’s ear (1), but “Deniall” laments God’s refusal to listen to distressed believers. Even poems that attempt to explain such contradictory emotional experience contradict each other. For example, “The Pulley” explains that God withholds the single blessing of “rest”

from humans in order to draw them to himself, briefly allowing readers to take comfort in the idea that emotional restiveness is a salvific experience. Yet other poems, such as “Giddinesse,” take the opposite view, branding humans’ volatile passions as obstacles that prevent them from communing with God. Rather than offer a predetermined structure for navigating religious and emotional life, *The Temple* belies the stable architectural model its title promises, building, stripping down, and rebuilding itself again and again.

Many literary scholars acknowledge *The Temple*’s engagement with spiritual and emotional affliction, but few recognize that the sequence’s troubling contradictions and structural inconsistencies are essential to its consolatory project. Instead, they explain *The Temple*’s ideological disjunctions as literary devices that ultimately construct a harmonious articulation of religious devotion. Some contend that *The Temple*’s despairing and rebellious poems are calculated fictions Herbert staged in order to offer examples of negative behavior or in order to lead readers through a meditative process that requires them to acknowledge and then reject erroneous thinking.<sup>7</sup> Others argue that poems that seem to contradict the volume’s devotional project record Herbert’s personal struggles with the Christian life, problems he eventually overcame.<sup>8</sup> Still others link *The Temple*’s contradictory emotional outbursts to theological forms and traditions such as the catechism or Reformation theology.<sup>9</sup> All of these critical approaches

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<sup>7</sup> See Anne C. Fowler, “‘With Care and Courage’: Herbert’s ‘Affliction’ Poems,” in “*Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne*”: *Essays on George Herbert*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 129-45 and Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

<sup>8</sup> See Diana Benet, *Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1984); Christina Malcolmson, *Heart-work: George Herbert and the Protestant Ethic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*. While Vendler allows for the possibility of greater ambivalence in Herbert’s religious attitudes, she primarily reads the poems as utterances of a poetic self informed by Herbert’s biography.

<sup>9</sup> See Stanley Fish, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) and Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert’s Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

attempt to reconcile *The Temple*'s contradictions and disjunctions under the aegis of a larger biographical, religious, or cultural worldview.

In his work on structuralist poetics, Jonathan Culler argues that readers expect poems to operate as coherent units and that this expectation shapes the way they interpret poems:

The crucial point, however, is that even if we deny the need for a poem to be a harmonious totality we make use of the notion in reading. ...And poems which succeed as fragments or as instances of incomplete totality depend for their success on the fact that our drive towards totality enables us to recognize their gaps and discontinuities and to give them a thematic value.

In the case of Herbert scholarship, we might say that readers expect both individual lyrics *and* the lyric sequence that is *The Temple* to function as a coherent unit. When it does not, they assign a historically or theologically acceptable “thematic value” to such gaps. Culler goes on to claim that “modern poetry” often deliberately resists expectations of unity, instead exhibiting a “failure to realize, except momentarily and tenuously, the continuity promised by formal patterns.”<sup>10</sup> Yet this moving description of twentieth-century poetry’s formal ability to underline the fragility of emotional, aesthetic, or ideological orders almost perfectly describes Herbert’s strategies for illustrating grief and anxiety in the seventeenth century. Although *The Temple* pre-dates the formal advent of modern and post-modern poetics, its cyclical construction and dissolution of formal patterns and ideological orders is similarly central to its aesthetic and social functions.

*The Temple*'s insistence on exposing the “momentary” and “tenuous” nature of consolation also implicitly critiques existing early modern cultural discourses about emotional management. Theodor Adorno claims that “great works of art,” give “*form to the crucial*

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 170-72.

*contradictions in real existence*” in opposition to the artificially constructed order of ideology.<sup>11</sup> Without simplifying early modern consolatory discourse into a single, coherent ideology, we can nevertheless observe how particular early modern texts about consolation encourage readers to act as if there were such a coherent order according to which they might manage their emotional lives. In reality, however, early moderns often received mixed messages about the meaning of their suffering, let alone ways to alleviate it. Calvinist theology, for example, left many in doubt about whether their suffering indicated election—God tests the elect and allows them to be an example of endurance for other Christians—or damnation—God punishes the wicked with crippling despair.<sup>12</sup> While such theological institutions and systems of thought purport to explain a believer’s emotional experience, their ideological power resides in the contradiction and uncertainty such explanations generate. If people can never be sure of their salvation, for example, they must constantly perform a type of self-scrutiny in an effort to align themselves with the values of such institutions.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, *The Temple*’s portrayal of contradiction works to allay such anxieties, showing instead that such contradictions are a predictable part of emotional life, not necessarily an irrefutable sign of moral failing. *The Temple* is not an overt attack on early modern ideology about emotion, but its lyrics do give shape to the contradictions present in early modern experiences of grief and anxiety. Although many critics attempt to establish which philosophical, political, and theological discourses most influenced Herbert’s poetry, I would argue that merely

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<sup>11</sup> Theodor Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 39. Italics are as they appear in the text.

<sup>12</sup> John Stachniewski examines the psychological contradictions in Calvinism in great detail in *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> At the time of *The Temple*’s publication, Calvinism was no longer the dominant theological mode in the Church of England. That Charles I felt the need to ban preaching and printing about predestination in 1628, however, suggests that Calvinist thought retained a strong hold on a generation of preachers educated in the 1590s during Calvinism’s academic heyday at places like Cambridge University, where Herbert was educated.

locating dominant strands of intellectual influence in *The Temple* ignores a major function of its cultural project—which is precisely to unsettle the coherence such intellectual systems claim in their attempts to explain and contextualize human suffering.<sup>14</sup> The sequential properties of *The Temple* allow Herbert and his readers to try on many of these systems for size, but it also allows them to assess when these discourses contradict themselves or fail to apply to a specific situation. More importantly, *The Temple* incorporates such critique into devotional practice as an acceptable and even advisable activity for Christian believers.

While Herbert never wrote a prose consolation manual, as many of his clerical contemporaries did, he did write a manual about the priestly profession that significantly informs *The Temple*'s consolatory project.<sup>15</sup> Like Herbert's lyric sequence, *The Temple*, his prose manual, titled *A Priest to the Temple, or The Country Parson His Character and Rule of Holy Life*, insists that consolation emerges only after a thorough analysis of emotional experiences like grief and temptation. In a chapter misleadingly titled "The Parson's Library," Herbert describes the priest's intellectual resources, not as books, but as a catalogue of his personal experiences:

Hee that hath considered how to carry himself at table about his appetite, if he tell this to another, preacheth; and much more feelingly, and judiciously, then he writes his rules of temperance out of bookes. So that the Parson having studied,

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<sup>14</sup> Sidney Gottlieb, for instance examines the stoic influence on poems such as "Constancy," "Content," and "Vertue," while Richard Strier argues that these poems' presence in *The Temple* is constantly countered by others that value intense passion, such as "Sighs and Groans," "The Storm," and "Gratefulnesse." Because these latter poems' treatment of emotion mirrors Reformation theology, Strier claims, they present a more accurate picture of Herbert's views on emotion. See, respectively, Sidney Gottlieb, "From 'Content' to 'Affliction' (III): Herbert's Anti-Court Sequence," *English Literary Renaissance* 23.3 (Fall 1993): 472-89 and Richard Strier, "Against the Rule of Reason: Praise of Passion from Petrarch to Luther to Shakespeare to Herbert," in *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, ed. Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 23-42.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert also translated Luigi Cornaro's *A Treatise of Temperance and Sobriety*, a text detailing the process of regulating one's passions and humors. For Herbert's English translation, see F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945).

and mastered all his lusts and affections within, and the whole Army of Temptations without, hath ever so many sermons ready penn'd, as he hath victories. And it fares in this as it doth in Physick: He that hath been sick of a Consumption, and knows what recovered him, is a Physitian so far as he meetes with the same disease, and temper; and can much better, and particularly do it, then he that is generally learned, and was never sick.<sup>16</sup>

This passage reveals the importance of mastering one's own passions in order to then articulate the process to others who might benefit from it. While a substantial repertoire of affliction helps the parson relate to his parishioners, it also helps him generate a "library" of strategies for consoling them. In the chapter, "The Parson Comforting," Herbert claims that the effective preacher will have "thoroughly digested all the points of consolation, as having continuall use of them." Rather than present a single formula for consolation, Herbert lists a multitude of arguments the parson can use to comfort his flock, including reminders of God's general providence, a defense of the salutary effects of affliction, and a comparison between the paltry grief of earth and the immense joy of heaven.<sup>17</sup>

As much as it values personal experience, however, *The Country Parson* also recognizes the important roles of language and rhetoric in articulating consolation to a larger audience. In order to do his job correctly, a priest must have a nuanced awareness of how both his language and his manner affect his congregation and how different contexts and audiences require different rhetorical modes of address. For instance, Herbert advises preachers assigned to rural parishes to employ agrarian metaphors to capture the attention and mirror the experience of their

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<sup>16</sup> George Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple or, The Country Parson His Character and Rule of Holy Life*, in Hutchinson, ed., *Works*, 278.

<sup>17</sup> Hutchinson, *Works*, 249-50.

working-class congregations.<sup>18</sup> But as we have already seen, despite his prescriptions for delivering successful sermons, Herbert claims in “The Church Porch” that poems are far more effective than sermons for capturing an audience’s attention. Given *The Country Parson*’s intense preoccupation with effectively employing language in sermons, catechism, and personal conversations with parishioners, what might have led Herbert to turn to lyric to “finde him, who a sermon flies”?

This question is further complicated by the fact that that Herbert never made any documented effort to publish his poems. In his 1670 biography of Herbert, Izaak Walton claimed that the dying poet authorized Nicholas Ferrar to publish his manuscript of poems only “if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul,” yet many scholars have questioned Walton’s accuracy as source of information.<sup>19</sup> Even if this conversation actually occurred, it paints *The Temple*’s publication as a modest afterthought rather than as a goal toward which Herbert was working all along. Many readers and critics read *The Temple*, as the title page of the 1633 edition leads them to, as a posthumous glimpse into the “private ejaculations” of a servant of God. Yet Herbert’s references to readers in poems such as “The Church-porch” suggests that he may have desired his poems to function, not simply as a means of self-therapy or private devotion, but as vehicles of emotional consolation to a larger audience.

Regardless of Herbert’s intentions regarding publication, *The Temple* was an instant success with early modern readers, commanding numerous editions and reprints throughout the seventeenth century. Although Herbert did not live to see *The Temple* in print, the book was

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<sup>18</sup> Hutchinson, *Works*, 228.

<sup>19</sup> Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr George Herbert*, in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (New York: Penguin, 2004), 311. For critiques of Walton’s biographical methods, see Amy M. Charles’s biography, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); David Novarr, *The Making of Walton’s “Lives”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); and John Butt, “Izaak Walton’s Methods in Biography,” in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association XIX* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 67-84.

immediately and almost ubiquitously admired for its reputation as “as a source of spiritual instruction and comfort.”<sup>20</sup> Early modern readers of diverse religious, political, and social backgrounds copied Herbert’s verse into their commonplace books, incorporated it into their sermons, and created their own sequels to and adaptations of *The Temple*.<sup>21</sup> During a century in which England became increasingly polarized across theological, political, and social divides, *The Temple* was beloved by Puritans and Anglicans, parliamentarians and royalists, traditionalists and radicals alike. Indeed, as C.A. Patrides reminds us, *The Temple* was far more widely read in the seventeenth century than *Paradise Lost* was.<sup>22</sup>

Some critical work on *The Temple* addresses its reception by actual readers in the seventeenth century, but only a few studies examine how *The Temple* itself theorizes the process of reading devotional poetry.<sup>23</sup> Sean McDowell argues that Herbert was able to move readers’ emotions through his facility with “rhetorical theory and faculty psychology,” and Anne Ferry claims that Herbert models *The Temple* after psalters and commonplace books, genres which would have evoked a certain set of reading practices.<sup>24</sup> But while these studies offer fascinating readings of *The Temple*’s rhetoric, they do not explain why Herbert chose to implement these strategies in lyric poetry rather than in the genres from which he borrows such rhetorical techniques.

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<sup>20</sup> Helen Wilcox, “In the *Temple* Precincts: George Herbert and Seventeenth-Century Community-Making,” in *Writing and Religion in England, 1558-1689: Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory*, ed. Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 257.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Ray’s *The Herbert Allusion Book: Allusions to George Herbert in the Seventeenth Century* remains the most complete collection of contemporary references to Herbert’s work, and, as such, it is an invaluable resource for assessing seventeenth-century reception of Herbert’s poetry. *The Herbert Allusion Book* is a special issue of *Studies in Philology* 83.4 (Autumn 1986).

<sup>22</sup> C. A. Patrides, ed., *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 3.

<sup>23</sup> For such a reception-based study of *The Temple*’s seventeenth-century editions and actual readers’ uses of them, see Wilcox, “In the *Temple* Precincts.”

<sup>24</sup> Sean McDowell, “Finding Readers: Herbert’s Appeals to the Passions.” *George Herbert Journal* 26.1-2 (Fall 2002-Spring 2003): 65; Anne Ferry, “Titles in George Herbert’s ‘little Book.’” *English Literary Renaissance* 23.2 (Mar. 1993): 314-44.

This chapter argues that the formal properties of the lyric and the lyric sequence in particular allow Herbert to offer a different kind of consolation from the sermons a preacher might deliver or the prose consolation manuals his parishioners might read. Sermons must make their arguments in the space of a few hours and should leave their audience in no doubt of God's providence and authority.<sup>25</sup> Prose consolation manuals are less bound by such time constraints, but they also seek to offer a coherent, orderly process by which one should set aside grief and accept consolation. Some texts, like Richard Sibbes's *The Soules Conflict with Itself*, published only two years after *The Temple*, even offer carefully numbered steps readers can follow when dealing with grief.<sup>26</sup> Unlike either of these genres, *The Temple* reveals the contradictions, emotional outbursts, and manipulations of language necessary to transform personal experience into "sermons ready penned."<sup>27</sup> By making this process transparent and explicit, Herbert offers lay readers as well as preachers a variety of models for performing this "digestion" of emotional experience so necessary to achieving consolation.<sup>28</sup> Just as Herbert's country parson carries a "toolbox" of consolatory arguments into his visits with parishioners, so Herbert the poet uses a variety of formal techniques to illustrate emotional distress in *The Temple*. As I will argue below, these formal techniques operate both on the micro-level of the individual poem and on a macro-level in the sequencing of poems in *The Temple*.

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, early modern sermons also circulated in print collections, allowing readers to interact with them in a prolonged textual manner as well as in an immediate aural manner. Regardless of format, however, incorporating extensive doubt into sermons would have been a politically dangerous as well as spiritually dubious course of action in the 1620s and 1630s.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Sibbes, *The Soules Conflict with it self, and Victorie over it self by Faith* (London, 1635), 84, 543.

<sup>27</sup> This phrase also recalls "Jordan" (II)'s famous closing lines: "There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd: / Copie out onely that, and save expense" (17-18).

<sup>28</sup> Stanley Fish notes a divide between critics who paint Herbert as a "poet of order and stability" and critics who characterize him as a "poet of change and surprise." Fish's study goes on to locate *The Temple*'s dialectic between order and instability in the formal features of the catechism, but I propose that we might also understand this tension in terms of how *The Country Parson* describes the preacher's multi-pronged approach to consolation. Fish, *Living Temple*, 5.

*Theorizing the Emotional Reader*

Many of *The Temple*'s most anthologized poems, such as "Jordan (II)," "The Windows," and "The Forerunners," explore the ethical and aesthetic stakes of writing devotional poetry. I would like to turn here to a lesser-known poem that theorizes the process of *reading* devotional poetry. Like "The Church-porch," "Obedience" explicitly imagines a larger audience for devotional verse and offers a conceptual model for how such poetry might extend consolation to its readers. "Obedience" opens with an extended metaphor of the poem as a legal document that transfers ownership of the poet's heart to God:

My God, if writings may  
Convey a Lordship any way  
Whither the buyer and the seller please;  
Let it not thee displease,  
If this poore paper do as much as they.

On it my heart doth bleed  
As many lines, as there doth need  
To passe itself and all it hath to thee.  
To which I do agree,  
And here present it as my speciall deed. 1-10

The metaphor of the poem as a deed emphasizes language's ability to powerfully alter material circumstances, despite the fragile media of paper and ink by which words achieve such efficacy.

In the same way as a paper deed, the poet implies, even a “poore” poem can effect actual spiritual exchange between himself and God (5).

“Obedience” drafts a social contract that ensures the poet’s relationship to God—once the deed has been completed, the poet is committed to permanently resigning his will to God’s even when he no longer feels a “sincere” desire to do so. The deed serves as a safeguard against the inevitable moments when the poet’s desires to direct his life in his own way will come creeping back. In this sense, the deed relieves the poet of the pressure to maintain a stable emotional self that persistently desires the same things. Furthermore, while a deed functions as a concrete reminder of a buyer and seller’s transaction, it also serves as proof for other people that such a transaction has actually occurred. Just as lawyers, officials, or other people might peruse a deed to assess its fairness or to resolve a subsequent dispute, so more people than the writer and the addressee may read this poem’s “deed.” By imagining his poem as a legal document, Herbert also marks it as a public document.

In addition to providing evidence for the poet’s commitment to God, “Obedience” also serves as an exemplary document that others are free to copy. After outlining the terms on which he transfers his heart to God, Herbert concludes by reflecting on the deed’s usefulness to a larger audience:

He that will pass his land,  
As I have mine, may set his hand  
And heart unto this deed, when he hath read;  
And make the purchase spread  
To both our goods, if he to it will stand.

How happie were my part,  
If some kinde man would thrust his heart  
Into these lines; till in heav'ns court of rolls  
They were by winged souls  
Entred for both, farre above their desert! 36-45

This final twist reveals the poem to be not simply a deed, but also a legal template. If another person wants to perform a similar transaction with God, he need only “set his hand / And heart” to the wording of “Obedience.” The image of someone “setting his hand” to the deed and “thrusting his heart” into its “lines” evokes the practice of filling one’s personal information into the blanks on an existing template. Like a legal template, this poem’s utterance can be effectual for a large number of people, despite its status as a generic, previously prepared document. In fact, “Obedience” suggests that following or copying a pre-existing document is not only an adequate, but an ideal, form for communicating with God.<sup>29</sup>

This metaphor of the poem as a template into which readers may insert themselves also implies intense emotional engagement with the poem. A person thrusting her heart into the lines of the poem speaks them as if they were her own. In an article on historical poetics, Yopie Prins suggests that it is possible to view lyric as an entity akin to a musical score—a poem is something that a human voice “performs.” A musical score is not the song itself but a set of directions for producing song. Just as many people can render different performances of the same musical score, so many people can offer different performances of a single poem’s text. This model of written poetry allows us to attend to lyric’s communal functions rather than

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<sup>29</sup>Liturgy is, of course, another “template” for religious devotion, and many early modern divines praised its superiority to spontaneous utterances of devotion. For a thorough exploration of the connections between liturgical forms and early modern devotional poetry, specifically Herbert’s, see Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

reading every poem as the original utterance of a single speaking voice.<sup>30</sup> Herbert's desire for another reader to "thrust his heart" into the lines of his poem similarly theorizes poetry as a script for emotional and spiritual performance. Herbert's metaphor of the poem as a deed, however, emphasizes the spiritually efficacious nature of such performance—reading the poem produces not simply an aesthetic performance of devotion but also a spiritual action that alters the reader's relationship to God. Just as a signed will or marriage license can signify deep emotion without requiring linguistic originality, so a reader can express devotion to God by affixing his name or "heart" to a set of words a poet has prepared.

"Obedience"'s apparent unconcern with "originality" as a guarantor of emotional sincerity points to a communal conception of poetry widely accepted in the early modern period, yet under-emphasized in the twentieth-century critical models of lyric by which Herbert has traditionally been read. Rather than provide readers with entertainment or an opportunity to overhear an imagined character's private moment, this poem explicitly encourages readers to adopt its words for their own devotional purposes.<sup>31</sup> Herbert's fervent desire for an imitator implies that others' willingness to re-use his language in their own devotional exercises is the ultimate sign that his poetry has achieved a useful social function. "Obedience" suggests that poems are most successful when, like a template, they can be "filled" or spoken by other readers with minimal alteration. That is, a poem is most effective when its sentiment and even its

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<sup>30</sup> Prins develops this interpretive model as she examines Sidney Lanier's manual on metrics and prosody. While she uses a nineteenth-century text to show that such models of poetry existed long before post-modern conceptions of prosody that disrupts the lyric's singular speaking voice, she acknowledges that other pre-twentieth-century literary periods can produce similar examples. Yopie Prins, "Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and *The Science of English Verse*." *PMLA* 123.1 (Jan. 2008): 229-34.

<sup>31</sup> The model of poetry as the "overheard" utterance of an imagined speaker was popularized by John Stuart Mill's essay "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties." *The Monthly Repository* (Oct. 1833).

articulation of that sentiment is *not* unique to the writer's experience.<sup>32</sup> Herbert's imaginative vision of how readers might use his poetry is all the more fascinating because later early modern poets *did*, in fact, freely plunder the words, lines, and structures of *The Temple*.<sup>33</sup> While twentieth-century criticism often treats such poets as lesser imitators of the more talented Herbert, "Obedience" suggests that they were engaging with Herbert's poetry in precisely the way he would have wanted.

While readers can use Herbert's poems for any number of purposes, the template model of devotional reading is particularly suited to console readers for their inability to maintain a stable sense of joy or devotional fervor. As I argue in the previous chapter, Mary Wroth's use of plural pronouns and rejection of deictic markers enables readers to detach her sonnets from the presumptive narrative context of Pamphilia and Amphilanthus's relationship and to insert their own experiences into the poems. Similarly, Herbert often leaves his descriptions of grief abstract, as in in "Affliction" (III), veiling them from any distinguishing markers that would link them to a specific person or circumstance.<sup>34</sup> In addition to creating generic utterances that other readers can inhabit, the poem also offers a formal consolation that cannot be achieved by rhetorical content alone. By asking readers to insert themselves into his poems, Herbert also invites them to experience the poems' form as illustrative of their own emotional experience.

"Affliction" (III)'s depiction of grief is made more dramatic by its placement directly after a group of Neostoic poems which paint grief as a sign of both intellectual and moral

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<sup>32</sup> Other poems in *The Temple* confirm this point, highlighting how Herbert thought of his own work as "copies" of pre-existing material or as writings composed in collaboration with God. See, respectively, "Jordan" (II) and "A True Hymn."

<sup>33</sup> Henry Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (London, 1650) is the best-known instance of such borrowing, often lifting entire titles, lines, and stanzas from *The Temple* without citation. See also Christopher Harvey's *The Synagogue, or the Shadow of the Temple. Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (London, 1640).

<sup>34</sup> It is, however, very common for critics to treat such poems as if they were biographical. See, for example, Benet, *Secretary of Praise*, Malcolmson, *Heart-work* and Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*.

weakness. “Content” chides the poet’s “mutt’ring thoughts,” urging them not to follow every “untrained hope or passion,” an activity the poet describes as “wantonness in contemplation” (1, 6,8,). “Humility” offers a fable about the dangerous effects of pride, while “Constancy” lauds the man “Who never melts or thaws / At close tentations” and who refuses to be overwhelmed by the passions of other people (21-22). These poems offer readers familiar precepts about controlling their passions, but “Affliction (III)” interrupts this series of didactic poems by sweeping human agency out of the conversation. While poems like “Constancy” imply that humans can and should control their emotions, “Affliction (III)” suggests that they cannot—and furthermore, that this emotional instability actually signifies a kind of communion with God.

If “Obedience” invites a reader to “thrust his heart,” into the words of the poem, “Affliction” (III) combines this invitation with an awareness of God’s ability to enter and infuse human expressions of emotion. The poem opens with an analysis of what appears to be an involuntary exclamation:

My heart did heave, and there came forth, *O God!*

By that I knew that thou wast in the grief,

To guide and govern it to my relief,

Making a scepter of the rod:

Hadst thou not had thy part,

Sure the unruly sigh had broke my heart. 1-6

The italicized spondee “*O God!*” both visually and aurally separates itself from the rest of the poem, marking the phrase as a subject of contemplation. The stanza’s past tense verbs further frame the exclamation as something that has already been spoken rather than as something that is currently being uttered, and this temporal distance allows the speaker to step back and consider

the exclamation as a quotation—or a text—to be interpreted. This critical distance also lets the poet deflect emotional agency from himself and his readers. Describing how his heart “heaved” and the phrase “came forth,” the poet marks the human body as a passive vehicle from which emotion erupts involuntarily. In a clever play of words, the speaker notes that God is “in the grief,” suggesting that God himself may be the source of such an “involuntary” expression of grief. When the poet claims that this “unruly sigh” would have broken his heart if God had not “had [his] part,” he draws on the language of musical parts to imply that both God and the poet speak this phrase together.

At first, “Affliction (III)” imagines God inhabiting the poet’s emotion in a benevolent way—to turn the “grief” of the second line into its third-line rhyme, “relief.” Yet the imagery Herbert uses to describe this transformation subtly questions whether a shift from human to divine rule will necessarily bring a cessation of pain. The speaker claims that God has turned his rod of discipline into a scepter, yet the latter kind of rod can still symbolize punitive authority. Because the word “rod” also carries biblical connotations of a shepherd’s staff, which can be used to comfort a flock, Herbert might easily have drawn attention to the dual meanings of this word.<sup>35</sup> Instead, he chooses to convert the disciplinary rod into a scepter, another rod-shaped instrument used to symbolize power and keep subjects in submission. As Michael Schoenfeldt’s readings of *The Temple* remind us, corporal punishments, including torture, *were* an integral part of political governance in early modern England, a fact not lost on Herbert.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than interrogate this failed attempt to transform suffering through metaphor, as a poet like John Donne might have, Herbert simply moves on, leaving the “bad” metaphor as a trace of the analytical work involved in seeking consolation. The second stanza continues this

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<sup>35</sup> See Wilcox, ed., *Complete English Poems*, n. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power*, 121.

search for a proper metaphor, imagining the life-sapping sigh of affliction as a “gale” to move the poet to heaven “sooner” (12). Yet in the final stanza, Herbert returns to the question of how God can be “in” someone’s grief, modifying his previous explanation:

Thy life on earth was grief, and thou art still

Constant unto it, making it to be

A point of honour, now to grieve in me,

And in thy members suffer ill.

They who lament one crosse,

Thou dying dayly, praise thee to thy losse. 13-18

Here Herbert entertains an orthodox ideal, in which believers welcome grief because it helps them identify with Christ’s suffering. A suffering Christian can take comfort in the idea that his pain affirms his “membership” in the true church. By claiming that God “grieves” in him as well as “suffers” in him, Herbert licenses grief as a normal and even necessary Christian activity. Emotional outbursts become signs of God’s own grief that emerge through the vehicle of the human body. If a believer is a “member” or a part of Christ’s body, as St. Paul claims, then a suffering Christian might very well be God’s mouth, or his vocal chords—when a cry erupts from this “member,” God himself is articulating grief.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, when believers observe each other suffering, they can take comfort in the conviction that they suffer toward the common goal of embodying Christ’s passion.

But even while these stanzas explain human grief as divine emotions being expressed through the believer, their meter becomes more and more irregular, deviating from the iambic metrics set up in the first stanza. Enjambments begin to fragment semantic units across line

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<sup>37</sup> See Colossians 1:24 (Authorized Version).

breaks, even as the speaker claims that God's "breath" gives him "shape" (7). As Herbert develops an ideological order to explain grief, he retains its distressing effects in the physical frame of the poem, illustrating how grief continues to rack the speaker's soul. In one such enjambment—"thou art still / Constant"—Herbert recalls the language of the stoic poem, "Constancie," that directly precedes "Affliction (III)." While stoic ideals of constancy involve maintaining an inner peace despite the "storms" of circumstance and human passion, Herbert rewrites constancy as God's continual commitment to a passion that proves salvific for humans. Because God chooses to speak and feel through his subjects, human grief can also be recontextualized as a form of spiritual constancy rather than as a dangerous, sinful passion. In this context, a slightly warped or broken poetic form becomes not a sign of the poet's "unruly" emotions, but a formal proof of his likeness to Christ (6).

### *Metaphorical Approaches to Consolation*

Like "Affliction" (III), "The Flower" capitalizes on poetry's formal and linguistic power to illustrate the contours of emotional life in a way that consoles readers for their inability to keep a tight rein on their passions. While the former poem offers the consolation that emotional instability can actually mirror Christ's own passion, the latter draws on climatological metaphors to portray emotional fluctuation as both a natural and providential process. The use of metaphor in consolatory or didactic texts is certainly not exclusive to poetry—many early modern prose texts make ample use of vivid metaphor, and we have already seen how Herbert himself talks about the parson's responsibility to craft appropriate metaphors for his sermons. In "The Flower," however, Herbert does not simply present a metaphor in order to make an argument about emotional management, but he reflexively considers the very process of finding

consolation in metaphor, acknowledging both the productive insight it can offer, as well as the alarming slippage between vehicle and tenor that threatens to undercut such consolation.

“The Flower” opens with the suggestion that if plants experience natural, regular cycles of growth and death, perhaps human emotion operates according to a similar seasonal model:

How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean  
Are thy returns! ev’n as the flowers in spring;  
To which, besides their own demean,  
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.

Grief melts away

Like snow in May

As if there were no such cold thing. 1-7

On the surface, the metaphor’s content is relatively straightforward and conventional, even if its form and language are beautifully unique. Emotions are like weather—grief is like the harsh cold of snow, and the return of joy is like sunlight that melts the snow. The poet’s heart is like a flower—it retreats into the earth during a snowy winter and flourishes in the warmth of spring sunshine. Just as perennials shed their leaves and flowers for a winter hibernation period, so humans move between seasons of joy and grief, seeming to be dead when they are simply waiting for the return of joy (ll. 8-14).

While we might traditionally call “The Flower”’s predominant conceit an “extended metaphor,” the poem does not provide the kind of neat, ideological coherence such a term connotes. At times, the metaphor feels fully integrated into the poem, as when Herbert seamlessly uses verbs associated with plants to describe his emotional life—“I grow in a straight line” or “I bud again” (29, 36). At other times, though, Herbert uses the apparatus of simile,

reminding readers that his heart works “as” or “like” a flower. In addition to using such linguistic markers to draw attention to the separation between the metaphor’s vehicle and tenor, Herbert often wanders away from the metaphor altogether, attempting to recapture the strangeness of both natural and emotional phenomena.

After introducing the metaphor of soul as flower, the third stanza abruptly questions the natural order implied by this metaphor. Instead, God’s abilities to kill and quicken seem to work at odds with nature—they are described as “wonders” with transformative “power[s]” that can instantly exalt people to heaven or throw them down to hell (15-16). This imagery of vast spatial distances echoes lines from the preceding poem, “The Crosse,” in which the speaker complains that God raises people up only to throw them down (22). By gesturing back to images from poems that precede “The Flower,” Herbert mutes the representational coherence of its predominant metaphor. Even as “The Flower” represents emotion through natural cycles, it acknowledges the incomplete and provisional nature of using a single metaphor to make sense of radical mood fluctuation. Allen Grossman reminds us that such incompleteness is inherent to metaphor: “What is *like* cannot be unique,” yet “What is *like* cannot be identical.” Instead, he argues, a poem “reduces the uniqueness (inconceivability) of personal (own) experience” by employing metaphor.<sup>38</sup>

We can see this principle at work in “The Flower”’s second stanza, which opens with a question of “inconceivability,” followed by a simile that marks the likeness hearts and flowers share:

Who would have thought my shrivel’d heart

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<sup>38</sup> Allen Grossman, *Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics*, in Allen Grossman and Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 248-49.

Could have recovered greenness? It was gone  
Quite underground; as flowers depart  
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;  
Where they together  
All the hard weather,  
Dead to the world, keep house unknown. 8-14

By declaring emotions to be like seasons and hearts to be like flowers, Herbert reduces—but does not eliminate—the unknowable quality of emotional experience by comparing it to something familiar and knowable.<sup>39</sup> As the third stanza shows, such similes may help humans understand emotion *better*, but they cannot offer *complete* understanding. Here Herbert explicitly recognizes the danger of confusing the proximate likeness of metaphor with the congruence of equation: “We say amisse, / This or that is: / Thy word is all, if we could spell” (19-21). In contrast to human ability to approximate meaning with metaphor, God’s word establishes a definite meaning for “all” that “is.”

Although this stanza seems like a digression from the poem’s organizing metaphor, its meditations on the nature of simile and metaphor are central to the poem. “If” humans could “spell,” or interpret, Herbert claims, they could fully understand the workings of their own emotions. Herbert uses the word “if,” not to express possibility, but rather to signify impossibility. If *The Temple* makes anything eminently clear, it is that humans cannot perfectly interpret God’s word or the emotional mechanisms with which he has endowed them. This point illuminates other moments in “The Flower” where Herbert uses the phrase “as if” to indicate the

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<sup>39</sup> This also mirrors Herbert’s expressed preference for agrarian metaphors, the usefulness of which he explains in *The Country Parson*: “[The parson] condescends even to the knowledge of tillage, and pastorage, and makes great use of them in teaching, because people by what they understand, are best led to what they understand not.” Hutchinson, *Works*, 228.

deceptive powers of simile. In the first stanza, he explains that grief melts like snow in May, “as if there were no such cold thing” (7)—a phrase whose evocative power resides in the fact that humans clearly recognize it as a fantasy. Obviously, snow will return, and so will grief.

As Herbert returns to the flower metaphor in the fourth and fifth stanzas, he uses the phrase “as if” to illustrate a self-deception that should be similarly see-through to humans but is not. The speaker chronicles his good intentions to reach toward heaven, “growing and groning thither” but also acknowledges that his “sinnes” make him overly ambitious, acting “as if heav’n were [his] own” (25, 28, 30). This draws God’s “anger,” which cuts him down to size, reversing the excessive entitlement of such an attitude. Longing for stability, the speaker pleads: “O that I once past changing were, / Fast in thy Paradise where no flower can wither!” (22-23). As Herbert begins to write sin into the flower metaphor, he touches on a common anxiety about the cause of emotional instability, as articulated in other poems, such as “Giddieness.”

While Herbert opens “The Flower” by using simile to move from inconceivability to likeness, he ends the poems by reversing that movement from likeness back to inconceivability. The penultimate stanza begins by comparing the poet’s emotional and inspirational renewal to a plant’s budding, but it ends with an exclamation of wonder that exceeds the pattern the flower metaphor offers:

And now in age I bud again,  
After so many deaths I live and write;  
I once more smell the dew and rain,  
And relish versing: O my onely light,  
  
It cannot be  
That I am he

On whom thy tempests fell all night. 36-42

Although Herbert emphasizes a repetitive process through the words “again,” “so many,” and “once more,” he cannot shake his original sense of incredulity at the swift change from grief to joy, from silence to prolific writing. While other poems in *The Temple* describe writing poetry as an agonizing process, Herbert here associates writing with the sensory pleasures of dew and rain; he now “relishes” the process of concocting verse. Like his changeable emotions, the poet’s ability to write verse is a talent that can be abruptly taken away or felicitously visited upon him by God.

In addition to linking writer’s block to grief (and inspiration to joy), Herbert’s conclusion to “The Flower” suggests that poetry plays a crucial role in helping other readers understand the cycles of joy and despair that govern emotional experience. The final stanza opens:

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,  
To make us see we are but flowers that glide:  
Which when we once can finde and prove,  
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide.  
Who would be more,  
Swelling through store,  
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride. 43-49

Here “The Flower”’s individual musing on grief and consolation open up into an inclusive use of the first person plural, including other readers and believers in the insight the poem offers. As Herbert invites readers to identify with his speaker’s metaphor, he also encourages them to see themselves, not as diseased outsiders, but as typical members of a larger “garden,” or emotional community. In the same moment, Herbert moves from the linguistic apparatus of simile to a

more direct metaphorical language: “we *are* but flowers,” rather than “we *are like* flowers.” Once the poet considers his writings’ potential to help other people understand their emotional cycles, he is able to move from observing the flower as a pattern for emotion to inhabiting the metaphor as a model.

Despite metaphor’s inability to offer a stable or complete model of emotion, “The Flower” still celebrates poetry as a useful tool for understanding and managing emotion. Poetry and metaphor “make us see” patterns that console by offering an explanation for the temporary nature of both grief and relief. Put another way, God’s demonstrates his love for humans by providing them with aesthetic faculties through which they can come to understand their relationship to his power. “The Flower”’s pattern humbles humans, reminding them that they “are but flowers that glide,” but it also allows readers to understand their perceived shortcomings as phases of a necessary cycle. Although Herbert does allude to sin as a cause of grief, the poem’s final stanza redefines pride. The “pride” of trying “to be more” is not the effort to avoid grief but rather the false belief that it is possible to “grow out” of the cycles of emotional growth and decline. A flower that grows quickly is not trying to be something other than a flower—but a flower that never withered would cease to have a place in the natural world. A person who accepts grief’s advent as a natural part of life can also look forward to the inevitable return of joy as yet another season of emotional life. For Herbert, poetry offers readers and writers a space to construct patterns that help them “finde and prove” their own nature.

“The Flower” suggests that metaphors can only provide transient consolation, but according to Grossman, this very incompleteness can also facilitate a way of knowing oneself in relationship to God:

The sacred is functionally a principle of orientation. This function is enabled by the nature of divinity as generative of boundaries. Metaphor implies the experience of sanctity by repeating the constraints which boundedness imposes on experience. The particle ‘like’ functions as divinity by keeping realms in being, in the same way that ‘space’ enables perception by interposing a middle term between subject and object.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, metaphor provides the space necessary for humans to correctly “see” their relationship to a God who is fundamentally different from themselves. The metaphor in “The Flower” illustrates such ontological boundaries, both in its status as a metaphor and in its semantic content—once humans can “find and prove” their nature, they recognize their place within the borders of God’s “garden.” As “The Flower” and many other poems in *The Temple* suggest, sin can be implicated in emotional instability, but such instability can also simply be a characteristic that defines humans as “not-God.” While *The Temple* never permanently separates anxieties about emotional instability from anxieties about sin, “The Flower” offers a brief moment in which the volatile passions inherent to “human nature” may be read as divine order rather than as evidence of sin.

### *“Tempering” Emotional Instability*

While poems like “Affliction” (III) and “The Flower” offer illustrative models of emotion on the level of the individual poem, Herbert also uses the larger formal properties of lyric

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<sup>40</sup> Grossman, *Summa Lyrica*, 249-50.

sequencing to illustrate emotional movement. As “Affliction” (III)’s placement directly after several Neostoic poems shows, the sequencing of individual poems plays an important role in *The Temple*’s consolatory project. In an expansive study of the history of the lyric sequence, Roland Greene argues that the genre offers a more fluid version of temporality than other literary forms, such as epic verse or prose narrative. Although there often are “fixed limits” of time that bound the events and thoughts of a particular lyric sequence, the sequence itself is not driven by a linear plot but rather by a process of accumulation and retrospection.<sup>41</sup> Because the structure of a lyric sequence downplays rigid chronological orders, readers are free to identify and track other organizing relationships between poems that illuminate the work’s larger thematic structures. According to this theory, a sequence such as *The Temple* offers an infinite number of possible combinations by which readers might explore certain themes or seek out subjects that interest them.

A quick overview of scholarship on *The Temple*’s structure, however, reveals that certain ways of organizing the poems are more attractive to literary critics than others. In order to make *The Temple* more manageable, many critics select and regroup its poems according to qualities such as biographical content, shared titles, or typological patterns of spiritual progress.<sup>42</sup> Yet such criticism often ignores a number of combinations that upset assumptions about Herbert’s pious character or even about the types of devotional thought that were possible in the seventeenth century. For every grouping that demonstrates a movement from grief to joy or from rebellion to submission, it is also possible to construct a “subsequence” that moves in the

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<sup>41</sup> Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 49-51.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Benet, *Secretary of Praise*; Daniel Rubey, “The Poet and the Christian Community: Herbert’s Affliction Poems and the Structure of *The Temple*.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 2.1 (Winter 1980): 105-23; and A.E. Watkins, “Typology and the Self in George Herbert’s ‘Affliction’ Poems,” *George Herbert Journal* 31.1-2 (Fall 2007-Spring 2008): 63-82.

opposite direction, simply by grouping the poems differently or by choosing different end points for the “sequence.” Even when *The Temple* explicitly encourages readers to notice shifts from what we might simplistically term “positive” to “negative” affects, critics are less inclined to label these movements suitable models for understanding *The Temple* as a whole.

*The Temple*’s five “Affliction” poems offer perhaps the most popular subsequence for critics interested in Herbert’s portrayal of emotion. Daniel Rubey claims that the poems “constitute a coherent structure organized around movement from the individual and autobiographical in ‘Affliction (I)’ to the communal and typological in ‘Affliction (V),’ where Herbert’s personal history is enclosed within the historical community of the Church.”<sup>43</sup> Paul Dyck usefully reminds us, however, that the poems with shared titles were not numbered until F.E. Hutchinson’s 1941 edition of *The Temple*. Furthermore, Dyck argues,

All five ‘Affliction’ poems occur within fifty-eight poems and within fifty-two pages, so that they are concentrated and yet far enough apart to make it challenging to find and identify them as a group. ...Because there are many instances of ‘Affliction’ and because they can be read in many different orders, any reader’s progress through the text becomes multi-linear and recursive.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to ignoring the psychological effect of the lyrics that separate the “Affliction” poems, such a linear reading disregards the presence of the three despairing poems that directly follow the “sequence.” Despite the insight of “Affliction” (V), “Mortification,” “Decay,” and “Misery,” are some of the darkest and most despairing poems in the entirety of *The Temple*. If we expand the borders of the “Affliction” subsequence by even a few poems, then, it becomes far more

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<sup>43</sup> Rubey, “Poet and Christian Community,” 107. See also Watkins, “Typology and the Self.”

<sup>44</sup> Paul Dyck, “‘Thou didst betray me to a lingering book’: Discovering Affliction in *The Temple*.” *George Herbert Journal* 28.1-2 (Fall 2004-Spring 2005): 29.

difficult to read the original subsequence as a model for interpreting “the overall design of *The Temple*,” as Gary Kuchar claims we should.<sup>45</sup>

Poems like “Decay” and “Miserie” do not necessarily negate the consolatory force of poems like “Affliction” (V), but they do construct a more complicated model of consolation that emphasizes the recurrence of grief rather than the possibility of permanently escaping grief. In the following pages, I will examine a pair of poems that share a title without demonstrating a progressive spiritual journey from sin to grace or from ignorance to maturity. Unlike the “Affliction” poems, the “Temper” poems actually do occur right next to each other in *The Temple*—arguably they encourage readers to interpret them as a unit much more explicitly than the scattered “Affliction” poems do.<sup>46</sup> Yet because the poems move from insight to frustration, critics have been more hesitant to declare them a model for understanding the larger structure of *The Temple*. In the following reading, I offer an important critical corrective to sequential interpretations of *The Temple* by illustrating what happens when a similar logic of “reading in order” is applied to the “Temper” poems.

The “Temper” poems create a hall of mirrors effect as they explore strategies for dealing with anxiety about emotional management—they search for consolation in a whirling cycle of metaphorical, formal, and rhetorical models, trying to find one that explains *why* grief is so tenacious. The poems’ contiguous placement in the sequence invites readers to regard them as a pair, but despite their proximity, “The Temper” (I) and (II) propose wildly different approaches to the same problem. On one hand, the poems seem to indict each other, illustrating the very emotional instability they attempt to alleviate—as soon as the speaker constructs one pattern for

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<sup>45</sup> Gary Kuchar, *The Poetry of Religious Sorrow in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>46</sup> See “The H. Scriptures” (II), however, which acknowledges the interpretive practice of cross-referencing scattered verses in order to create meaning.

managing his grief, it attacks in a different way. On the other hand, the poems imply that consolatory strategies must be similarly flexible if they are to treat emotions that evolve so rapidly.

“The Temper” (I) opens with an exclamation about the difficulty of maintaining a stable emotional state:

How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes  
Gladly engrave thy love in steel,  
If what my soul doth feel sometimes,  
My soul might ever feel!

Although there were some fourtie heav'ns, or more,  
Sometimes I peere above them all;  
Sometimes I hardly reach a score,  
Sometimes to hell I fall. 1-8

Herbert uses the directional language of flying and falling to establish a spatial metaphor for the stark difference between the kinds of emotional states humans experience. By identifying these high and low places as heavens and hells, Herbert assigns a moral value to different emotional experiences. Being above “fourtie heav'ns” indicates not only a state of joy, but an ability to offer God a consistent measure of praise and devotion. Being in “hell” represents grief, but also an inability to craft poetry worthy of permanent engraving.

As the poem continues, the speaker tries to escape from this equation of emotional experience with moral value by implying that God, rather than himself, is the cause of this instability. “O rack me not to such a vast extent,” he pleads (9). “Wilt thou meet arms with man,

that thou dost stretch / A crumme of dust from heav'n to hell?" he asks (13-14). If the speaker recognizes that God is the agent who causes his drastic mood swings, he can momentarily absolve himself from responsibility for regulating his own emotions. Yet if this rhetorical move offers the consolation of being free from responsibility, it depends upon a terrifying construction of divine agency. Where "Affliction" (III) hints at torture, "The Temper" (I) explicitly identifies God as a torturer who manipulates the poet's emotions into painful and unnatural positions, like a contorted human body upon a rack. The poem's metrics formally underline this metaphor of torture—as each stanza contracts a pentameter line to two tetrameters to one trimeter, Herbert creates the impression that the poem itself is continually being stretched and compressed in concert with the speaker's emotional state.

Thus far, the poet has outlined two possibilities—either his unstable emotions indicate his nature as a sinful, fallible human, or they are the result of a sadistic God who enjoys toying with his subjects. The final stanzas of the poem offer three consecutive attempts to create alternatives to this unattractive dichotomy. In the fifth stanza, the speaker pleads with God to do away with emotion altogether. Identifying the phenomenon of emotional instability itself, rather than his frequent "lows," as his main source of distress, the poet begs for freedom from emotional imbalance:

O let me, when thy roof my soul hath hid,

O let me roost and nestle there:

Then of a sinner thou art rid,

And I of hope and fear. 17-20

Here the speaker expresses a desire to give up *all* emotional extremes, the pleasurable as well as the painful. This stanza wistfully desires a state of emotional stasis in which the speaker escapes

his sinful, unstable nature by abandoning not only grief but also hope. Herbert's metaphor of a "roof" further encapsulates the contradictory nature of the emotions coursing through the poem. On one hand, the speaker's desire to "roost and nestle" in the rafters suggests a bird coming home to a safe nest, sheltered from the buffets of wind and rain. Yet the speaker's claim that this event would also rid God of a sinner hints that this could only be accomplished in death—the metaphor's taper into vagueness implies that the speaker knows that what he is asking is impossible.

The penultimate stanza revises this fantasy of solution by exposing the desire for emotionlessness as yet another extreme. Rather than end with the wish for escape, the poem draws readers back down into the world, attempting to find a compromise between the speaker's desire for emotional peace and God's desire to painfully pull him in multiple directions. Turning to a new metaphor, Herbert explains emotional instability as the process of tuning a musical instrument:

Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best:

Stretch or contract me thy poore debter:

This is but tuning of my breast,

To make the musick better. 21-24

Instead of assigning grief and joy moral values, Herbert redefines emotional extremes as aesthetic entities. Such fluctuations of passion are not indications of sin but are simply byproducts of an emotional calibration that eventually allows the speaker to acquire a temporary equilibrium. Just as a string being tuned produces notes both higher and lower than it is supposed to, the poet must experience these extreme emotional "notes" before he can sound the proper tone of praise between them. If emotional "tuning" is necessary for producing art, he can

embrace it as a means to an end. But despite the appeal of this metaphor, Herbert acknowledges the vestiges of moral condemnation that lurk in such a model of emotional change. By using the term “debter” to describe himself, the poet alludes to a kind of criminal likely to be “stretched” and “contracted” on a rack in early modern England, letting out a painful “music” of cries in response to this “tuning.” Once more, Herbert returns to the specter of torture, suggesting that the stringed instrument, the poverty-stricken debtor, and the believer’s heart are all imperfect objects being forcibly molded into a condition that makes them more useful to their sovereigns.

In the last stanza, Herbert makes a final attempt to escape the recurring alignment of emotional instability with moral decay by closing the “distance” between joy and grief:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,  
Thy hands made both, and I am there:  
Thy power and love, my love and trust  
Make one place ev’ry where. 25-28

Here Herbert implies that the experience of holding company with lowly dust or exalted angels is essentially the same. He does this by separating spatial language from moral value and by finding common ground between two very different states of being. Because God created both dust and angels, being with either one can be described as being “there”—in the presence of God’s creation. Rather than consider himself either in hell when grieving or in heaven when joyous, the speaker redefines both of these metaphorical locations as “one place.” Put another way, Herbert’s equation of keeping company with dust and angels rejects a dualist attitude that would see grief as a fleshly experience and joy as a spiritual one. While joy and grief feel like different emotions to humans, he argues, they are essentially the same type of experience. Line twenty-seven’s syntax further underscores this newfound coherence in emotional experience by

linking God's power to the speaker's trust through their mutual love. The repetition of the word "love" obliterates the distance between his suffering and God's agency. If the speaker can trust that "ev'ry where" is one place, he can reread emotional instability as an "affective illusion" covering the truth of his constant, unshakable proximity to God and his creation.

Even as a single poem, "The Temper" (I) illustrates the necessity of working through multiple conceptual models of emotional change. As Herbert moves through the various possibilities in the last three stanzas of the poem, he recognizes the problems with each model and demonstrates a commitment to revision until he finds a consolatory strategy that "works." Yet as merely one poem within a vast lyric sequence, "The Temper" (I) also offers an important point of contrast for other poems that critique *its* process of seeking consolation. In a sequential progression that would be comical, if it were not such a tragically accurate depiction of the way emotion works, "The Temper" (I)'s soaring insight is directly followed by "The Temper" (II)'s dumbfounded reaction: "It cannot be. Where is that mightie joy, / Which just now took up all my heart?" (1-2). It is as if all the intellectual and aesthetic work of turning grief to relief in "The Temper" (I) never happened. This new poem reasserts the tenacity of grief, revealing the first poem's insight to be a temporary experience of joy destined to change like all of the poet's other emotions.

In particular, "The Temper" (II) reopens the question of agency, suggesting that the poet's emotional fluctuations are, in fact, excellent markers of his weakened moral condition. "The Temper" (II) not only considers, but outright assumes that the poet's own sin is causing his emotional instability: "Lord, if thou must needs use thy dart, / Save that, and me; or sin for both destroy" (3-4). In this model of emotion, grief is a well-deserved punishment for sin, which could be defined either by particular actions or simply by a person's sinful nature as a human

being. By assuming sin is the source of his grief, the poet deeply compromises the metaphors of consolation and agency he previously constructed in “The Temper” (I). Instead of viewing grief as a salutary process by which God tunes an instrument to prepare it for praise or as a sign of unity with God’s creation, “The Temper” (II) considers grief a direct indication of moral failure. “The Temper” (II) returns yet again to its companion poem’s description of God as a torturer, inflicting punishment on his errant subjects. In fact, “The Temper” (II) has regressed even farther than “The Temper” (I), which at least considers the possibility that God’s torture is unfair.

While “The Temper” (I) strives to console readers for emotional extremes by redefining these experiences as parts of the same whole, “The Temper” (II) reneges on this insight, asserting that God’s creation is *not* as stable as the speaker claimed a moment before:

The grosser world stands to thy word and art;  
But thy diviner world of grace  
Thou suddenly dost raise and race,  
And ev’ry day a new Creatour art. 5-8

As the speaker distinguishes between the physical world of nature and the divine world of grace, he further explains humanity’s difficulty negotiating the two worlds. The natural world’s order is comprehensible to humans, but the spiritual world operates according to different rules that do not follow a recognizable order. If humans do not know the principles by which the world of grace operates, they will have even more difficulty distinguishing between punitive and salutary grief. The speaker points out that it would be far less harmful if the physical world followed erratic laws. He does not mind if “elements change, and heaven move,” as long as God’s “higher Court” maintains permanent residence in his heart (14-15). Rather than explain volatile emotion as part of God’s redemptive process, “The Temper” (II) imagines God’s indwelling as a state

marked by emotional stability. This closing request for stability and fixedness brings the reader back to the opening cries of “The Temper” (I). And even though the poem ends with this plea, it gives no indication that God will consent to the poet’s request.

So if “The Temper” (II) undoes the arguments of the preceding poem, does it also strip “The Temper” (I) of its consolatory value? On the surface, these two poems show a speaker who has not only failed to solve the problem of his changeable temper but who has also failed to retain a stable explanation of emotional instability. As a pair, however, the “Temper” poems do offer readers a sympathetic articulation of emotional instability that might mirror their own. The poems’ contiguous presence in *The Temple* illustrates both Herbert’s acknowledgement that emotional experience overflows the bounds of one poem’s utterance and his understanding of how rapidly emotions can change. The “Temper” poems may not answer the question they set out to solve, but they do console by striving to present an honest view of the way emotions work—they shift; they contradict each other; they return. If we read the “Temper” poems “in order,” we can see a picture of emotional life that operates according to a recursive temporality rather than a progressive linear development. If *The Temple*’s emotional sequencing moves in a multitude of directions, while maintaining its status as a volume of devotional poetry, it can also validate rather than condemn the setbacks of trying to manage shifting emotions. The “Temper” poems value sustained analytical effort to understand and manage emotion, but they also illustrate their understanding of the cyclical and recursive process of such a project. After all, if God himself builds and rebuilds the world of grace on a daily basis, is it so bad if believers’ emotional lives (or *The Temple*’s structure) follow suit?

In both individual lyrics and in its larger structure, *The Temple* uses poetic form to model a process of understanding emotion that was beginning to gain traction in other areas of early

modern society, if not in sermons or religious consolation manuals. Texts like Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) were maniacally dedicated to collecting various explanations and cures—both religious and secular—for melancholy and grief. While Burton acknowledges that sin or religious superstition can cause melancholy, he also allows that diet, climate, and an individual's unique physiology can cause emotional distress and wild mood fluctuations. Despite the vast differences in their modes of writing, both Burton and Herbert use linguistic form to create an inclusive understanding of emotion that looks beyond sin and moral weakness for other explanations of grief and instability.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, *The Temple* consoles by offering a more complex and forgiving understanding of emotional instability *within*, rather as an alternative to, early modern religious discourse.

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<sup>47</sup> In fact, despite *The Anatomy of Melancholy*'s status as an informational treatise, scholars often include it in literary studies because of its unique stylistics. See, for instance, the chapters on Burton in Stanley Fish, *Self-consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) and Doug Trevor, *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For a further discussion of this phenomenon, see Mary Ann Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

## Chapter 4

### Consoling Dialogues in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

From its first line, *Paradise Lost* promises to account for the existence of evil in the world by telling the tale of “man’s first disobedience” (1).<sup>1</sup> Yet even as it crafts a story about the origins of grief and pain, Milton’s epic also creates a narrative about the genesis of consolation—the process by which fallen beings manage distressing emotions. *Paradise Lost* stages multiple approaches to consolation: Satan and the demons seek emotional respite in political activity and civilization, while the archangel Michael attempts to comfort Adam and Eve with visions of their offspring’s future victory over Satan. Adam and Eve cling to each other’s company for solace against the dangerous and unfamiliar world beyond Eden’s gates. *Paradise Lost*’s status as an epic poem with a defined plot, characters, and dialogue generically sets it apart from the lyric sequences of Shakespeare, Mary Wroth, and George Herbert. Yet like these writers, Milton is similarly fascinated by poetry’s ability to produce a complex discussion that considers both the ethical stakes and the practical mechanics of achieving consolation.

Literary scholars have long scrutinized Milton’s intellectual and theological commitments as a way of interpreting his literary works, and research on consolation in *Paradise Lost* is no exception to this trend. This work focuses almost exclusively on Michael’s visit to Adam and Eve in Books 11-12, and it attempts to locate intellectual source material that

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<sup>1</sup> William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon, eds., *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: Modern Library, 2007). All other quotations of Milton’s work are taken from this edition.

illuminates the angel's strategies for consoling the fallen humans. Critics like Christopher Fitter trace Michael's views to classical source texts of consolation for political exile, while others, like Ann Astell, insist that Christian texts of consolation, such as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, more closely inform Michael's message.<sup>2</sup> Such readings construct a hierarchical model of consolation in which readers receive comfort from authoritative texts, much as Adam and Eve receive Michael's divine revelation.

On closer examination, however, *Paradise Lost* reveals an intense skepticism about whether such intellectual traditions offer humans sufficient resources to engage the problems of fallen existence. More specifically, *Paradise Lost* questions the efficacy of consolatory modes that require morally compromised beings, first, to desire consolation for the right reasons and, second, to successfully navigate and implement a complex set of directions for attaining consolation. As I will argue below, Milton regards this problem as one endemic both to secular modes of consolation, such as Stoic philosophy, and to religious modes of consolation, such as biblical narrative. In his portrayals of the demons' attempts to console themselves in hell and Michael's consolation of Adam after the fall, Milton identifies ways in which these received consolatory traditions fail to help fallen beings ethically manage emotion.

In their place, he privileges a more active model in which humans construct their own consolation in collaboration with other people. While scholarship on consolation in *Paradise Lost* tends to focus on philosophical or didactic modes of consolation, I argue that Milton identifies communal modes like dialogue and affective performance as the most successful

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Fitter, "Native Soil": The Rhetoric of Exile Lament and Exile Consolation in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 20 (1984): 147-62. Ann W. Astell, "The Medieval 'Consolatio' and the Conclusion of 'Paradise Lost.'" *Studies in Philology* 82.4 (Autumn 1985): 477-92.

vehicles of consolation in the epic. Milton frames Adam and Eve's ongoing dialogue about how to repair their marriage and navigate their fallen world as an epic journey, complete with numerous obstacles and frustrations. In the couple's faltering but persistent attempts to find consolation in their newly imperfect relationship, Milton offers his readers a more active, collaborative alternative to their society's intellectual discourses of consolation. At the same time, *Paradise Lost* identifies the pursuit of consolation as a subject worthy of epic, steering readers through interpretive detours and pitfalls in a quest for comfort in a fallen world.

### *Satan and the Consolation of Philosophy*

While Satan and the demons draw on a classical tradition of philosophical consolation, as well as early modern medical models of consolation, they do so at a point in time before those discourses existed. Satan does not exactly corrupt a pre-existing consolatory discourse, but he does produce one with arguments and methods that early modern readers would have recognized. By allowing the demons to articulate and then successfully implement what sound like conventional early modern arguments of consolation, Milton invites readers to ponder the origins of these arguments. As Satan and the demons use consolatory discourse to distract themselves from their own pain long enough to harm Adam and Eve, Milton demonstrates how modes of consolation based on competent philosophical reasoning or medical theory can still have harmful effects. He makes a point of how successfully Satan's "high words, that bore / Semblance of worth, not substance, gently raised / [the demons'] fainting courage and dispelled their fears" (1.528-30). Satan's "high words," rehearse familiar arguments from Stoic philosophy and early modern medical theory in order to manipulate his crew into "voting" for his pre-determined plan

of corrupting humanity.<sup>3</sup> The demons' successful use of these consolatory strategies lifts their spirits, distracts them from the truth of their plight, and motivates them to do even more harm by sabotaging God's newest creation. If fallen devils can successfully construct a consolatory system of thought despite their utter moral degradation, how can fallen humans know that their own modes of consolation are not similarly compromised and self-deluding?

Book 1 opens with the iconic image of Satan being “[h]urled headlong” into hell, yet before line 100 Satan is already looking on the bright side, taking stock of the mental and emotional resources he has retained after his fall (1.45). The demons experience their fall in similar ways to Adam and Eve—they become aware of physical pain, separation from God, and the tumultuous nature of distressing emotion. As the demons search for ways to make their existence in hell more bearable, they engage with several models of emotional management common to early modern's England's considerable body of consolatory prose. For obvious reasons, Satan and his crew do not discuss scripture-based methods of consolation, but they do consider both philosophical strategies that preach mental discipline and medical models that favor altering and adapting to one's physical environment. The devils' council presents a host of consolatory practices, resembling hybrid-genre texts like Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* that serve as catch-alls for a variety of diverse approaches to treating madness and grief.

Given Milton's regard for classical texts in his own prose, we might expect him to portray Satan as a skilled, but ultimately corrupt, reader of a venerable philosophical tradition of consolation. Indeed, many critics have parsed the logical and theological fractures in Satan's

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive discussion of the manipulative potential of early modern consolatory discourse, see Fred B. Tromly, “Grief, Authority and Resistance to Consolation in Shakespeare,” in *Speaking Grief in English Literary Culture: Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Margo Swiss and David A. Kent (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 20-41.

arguments, highlighting his ability to seduce both readers and his fellow demons with flashy oratory rather than reasonable debate.<sup>4</sup> Yet rather than paint Satan simply as a corrupt reader, Milton offers a more nuanced view of how a text's form and subject matter can amplify moral defaults already present in a reader. If scholars approached the period's consolation manuals with the same argumentative rigor they reserve for the devils' council, they would find similar contradictions, logical incoherencies, and endorsements of wilful deception. In fact, many of the period's more pragmatic texts about emotional management admit that these intellectual manipulations are a necessary evil in their ultimate project of treating emotionally and mentally distressed patients. In his study of Renaissance medical ethics, Winfried Schleiner finds that a large number of early modern physicians considered it appropriate to lie to their patients about their conditions in order to achieve effective healing.<sup>5</sup> Many of the period's prose consolation texts reflect this medical culture—writers such as Timothy Bright and Robert Burton, for example, license deceit, exaggeration, and slander as long as they help a put a suffering patient in a better mindset to be cured.<sup>6</sup> In these writers' view, a beneficial end clearly justifies dubious ethical means.

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<sup>4</sup> John M. Steadman insists that Satan's speeches are examples of skilled sophistry and "specious rhetoric" that Milton could not have endorsed, while Stanley Fish famously argues that Milton purposefully imbues demonic speech with the appearance of reason to seduce readers into enacting and then recognizing their fallen nature. See John M. Steadman, "Milton's Rhetoric: Satan and the 'Unjust Discourse.'" *Milton Studies* 1 (1969): 70 and Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost"* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), 15-17, as well as Stanley Fish, "The Harassed Reader in *Paradise Lost*." *Critical Quarterly* 7.2 (June 1965): 162-82. For an extensive discussion and bibliography of this critical tradition, see John Carey, "Milton's Satan," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 131-45 and Linda Gregerson, *The Reformation of the Subject: Spenser, Milton, and the English Protestant Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 198-230.

<sup>5</sup> Winfried Schleiner, *Medical Ethics in the Renaissance* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Bright, *A treatise of melancholy* (London, 1586), 248; Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson, vol. 3 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1932) 200-202.

Yet while a physician in sound health might be able to competently distinguish between ends and means, an emotionally desperate patient—or reader—might not. By focusing on the treatment of symptoms at the expense of larger ethical principles, this consolatory tradition opens itself up to be used by individuals seeking to treat sin’s consequences rather than eradicate its presence. Milton dealt with many of these concerns earlier in the prose tract *Areopagitica*, where he claim that books’ moral utility is directly related to the moral character of their readers. For wise and righteous readers, books are “useful drugs and materials wherewith to temper and compose effective and strong medicines which man’s life cannot want. The rest, as children and childish men who have not the art to qualify and prepare these working minerals, well may be exhorted to forbear, but hindered forcibly they cannot be by all the licensing that sainted inquisition could ever yet contrive.”<sup>7</sup> Milton’s case against book licensing rests both on a plea for the rights of responsible readers and on an argument about the futility of trying to enforce censorship. Yet Milton’s description of the bad reader, “who will be a fool with the best book, yea or without book,” sits uneasily alongside his arguments for the moral and spiritual value of engaging with difficult texts.<sup>8</sup>

*Areopagitica*’s character-based model of reading has particularly troubling implications for consolatory texts meant to provide moral and spiritual guidance to emotionally distressed readers. Early modern consolation manuals, whether philosophical, religious, or medical in content, often explicitly address themselves to grieving or melancholy readers, people many early moderns would have considered mentally and spiritually infirm. But if a book’s subject matter is only as useful as the moral and interpretive strength of the person reading it, how can one trust a reader out of her mind with grief or out of his wits with melancholy to patiently

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<sup>7</sup> Kerrigan, et. al., *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, 941-42.

<sup>8</sup> Kerrigan, et. al., *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, 941.

interpret and properly apply its arguments? To make matters worse, these texts frequently present their consolatory methods in a diffuse manner, requiring readers to trace their arguments over many hundreds of pages. Even if such a text's author impeccably navigates the thorny theological and philosophical tensions of the humanist consolation tradition, emotionally compromised readers might still find themselves entangled in fruitless debates or tempted by false comforts.

Although texts like Burton's and Bright's do spend a good deal of time explaining the moral goals of consolation, even their formal organization further invites readers to separate moral ends from therapeutic means. Detailed tables of contents clearly describe the substance of each chapter, allowing readers to skip ahead to the sections focused on practical treatments. Burton himself endorses such selective reading, describing it as the process by which he composed *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, haphazardly gathering a "smattering" of knowledge from disparate sources, "not to be a slave of science or dwell altogether in one subject, as most do, but to rove abroad, *centum puer artium* [one who can turn his hand to anything], to have an oar in every man's boat, to taste of every dish, and sip of every cup."<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Stanley Fish's model of Miltonic temptation, Milton does not have Satan get little things about the tradition wrong in order to trip up a reader—rather, he shows Satan selectively citing a tradition that already encourages its audience to read selectively, to do whatever it takes to treat their symptoms or those of their friends and patients.

Satan's first attempts at consolation start where many early modern philosophical approaches to consolation begin—with the Stoic dichotomy between the body and the soul. As he awakens on the flaming lake, tormented by "lost happiness and lasting pain," Satan

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<sup>9</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 1, 17.

recognizes his chief companion, Beelzebub (1.55). After a brief commiseration about the place to which they have fallen and the horrific transformation of their persons, Satan admits that while he is “changed in outward luster,” his “fixed mind” allows him to remain committed to his task despite adversity and military defeat (97).<sup>10</sup> Applying a similar separation between qualities of mind and the material world, Satan assesses his tactical situation:

What though the field be lost?  
All is not lost; the unconquerable will,  
And study of revenge, immortal hate,  
And courage never to submit or yield:  
And what is else not to be overcome? 105-09

The demons’ inner resolve or “unconquerable will” is a far more important resource, Satan reasons, than a lost battleground. While classical Stoicism sometimes rejects political engagement as a vain pursuit, Satan’s arguments display a Neostoic sensibility in line with common early modern interpretations of Stoic philosophy. Because Neostoics value political responsibility and even leadership to a certain extent, Satan can use their philosophy as consolation for military defeat and mass exile. Drawing on this more pragmatic version of Stoic philosophy, Satan reasons that the demons’ suffering will make them stronger—now that they have gathered some military “experience,” he and his crew are better equipped to engage in future battles and can hope for better success next time (118).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Even consolatory texts that do not explicitly align themselves with Stoicism make use of the body/soul divide to encourage individuals to concentrate on their spiritual health in the midst of physical pain. Religious consolation manuals, such as Thomas Becon’s *The Sycke Mans Salve*, may even go so far as to imply that the body and the soul’s wellbeing have an inverse effect on each other—when the body is healthy, this may be a sign that the soul is spiritually stagnant. Thomas Becon, *The Sycke Mans Salve* (London, 1561), 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Justus Lipsius’s arguments about how suffering serves a moral function similar to athletic training. Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, trans. John Stradling, ed. John Sellars (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006), 90.

Stanley Fish has made us attentive to Milton's authorial asides that abruptly puncture Satan's seductive rhetoric, but in addition to indicting Satan, these asides also flag the ease with which familiar consolatory discourses can be used for evil purposes. Unlike readers of the poem, the characters being consoled have no access to Milton's commentary. Directly after Satan's declaration of the "more successful hope" that will allow him to wage eternal war against God, Milton claims that Satan's prideful speech belies his inner despair: "So spake the apostate angel, though in pain, / Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair" (1.120, 125-26). At first it seems that Milton critiques the deception of speaking what one does not feel, but Satan's insincerity is not the true problem here. Instead, Milton highlights Satan's ability to use philosophical arguments to ignore a feeling of despair that should stop him in his tracks.

Consolatory writers often encourage individuals to do just what Satan seems to do here: call upon the mind's powers of reason even when they seem at odds with one's turbulent emotional state. Thomas Wright advises his reader not to "vex and trouble thyself too much when a passion seizeth upon thee, but diverting thy mind from it, and restraining thy consent as well as thou canst from yielding unto it; and in short time thou shalt see it vanish away."<sup>12</sup> Satan resembles the kind of model reader consolatory writers might hope for—attentive, tenacious, and willing to let reason master passion. Yet by "diverting his mind" from his despair, Milton shows us, Satan continues to resist an emotion God desires him to feel as part of his punishment. Furthermore, Satan's temporary ability to stanch this despair leads him to commit further crimes against both God and humanity. Ironically, if Satan were more like a melancholy patient resistant to treatment—holing himself up in a dark room and succumbing to his despair—Adam and Eve might have escaped his temptation.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in General*, ed. William Webster Newbold (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 158.

Later, Satan uses Stoic philosophy to insist on his mind's ability to overcome and even transform his physical environment from something painful to something productive, proclaiming:

[T]hou profoundest Hell  
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings  
A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what should I be, all but less than he  
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built  
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:  
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n. 1.251-63

Here, Satan draws on an early modern tradition of consolation for war or political exile, including Neostoic texts such as Justus Lipsius's *On Constancy* and Guillaume du Vair's *A Buckler Against Adversitie*, both of which were translated into English for early modern readers. In the first text, the character "Lipsius" wants to leave his country to escape the affliction of war, but the character "Langius" advises him that a change in his external circumstances will not lessen his worry because the true war is in his mind. To achieve real peace, he must forsake not

his country but his affections.<sup>13</sup> Satan uses similar rhetoric, stressing his mind's ability to transform and define physical spaces.

*A Buckler Against Adversitie*, written during a period of civil war in France, offers a more practical consolation to those worried about being forced to leave their home. This text prepares readers to patiently endure the loss of their homes by reminding them, first, that citizens voluntarily and happily leave their homes for activities like ambassadorial service and colonization, and, second, that if they were not allowed to leave their native country it would start to feel more like a prison than a cherished home.<sup>14</sup> Satan constructs versions of both of these arguments: he voices his intent to “reign” in hell, creating an independent kingdom from which he will later suggest colonizing earth; he also takes comfort in the idea that hell offers political freedom even if it does not offer the same physical pleasures as heaven.

When Beelzebub challenges Satan's arguments, questioning whether God has preserved their “spirit and strength entire” to extract more pain or labor from them, Satan responds by reasserting his intention never to aid God and by calling for a more extended, inclusive debate about the best way to move forward (1.146):

Thither let us tend  
From off the tossing of these fiery waves,  
There rest, if any rest can harbor there,  
And reassembling our afflicted powers,  
Consult how we may henceforth most offend  
Our enemy, our own loss how repair,

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<sup>13</sup> Lipsius, *On Constancy*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Guillaume Du Vair, *A Buckler Against Adversitie: or A Treatise of Constancie*, trans. Andrew Court (London, 1622), 19-22.

How overcome this dire calamity,  
What reinforcement we may gain from hope,  
If not what resolution from despair. 183-91

At this point in the epic, Satan's commitment to analyzing defeat and learning from his mistakes seems to make him a better military leader than some heroes of classical epic. Rather than waste time dwelling on his humiliation while his fellow soldiers languish, like Achilles, or pursuing his own pleasure, as Aeneas does in Carthage, Satan calls together a council to hear the demons' concerns and ideas.

Even Satan's decision to call a public council parallels the communal aims of Lipsius and du Vair's texts, which construct fictional dialogues as frames for their arguments. Du Vair features speakers who transcend their individual troubles to engage in intelligent dialogue about "public" or "common" calamities. One character in *A Buckler Against Adversitie* even advocates public consolation when it is nearly certain that a country cannot be saved: "And though we were sure that we were not able to save our countrey, should we forsake it for all that? Wee doe not forsake those that are stricken with incurable diseases. It is no small smatter [sic], in my opinion, to make death gentle and easie to them which cannot avoyde it, and give them lenitive remedies, when others can doe no good."<sup>15</sup> According to du Vair's logic, even if Satan knows, as readers do, that his efforts are doomed to fail, he still fulfills the actions of a model ruler by consoling his people anyway.<sup>16</sup> Not only do Satan's consolatory methods associate him with early modern Neostoics, but his ability to speak consoling words to his political inferiors despite his inner

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<sup>15</sup> Du Vair, *Buckler Against Adversitie*, 122.

<sup>16</sup> I do not intend to claim here that Satan sincerely wants to help the fallen angels feel better. I do however, argue that his consolatory arguments, no matter how disingenuous, closely mirror those Neo-stoic texts encourage political leaders to use.

misgivings also aligns him with virtuous classical heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas and prominent early modern literary heroes such as Tasso's Sir Godfrey and Shakespeare's Henry V.

The problem with Satan's use of Stoic consolation is not one of fundamental misunderstanding—rather it is one of gross misuse. While this tradition is meant to console those who suffer from political or religious persecution, Satan instead uses it to numb his own and his crew's awareness of their irrevocable damnation. Satan has practiced the Stoic strategy of changing one's situation by changing one's perspective so well that he believes himself to be suffering from political persecution and oppression rather than from the just consequences of sin. Early modern consolation manuals often concern themselves with the opposite problem, striving to reassure overly sensitive individuals who misattribute their suffering to sin or damnation rather than to God's desire to test them or make them better Christians. There is, of course, a difference between fallen humans, who can be redeemed, and fallen angels, who are already damned. While the former could conceivably seek consolation in the service of moral rehabilitation, the latter cannot. Yet Satan's use of Stoic arguments here glaringly exposes a form of self-deluding consolation that fallen humans could easily employ as well. Rather than focus only on its benefits, Milton draws attention to the more sinister potential of philosophical consolation—its arguments are fluid and malleable enough to allow a variety of fallen beings to justify immoral action, dull pain with the temporary bandage of Stoic philosophy, and endlessly avoid confronting the moral repugnance of sin.

The devils' council introduces several new modes of consolation, mirroring common early modern debates pitting Stoic models of the rational mind that transcends bodily weakness against what William Bouwsma has termed an "Augustinian" model that take the body's needs

into account.<sup>17</sup> While Moloch advocates a suicide mission of open war, Belial begins a conversation that invites the demons to move from rigid Stoic modes of consolation focused only on the mind to more pragmatic modes focused on coping with or altering their environment. Pointing to the futility of Moloch's plan—God either cannot or will not allow them to seek peace in annihilation—Belial urges endurance and rehabilitation rather than preparation for death. In contrast to Moloch's desperate abandon, Belial reminds his fellow demons that their existence, even though painful, still offers something worth preserving:

[F]or who would lose,  
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,  
Those thoughts that wander through eternity,  
To perish rather, swallowed up and lost  
In the wide womb of uncreated Night,  
Devoid of sense and motion? 2.146-51

Here, Belial seems to draw on the Stoic separation between the mind and the body. Despite their crippling physical pain and incarceration in hell, the demons still possess intelligent minds that are free to “wander through eternity.” Yet rather than deny the importance of pain or regard it as something that exists outside the demons' minds, Belial acknowledges and addresses this problem.

While “pain” in the passage above could refer to the mental anguish of captivity or defeat, we know that the demons do experience intense physical pain, a sensation they first

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<sup>17</sup> William J. Bouwsma, “The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought,” in *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19-73. Bouwsma is careful to note that the categories of Stoicism and Augustinianism did not constitute clear intellectual camps in the early modern period but rather two ideological polarities of humanist discourse. Few thinkers fell neatly into one or the other category but instead borrowed ideas from both traditions.

encounter during the war in heaven. In Book 6, the fallen angel Nisroch movingly explain pain's ability to alter mind and character, upending the Stoic dichotomy of body and soul:

[F]or what avails  
Valor or strength, though matchless, quelled with pain  
Which all subdues, and makes remiss the hands  
Of mightiest. Sense of pleasure we may well  
Spare out of life perhaps, and not repine,  
But live content, which is the calmest life:  
But pain is perfect misery, the worst  
Of evils, and excessive, overturns  
All patience. 6.456-64

Stoic consolation, Nisroch implies, can work when a person is dealing with the loss of pleasure, but it can do little in the face of blinding pain.

As if anticipating this critique, Belial offers pragmatic consolatory arguments, instructing the council on the relative nature of pain and the possibility of easing it. In order to highlight their current good fortune, Belial reminds the demons that things have been worse in the past and that they could be worse in the future:

Is this then worst,  
Thus sitting, thus consulting, thus in arms?  
What when we fled amain, pursued and strook  
With Heav'n's afflicting thunder, and besought  
The deep to shelter us? This Hell then seemed  
A refuge from those wounds. Or when we lay

Chained on the burning lake? That sure was worse. 2.163-69

Belial continues in this vein, listing a multitude of ways in which the demons' current condition could be made worse in the future by provoking God to mete out new punishments.<sup>18</sup> In addition to mental exercises meant to change the demons' perspective on pain, Belial also offers the more tangible hope that their bodies will grow accustomed to their environment, gradually lessening the distracting force of pain:

Our purer essence then will overcome  
Their noxious vapor, or inured not feel,  
Or changed at length, and to the place conformed  
In temper and in nature, will receive  
Familiar the fierce heat, and void of pain;  
This horror will grow mild, this darkness light. 215-20

While demons' and angels' physical bodies are constituted differently than humans', as Raphael explains to Adam in Book 5, Belial here uses language that evokes humoral theory to explain the process of adapting to one's environment. Belial suggests that if they wait patiently, either God's neglect or "chance" may ease their lot (222). After Belial's speech, Milton scoffs: "Thus Belial with words clothed in reason's garb / Counseled ignoble ease, and peaceful sloth, / Not peace" (226-28). Yet Belial's words themselves do not lack reason—they simply use a reasonable set of consolatory arguments to resist repentance.

Building on Belial's arguments, Mammon suggests a version of adaptation to hell that stresses the demons' agency rather than that of God or chance. While he essentially repeats

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<sup>18</sup> This mental exercise of imagining oneself in a worse position in order to prompt gratefulness even echoes Christian consolatory texts. Jeremy Taylor, for instance, asks his readers to compare themselves to people who are socially beneath them so that they may put their own trials into better perspective. *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, ed. P.G. Stanwood, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 111.

Belial's hope that their "temper" will adapt to the fires of hell, making their "torments" their "elements," Mammon points out the folly of waiting on chance and the humiliation of relying on God's mercy (2.274-78). Instead, he champions hard work and ingenuity as the forces that will ease their pain:

Let us not then pursue  
By force impossible, by leave obtained  
Unacceptable, though in Heav'n, our state  
Of splendid vassalage, but rather seek  
Our own good from our selves, and from our own  
Live to our selves, though in this vast recess,  
Free, and to none accountable, preferring  
Hard liberty before the easy yoke  
Of servile pomp. Our greatness will appear  
Then most conspicuous, when great things of small,  
Useful of hurtful, prosperous of adverse  
We can create, and in what place soe'er  
Thrive under evil, and work ease out of pain  
Through labor and endurance. 249-62

Like Satan's earlier speech to Beelzebub, Mammon's speech displays the Stoic value of prioritizing political freedom over bodily ease and the epic value of exhibiting "greatness." Yet Mammon takes this philosophy a step farther, taking consolation in the devils' ability to make their new habitation comfortable and even glorious. He offers specific examples of the "skill" and "art" they would develop to make their "own good," such as mining hell's soil for gems and

creating magnificent edifices (270-73). Such a speech would be fully at home in an epic like the *Aeneid*, which values the sacrifice of leaving a familiar life in Troy and a decadent one in Carthage in exchange for political autonomy. And like Aeneas, Mammon urges the demons to take pride in the hard work of creating a new civilization with its own distinct culture.

Yet despite Mammon's expressed willingness to engage in hard work, Milton observes that the demons only assent to Mammon's speech because they fear another battle with heaven worse than they dread hell (2.292-93). In spite of his industrious commitment to making the most out of a bad situation, Mammon's speech instantly becomes void for Milton because the "easy yoke" he seeks to escape is God's. As with Belial, context rather than faulty reason marks Mammon's speech as sinful pride rather than legitimate consolatory discourse. Mammon's phrase for humiliating servitude, the "easy yoke," perversely echoes and rejects Christ's formulation of true consolation in Luke: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."<sup>19</sup> Later in the poem, Adam will suggest to Eve that they ask God to teach them ways of dealing with extreme heat and cold so that they may adapt to their new world. Because Adam and Eve accept God's agency as the driving force behind these adaptations, hard work and physical adaptation become legitimate modes of consolation.

Although Beelzebub dismisses Mammon's arguments as "[h]atching vain empires," the demons actually take his advice and attempt to seek consolation by building up Pandemonium and engaging in civilized social activities (2.378). Before he leaves for earth, Satan urges the

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<sup>19</sup> Luke 11:28-30. Authorized Version.

demons to make their surroundings more comfortable, even as he implies that their stay in hell is only temporary:

[I]ntend at home,  
While here shall be our home, what best may ease  
The present misery, and render Hell  
More tolerable; if there be cure or charm  
To respite or deceive, or slack the pain  
Of this ill mansion. 457-62

Satan's advice once again lines up with early modern advice about treating melancholy. Bright prescribes comfortable housing and beautiful surroundings as antidotes for melancholy spirits, ordering patients' houses to be filled with fresh air, bright light, and therapeutic gemstones (such as those Mammon seeks to mine in hell's soil).<sup>20</sup> Because they believed that idleness fed melancholy moods, writers like Bright and Burton also instructed patients to occupy themselves with physical and mental employments to ward off sadness, and this is precisely what the demons do. Some occupy themselves with athletic competitions, others with exploration and surveys of their new territory. Still other demons seek consolation in the aesthetic or intellectual endeavors of music, verse, and philosophical debate.

Milton judges the demons that seek consolation in philosophy most harshly, reiterating the dangerous allure of a system of thought that can temporarily dull pain and obscure evil intent. The demons discuss themes that are vastly important both to the epic itself and to Milton's entire career, including providence, foreknowledge, free will, good and evil, happiness and misery, passion and apathy, glory and shame (2.559-64). Yet Milton terms their discussions:

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<sup>20</sup> Bright, *Treatise of Melancholy*, 263-64.

Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy:  
Yet with a pleasing sorcery could charm  
Pain for a while or anguish, and excite  
Fallacious hope, or arm th' obdurèd breast  
With stubborn patience as with triple steel. 565-569

Perhaps it is predictable, given Milton's model of reading in *Areopagitica*, that he seems most worried about the "charms" of rhetorical debate and the ability of philosophy to produce a "stubborn patience" that is a moral stumbling block rather than a virtue. What is more surprising, however, is that Milton here finds the perils of fallen interpretation to render this philosophy almost as irredeemable as the demons themselves. Rather than argue, as *Areopagitica* does, that a good reader could skillfully navigate consolatory texts to find useful sources of comfort, *Paradise Lost* questions the entire premise of this intellectual consolatory tradition. While we most often associate this later Miltonic attitude with the heroes of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, Books 1 and 2 of *Paradise Lost* show Milton significantly experimenting with what it might mean to discard classical teachings about managing suffering.

In *Paradise Regained*, Christ will articulate a more common early modern critique of Stoicism, exposing the Stoics as the "last" and worst example of "philosophic pride," arrogant self-sufficiency, and empty boasting in a list that includes the Platonists, the Sceptics, and the Peripatetics (4.300). Yet in *Paradise Lost*, Milton suggests that medical and philosophical consolatory traditions are problematic because they actually *can* work in nearly any context—even if only in a temporary sense. Furthermore, they can work against justice, consoling people, who, like the demons, might not deserve consolation at all. The demons have the drive to pursue healthy physical and intellectual exercise because Satan's words and actions have inspired them

to hope: “Thence more at ease their minds and somewhat raised / By false presumptuous hope,” the devils choose employments that best suit their individual inclinations (2.521-22). While Milton does not fully reject this received intellectual tradition of consolation, he does show how its methods are immensely attractive to morally compromised beings. Without a clearly defined ethical goal, consolatory arguments can temporarily ease pain, prolong sinful action, and harm other innocent people in the process. While early modern consolatory discourse often proves too narrow and rigid for Shakespeare, Wroth, and Herbert, its capacious and flexible nature poses a problem for Milton. The innumerable consolatory strategies of this vast tradition leave much room for interpretation, and consequently, much room for error when made available to fallen readers.

#### *Angelic Consolation and the Problem of Access*

Satan and the demons illustrate how easy it is to use consolatory arguments for morally suspect purposes, but Michael’s consolation of Adam after the fall foregrounds the ethical goals of consolatory thought and practice. God’s instructions to Michael stress a model of comfort that cultivates spiritual peace but also requires Adam and Eve to accept and acknowledge their just banishment from the garden: “If patiently thy bidding they obey, / Dismiss them not disconsolate” (11.112-13). Michael’s announcement to Adam clearly lays out the moral purpose of his consolatory mission:

Ere thou from hence depart, know I am sent  
To show thee what shall come in future days  
To thee and to thy offspring; good with bad  
Expect to hear, supernal grace contending

With sinfulness of men; thereby to learn  
True patience, and to temper joy with fear  
And pious sorrow, equally inured  
By moderation either state to bear,  
Prosperous or adverse: so shalt thou lead  
Safest thy life, and best prepared endure  
Thy mortal passage when it comes. 356-66

Like Satan, Michael draws on Stoic thinking, but where Satan emphasizes a dramatic split between bodily pain and the resolute mind, Michael focuses on the Stoic concepts of moderation and temperance. Rather than fully eradicating pain, Michael's biblically inflected Stoicism encourages Adam and Eve to accept both joy and sorrow with equanimity. For Milton's God, a consolation that completely numbed the pain of the fall would be a failure of divine justice, but Michael's moral lessons offer strategies for coping with necessary pain and avoiding the unnecessary pain that results from sin. While the demons use consolatory discourse to sidestep the moral import of their pain, Michael's consolatory tactics discover the source of that pain, distinguishing between persecution and just punishment for sin.

While Michael is adamant that neither physical nor emotional pain can be fully overcome as long as the current world continues to exist, he does offer Adam a biblically informed version of consolation that can help him escape some of the more extreme evils of fallen existence. Where Satan consoles the demons in order to spur them to a further rebellion that cannot change their eternal pain, Michael offers Adam and Eve moral guidelines that will ease pain in both the near and distant future. Michael's consolation of Adam and Eve avoids many of the problems of Satan's philosophical consolation, first, because Michael's story comes directly from God,

leaving no room for error, and, second, because Michael can step in to correct Adam when he misinterprets the moral import of Michael's visions and conversation.

Michael's consolation differs from Satan's in its form as well as its purpose. While Satan and the demons primarily draw on the maze-like rhetorical arguments of philosophy or early modern medical theory, Michael consoles Adam with a linear narrative of the future that stretches from the story of Cain and Abel to the second coming of Christ. Each episode in the narrative is followed by an explicitly articulated moral lesson that Adam is meant apply to his own life. These stories from biblical history—biblical future to Adam—teach by both negative and positive example, using a technique early moderns more often associated with poetry than philosophy. In juxtaposing Satan's philosophy with Michael's poetic narrative, Milton reinforces an idea famously articulated by Philip Sidney—that “patterns” or stories convey moral truth more effectively than abstract philosophy. Sidney relates the story of Alexander the Great, who “left his schoolmaster, living Aristotle, behind him, but took dead Homer with him. ... He well found he received more bravery of mind by the pattern of Achilles than by hearing the definition of fortitude.”<sup>21</sup> Citing the difference between “reporting and representing,” Sidney adds that poetry offers an even better cache of moral patterns than history because poets have license to change events or shape them so that they offer the best examples of virtuous action to their readers.<sup>22</sup> Michael follows a similar formula, teaching through poetic pattern by narrating a selective version of biblical history that best fits his consolatory purpose.

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<sup>21</sup> Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, in *Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 238.

<sup>22</sup> Sidney, *Defence*, 244.

In *The Defence of Poesy*, Sidney explains that philosophy is beneficial to readers who already possess a significant measure of self-control and moral fortitude but that its difficulty makes it inaccessible to readers who most need moral instruction:

The philosopher showeth you the way, he informeth you of the particularities, as well of the tediousness of the way, as of the pleasant by-turning that may divert you from your way. But this is to no man but to him that will read him, and read him with attentive studious painfulness; which constant desire whoever hath in him, hath already passed half the hardness of the way, and therefore is beholding to the philosopher but for the other half.<sup>23</sup>

Sidney speaks of moral instruction in a broad sense, but his point readily applies to early modern consolatory discourse, much of which was framed as instructional literature. Sidney's critique of philosophy as a genre most useful to those who least need its lessons anticipates Milton's concern that the philosophical tradition of consolation addresses itself, in all its ambiguity, to those readers who are most emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually infirm. Sidney worries that those who most need moral instruction simply won't read books of philosophy, but, as the devils' council shows, Milton seems to worry that they will.

In contrast to these confusing and often contradictory texts, Michael's consolatory vision offers the double assurance of being both biblical in its content and narrative in its form, offering readers a more direct route through material already determined to be "true." Yet as we have seen in *Areopagitica*, Milton also insists that even the most sacred texts can be corrupted by foolish readers. As I will argue below, Milton's investment in readers' interpretive ability as well

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<sup>23</sup> Sidney, *Defence*, 226.

as texts' moral pedigree or rhetorical dexterity leads him to identify problems with Michael's version of consolation as well as with Satan's.

Michael's narrative lacks the ease and pleasure Sidney insists make poetic patterns so easy to digest, offering instead horrific scenes of suffering and mass destruction. Along with these scenes, however, Michael does supply pithy moral proverbs that can help Adam avoid the more extreme evils of the fall. For example, when Michael shows Adam the "lazar-house" of diseased inmates, Adam is overcome by pity and by fear of dying such a painful death. After priming Adam to ask if there is a way to escape such a death, Michael informs Adam that he can avoid the illnesses of the lazar-house if he "well observe[s] / The rule of *not too much*, by temperance taught / In what thou eat'st and drink'st, seeking from thence / Due nourishment, not gluttonous delight" (11.530-33). When Adam is similarly distressed by the vision of the Flood, Michael relays a lesson about the dangers of pursuing fame and pride and the moral torpor that can result from luxury and ease. If Adam shuns these temptations and follows the "paths of righteousness" like Noah, he can hope that God will spare him from similar destruction (814).

In addition to offering moral lessons for avoiding extreme pain or destruction, Michael's narrative also consoles by offering Adam new ways of reading the world. For example, after the vision of the flood, Michael corrects Adam's instinct to feel distress at the loss of any human life. Instead, Michael encourages Adam to value only life that brings glory to God. Once Adam sees the deliverance of Noah, he experiences intense joy and describes his emotional relief to Michael as follows:

O thou who future things canst represent  
As present, Heav'nly instructor, I revive  
At this last sight, assured that man shall live

With all the creatures, and their seed preserve.  
Far less I now lament for one whole world  
Of wicked sons destroyed, than I rejoice  
For one man found so perfect and so just,  
That God vouchsafes to raise another world  
From him, and all his anger to forget. 11.870-78

Not only has Adam's factual interpretation of the flood been corrected by hearing the end of the story, but his attitude toward mass destruction has changed as well. In his previous speech, Adam laments the mass of humanity and the beauty of the world that perishes in the flood, but after Michael's lesson that "God attributes to place / No sanctity, if none be hither brought / By men who there frequent, or therein dwell," he ceases to value nature and humanity for their own sake (836-38). On the contrary, he recognizes that only individuals who please God are worth preserving. This recalibration of Adam's values does not lessen widespread death and destruction, but it works by teaching Adam to affirm rather than resist God's acts of judgment.

When Michael finishes his vision, Adam articulates the lessons he has learned from the angel's narrative of biblical history. He has learned to be content with the knowledge he has been given rather than seeking to know things beyond his limits (12.558-60); he has learned to obey God unquestioningly and to rely on him alone for guidance (561-64); he has learned that God's system of value operates differently from the world's, favoring meekness over strength; and finally, he learns that death and suffering can be spiritually valuable experiences, as "suffering for truth's sake / Is fortitude to highest victory, / And, to the faithful, death the gate of life" (569-71). All of Adam's statements about what he has learned represent ideal outcomes of divine consolation—rather than simply dulling Adam's grief and pain, Michael's story has given him a

peace that comes from just the right amount of knowledge about how to live the best life possible in a fallen world. Right before they leave the mountaintop, Michael urges Adam:

[O]nly add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,  
Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,  
By name to come called charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
A paradise within thee, happier far. 581-87

By emphasizing the importance of deeds at the end of his story, Michael identifies consolation as a three-step process that must encompass the correct relation, reception, and implementation of knowledge.

Unfortunately, a misstep at any of these stages can cause consolation to go completely wrong. As I have already argued, Milton suggests that manmade consolatory traditions can go wrong at all of these stages—the consolatory argument itself can be flawed; a reader or audience can misinterpret a consolatory argument; and finally, humans can implement consolatory thought in a way that promotes further grief, trading temporary relief for lasting pain. Michael’s consolation eliminates error at the first two stages—he relates his consolation to Adam by divine revelation, and he coaches Adam through the reception process until he fully understands the spiritual lessons of the narrative. Yet if Adam desires his momentary peace to be a lasting one, he must successfully implement the lessons he has gained from Michael’s story.

Despite the ethical goals and divine authority of Michael’s consolation, human liberty threatens to undo or ignore its meticulously crafted moral lessons. Michael himself admits that

humans will corrupt even the “inward consolations” of the Holy Spirit (12.495). Power-hungry churchmen will “appropriat[e] / The Spirit of God” for their own secular gain, claiming special access to one meant to be a “comforter” for all believers (486, 518-19). By enforcing their own religious laws that value “outward rites and specious forms” over the Spirit’s inward guidance, these leaders not only reject God’s consolation for themselves, but they effectively strip thousands of people of the full consolation they should receive from the Holy Spirit (534). Yet even for a person like Adam, who genuinely desires to live according to the principles of temperance and humility, Michael’s consolation presents a host of obstacles.

First of all, Michael’s consolation requires constant interpretive guidance, a thing to which Adam will no longer have access when Michael departs. In the course of his story, Michael often brings Adam up short when he comes to erroneous conclusions about what he sees. For example, when Adam rejoices at the vision of men enjoying beautiful women, seeing it as a happy alternative to the lazar-house, Michael informs him that the women have forsaken “domestic honor” for salacious dress and activity (11.617). Yet when Adam overcorrects and complains that women are the source of man’s woe, Michael retorts that man’s woe stems from his “effeminate slackness ... / who should better hold his place / By wisdom and superior gifts received” (634-36). Yet while Michael insists that female promiscuity is no excuse for male sin, a closer look at his story reveals a thicket of confusing signals that encourage Adam to draw causal links between the two. Before he insists that Adam should not blame women for his troubles, Michael repeatedly singles Eve out for blame in the course of his narrative. When he introduces the lazar-house, Michael warns Adam that he is about to view monstrous diseases, “that thou may’st know / What misery th’ inabstinence of Eve shall bring on men” (475-77). After the vision of the hospital, Michael continues to explain that the diseased patients forsook

God's image for "a brutish vice, inductive mainly to the sin of Eve" (518-19). When even divine consolation relayed by an angel contains such interpretive hazards, Adam's chances of consistently and correctly reading the world on his own seem slim.

Second, consolation by divine revelation presents problems of access for those who do not directly engage with God's messenger. Even if Adam were able to correctly implement Michael's consolatory lessons, the task of conveying these to his family creates yet another layer of potential interpretive error. Michael's story is itself evidence that most of Adam's descendants will fail to accept the consolation God offers them. In an odd reversal of the trope that history provides moral education, Adam gains instruction from the future mistakes of his offspring. Yet in this process, he himself is indicted as a poor teacher of these truths. The gory vision of Cain murdering Abel implies that Adam will not be able to effectively relay these lessons for even a single generation.

Eve's exclusion from Michael's visions further illustrates the problem of access to divinely narrated consolation. While Michael and Adam survey human history, Eve spends her last moments in Eden sleeping. Unlike Adam's consolation, which derives from the process of drawing rational conclusions from specific examples, Eve falls asleep weary with "sorrow and heart's distress" and wakes in peace, affirming that "God is also in sleep" (12.611, 613). On one hand, Eve's dream could suggest a more direct form of consolation in which God directly alters her emotional state through a calming dream. Yet in contrast to Raphael's visit, where Eve chooses to slip away from the conversation because she enjoys learning things from Adam directly, Michael's visit emphasizes Eve's forced exclusion from male discourse. Right before they descend the mountaintop, Michael tells Adam:

Her also I with gentle dreams have calmed

Portending good, and all her spirits composed  
To meek submission: thou at season fit  
Let her with thee partake what thou hast heard,  
Chiefly what may concern her faith to know,  
The great deliverance by her seed to come  
(For by the woman's seed) on all mankind. 595-601

Instead of offering Eve an intellectual narrative from which she can draw rational lessons about how to live in a fallen world, Michael gives her a vague dream that he assures Adam will make her a more submissive partner. Although Michael charges Adam to pass his consolatory message on to Eve, Adam's failure to ensure that his sons implement Michael's lessons suggests that Eve may also lack for consolation in a world where her happiness is tied to the will and ability of her husband. Eve's situation exposes not only the problem of gendered access to consolation, but also the question of how *anyone* without direct access to divine revelation can expect to find comfort in a fallen world.

If Michael's consolation raises problems for the epic's characters, it presents even greater difficulties for readers of *Paradise Lost*. As an epic narrative within a larger epic, Michael's story of biblical history operates much as we might expect an early modern Christian epic to operate. J. Christopher Warner describes a biblical epic as one that "works rhetorically, meaning seductively and suasively, to prompt emotional and intellectual responses that will facilitate in readers their escape from the life of earthly pleasure to a life of heavenly contemplation, from being lost in sin to finding peace in faith and God's grace."<sup>24</sup> This is precisely what Michael's story does for Adam—it offers persuasive narrative and rhetorical arguments to lead him away

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<sup>24</sup> J. Christopher Warner, *The Augustinian Epic, Petrarch to Milton* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

from sin into a life of peace, with the added bonus of an angelic interpreter to make sure Adam's "emotional and intellectual responses" to the story do not stray from its author's intentions.

Yet because Milton's readers occupy a different historical moment in Michael's narrative, they also necessarily apprehend its consolatory message in a different manner. While Michael's story offers Adam new knowledge about the future, most of his tale chronicles what would be a distant biblical past for readers. Because readers already know the story, they can approach Michael's narrative with the weight of past readings, sermons, and exegetical commentary that could supplement or contradict the angel's interpretations. Milton's readers also have access to less consoling parts of the biblical narrative that Michael conspicuously leaves out. While Adam only knows what Michael tells him of biblical heroes such as Noah and Moses, a reader of *Paradise Lost* could recall Genesis 9's account of Noah's drunkenness after the flood or Numbers 20's story of Moses' fit of anger that God punishes by condemning him to die without leading the nation of Israel into the Promised Land. Michael selectively packages biblical history in a narrative form meant to console, but unlike Adam, readers are left to sort out complications such as a temperate, godly man turned into a drunk or a God who cannot forgive a momentary expression of frustration from his weary servant.

Furthermore, even if readers agree with the moral lessons Michael draws from biblical history, his conversation with Adam itself remains a literary creation rather than a biblical truth. As an event imagined by Milton rather than drawn from a biblical source text, Michael's use of narrative to console Adam more closely mirrors a human attempt at consolation than a truly divine model. Michael articulates more ethically sound goals for consolation than Satan does, and he uses biblical material rather than classical philosophy, but readers can recognize his visions as one among many human retellings of the biblical story. As such, Michael's narrative

cannot offer readers of *Paradise Lost* a significantly more reliable form of consolation than any other early modern interpretation of scripture. Michael himself notes how easy it will be for ecclesiastical leaders to twist the truths of scripture for their own selfish gain, and there is little reason to think that readers would automatically exempt Milton from this possibility—or even that Milton would desire them to do so.

Some early modern readers did, in fact, take issue with Milton's poetic license in adding events to the biblical story. In 1698, for instance, Charles Leslie characterized Milton's account of the war in heaven as "a Scene of Licentious Fancy," arguing that poetry "ought not to exceed the Bounds of *Probability*, not to Expatriate into Effeminate *Romance*, but to express *Truth* in an *Exalted* and *Manly* Improvement of Thought."<sup>25</sup> Even in his prefatory poem to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, Andrew Marvell recounts his worry that Milton would "ruin" the biblical story by obfuscating scriptural truths that should be "easy" to apprehend ("On Mr. Milton's *Paradise Lost*," 7, 16). Although *Paradise Lost* paints its author's blindness as a condition that offers him greater access to divine truth, Marvell frets that Milton's physical disability might lead him to overcompensate intellectually, making the story unnecessarily complicated in an attempt to seek "revenge" on the world (10). While Marvell eventually assures readers that Milton has not ruined the story, his poem anticipates and articulates a contemporaneous critique of the epic to which Milton could not have been blind.

For readers to experience a consolation like Michael's at its most potent, they would need to be visited by an angel or by God himself. By introducing layers of mediation, including his own narrative of Michael's narrative, Milton both recognizes the unlikelihood of such an event and acknowledges the difficulty of conveying divine consolation in the absence of direct

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Leslie, *The History of Sin and Heresie Attempted*, in *The Critical Response to John Milton's Paradise Lost*, ed. Timothy C. Miller (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 48.

communication with God. Characters like Eve and her children do not have access to an angelic interpreter of biblical history, and biblically informed readers cannot ignore the constructed nature of Michael's narrative. Michael's consolation more closely ties itself to an ethical end goal than the philosophical arguments the demons use for consolation, but it provides little comfort to anyone but Adam—and even that comfort, Milton suggests, may be transient.

### *The “More Heroic” Consolation of Human Companionship*

In the previous two sections, I have argued that Milton finds both philosophical thought and angelic instruction to be unreliable, or at least impractical, sources of consolation for fallen humans. But where these types of consolation fail, Milton recognizes a third kind of consolation in human companionship. Intellectual modes of consolation relayed through books or even an angel can be misused by or inaccessible to spiritually infirm beings in *Paradise Lost*, but human relationships can offer immediate consolation to an individual overcome by passion. It is Eve's expression of sorrow and remorse—not a message from heaven or a philosophical precept—that stops Adam's vituperative self-pity in its tracks and lead him to initiate reconciliation with God. An emotional gesture like Eve's that affirms human community can catalyze spiritual redemption in individuals too distraught to patiently assess their situation. By marking such acts of emotional connection as a force that can regain humans a measure of liberty from grief and fear, Milton presents Adam and Eve's reconciliation as the central model of consolation in *Paradise Lost*.

At the beginning of Book 9, Milton outlines the ways in which *Paradise Lost* both differs from and transcends other epics. He explains that he has carefully chosen his subject matter in

conflict with a conventional understanding of epic that regards war as the “only argument / Heroic deemed” (9.28-29). Instead, his biblical subject matter affords him a story

Not less but more heroic than the wrath  
Of stern Achilles on his foe pursued  
Thrice fugitive about Troy wall; or rage  
Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused,  
Or Neptune’s ire or Juno’s, that so long  
Perplexed the Greek and Cytherea’s son. 14-19

Milton’s list of references to the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* signals his intent to shift the terms of his epic away from military action and toward a new understanding of heroism. Although Book 6 contains a full-scale war, in Book 9, Milton complains about other epics that waste their time describing the trappings of this military culture, such as tournaments, armor, horses, and feasts, “[n]ot that which justly gives heroic name / To person or to poem” (40-41). While focusing on the action of battles and games, these poets miss “the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom” (30-32). While the latter description of heroism makes it seem as if Milton wishes to sanitize the epic against the turmoil of an Achilles-like rage, he actually represents these heroic virtues as something that can emerge out of the messiness of human anger and pettiness. Michael shows Adam visions of patient martyrs, but, as I have argued, he cannot ensure that Adam will implement the lessons of these examples. Yet in Eve’s persistent attempts to reconcile with Adam and her unstinting desire to take his punishment upon herself, Milton offers readers an epic vision of patience and martyrdom that has immediate and tremendous consolatory efficacy.

In Milton’s prefatory note to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, he discusses the epic’s poetic form in ways that eventually mirror Adam and Eve’s consolation of each other. Milton

explains that he has abandoned rhyme in order to bring his work closer to the style of Homer and Virgil. In addition to reclaiming a classical epic style, however, Milton also imagines his poem as one that has broken free from the ethical pitfalls of rhyme. Not only is rhyme “trivial” and “jingling,” but it can be used “to set off wretched matter and lame meter” and is likely to make writers “express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than else they would have expressed them.” *Paradise Lost*’s blank verse, on the other hand, should “be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming.” While Milton uses the term “recover” in a stylistic sense, his language of liberty and bondage lends a moral valence to his literary project. Although *Paradise Lost* relates the story of man’s fall from grace, Milton implies that its existence might help the English nation recoup some of the fall’s effects in the form of artistic and political liberty. In a more literal sense, “recovery” is an important part of the epic’s plot. Rather than end with the fall and God’s just wrath, the epic continues with the story of Adam and Eve’s reconciliation, confession, and consolation. While they do not regain their original status as unfallen beings, they do recover a measure of their former relationship with God, their former intimacy with each other, and their former joy in the natural world. Thus, Milton’s humanist project of recovering a classical style for a Christian epic maps onto an ancillary project of redeeming human dialogue as a form particularly suited to ethical consolation.

In contrast to the received forms of philosophy and biblical narrative, Milton shows Adam and Eve working out their own consolation through dialogue and affective performance. Citing Milton’s insistence in the divorce tracts on “conversation as the defining feature of love relationships,” Erik Gray argues: “Soliloquy, as critics have noted, is a debased form of discourse in the poem, used only by fallen characters. Adam and Eve, by contrast, express their

‘conjugal fellowship’ through dialogue.”<sup>26</sup> But if dialogue as a rhetorical form offers Adam and Eve opportunities to affirm their love, it also affords them a means to criticize, deceive, and attack each other. Milton locates the seeds of Adam and Eve’s consolation in the very phenomenon that necessitates its existence—the complicated process of articulating and responding to the intense emotions that constitute human relationships. Although Milton makes it abundantly clear that marital dialogue has the potential to cause spectacular damage, he also represents dialogue as a form that can be redeemed, making it a powerful tool by which humans can manage the emotional consequences of their fall.

Arguably, the fall itself is precipitated by a marital dialogue that creates an emotional rift between Adam and Eve. Eve’s explanation of her desire for knowledge appears to be largely influenced by an earlier conversation with Adam about working in separate parts of the garden. While he commends Eve’s impulse to work efficiently, Adam worries that their separation will invite the intruder of whom Raphael warned them and implores Eve to stay by his side. Eve perceives that Adam does not trust her to face trials on her own and presses the point until he allows her to leave. As she walks away, Eve delivers a parting shot to Adam in which she argues that Satan would never stoop to attack the “weaker” partner first, a category, she implies, in which Adam has placed her (9.383). After she eats the fruit, Eve ponders whether or not to share it with Adam:

But to Adam in what sort  
Shall I appear? Shall I to him make known  
As yet my change, and give him to partake  
Full happiness with me, or rather not,

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<sup>26</sup> Erik Gray, “Come Be My Love: The Songs of Songs, *Paradise Lost*, and the Tradition of the Invitation Poem.” *PMLA* 128.2 (Mar. 2013): 381-82.

But keep the odds of knowledge in my power  
Without copartner? So to add what wants  
In female sex, the more to draw his love,  
And render me more equal, and perhaps,  
A thing not undesirable, sometime  
Superior; for inferior who is free? 816-25

As we know from Adam's previous conversations with Raphael, he specifically calls Eve his "inferior" and speculates that God may have created her with "[t]oo much of ornament, in outward show / Elaborate, of inward less exact" (8.538-39, 541). Eve's desire to make herself "more equal" to Adam and to ameliorate a mental deficiency in the female sex seems to express not simply a dissatisfaction with her marriage's gender hierarchy but also a sophisticated ability to intuit Adam's misgivings about her inner character and intelligence.

Dialogue in *Paradise Lost* also serves as tool to hide deeper fears and motivations from one's partner. As Adam and Eve discuss the merits of eating the fruit, they couch their arguments in terms of their disinterested love for each other. Adam assures Eve:

However I with thee have fixed my lot,  
Certain to undergo like doom; if death  
Consort with thee, death is to me as life;  
So forcible within my heart I feel  
The bond of nature draw me to my own,  
My own in thee, for what thou art is mine;  
Our state cannot be severed, we are one,  
One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself. 9.952-59

Adam's controlled articulation of loyalty belies his inner panic, which Milton signals in a soliloquy fraught with frantic, repetitive listing, obsessive alliteration, and violent metrical disruptions. To himself Adam exclaims, "How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost, / Defaced, deflower'd, and now to death devote?" (900-01). In addition to lamenting Eve's change, Adam considers his own fate:

Should God create another Eve, and I  
Another rib afford, yet loss of thee  
Would never from my heart; no no, I feel  
The link of nature draw me." 911-14

In contrast to this desperate self-speech, Adam presents himself to Eve in a "calm mood," as one "submitting to what seemed remediless" (919-20). Adam's performance of calm can be read as a desire to protect Eve from his fear of her impending death, but it is also a strategy for maintaining his position as the emotionally stable spouse and highlighting the nature of the sacrifice he is making to remain with Eve.

Eve describes Adam's decision as a "trial" of his love for her—a word that perversely evokes their failure to pass God's trial of obedience (9.961). As she praises Adam for his devotion, Eve claims that she has thought carefully about whether to bring Adam into her risky venture:

Were it I thought death menaced would ensue  
This my attempt, I would sustain alone  
The worst, and not persuade thee, rather die  
Deserted, than oblige thee with a fact  
Pernicious to thy peace. 977-81

Yet only lines earlier, in her own soliloquy, Eve decides to offer Adam the fruit because she cannot bear the idea of her husband living in Eden without her, “wedded to another Eve” (828). Even while both partners make grand claims to put the other’s wellbeing before their own self-interest, this marital dialogue only thinly disguises a sentiment that might be best described as the consolation of mutually assured destruction.

Once they feel the effects of the fall, Adam and Eve argue back and forth in an attempt to shift blame for their sin onto each other. Milton closes Book 9 with the couple locked in a conflict characterized by vicious dialogue: “Thus they in mutual accusation spent / The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning, / And of their vain contest appeared no end” (9.1186-88). With the term “vain contest,” Milton figures Adam and Eve’s conversation as a military stalemate—neither side will give up ground, but neither side can gain anything of worth. While they continue to view their relationship as a battleground, Adam and Eve engage in a zero-sum game in which one person’s victory is necessarily another person’s loss. In the classical epics with which Milton and his readers were familiar, honor is distributed in a similar way—warriors strip their dead opponents of their armor, which then becomes the material sign of the victorious soldier’s heroism. Yet Milton eventually allows Eve to achieve a type of heroism far different from this classical model. By shifting the terms of their “contest” from “mutual accusation” to “self-condemning,” Eve negotiates a victory for both parties.

Eve’s reconciliation with Adam in Book 10 is the defining moment of successful consolation in *Paradise Lost*. Even before Michael arrives on the scene with his lengthy lessons about temperance and pride, Eve’s simple expression of humility effects an immediate emotional change in Adam that leads the couple to renew their bond with each other and to pursue spiritual redemption as well. When Eve approaches Adam, he is in the midst of a long soliloquy of

despair, contemplating the contempt of his future children, expressing anger at God for creating him, and worrying about what exactly death is and when it will come. When Eve attempts to comfort Adam by speaking “soft words to his fierce passion,” he explodes with vitriolic accusations, lamenting that God created the female sex and prophesying future misery for all husbands (10.865). But while Adam does not respond well to Eve’s initial words of comfort, he does respond to her next speech, which is accompanied by a physical performance of her emotional distress:

[B]ut Eve  
Not so repulsed, with tears that ceased not flowing,  
And tresses all disordered, at his feet  
Fell humble, and embracing them, besought  
His peace, and thus proceeded in her plaint. 909-913

The phrase “not so repulsed” captures both the repulsive force of Adam’s misogyny and Eve’s militant perseverance in executing a renewed assault on one resisting her advances.

Once Eve’s physical display of affect has caught Adam’s attention, her twenty-three brief lines of speech instantly break the momentum of Adam’s 142-line rant. Her words draw further attention to the significance of her physical performance of sorrow:

[T]hy suppliant  
I beg, and clasp thy knees; bereave me not,  
Whereon I live, thy gentle looks, thy aid,  
Thy counsel in this uttermost distress,  
My only strength and stay: forlorn of thee,  
Whither shall I betake me, where subsist?

While yet we live, scarce one short hour perhaps,  
Between us two let there be peace, both joining,  
As joined in injuries, one enmity  
Against a foe by doom express assigned us,  
That cruel serpent. ... 10.917-27

The rest of Eve's speech verbally stresses her sorrow at wounding Adam, pleads for his forgiveness, and offers to ask God to transfer all of the punishment for their sin to her. Like Priam begging for Hector's body, Eve identifies herself as a "suppliant"—an epic role that uses the physical display of prostration to powerful effect. While words of reason cannot reverse Adam's despairing contempt, Eve's willingness to inhabit the physical and emotional role of the supplicant forces Adam into a role that requires him to grant her request.

Where Eve's "soft words" fail to calm Adam, this impassioned plea, reinforced by affective performance, affects him instantly:

She ended weeping, and her lowly plight,  
Immovable till peace obtained from fault  
Acknowledged and deplored, in Adam wrought  
Commiseration; soon his heart relented  
Towards her, his life so late and sole delight,  
Now at his feet submissive in distress,  
Creature so fair his reconciliation seeking,  
His counsel whom she had displeased, his aid;  
As one disarmed, his anger all he lost,  
And thus with peaceful words upraised her soon. 10.937-46

Milton says that Eve's "lowly" stance causes "commiseration" in Adam—rather than simply lamenting his own plight, Adam begins to see his and Eve's emotional suffering as something irrevocably intertwined.

As if suddenly embarrassed by his wife's extravagant display of the abjection he insisted she should feel, Adam feels compelled to raise Eve off the ground to a more equal footing with him. Yet despite her submissive stance, Milton frames Eve's performance of submission and sorrow as an epic victory—she "disarms" Adam, stripping him both of the means and the desire to continue maligning her. In contrast to Virgil's song "of arms and the man," *Paradise Lost* celebrates a female epic hero whose affective communication can *end* conflict.

Although Adam knows that neither he or Eve can fully take on the other's punishment, his wife's sincere offer to do so leads him to reject the vain project of "mutual accusation" for the more active pursuit of mutual consolation. He says to Eve:

But rise, let us no more contend, nor blame  
Each other, blamed enough elsewhere, but strive  
In offices of love, how we may light'n  
Each other's burden in our share of woe. 10.958-61

Still using a language of epic heroism, Milton shows Adam and Eve "striving" to create methods of dealing with the consequences of the fall. In the conversation that follows, Adam and Eve hash out various possibilities for dealing with the consequences of the fall. Eve, for example, suggests abstaining from sex as a way to spare their future children the pain of a dangerous world. When Eve mentions that she is also willing to commit suicide if Adam finds sexual abstinence too difficult, she reveals the depths of her resolve to prevent the spread of her anguish to other people. Adam rejects this suggestion, reminding Eve of their promised revenge against

Satan, but he speculates that God might teach them strategies for braving elemental extremes like heat and cold. As Adam and Eve sift through these strategies together, Milton shows them building their own model of consolation rather than enacting one they receive from an angel or a book.

Not only does Eve's gesture of humility repair the humans' relationship with each other, but it also provides a template for their reconciliation with God. As Adam and Eve seek God's forgiveness, they almost exactly reenact Eve's appeal to Adam:

[T]hey forthwith to the place  
Repairing where he judged them prostrate fell  
Before him reverent, and both confessed  
Humbly their faults, and pardon begged, with tears  
Watering the ground, and with their sighs the air  
Frequenting, send from hearts contrite, in sign  
Of sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek. 10.1098-1104

Like Eve before Adam, the humans here match a physical display of repentance with humble words, disarming God's wrath with meek confession. For the first time since the morning Eve left to work alone, the couple approaches God together rather than as individual entities. As they return to their habit of communal prayer, Adam and Eve regain a measure of the interpersonal unity they enjoyed before the fall. This moment also illustrates how essential such human communion is to spiritual life—Eve's earlier gesture of humility serves as both the catalyst and the model for renewing relations with God.

Yet even as Eve recovers a sense of unity with Adam, the more strictly gendered hierarchy of their postlapsarian relationship illuminates Milton's sense of consolation as a

necessarily partial recompense for loss. It is difficult to ignore the gendered implications of Eve's confession; as the "weaker" spouse, she assumes a posture of physical submission and she absorbs the guilt Adam's has heaped upon her. Despite the stunning efficacy of this move, Eve's commitment to saving the marital relationship above all else overtakes her earlier desire to work apart from Adam and to develop an identity independent from his. By Book 11, she is swearing never to leave her husband's side again (11.176). As we see in Adam's later conversations with Michael, Adam retains a sense of Eve's duplicitous nature even after they reconcile, assuming that the women he sees in Michael's visions are the cause of men's sin. The final moments of the epic are filled with language that illustrates the lingering emotional imprint of the fall even in moments of peace and joy. God commands Michael to send Adam and Eve from the garden "sorrowing, yet in peace" (117); Michael instructs Adam to "temper joy with fear / And pious sorrow" (361-62). When Adam and Eve confess their sin to God, Milton says they "found / Strength added from above, new hope to spring / Out of despair, joy, but with fear yet linked" (137-39). In the same way, Adam and Eve remain linked to each other in both consoling and insidious ways.

But despite these obstacles, Adam and Eve must find consolation in each other if they are to find it anywhere at all. As they lose the company of angels, God's visible presence, and the beauty of Eden, their human relationship is forced to stand in for all of these lost comforts. When Eve laments their banishment from the garden, Michael advises her to define home by Adam's presence rather than by geographical markers. While Michael admonishes Adam that God is everywhere, not just in Eden, Michael's visit itself is a painful reminder that God will no longer speak directly to Adam as he did in the garden. Michael also consoles Adam with the idea of the

“paradise within”—instead of trees and fruit, Adam will enjoy the spiritual fruits of charity, patience, and temperance (12.587).

Yet as promising as these inward adornments may be, they represent a shift from the physical comforts of Eden to the abstract comforts of spiritual labor. Just as Adam will have to wring his food out of the dirt through hard work, so his inner paradise will remain intensely difficult to cultivate. Citing Milton’s monist construction of Eden, Beverly Sherry notes that “such ‘inward consolations’ (12.495) are a radical diminution of the first paradise. The senses have no part in this solely inner condition, so that, by comparison with the ‘blissful Seat’ of Eden, ‘a paradise within’ is a kind of half life, even if Adam and Eve should win it.”<sup>27</sup> Eve’s consolations after the fall remain similarly conceptual—she must be comforted by the knowledge that her descendant will defeat Satan, yet she will not live to see the birth of this child. In a fallen world where consolation is either inaccessible or abstract, human companionship, while imperfect, offers one of the only sources of tangible and immediate consolation left to Adam and Eve.

Right before Michael escorts the humans out of Eden, Eve reassures Adam with what Milton describes as “words not sad” (12.609):

Whence thou return’st, and whither thou went’st, I know;  
For God is also in sleep, and dreams advise,  
Which he hath sent propitious, some great good  
Presaging, since with sorrow and heart’s distress  
Wearied I fell asleep: but now lead on;  
In me is no delay; with thee to go,

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<sup>27</sup> Beverly Sherry, “A ‘Paradise Within’ Can Never Be ‘Happier Farr’: Reconsidering the Archangel Michael’s Consolation in *Paradise Lost*.” *Milton Quarterly* 37.2 (May 2003): 85.

Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,  
Is to go hence unwilling; thou to me  
Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou,  
Who for my willful crime art banished hence.  
This further consolation yet secure  
I carry hence; though all by me is lost,  
Such favor I unworthy am vouchsafed,  
By me the promised seed shall all restore. 610-23

Gray reads Eve's final speech as an invitation poem to Adam in which she "reassert[s] the mutuality of their relationship, continuing a conjugal dialogue that stretches across the apparent rupture of the Fall."<sup>28</sup> Yet we might also read Eve's fourteen-line speech as the world's first sonnet—a form early modern poets found particularly suited for exploring an erotic love inextricably mingled with regret and humiliation. Like an abject sonneteer, Eve labels herself "unworthy" and guilty of "willful crime," but she also describes her emotional connection to Adam as one that supersedes the comforts of Eden: "thou to me / Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou." Just as Shakespeare and Wroth use the sonnet form as an alembic to distill the pain of love into the substance of consolation, so Eve uses poetic dialogue to shape a consoling vision of the world she and Adam will inhabit together once they are banished from Eden. In contrast to Satan's assertion that the individual mind can make a heaven of hell and vice versa, Eve envisions human companionship as a force that has the power to transform an uncomfortable physical world.

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<sup>28</sup> Gray, "Come Be My Love," 372.

Like philosophical argument and biblical narrative, poetic dialogue is a mode subject to moral compromise and misuse in *Paradise Lost*. Yet unlike these previous two modes, dialogue coupled with honorable, selfless action offers a form of consolation that more closely accords with Milton's firm commitment to the simultaneous existence of providence and free will. In the final lines of the epic, Milton describes Adam and Eve's departure from Eden in terms of these two principles:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and providence their guide:  
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way. 12.645-49

If manmade books of consolation offer too much scope to free will, leaving people without the proper interpretive guidance, angelic instruction and divine revelation are too one-sided, handing down consolation from above without taking human choice into account. Human relationships, on the other hand, allow people to seek consolation in a way that marries these two principles—by engaging with a divinely-created being, people rely on God's providence, but in navigating that relationship, they are left to their own choices. *Paradise Lost* ultimately promotes a more active, socially-oriented model of consolation than those Satan and Michael advocate. In contrast to Michael's model of the "paradise within" and Satan's insistence that "the mind is its own place," Adam and Eve draw on the resources of their social environment to manage the emotional consequences of the fall. Rather than attend only to their own individual emotions, they work together to construct their relationship as a space of mutual comfort in a newly dangerous world.

Just as Adam and Eve falter toward a reconciliation over the course of Books 9-12, so Milton suggests that other fallen humans (and readers) may wend a “wand’ring” path toward consolation in communion with each other. As I have argued above, *Paradise Lost* critiques the effectiveness of received intellectual modes of consolation, whether they stem from a demon or an angel. It does, however, support a version of consolation that finally mirrors its commitments to the literary genre of epic. Milton claims he is telling a “tragic” tale of man’s fall that rivals the rage of Achilles, but like the *Iliad*, *Paradise Lost* is also a story about how rage and passion are finally managed, muted, and at least partially resolved (9.6). While the fall besets human relationships with new obstacles like inequality, jealousy, and frustration, it also creates a world in which the quest to wring consolation out of these relationships is itself an epic endeavor. This model of consolation is one that readers who are perplexed by books of philosophy or who lack access to angelic instruction can carry away from the poem. In a fallen world, Milton implies, love isn’t all you need, but sometimes it’s all you have.

## Conclusion

In his study of madness and anxiety in seventeenth-century England, Michael MacDonald claims that early moderns “placed even greater emphasis on the curative powers of the imagination than we do today,” seeking treatment in religious and magical remedies, as well as in physiological ones.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, early modern readers and writers managed troubling emotions through a variety of textual genres, including philosophical dialogue, scriptural commentary, medical treatises, and, as I have argued, literary forms like poetry. While we still acknowledge that poetry’s “emotional” nature makes it an attractive form in which to express deep loss, romantic feeling, or even adolescent angst, we no longer tend to see verse as a legitimate form of treatment for emotional upheavals that threaten to disrupt our physical health, professional productivity, and social relationships.

After the English Civil War, the Restoration monarchy outlawed many magical and religious methods for treating madness in an attempt to quell religious radicalism. At the same time, Enlightenment culture encouraged methods of treatment guided by new developments in secular medicine. In many cases, patients felt that the older “imaginative” techniques for treating mental and emotional distress actually worked more effectively than the newer “scientific” ones. Church and government pressure, however, worked to eradicate these older treatments in favor

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<sup>1</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 193.

of empirical (and often violent) techniques, such as solitary confinement, beating, or forced vomiting.<sup>2</sup> MacDonald concludes:

The mad and melancholy people of eighteenth-century England suffered the ancient treatments without even the consolation of traditional cosmology. Their anguish was robbed of transcendent significance; their discomforts were stripped of cosmological justification. Properly, we should not speak of the rise of medical science, we should talk instead of the decline of therapeutic eclecticism.<sup>3</sup>

MacDonald's critique of Restoration medical culture mirrors a more contemporary complaint that Western biomedicine focuses on the chemical and physiological causes of emotional suffering to the exclusion of other factors. In her study on the cultural impact of antidepressants in the U.S., for example, Katherine Sharpe explores the relatively recent push to treat emotional distress primarily with pharmaceuticals rather than with psychoanalysis or other forms of talk therapy.<sup>4</sup> Interviewing members of the first generation to be prescribed antidepressants as children and teenagers, Sharpe examines the long-term effects of understanding troubling emotion as illness. Many of the people Sharpe interviewed found consolation in the idea that their depression or anxiety was a biological disease like diabetes, as it allowed them to view episodes of overwhelming sadness or panic as medical symptoms rather than as character defects. (We see a similar kind of consolatory argument in Robert Burton's

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<sup>2</sup> MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 10-11, 176-78.

<sup>3</sup> MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 197.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to explaining the medical field's shift toward chemical causes of emotion, Sharpe also chronicles the legal and economic factors behind this shift in treatment practices. She cites, for example, the 1997 FDA decision that made it legal for pharmaceutical companies to market drugs directly to consumers. She also cites the rise of the "managed care" insurance model, in which an insurance company pays for "the least-expensive effective treatment for a given illness"—which tends to mean psychopharmaceuticals rather than talk therapy. Katherine Sharpe, *Coming of Age on Zoloft: How Antidepressants Cheered us Up, Let us Down, and Changed Who we Are* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 89, 182-184.

unusual claim in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* that those who commit suicide do so primarily because of illness and that a merciful God might still grant them salvation.<sup>5</sup>) Yet many of Sharpe's interviewees also expressed concern about how their medical diagnosis had shaped their emerging sense of self as adolescents and young adults. Additionally, they often cited difficulties distinguishing between "normal" emotions and symptoms of mental illness.

Scholars like Daniel Gross and John McKnight have begun to show how a modern medical interest in the brain chemistry of emotion assumes a model of emotion located almost exclusively in individuals rather than in their social networks or environmental surroundings.<sup>6</sup> McKnight argues that our current service economy encourages us to see emotional distress and mental illness as problems within individuals that need to be fixed by professional experts, rather than by that individual herself, her family, or her community. This attitude arises from what McKnight terms "the translation of a need into a deficiency." He explains: "A need could be understood as a condition, a want, a right, an obligation of another, an illusion, or an unresolvable problem. Professional practice consistently defines a need as an unfortunate absence or emptiness in another."<sup>7</sup> Like a modern service economy that requires need to produce work for professionals, so early modern presses and writers also capitalized on readers' understanding of emotional turmoil as a problem in need of fixing, producing numerous texts of consolation that sold well.

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<sup>5</sup> Burton says, "If a man put desperate hands upon himself by occasion of madness or melancholy, if he have given testimony before of his regeneration, in regard he doth this not so much out of his will as *ex vi morbi* [on account of his disease], we must make the best construction out of it, as Turks do, that think all fools and madmen go directly to heaven." Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 3, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1932), 408.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6, 28.

<sup>7</sup> John L. McKnight, "Professionalized Services: Disabling Help for Communities and Citizens," in *The Essential Civil Society Reader: Classic Essays in the American Civil Society Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 188. Originally published in John McKnight, *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterparts* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1995).

While poetry was certainly not exempt from this kind of print marketing, this dissertation argues that poetry also challenged prevailing notions of emotional distress as a problem to be solved. Rather than ask readers to view their emotional needs only as moral or humoral deficiencies, early modern poetry offered readers alternative ways to understand emotions like desire, loss, or frustration. Mary Wroth, for example, frames grief and desire as emotions that make Pamphilia a constant devotee of Love rather than a compromised woman betrayed by her lover. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton shows how Adam and Eve convert their moral deficiencies after the fall into an obligation to meet each other's emotional needs. Early modern poetry consoles by encouraging readers to examine emotional experience from multiple perspectives and to seek alternatives to their society's conventional definitions of emotion.

Much like the religious and magical treatments MacDonald claims were so effective for curing melancholy, poetry consoled early modern readers because its "imaginative" properties offered unique ways to make sense of and give voice to emotional suffering. While nonliterary discourses also encouraged readers to contextualize suffering within an ordered universe, their advice about emotional management often fell along intellectual and doctrinal lines to the exclusion of other potential treatment methods. For example, because early modern Puritans tended to regard emotional distress as a battle between the spiritual forces of grace and sin, they encouraged intense introspection and self-discipline as the best means of managing troubling emotions. Anglicans, on the other hand, emphasized community over self-reflection, promoting the comforts of companionship and participation in religious exercises, such as formal prayer.<sup>8</sup> As I argue in this dissertation, the formal properties of early modern verse allow poets to approach the social project of consolation across such doctrinal and intellectual divides. In *The*

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<sup>8</sup> MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 219, 221.

*Temple*, for example, lyric sequencing allows Herbert to move easily between poems that stress individual introspection and identification with the emotions of the church as a larger community. In a similar fashion, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* simultaneously insist on the commemorative power of exceptional verse and on the legitimate consolation to be found in transient utterance or unexceptional poetry.

*Forms of Consolation in Early Modern English Poetry* offers an account of how literature presented readers with unique tools for emotional management in a society that was beginning to pathologize distressing emotion as illness. As eighteenth-century England moved toward more scientific methods of treating mental illness, emotionally troubled individuals were increasingly sequestered from the rest of society to receive treatment in mental hospitals. This practice shifted the burden of emotional management from a patient's larger community—including preachers, politicians, and poets—to professional physicians. Even though the U.S. has deinstitutionalized most of its mental health facilities, we continue to be guided by a similar model of emotional management. While scientific and medical research have produced extremely important knowledge about human emotion, I argue that we have much to learn from examining how people managed emotion in a historically distant past. In particular, we might ask how literature's close attention to the language in which we articulate emotion can play a larger role in identifying and managing emotional distress. By exploring how early moderns used poetry to frame emotional management as a social and aesthetic project, we can gain new ideas for how literature and the arts can play an important role in cultivating emotional and mental health today.

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