The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School
College of the Liberal Arts

ANXIOUS CONFESSIONS:
PENITENCE, MEMORY, AND DESIRE
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

A Thesis in
English
by
Paul Dustin Stegner

Copyright 2007 Paul Dustin Stegner

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

May 2007
This thesis of Paul Dustin Stegner was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Patrick G. Cheney  
Professor of English and Comparative Literature  
Thesis Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Robert R. Edwards  
Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Laura L. Knoppers  
Professor of English

Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr.  
Professor of English

Linda Woodbridge  
Professor of English and Weiss Chair in the Humanities

Ronnie Po-chia Hsia  
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of History

Robert Caserio  
Professor of English and Head of the Department of English

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
ABSTRACT

Anxious Confessions: Penitence, Memory, and Desire in Early Modern English Literature

addresses the consequential intersections of literary imagination and penitential practices in early modern England. The English Reformation rejected the sacramental status of private, auricular confession and dispensed with the medieval requirement that individuals confess their sins at least once a year. The Church of England maintained a desacramentalized, voluntary form of private confession, but reserved it as an extraordinary rite for those individuals needing further consolation. However, this reorientation led to the effective disappearance of the rite in early modern England. The loss of private confession disrupted a significant means for achieving forgiveness and reassurance. Conventionally, literary critics have overlooked the importance of private confession in early modern England because they tend to categorize ritual practices as either Protestant or Roman Catholic and to associate literary representations of the rite of private confession with England’s religious past or with contemporary Roman Catholicism. This received interpretation neglects the ongoing literary engagements with the developments in penitential practices in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. By reconstructing the discourses surrounding the rite of private confession in early modern England, this study explores how four major authors—Spenser, Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Donne—represent the rite as a unique site for negotiating memories of past sins and achieving reconciliation and consolation. In its consideration of the widespread effects of the shifts in ritual confession, this study examines texts ranging from epic poetry, sonnet sequences, and female complaint to sermons, devotional prose, and early modern translations of St. Augustine. This study demonstrates how early modern representations of the rite of private confession engage the shifting relationship of individuals to political, ecclesiastical, and divine authority in the early modern period.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................................................ v

Chapter 1: PENITENTIAL LIVES AND AFTERLIVES: THE RITE OF PRIVATE CONFESSION IN THE AGE OF REFORMATIONS................................................................. 1
   From the Center to the Margins:
   Confession in England from Wyclif to the Early Reformation................................. 7
   Sacramental Remains: Auricular Confession in England, 1548-1633............... 21

Chapter 2: “FROM POINT TO POINT, AS IS BEFORE EXPREST”: PROTESTANT CONFESSIONAL MODELS IN SPENSER’S LEGEND OF HOLINESS........................................ 39
   Memories of Sin: Spenser and Augustine................................................................. 41
   Forms of Confession in the Legend of Holiness...................................................... 48
   The Redcrosse Knight’s Narrative Lacunae at the Court of Eden............... 61

Chapter 3: “TRY WHAT REPENTANCE CAN”: DOCTOR FAUSTUS, HAMLET, AND THE FAILURE OF CONFESSION.............................................................. 70
   Ritual Confession and the Problem of Assurance.................................................... 72
   Confession and Anti-Confession in Doctor Faustus................................................. 83
   Hamlet, Confession, and the Extraction of Interiority.............................................. 94

Chapter 4: WILL AND THE “RECONCILED MAID”: REREADING CONFESSION IN SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS.............................................. 112
   The Confessional Form of A Lover’s Complaint.................................................... 114
   Confessions of Will: Penitence and Desire in the Sonnets................................... 123
   The Limits of Self-Examination............................................................................... 138

Chapter 5: “I LOOK BACK UPON THE SINS”: CONFESSION AND MEMORY IN DONNE’S SERMONS ON THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS AND DEVOTIONS UPON EMERGENT OCCASIONS............................................................................. 142
   Remembering and Forgetting in the Christian Economy of Salvation.............. 147
   Private Confession and Absolution in Donne’s Penitential Theology:
   “woe unto me if I be alone”................................................................................... 165

Conclusion..................................................................................................................................................... 181

Works Cited.................................................................................................................................................. 187
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project began almost a decade ago in Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis’ St. Ignatius Institute seminar on European Literature to the Renaissance. I will always be grateful to Professor Leiva for being a wonderful mentor and friend and for introducing me to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. At Penn State, this project took on a new form in Patrick Cheney’s seminar on Shakespeare’s poetry. I am very thankful to Professor Cheney for being an ideal supervisor and excellent friend who has always been generous with his assistance and encouragement. I am also thankful to my dissertation committee: Robert Edwards, Laura Knoppers, Linda Woodbridge, Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, and, especially, Garrett Sullivan. This project also benefited from David Scott Kastan and Linda Levy Peck’s “Researching the Archives” seminar at the Folger Institute, which offered several important suggestions for improving my chapter on early modern drama. The Rock Ethics Institute dissertation seminar at Penn State also provided an excellent forum for presenting my initial research findings. I am thankful to the Folger Institute and the Rock Ethics Institute’s generous grants that allowed me to conduct my archival research. In addition, I am indebted to several literary scholars and early modern historians who have offered me advice and assistance, including Lukas Erne, Andrew Escobedo, Carol Kaske, Heather Hirschfeld, Susanna Monta, Sarah Beckwith, Jodi Bilinkoff, John Carlson, and Michael Kiernan. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues, especially John H. Martin, Vince Ryan, Jeffrey Pruchnic, Christopher and Laura White, Patrick O’Banion, Cassie Thomas, and Steele Nowlin. I am grateful to Patsy and Jerry Shaw for all of their encouragement. I would especially like to thank Nicole Jacobs for her superb criticism and constant, loving support. Finally, I want to acknowledge my parents—Paul and Mary K. Stegner—for their love, understanding, and kindness. I dedicate this dissertation to both of them.
Chapter 1

Penitential Lives and Afterlives:

The Rite of Private Confession in the Age of Reformations

This study is about the consequential intersections of literary imagination and penitential practices in early modern England. In 1548, the Church of England abolished confession as a dominical sacrament and subsequently eliminated the longstanding medieval requirement that individuals confess their sins annually. The rejection of the sacramental status of private, auricular confession radically transformed the penitential process by shifting the rite from the center to the margins. Although the English Church briefly restored confession as a sacrament during the reign of Queen Mary I, the Elizabethan Settlement in 1558 reaffirmed that private confession was not a sacrament and, though beneficial, not necessary for salvation. Early modern editions of the Book of Common Prayer accordingly retained a form of the rite, but it effectively disappeared from the ritual life of the English Church. This transformation occurred swiftly in ecclesiastical policy, but remained a subject of religious polemic from the Elizabethan Settlement to the translation of William Laud to the Archbishopric of Canterbury in 1633. With the rise of Laud, the debate surrounding private confession did not disappear, but rather became part of the Church of England’s official emphasis on ritual and ceremony. The late sixteenth- and early-seventeenth century theological discourses surrounding private confession synecdochically demonstrate the multiple and, at times, divisive currents in the early modern Church of England.

The debate over private confession was not limited to ecclesiastical writers or religious polemic between English Protestants and Catholics, but radiated outward to variety of literary sites, including Spenser’s national epic, The Faerie Queene, the early modern English stage, Shakespeare’s poetry, and Jacobean devotional literature. Private confession, I argue in this
study, continued to be significant to literary authors of the time because it provided a unique means for negotiating memories of past sins and achieving reconciliation and consolation. Literary critics have previously examined the “profoundly traumatic” repercussions stemming from the Church of England’s changes in penitential practices, particularly its rejection of the prayers for the dead and the doctrine of Purgatory, but have generally overlooked the effects of the reorientation of the rite of private confession.¹ Even more so than the notable afterlife that accompanied the rejected doctrine of Purgatory, which “is, after all, simply an extension of the penitential process,” the rite of private confession continued to exert a powerful emotional, psychological, and spiritual influence on the literary imagination of early modern England.²

The printing, importation, and circulation of sermons, devotional manuals, and theological treatises on private confession further indicate that the transition from the medieval to the early modern penitential system was neither an immediate nor a smooth process.³ On the


contrary, support for the administration of private confession points toward the persistence of traditional ritual practices long after the elimination of penance as a sacrament and its marginalization in the Church of England. This description challenges the conventional argument of literary critics that the English Reformation put an end to the debates surrounding private confession. John King’s remarks in *Spenser and the Reformation Tradition* illustrate this critical commonplace: “Although penance retained a place in the Protestant devotional scheme, it lost the sacramental status it had possessed in the Roman rite. The doctrine of justification by faith alone supplanted the Catholic penitential system based upon private confession and clerical absolution.” Protestant belief in “faith alone” did not, however, efface the “Catholic penitential system” and establish a uniform, stable approach to penitence. The issue of the rite of private confession remained alive and dynamic during the early modern period.

From Spenser’s militant Protestantism to Shakespeare and Marlowe’s ambiguous theological beliefs to Donne’s ordainment in the Jacobean Church of England, early modern writers’ treatments of private confession are not marked by doctrinal or religious homogeneity, but rather, I posit, by representations of the rite as essential for responding to the Christian mandate that repentance is necessary for salvation. This concentration on how early modern authors treat the consolatory and reconciliatory potential of private confession departs from the

---


critical and historiographical emphasis on the rite as a form of social control. In particular, it challenges Michel Foucault’s influential argument in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* regarding the connections between sacramental penance, power, sexuality, and the emergence of Western subjectivity. Instead of examining how the rite may contribute to compulsory extraction and diffusion of power over sexual identity, then, this study focuses more on the ways in which early modern literary writers depicted private confession as efficacious for confronting the memorial effects of transgressive desire and fulfilling the Christian mandate that repentance is necessary for salvation. In so doing, this study draws on the critical and historiographical approach that traces the positive dimension of private confession and, in the process, aims to reconstruct the perspective of many early modern writers.

---


While the first chapter of the study analyzes the historical development of private confession in the early modern period, the remaining four chapters consider a series of texts that deploy forms of private confession in historically important ways: Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596); Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (1604 and 1616) and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603, 1604, and 1623); *Shake-speare’s Sonnets*, which includes a sequence of 154 sonnets and *A Lover’s Complaint* (1609); and Donne’s Sermons on the Penitential Psalms (c. 1618-25) and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624). This configuration of representative texts constitutes a series of literary engagements with the disruption of the rite of private confession in the wake of the English Reformation. When considered together, these texts manifest the importance of the rite to a variety of discursive forms: epic, tragedy, lyric, sermon, and devotional prose. These literary forms represent the existence of diverse and sometimes competing forms of penitence after the Elizabethan Settlement, and reveal the degree to which individual subjectivity remained connected to traditional ritual practices during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They also show the shifting relationship of individuals to political, ecclesiastical, and divine authority in the early modern period. Instead of classifying texts and writers as either Protestant or Catholic, medieval or early modern (or proto-modern), then, this study demonstrates how, beyond the rhetoric of absolutist theological polemic, early modern

---

Confession 369-70, notes the centrality of consolation in Reformation debates over private confession. This interpretation of private confession has been applied to medieval literature; see Anthony Low, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2003) 36. Low’s argument draws from Duggan’s account of the limited use of ritual confession in imposing social control. For early modern accounts of the benefits of private confession, see Henry VIII, *[The King’s Book]* *A necessary doctrine and erudicion for any chrysten man* (London, 1543) Fv; and [Laurence Vaux], *A brief fourme of confession instructing all Christian folke how to confesse their sinnes, [and] so dispose themselves, that they may enjoy the benefit of true pena[n]ce* (Antwerp, 1576) b4v; and John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1953-62) 9: 108. For an example of Counter-Reformation emphasis on the consolatory dimension of confession, see William Allen, *A treatise made in defence of the lauful power and authoritie of priesthood to remitte sinnes of the peoples duetie for confession of their sinnes to Gods ministers: and of the Churches meaning concerning indulgences, commonlie called the Popes pardo[n]s* (Louvain, 1567) 245-48. On Allen’s treatment of confession, see Elizabeth Hanson, *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 48-49.
interiority and literary representations of it underwent a continuing process of definition and redefinition.

This opening chapter goes on to illustrate the importance of private confession in early modern England by reconstructing the development of the rite from the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 to the translation of Laud. To contextualize the English Reformation’s transformation of the rite, this chapter traces the effects of the Lateran reforms in medieval England, treats early sixteenth-century challenges to the penitential system, and examines the debates surrounding private confession in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Turning toward representations of the rite in literary texts, chapter two concentrates on how Spenser’s treatment of Redcrosse’s memories of sexual sins and his subsequent spiritual development indicates the pastoral importance of confessional rites for addressing the memorial, private, and public effects of sin. Chapter three shows a different, more pessimistic rendering of private confession, as both Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* depict the failure of the rite in the wake of the English Reformation’s changes to traditional penitential practices. In the Protestant contexts of these plays, Marlowe and Shakespeare focus on the remnants of sacramental confession—evangelical Wittenberg and reformed Wertenberg—to underscore the difficulty of experiencing forgiveness and spiritual resolution in the transformed theological landscape of early modern England. Chapter four focuses on how the 1609 quarto of *Shakespeare Sonnets* transposes the problem of making a satisfactory confession into a lyric register and explores the tensions between penitential resolution and recursive forms of desire. Turning toward the reemergence of private confession in the Jacobean Church of England, chapter five analyzes the manner in which Donne’s penitential theology depicts the rite as an effective means for accomplishing spiritual and psychological consolation, but also as evidence of individuals’
dependence on ecclesiastical rites and ministers. Altogether, these chapters address how literary authors responded to the loss of traditional penitential practices, and the various ways in which they reimagined the place of private confession and ritual in early modern England.

**From the Center to the Margins:**

**Confession in England from Wyclif to the Early Reformation**

The virtual disappearance of private confession in the Church of England remained such a contentious subject because of the Christian mandate that repentance is necessary for salvation. John the Baptist announces the centrality of repentance in Christian soteriology when he declares: “Repent: for the kingedome of heauen is at hand” (Matt. 3: 2). The early modern English Church contended that public, liturgical confession and private penitential prayer satisfactorily fulfilled this penitential obligation. In so doing, it joined the broader Reformation debates about repentance that concentrated not on if, but rather on how Christians should confess their sins. More specifically, the debate focused on whether the faithful needed to confess sins directly to God, publicly through common worship, or, as the medieval Church required, privately to a priest, who assumes the role of *alter Christi* in the penitential rite. The question thus focused on the place of confession in the sacramental life of the Christian Church: Was it necessary for salvation or was it *adiaphora*, that is, beneficial but not required for salvation?

In many ways, this controversy over confession emerged from changes in penitential practices in the medieval period. The Church traditionally grounded its authority over the administration of private, auricular confession in the “power of keys” that Christ grants to Peter: “And I will giue vnto thee the keyes of the kingdome of heauen: and whatsoever thou shalt binde vpo[n] earth, shalbe bound in heauen: and whatsoever thou shalt lose on earth, shalbe losed in

---

heauen” (Matt. 16: 19). A form of private confession existed in the early Church, but became increasingly more common after the seventh century, primarily as a result of the influence of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic churches, and eventually replaced most forms of public confession. With the promulgation of *Omnis utriusque sexus*, the twenty-first canon of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the penitential landscape of Latin Christianity changed dramatically. The canon decreed that every person of the faith confess annually:

> Every *fidelis* of either sex [Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis] shall after the attainment of years of discretion separately confess his sins with all [omnia sua solus peccata] fidelity to his own priest at least once in the year: and shall endeavour to fulfill the penance imposed upon him to the best of his ability, reverently receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist at least at Easter: unless it happen that by the counsel of his own priest for some reasonable cause, he hold that he should abstain for a time from the reception of the sacrament: otherwise let him during his life be repelled from entering the church, and when dead let him lack Christian burial. Wherefore let this salutary statute be frequently published in the churches, lest any assume a veil of excuse in the blindness of ignorance [ignorantiae causa velamen excusationis assumat].

The effect of the Lateran penitential reforms on the laity and the clergy is difficult to overestimate. Henry Charles Lea contends that the canon “is perhaps the most important legislative act in the history of the Church,” and Pierre Payer observes: “Of its many reforming decrees the twenty-first canon of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) likely had the most effect on the lives of ordinary people and the parish clergy.” The medieval Church now expected the faithful to confess annually and the clergy to administer the sacrament satisfactorily, a requirement that led to the emergence of penitential manuals (*Libri poenitentiales*) and writings

---


12 Qtd. in Watkins 2: 748. For the Latin text, see Watkins 2: 733.

for academics (Summae confessorum or Summa de casibus conscentiae). Along with the Lateran Council’s requirement for annual confession, medieval writers began to articulate an etiquette of confession that was designed to encourage contrition and a proper interior disposition and to avoid equivocation, concealment, and disobedience. The prominence of sacramental confession in medieval English literature, such as Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, Gower’s Confessio Amantis, Langland’s Piers Plowman, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and The Book of Margery Kempe, further registers the extent of the dissemination of the Lateran Council’s changes in penitential practices in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The Lateran Council’s reforms also necessitated an interpretation of the status of confession in the patristic period that would accord with medieval penitential doctrine. Given his overarching authority in the medieval period, St. Augustine’s teachings on private confession featured prominently in the establishment of the early origins of the sacrament. Augustine may have stressed the necessity of reconciliation for salvation, “put[ting] it on the very same level as baptism,” but the majority of the medieval doctrine on sacramental private confession remained absent in his writings. However, the mid-twelfth-century pseudo-Augustinian penitential tract On True and False Penitence (De vera et falsa poenitentia), offered evidence that St. Augustine argued in favor of the power of the keys and the necessity of sacerdotal authority in the confessional process. In the Summa Theologiae, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas cites the

---

14 Tentler, Sin and Confession 28-53, discusses the different genres for administering confession.
15 The most popular summary of the components of a good confession during the medieval period is St. Thomas Aquinas’ so-called sixteen conditions, which appear in Scriptum super Sententitis 1.4 d.17 q.3 a.4 q.c.4 arg.1; see Tentler, Sin and Confession 106-7. The influence of Aquinas’ conditions may be seen in Robert Mannyng of Brunne, Handlyng Synne, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983) 11382-85.
16 Poschmann 101. For Augustine’s doctrine on the forms of ecclesiastical confession, see Watkins 1: 437-45; and Poschmann 84-86.
17 For a brief summary of the tract and its medieval reception, see Lea 2: 209.
tract to defend the division between venial and mortal sins. Furthermore, in the question titled “Whether Augustine Fittingly Defines Confession?” Aquinas defends Augustine’s definition of confession as an action that “lays bare the hidden disease by the hope of pardon [est quam morbus latens spe veniae aperitur]” in the context of priestly administration of the sacrament of penance: “Although the priest, as a man, may sometimes have knowledge of the penitent's sin, yet he does not know it as a vicar of Christ (even as a judge sometimes knows a thing, as a man, of which he is ignorant, as a judge), and in this respect it is made known to him by confession.”

The medieval refashioning of the Augustinian position of private confession would later become a subject of contention in the Reformation.

Before the Reformation, English writers criticized abuses in the practice of sacramental private confession. Most notably, John Wyclif revived a form of Donatism in his insistence on the necessary virtue of confessors. Contrasting the practice of general confession in the apostolic period to the Lateran requirement for private confession, Wyclif argues:

And so, 3if prestos prechiden faste as Crist haþ ordeyned hem to preche, it semeþ þat bis were know wiþ general confessioun. And so, al 3if it do good, neþeleþ it doþ much harm, for confessours han here menes to spuyle þe puple by symonye, and to fuyle hem many weyes by couytyse and leccherie.

---

19 Aquinas 5: 2580, Supp. 7.1. The Latin Text may be found in *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Commissio Piana, 4 vols. (Ottawa: Instituti Studiorum Mediævalium Ottaviensis, 1941) 25*a*. Aquinas is citing a sermon attributed to Augustine; see *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 39, col. 2215.
Yet critiques of particular failings of the medieval penitential system, which belong to the genre of ecclesiastical satire, represent a much more common theme in theological and literary writings of the period. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer’s varying representations of members of the medieval Church’s penitential system reflect this theme. On the one side, Chaucer depicts the Pardoner as a usurper of jurisdictional authority in his claims to administer absolution, while on the other, he presents the Parson as a virtuous and capable administrator of the sacrament of penance. For writers like Chaucer, the medieval penitential system contained imperfect members, but the system itself possessed the capacity to reconcile effectively the faithful and God through the ministry of the Church.

Reformation attacks on medieval penitential practices contrast with those of the medieval period in two ways. The first involves the reformers’ objection to sacramental confession because of a lack of scriptural precedent. Medieval writers routinely pointed to the failings of confessional practices, but generally accepted the scriptural authorization and medieval Church’s teachings on the necessity and sacramental nature of private confession. Supporters of the Church’s teachings on penitence used scriptural precedent, papal authority, and the benefits of the practice—in particular, its ability to effect consolation—to support their case. In his translation of the New Testament, however, Erasmus cast doubt on confession’s scriptural foundation when he translated the Greek term *metanoia* used in Matthew 3: 6 as *resipiscite*, meaning to change one’s mind or repent (*OED* def. 1), instead of the Vulgate’s rendering of the term as *poenitentiam agite*. This linguistic difference marks a general shift from penance to

---

23 For a detailed discussion of Erasmus’ translation as well as Luther’s reaction to Erasmus’ use of *metanoia*, see C.A.L. Jarrot, “Erasmus’ Biblical Humanism,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 17 (1970): 125-28. The adherence of Roman Catholics to the Vulgate translation became the subject of English Protestant polemic; see William Fulke, *Tvvo treatises written against the papistes the one being an answere of the Christian Protestant to the proud*
repentance, though writers from the patristic period through Calvin used the terms interchangeably. The second and more obvious difference results from the reformers’ success in rejecting and reorienting the penitential system established by the Lateran council. The place of auricular confession in Latin Christianity would be permanently altered both in those Protestant areas that rejected necessary sacramental confession and those Catholic areas that implemented the reforms of the Council of Trent.

Protestant reformers certainly had no intention of returning to the pre-Lateran state of Christian penance and discipline, but their solutions for the fate of private confession varied widely. For those who wanted to retain a form of private confession, the answer lay in purging the practice from ecclesiastical abuses. Luther’s position on auricular confession plays a particularly important role in subsequent developments in England because his revolutionary critique of the medieval Church’s penitential system and introduction of a reformed model of private confession influenced the general Reformation understanding of the rite. For Luther, private confession offers a means of reconciliation with God that provides consolation to the believer; but he argues that the abuses and tyranny of the papacy had corrupted the rite. In the Ninety-five Theses (1517), his treatment of repentance stresses the limitations of papal

\[\text{challenge of a popish Catholicke: the other a confutation of the popish churches doctrine touching purgatory & prayers for the dead (London, 1577) Cii}; \text{ and his subsequent treatise, A defense of the sincere and true translations of the holie Scriptures into the English tong against the manifolde cauls, friuelous quarels, and impudent slaunders of Gregorie Martin, one of the readers of popish diuinitie in the trayterous Seminarie of Rhemes (London, 1583) d[vii]-d[viii].}\]

authority. More forcefully, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) Luther focuses his critique on the priest’s treatment of the faithful in the rite of confession, arguing that “godless” priests “madly rage against the miserable souls of men with their contritions, anxious confessions, circumstances, satisfactions, works, and endless other such absurdities.” Furthermore, like many subsequent Protestant reformers, Luther attacks the ecclesiastical requirement that penitents enumerate all of their sins, considering such a requirement to be not only mentally destructive, but also theologically impossible given the overwhelming sinfulness of individuals and their actions. As he explains in the first of the Ninety-five Theses, the “entire life of believers [is] to be one of repentance” and, as such, a total confession of sins would be endless.

Luther considers private confession and, in particular, the declaration of absolution, to be an important means for achieving reassurance of God’s forgiveness of sins and finding consolation. He finds scriptural authorization for confessing sins to others in James 5: 16, “confitemini ergo alterutrum vestra” (“Acknowledge your fau[l]tes one to another”). However, Luther’s understanding of private confession, particularly its sacramental status, changed. Before 1520, he included the sacrament of penance, along with baptism and the Lord’s Supper,

---

26 *LW* 36: 61. Likewise, in *An Instruction to Penitents Concerning the Forbidden Books of Dr. M. Luther* (1522), written as a response to father confessors using the sacrament of penance to determine if a penitent reads Luther’s forbidden books, he encourages the penitent to resist the priest’s unwarranted questions and refusal to grant absolution. Luther explains: “I would go away from him [the confessor] as from one who, together with Lucifer, goes beyond his duty and authority and usurps the jurisdiction of God by probing into the secrets of the heart, a thing he has no right to do and something with which he should not concern himself. Where man does not absolve, there God absolves” (*LW* 44: 225).
27 See *The Sacrament of Penance* in *LW* 35: 2-21.
28 *LW* 31: 25.
29 David Bagchi provides a recent discussion of Luther’s attitudes toward private confession and the sacrament of penance in “Luther and the Sacramentality of Penance,” ed. Cooper and Gregory, 119-27.
as one of the three sacraments instituted by Christ. However, by the publication of *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in 1520, Luther considers private confession to be necessary for Christians, and explains that he is and was “heartily in favor” of it, “even though it cannot be proven from the Scriptures.”

Despite its lack of scriptural authorization, he offers a near encomium of the benefits of private confession: “It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is without equal for distressed consciences.” In a 1522 sermon, Luther reiterates his praise regarding its consolatory benefits in terms of his personal experiences:

> I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures of the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No one knows what it can do for him except one who has struggled often and long with the devil. Yes, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me. For there are many doubtful matters which a man cannot resolve or find the answer to by himself, and so he takes his brother aside and tells him his trouble.

Because of the spiritual benefits of auricular confession, Luther retains it as one of the three forms of confession, which also included confession to the congregation or another Christian (outlined in Matthew 18: 15-18) and private, unmediated confession to God. In his discussion of auricular confession, Luther, however, rejects the traditional ecclesiastical restriction of the

---

30 *LW* 36: 86.
31 *LW* 36: 86.
32 *LW* 51: 98. See also *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*: “For this reason, I have a high regard for private confession, for here God’s word and absolution are spoken privately and individually to each believer for the forgiveness of sins, and as often as he desires it he may have recourse to it for this forgiveness, and also for comfort, counsel, and guidance” (*LW* 37: 368).
33 Luther defines these three forms of confession in his sermon on Ruminiscere Sunday, 16 Mar. 1522, which is included in *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (1522), *LW* 51: 96-98. Luther reiterates the three types of confession in *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics* (1526), *LW* 36: 354-61. In the *Small Catechism* (1529), Luther identifies two forms of confession: to God and private confession to a pastor; reprinted in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 2000) 260-62; and in the *Large Catechism* he identifies these two as well as private confession to another Christian layperson; reprinted in *The Book of Concord 476-80*. David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 136-38, offers a brief discussion of confession in Luther’s catechisms. In the section *On Private Confession in Loci Communes* (1521), Melanchthon reiterates Luther’s three forms of confession; see *The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon*, trans. Charles Leander Hill (Boston: Meador, 1944) 256-57.
absolution of sins to a priest, contending that the power of the keys had been granted to all Christians. In *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), he explains that “the forgiveness of guilt is not within the province of any human office of authority, be it pope, bishop, priest, or any other. Rather it depends exclusively upon the word of Christ and your own faith.” Consequently, Luther advises that any Christian can declare the words of forgiveness, though he does maintain that the faithful should “observe … the established orders of authority.” In practice, however, Luther stressed private confession to ecclesiastical authorities, for he associates the rite with the preparation of the faithful for receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist.

As part of his reform of private confession, Luther reorients the traditional tripartite division of the rite (contrition, confession, satisfaction), and identifies absolution, grace, and faith as comprising the three parts of private confession, with faith being the most important. Diminishing an individual’s abilities to overcome sin or reassure himself or herself, Luther grounds all repentance in faith, writing, “Once faith is possessed, contrition and consolation will come as the inevitable and spontaneous consequence.” Luther’s emphasis on faith in confession drew Henry VIII’s derision in *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (1522):

First, after his [Luther’s] old custom, he proposed for a new thing what is by everybody commonly known, viz. That we ought to believe the Promise of God whereby he promiseth to those who Repent, Remission of Sins: And then he cryes

---

34 LW 35: 12.
35 LW 35: 13.
out reproachfully against the Church, for not Teaching this Faith. Who I pray you, exhorts any one to the Penance of Judas; that is, To be sorry for what he has committed, and not expect Pardon?\textsuperscript{38}

In contrast with the Roman Catholic stress on the efficacy of the sacrament of penance to impart grace, though, Luther’s emphasis on faith places the most importance on the individual’s belief in the totality of Christ’s atonement for sins. Heiko A. Oberman summarizes Luther’s position of faith and certainty of God’s position: “God and God alone produces certainty.”\textsuperscript{39} In the early work \textit{The Sacrament of Penance}, moreover, Luther insists that an individual must not question his or her forgiveness because it indicates a lack of faith in God’s promises: “There is no greater sin than not to believe this article of ‘the forgiveness of sins’ which we pray daily in the Creed. And this sin is called the sin against the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{40} For Luther, the words of absolution declare God’s forgiveness of sins, but forgiveness relies on the penitent’s faith.

By separating private confession from ecclesiastical abuses, then, Luther aims to reaffirm it as a means of consolation and assurance rather than as a mechanism of papal intrusions into the consciences of the faithful. Subsequent evangelical Protestants, such as Philip Melancthon and Andreas Osiander, reiterate Luther’s position on private confession. Indeed, Article 11 of the Augsburg Confession (1530), written by Melancthon, reads: “Concerning confession it is taught that private absolution should be retained and not abolished. However, it is not necessary to enumerate all misdeeds and sins, since it is not possible to do so. Psalm 19[:12] ‘But who can detect their errors?’”\textsuperscript{41} In discussing the “Word of absolution” in Article 24, moreover,


\textsuperscript{40} \textit{LW} 35: 14.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{The Book of Concord} 44. On Melanchthon and the Augsburg Confession, see Rittgers, \textit{Reformation of the Keys} 118-20.
Melancthon remarks: “how comforting and necessary it is for terrified consciences.”

The retention of private confession in Christian life thus becomes a distinguishing characteristic of evangelical Protestantism or what later became known as Lutheranism. Luther and the inheritors of his theology therefore sought to retain the positive psychological and spiritual elements of private confession introduced during the medieval period. As Thomas Tentler concludes, “In this debate [over sacramental confession] the clash was not merely over discipline and authority: it expressed itself most passionately in the claims of every religious system to console.” However, the Lutheran reorientation of private confession altered its place in Christian life and would lead subsequent reformers to diminish further its place in Christian life.

Given the popularity of Luther’s writings during and after the Henrician reforms, Luther’s treatment of private confession circulated in England. Henry VIII’s Assertio Septem Sacramentorum provided a highly visible explication of Luther’s arguments regarding the sacrament of penance even as it sought to refute them. And, after Henry’s official break from Rome, Lutheran doctrines on penance circulated in the Church of England. Further, during the reign of Edward VI, the publication of Richard Argentine’s translation of Luther’s Predigt am Sonntage Ostern as A ryght notable sermon ... of absolution and the true vse of the keyes full of great co[m]fort (1548) disseminated many of Luther’s primary themes on private confession, including his attack on Roman Catholic penitential practices, the consolation of private

---

42 The Book of Concord 134.
43 Ronald K. Rittgers, “Private Confession and the Lutheranization of Sixteenth-Century Nördlingen,” Sixteenth Century Journal 36 (2005), writes: “In Nördlingen and elsewhere private confession was an Unterscheidungslehre, a distinguishing ritual, or better yet, an Unterscheidungsrutual that clearly marked off Lutherans from other Protestants, at least at the level of formal confessional allegiance” (1085).
44 Tentler, Sin and Confession 369.
45 On the legacy of Luther’s reformation of private confession, see Tentler, Sin and Confession 350; Rittgers, Reformation of the Keys, 216-17; and Bagchi 123.
confession, and the extension of the power of the keys to the laity in cases of necessity.⁴⁶

Although the influence of Luther’s theology on the English Church waned over the course of the sixteenth century, his reorientation of private confession provided an important early Continental model for changes surrounding the rite, several of which the English Church would adopt by the mid-sixteenth century.⁴⁷

Concordant with Luther’s later thought, Continental reformers generally agreed on the biblical teaching on private, auricular confession, namely, Scripture allowed for the rite, but did not mandate it as compulsory or sacramental.⁴⁸ Moreover, they universally agreed on the papal abuses of auricular confession. The Basel reformer Johannes Oecolampadius, for instance, railed against the “psychotyrrani” that confessors inflict on penitents in the traditional penitential system and rejected confession as a sacrament; however, he stressed the biblical precedent for private confession and its consolatory value for the faithful.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Zürich reformer Huldrych Zwingli rejected the sacramental status of confession, though he retained a form of private confession for spiritual guidance and consolation.⁵⁰ Like Luther, Calvin cited James 5: 16 to prove the acceptability of private confession and defined two forms of private confession:

The one is made on our own account, and to it reference is made in the passage in James, “Confess your sins to one another” (James v.16); for the meaning is, that by disclosing our infirmities to each other, we are to obtain the aid of mutual

---

⁴⁶ See Right notable sermon, made by Doctor Martune Luther, vpon the twenteth chapter of Iohan, of absolution and the true vse of the keyes full of great cof[m]forte (Ippeswich, 1548), b[iiiiiiiiiii], b[vi].
⁴⁸ For an overview of the different German and Swiss reformers’ attitudes toward confession, see Ozment 49-56. For a summary of confession in the Swiss Reformation, see Owen Chadwick, The Early Reformation on the Continent (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 188-90.
counsel and consolation. The other is to be made for the sake of our neighbor, to appease him if by our fault he has been in any respect injured. 51

Further, Calvin declares that sacerdotal jurisdiction over confession was one of the many “frivolous absurdities” of Roman Catholicism, explaining that in Reformed Christianity “first, That we are to deposit our infirmities in the breasts of each other, with the view of receiving mutual counsel, sympathy, and comfort; and, secondly, That mutually conscious of the infirmities of our brethren, we are to pray to the Lord for them.” 52 Yet the close connection between private confession and reception of the Eucharist practiced in the Lutheran churches did not translate to Calvinist areas. 53 For Calvin, private confession became a practice reserved for extraordinary circumstances: for those “so agonized and afflicted by a sense of [their] sins that [they] cannot obtain relief without the aid of others.” 54 Reformers who minimized the importance of private confession turned their focus instead to general confession and absolution in a liturgical setting.

Drawing on Continental reformers as well as the Lollard tradition, English reformers during the Henrician era attacked the medieval Church’s penitential practices, denied its sacramental status, and aimed to reform the rite of private confession. 55 William Tyndale’s comments in The Exposition of the Fyrste Epistle of Seynt Jhon (1531) illustrate the argument of many of the early English writers toward a reformed model of auricular confession: “If we confess our sins, not in the priest’s ear (though that tradition, restored to the right use, were not damnable), but in our hearts to God, with true repentance and fast belief; then is he faithful to

52 Calvin 1: 539-40.
53 As Karant-Nunn observes, “Auricular confession, then, constituted one of the lines of structural as well as theological demarcation between Lutheranism and Calvinism” (100).
54 Calvin 1: 544. For a discussion of Calvin’s developing attitude towards general and private confession, see Lea 1: 515; and Tentler, Sin and Confession 362-65.
55 Shagan 207-09 notes several early English complaints against sacramental confession.
forgive and to purge us, because of his merciful truth and promise."⁵⁶ Although Tyndale’s arguments anticipate the English Church’s eventual position on confession, the Henrician Church’s teachings on penance nevertheless demonstrate a close continuity with the medieval penitential practices. The Ten Articles (1536), the more Protestant leaning, though never officially endorsed Bishops’ Book (1537), and the officially promulgated King’s Book (1543) all agree that penance is a scripturally warranted and necessary sacrament. The description of penance in the King’s Book illustrates the official doctrine during Henry’s reign:

The sacrament of penance is properly the absolution, pronounced by the priest, vpon suche as bee penitent for theyr synnes, and so doe knowlage and shewe theimselfes to be. To the obteinying of the whiche absolution or sacramente of penaunce, bee required contriton, confession, and satisfaction, as waies and meanes expedient and necessarily to obteyne the said absolucion. In all which waies and meanes, faith is necessarily requyred,as the ground and foundation of al thinges, that are to be done, for to attein the benefite of the sacramente of penance.⁵⁷

As part of Henry’s break with Rome, the doctrine of Purgatory and the various practices surrounding it, all of which belonged to the larger penitential system of the medieval Church, underwent a radical transformation. Yet the ritual component of traditional penitential practices remained unchanged; the efficacy of the rite and absolution were preserved in their entirety.

⁵⁷ Henry VIII, [The King’s Book] Eviii. Similar descriptions are found in [The Ten Articles] Articles devised by the kynges highnes maiestie, to stablyshe christen quietnes and vnitie amongst us, and to auoyde contentious opinio[n]s, which articles be also approued by the consent and determination of the hole clergie of this realme (London, 1536) Bii⁻Bi iii; [The Bishops’ Book] The institution of a Christen Man (London, 1537) F5⁺⁻F7⁺; The Six Articles (1539), printed in “An Acte abolishing diversitie of Opynons,” *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 3 (London, 1817; rpt. London: Dawsons, 1963) 740. The Bishops’ Book identifies the third part of penance as amendment of life rather than the traditional satisfaction, but the description almost entirely corresponds to those in the Ten Articles and the King’s Book. Levy-Navarro rightly argues that a “symbolic shift” in the doctrine of penance in the Church of England occurred during this period, but these texts indicate the degree to which the Henrician Church remained committed to the sacramentality of confession that Luther and later Continental reformers had for several decades denied outright (30-31).
Sacramental Remains: Private Confession in England, 1548-1633

In the reign of Edward VI, with the publication of *The Order of Communion* (1548), the English Church affirmed the arguments of many early Protestant writers that rejected the traditional sacramental system. The Church affirmed that auricular confession was no longer necessary for the faithful and aligned itself with mainstream Continental Protestantism. Unlike Calvin and early Luther’s abolishment of sacerdotal control of auricular confession, however, the Church of England maintained the medieval Church’s restriction of its administration to the clergy. *The Order of Communion* clearly outlines this ecclesiastical jurisdiction in restricting private confession to a “discere & lerned priest taught in the lawe of God.”

Taking the *media via*, the Church of England stressed the importance of an individual conscience in confession, but preserved ecclesiastical authority of the clergy. Similar to Calvinist-influenced theology, the English Church accepted a model of private confession in which the rite became an extraordinary means for members of the faithful needing further consolation and reassurances.

And if there be any of you whose conscience is troubled & greued in any thing, lacking comfort or counsaile, let him come to me or to some other discere & lerned priest taught in the lawe of God, and confesse and open his synne and grief secretlye, that he maye receaue suche ghostlie counsaile, advoue, and confort that his conscience may be releaued, and that of vs as a minister of God & of the church, he maye receaue co[m]forte and absolution, to the satisfaction of his mynd and ayoyding of al scruple and doubtfulness.

Significantly, *The Order of Communion* stresses ecumenism in its description of penitential practices. Instead of mandating general confession in the liturgy and excluding traditional auricular confession, it directs that “the rule of Charitie” should be applied toward the different ritual practices of the faithful:

---


59 *The order of Communion* Bl.
requiring suche as shalbe satisfied with a generall confession, not be bee offended
with them that doth use, to their further satisfiying thauriculer [sic] and secret
c:o[n]fessio[n] to [thei]r priest, nor those also which think needful or co[n]uenient
for the quietness of ther awne co[n]sciences, particularly to open ther synnes to
the priest, to be offended, with them which are satisfied with their humble
confession to God, and the generall confession to the Church.60

Over the course of the sixteenth century, however, such ecumenical language gives way and
private confession becomes increasingly transferred to a permissible, though extraordinary
status.

Following the Edwardian reforms, the Elizabethan Church of England taught that
auricular confession brought about the same desired spiritual and psychological effects as the
medieval rite of penitence. In fact, the rite of absolution in the Roman and the English Churches
appears to be identical due in part to the English Church’s retention of the Sarum formula for
absolution in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions of the Book of Common Prayer,
which found its origins not in the Reformation theology of Luther or Calvin, but in the Anglo-
Saxon and medieval Church.61 Indeed, following the traditional absolution rite, the 1559 Prayer
Book instructs that the priest should evoke the power to absolve sins granted the church by
Christ and state: “I absolve thee from all thy synnes, in the name of the father, and of the sonne,
and of the holy gost. Amen.”62 Yet despite the apparent continuity of the form of auricular
confession, the Church of England’s rejection of confession as a dominical sacrament

60 The order of Communion Bi.7v.
fundamentally altered the practice of private confession. The Book of Common Prayer relegates the rite of absolution to “The order for the visitacion of the Sycke.” Hence the form of absolution and the rite of penitence may have remained unchanged, but its implementation and practice were transformed.

The altered status of private confession in the Church of England is reflected most clearly in “The order for the administration of the Lordes Supper, or holy Communion” in the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer, which draws from the rite prescribed in The Order of Communion. Ordinarily, after the offertory prayers, the priest states to those receiving Holy Communion: “Draw nere, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort: make your humble confession to almighty god before this congregacion here gathered in his holy name, mekely kneling vpon your knees” (Mvii'). As the rubrics read, the priest then offers a “general confession be made, in the name of al those that are mynded to receiue holy Communion” (Mvii'). If “at certayne tymes … the Curate shal see the People negligent to come to the holy Communion,” the rubric instructs him to exhort the faithful to “consider wyth yourselues howe great injurye you doo vnto God … [when] you offende God so sore in refusynge thys holye Banquet,” before proceeding to the general confession (Miii'-Mv'). The priest may also, at his “discrecion,” include another exhortation to repentance that begins with a reminder to the

63 This change is registered in the differences between the 1549 Prayer Book which refers to “all priuate confession” (The booke of the common praier and administracion of the Sacramentes [London, 1549] Ddi'); and the 1559 Prayer Book which uses more ambiguous language: “the priest shall absolve him after this sort” (Pi').

64 Gerard Kilroy, “Requiem for a Prince: Rites of Memory in Hamlet,” Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare, ed. Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay, and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), citing Evelyn Waugh, Edmund Campion (New York: Longmans, 1935) 45, argues that a parliamentary bill outlawed absolution in confession by missionary priests. Kilroy writes: “Confession was one of the most controversial issues in Elizabethan England, partly because it became an offence after 1570 in an Act providing that ‘if any person after the same I July should take upon him to absolve or reconcile any person … or any shall willingly receive and take any such absolution or reconciliation’ he was guilty of high treason” (148). Kilroy is surely incorrect in his reading of the force of this act, for not only was it enacted in the twenty-third year of Elizabeth’s reign (1580-1), but also it refers to absolving English subjects from “due Obedience” to the monarch, thereby responding to Pope Pius V’s 1570 bull Regnans in excelsis, not sacramental absolution; see The Statutes of the Realm, vol. 4, pt. 1 (London, 1819; rpt. London: Dawsons, 1963) 657.
congregation to “searche and examine youre owne consciences” and “confesse your selues to almightye God with full purpose of amendment of life” (Mv'-Mvi'). Yet for the individual who cannot “by means aforesaid cannot quiet his own conscience, but requireth further comfort of counsel,” the priest states:

[T]hen let him come to me, or some other discrete and learned Minister of Gods worde, and open his griefe, that he may receiue suche ghostly counsaile, aduice, and comfort, as his conscience may be relieued: and that by the ministrie of Gods worde he may receyue comfort, and the benefit of absolucion, to the quieting of his conscience, and aduoyding of al scruple and doubtfulness. (Mvi')

In the Elizabethan Church, then, private confession became an exceptional means under sacerdotal authority for reconciling and comforting those faithful who could not achieve a “quiet conscience” on their own.

Even though the Book of Common Prayer was intended to codify the Elizabethan religious settlement and steer the media via between Calvinism and Roman Catholicism, several points of religious contention, including the power of absolution, were not completely resolved. Indeed, the treatment of absolution is different in the Prayer Book of 1559 and the Liber Precum Publicarum, the 1560 Latin translation of the Book of Common Prayer. John Booty notes that “[t]he Liber professes to be an exact translation of the entire 1559 Book, but it is not. Intended for use in the Universities by learned men, it omits such occasional, pastoral offices as Baptism and Matrimony. Of great interest are the indications of a revival of certain medieval practices.”

65 In “The order for the administration of the Lordes Supper,” the 1559 Prayer Book’s rite of general absolution reads, “Almighty God our heauenly father, who of his great mercy, hath promised forgieness of synnes to al the[m], which with harty repentaunce and true fayth turne vnto him” (Mvii'). By contrast, the Liber states: “Dominus noster Jesus Christus, qui suam potestatem dedit Ecclesiae, ut absolvat pœnitentes a peccatis ipsorum” (Our Lord Jesus Christ,

65 Booty 260.
who gave his own power to the Church, to absolve penitents from their sins).\textsuperscript{66} William Keating Clay observes the substantial difference in the Liber: “In the Book of 1560 Christ is said to have given to the Church his own power (\textit{suam potestam}) of absolving penitents, an expression for which there existed not the slightest ground.”\textsuperscript{67} Whether these changes reflect a wider resurgence of medieval confessional practice or simply registers a difference of emphasis in the Latin translation is unclear. However, the disjunction between two the 1559 Prayer Book and the Liber indicates the presence of an interpretive space that later theologians would use after the Elizabethan Settlement.

After the institution of the Prayer Book, however, the doctrinal issues surrounding confession and absolution remained generally dormant, and private confession all but disappeared in the religious life of the Established Church. The establishment of the Thirty-nine Articles in 1563 and required adherence to them by act of Parliament in 1571 signals the orthodox position on the altered status of auricular confession, for the Twenty-fifth Article instructs that confession, like confirmation and matrimony, “haue not lyke nature of Sacramentes with Baptisme and the Lordes Supper, for that they haue not any visible signe or ceremonie ordained of God.”\textsuperscript{68} The fate of private confession concerned several reformers in Edwardian England, who, as Keith Thomas relates, “felt wistful about the disappearance of the confessional.”\textsuperscript{69} Hugh Latimer, for instance, writes: “But to speak of right and true confession, I would to God it were kept in England, for it is a good thing. And those which find themselves grieved in conscience might go to a learned man that there fetch of him comfort of the word of

\textsuperscript{66} William Keating Clay, ed., \textit{Liturgal Services: Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer Set Forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth}, Parker Society Publications, vol. 30 (Cambridge, 1847) 393, the translation from the Latin is my own.
\textsuperscript{67} Clay xxviii-xxix; also qtd. in Booty 345.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Articles, whereupon it was agreed by the archbishoppes and bishoppes of both prouinces, and the whole cleargie, in the Convocation holden at London in the yere of our Lorde God 1562} (London, 1571) 16.
God, and so come to a quiet conscience, which is better and more to be regarded than all the riches of the world. And surely it grieveth me much that such confessions are not kept in England, &c.”

Despite these exhortations to perform private confession, however, the practice continued to wane. Those who privately confessed were generally limited, as Kenneth Parker notes, to “a self-selected clientele: the godly.”

The seminal role of the Cambridge divine William Perkins in the formation of English casuistry indicates the importance of private confessional forms for the godly members of the Church of England, but, at the same time, points to the exceptional nature of the practice after the Elizabethan Settlement.

Richard Hooker’s treatment of auricular confession in Book 6 of *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, which circulated in manuscript in the 1590s though not published until 1648, offers a representative view of confession in the late sixteenth-century Church of England. Hooker follows the Thirty-nine Articles in rejecting the sacramental nature of confession, describing it “as a virtuous acte, butt not commanded as a Sacrament.” Consonant with the 1559 Prayer Book, he further explains that it may “eas them [penitents] of all their scrupulosities, leave them settled in peace and satisfyed touching the mercie of God towards them…. To use the benefit of his [the confessor’s] help for our better satisfaction in such cases,

---

71 Parker 73.
74 Hill 3: 23.
is soe naturall that it can bee forbidden no man: butt yet not soe necessarie, that all men should be in case to need it.”

Moreover, he frequently attacks the Tridentine Catholic Church’s treatment of confession, especially its assertion that the priest’s absolution effects the remission of sins. He counters that the priest merely serves as a “true efficient cause of Grace” because “the remission of sinne is ascribed unto God, as a thing which proceedeth from him only.” And he concludes that “private ministeriall absolution butt declare remission of sins.” For Hooker, as for the majority of the Established Church in the Elizabethan era, private confession existed as an extraordinary means to console scrupulous penitents by leading them to recognize that they have received divine forgiveness.

The Church of England’s transformation of private confession relied on the rejection of the medieval interpretation of St. Augustine, whose penitential theology continued to define the argument for both English Protestants and Catholics. “Although the Reformation,” writes Alister McGrath, “is regarded as essentially a debate over the theological status and interpretation of Scripture, the practical truth of this statement has tended to obscure the fact that it was equally the continuation of a debate over the status and supremely the interpretation, of Augustine, inherited from the late medieval period.” In *A briefe confusion, of a popish discourse* (1583), for instance, the Cambridge divine William Fulke details how Catholics apply Augustine’s teaching that the faithful “[d]oe you suche penaunce, as is wont to be doone in the Church, that the Churche may pray for you. Let no man say, I doe it secretly, I do with with God alone” to arguments regarding the practice of auricular confession in the patristic period. Fulke

---

75 Hill 3: 102.
76 Hill 3: 90-91.
77 Hill 3: 97.
79 William Fulke, *A briefe confusion, of a popish discourse: lately set forth, and presumptuously dedicated to the Queens most excellent Maiestie: by Iohn Howlet, or some other birde of the night, vnder that name Contayning*
concentrates on this passage from Augustine because “Doe you suche penaunce” reads in the Latin text “Agite pœnitentiam” and thus lends support to the Roman Catholic interpretation of the Vulgate’s rendering of *metanoia*. Responding to this interpretation, Fulke claims that “these wordes are manifest that hee speaketh of open confession of suche as had openly offended the Church, and we to make open satisfaction for the same” rather than evidence of sacramental confession, and he goes on to rebuke Catholics for relying on pseudo-Augustinian writings to defend their penitential doctrine.\(^80\)

In addition, as early as the “De poenitentia I” in “Cranmer’s Great Commonplaces” (cir. 1538 or earlier), Thomas Cranmer cites Augustine’s *Confessions* 10.3.3 in order to demonstrate that auricular confession was not practiced in the early Church: “Quid mihi ergo est cum hominibus, ut audiant confessiones meas, quasi ipsi sanaturi sint omnes languores meos?”\(^81\) The most prominent and state-sanctioned early modern English text relying on this passage from Augustine to refute obligatory confession is “An Homilie of Repentaunce and of true reconciliation vnto God,” which was composed by John Jewel and printed as the final sermon in the second book of *Homilies* (1562-63, reissued with additions 1571). Referring to the fourth-century Patriarch of Constantinople Nectarius’ (Nechtarios) elimination of the penitentiary office, the sermon cites *Confessions* 10.3.3 as evidence that auricular confession was not practiced during the early Church and thus not instituted by Christ as a dominical sacrament:

\[^{80}\] Fulke, *A briefe confutation N*.  
Moreover, these are S. Augustines wordes: What haue I to do with men, that they shoulde heare my confession, as though they were able to heale all my diseases. A curious sorte of men, to knowe another mans lyfe and slothful to correct or amende theyr owne. Why do they seke to heare of me what I am, which will not heare of thee what they ar. And howe can they tell, when they heare by me, of my selfe, whether I tell the trueth or not: sith that no mortall man knoweth what is in man, but the spirite of man whiche is in hym.\(^2\)

The sermon goes on to reject the “repentaunce of the schoolemen” and medieval penitential practices.\(^3\) By rejecting the necessity of private confession, then, the early modern Church of England considered itself faithful to the thought of the most important Father of the Church.

The issue of confession nevertheless remained alive in religious writings and tracts in the late sixteenth century, especially in Roman Catholic writings in English published on the Continent and clandestinely in England. The necessity and sacramental nature of confession in Roman Catholicism continued to be divisive in religious polemic. Writing from Rouen (Roan) in 1586, the Catholic exile Richard Hopkins singles out sacramental confession as the primary obstacle preventing reconciliation of the Christian Churches in the West:

But to comfort nowe these zealous men, that seeme to be so desierous of vnitie in one vniforme Christian faith, & Religion emonge al Christians, in all Christian countreys throughout Christendome, and are so greatlie hindered in their so earnest desier of a Pacification, and reconciliation in Religion, with our trewe Catholike & Apostolique Church, by reason it requireth of the[m] Confession of their sinnes, and doinge penaunce for them, which as they saie their mans nature greatlie abhorreth, as burdensome vnto it.\(^4\)

---


\(^3\) “An Homilie of Repentance” fol. 282r. An earlier instance citing *Confessions* 10.3.3 occurs in Gracious Menewe (also attributed to Thomas Becon), *A plaine subuersyon or turnyng vp syde down of all the argumentes, that the Popecatholykes can make for the mai ntenance of auricular confession with a moste wholsome doctryne touchyng the due obedience* (Wesel?, 1555?) D’.


In the 1590s, missionary Jesuit priests, such as Robert Parsons and Robert Southwell, imported the Council of Trent’s teachings on the sacrament of confession. Southwell’s *Short Rvle of Good Life* (1595), which was popular with both English Catholics and Protestants, displays the post-Tridentine emphasis on frequent participation in sacramental confession. Holding himself up as a mirror of piety, Southwell explains:

> Every Sunday, & high feast, and all the festiuall daies of Christ, our Lady, the apostles, & such other principal holy daies I must prepare my selfe the day before to receiue. On Saturday at night or the euen if occasion serive [sic] I must go to confession, and with all diligence, the nearer the time commeth of receauing, the more wary must I be of my behauiour. I must go to confession twice in a weeke, wednesday and saterday at night, when there commeth not a great holy day or some other day.

Further, a 1605 printed edition of Southwell’s Rule circulated with a copy of Vincenzio Bruno’s *A short treatise on the sacrament of penance* that outlines Roman Catholic requirements for a proper confession. And Southwell’s poetry, such as *Marie Magdalene’s Funeral Tears* (1591) and *Saint Peter’s Complaint* (1595), which circulated together in printed editions, contains strong penitential themes that correspond to post-Tridentine Catholicism.

In addition to English Catholics living in exile at St. Omer, Douai, Rheims, and writing on the importance of confession, Continental writers also contributed to early modern English discussions on its place in the religious life of the faithful. The most influential Continental writer on confession to be translated into English was Fray Luis de Granada (1504-88), a Spanish Dominican and provincial of the Portuguese Dominicans whose writings had been prohibited by the Spanish Inquisition from 1559 until 1576. The number of translations and editions of

---


86 Robert Southwell, *Short rule of good life. To direct the devout christian, in a regular, and orderly course. Newly set forth, according to the authors direction, before his death* (London, [c. 1602-5]) 60-61.

Granada’s works demonstrates the extent of their popular appeal in early modern England even outside of theological circles. The concentration on confession in Granada’s works provides further evidence of the importance of the issue in early modern England. A treatise attributed to Granada, *A Breefe Treatise Exhorting Sinners to Repentance*, was translated by one M.K. around 1580 and reprinted in 1598 and 1599, and again by Thomas Lodge, who included it as the first part of *The Flowers of Lodowicke of Granado* (1601). Francis Meres also translated *The Sinners guide* (1598, reprinted 1614), a translation of Granada’s popular *Guia de Peccadores*. Interestingly, the printer was Edward Blount, who published Shakespeare’s First Folio (1623).

Granada’s works, H.S. Bennett notes, “were sufficiently esteemed to attract the notice of Protestants, and a number of adaptations of some of them began to appear, in which Catholic doctrine was quietly eliminated and the works given a Protestant outlook.” Like Parson’s and Southwell’s writings, Granada’s discussions of confession could be sufficiently adapted to conform to the orthodoxy of the Established Church. Yet the circulation of markedly Roman Catholic printed editions of Granada’s works, such as Hopkins’ translation of *The Memorall of a Christian Life* (*Memorial de la vida Christiana*), which contained Hopkins’ polemical Catholic preface on the sacrament of confession, indicate the existence of different audiences for his works who would interpret his discussion of confession in markedly different ways. From a

---

88 M.K.’s translation was also printed in Edinburgh by Robert Waldegrave, printer to James VI, in 1599.
89 Critics have noted that Shakespeare draws from Granada’s treatise *Of prayer, and meditation* (*Libro de la oración y meditación*) in his treatment of death in *3 Henry 6* 5.2.23-28 and *Hamlet* 5.1. Granada’s use of theatrical imagery would have appealed to Shakespeare’s frequent connection of life to the stage. For instance, Granada’s remarks on the last moment of life—“There [at the time of death] no truce dayes or time of repentance can be graunted, for that having finished the last pageant of the play, they can not enter the stage agayne to play their part afreshe” (8)—parallel Jacques’ famous description of the stages of life in *As You Like It* (see 2.7.139-166). On Shakespeare’s use of Granada in *3 Henry 6*, see Randall Martin, “Catilines and Machiavels: Reading Catholic resistance in *3 Henry VI,*” ed. Dutton, Findlay, and Wilson, 110; for similarities in *Hamlet*, see William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, Arden Shakespeare, 2nd ser. (London: Methuen, 1982) 550-51.
90 H.S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers 2: 1558-1603* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1965) 135. The religious beliefs of Thomas Lodge remain questionable and his translation could be interpreted as containing Catholic sympathies; on Lodge’s religious beliefs, see Alexandra Halasz’s entry for him in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 
synchronic perspective, English Catholics, on the one hand, would interpret Granada’s
discussion of a confession in the context of the sacrament of penance, which identified them with
Roman Catholicism and separated them from the Establish Church; but English Protestants, on
the other hand, would read his discussion of confession outside of a sacramental context and as
useful sketch of Roman Catholic confessional practices after the English Reformation.}

At the end of the sixteenth century, the issue of private, auricular confession reemerged in
the English Church. Lancelot Andewes occupied a central role in the debate surrounding
auricular confession in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. With a career that ranged from
chaplain to Queen Elizabeth to master of Pembroke College, Cambridge to Bishop of Winchester
to one of the most eminent preachers in the Jacobean court, Andewes’ consistent position in
favor of administering the rite evinces the ongoing attempts by conformists to reestablish its use
in the Church of England. In his ecclesiastical offices, pastoral writings, and court sermons,
Andewes sought to integrate the form of private confession sanctioned by the Prayer Book into
the sacramental life of the Church. From 1589 until 1609, Andewes held the prebendary of
Pancratius (St. Pancras) at St. Paul’s, which had been used in the Middle Ages for administering
the sacrament of confession.\footnote{In the entry for Andewes in the \textit{New Dictionary of National Biography}, Peter McCullough describes Andewes’
revival of auricular confession in the context of avant-garde conformity. On Andewes at St. Paul’s, see also
Nicholas Lossky, \textit{Lancelot Andewes, The Preacher (1555-1626): The Origins of the Mystical Theology of the
Andewes,” \textit{John Donne Journal} 22 (2003): 168.} This prebendary, as Sir John Harington notes, was “call[ed] the
Confessor or Confessioner, a place notoriously abused in the time of Popery by their tyranny and
superstition, but now of late, by contrary extreme, too much forgotten and neglected.”\footnote{Andrewes 11: xxxvi.}
Seeking to introduce a reformed model of private confession, Harington records that Andewes,
“especially in Lent time,” would “walk duly at certain hours in one of the aisles of the church,
that if any came to him for spiritual advice and comfort, (as some did, though not many), he might impart it to them.”

In *A Manual of Directions for the Sick* (c. 1590-1605, printed 1648), Andrewes similarly emphasizes the utility of private confession and absolution through a series of questions and prayers, derived largely from Scripture, meant to be directed by the minister at and for the infirmed. The manual follows the Prayer Book by implying that private confession is to be reserved for exceptional sins: “Be there, or is there any special sin, that doth lie heavy on your conscience, for the which you need, or would require the benefit of private *Absolution*?”

Nicholas Tyacke explains that Andrewes’ remarks were “warranted by the Elizabethan Prayer Book,” but observes that “he was engaged in reviving practices, especially confession, which had fallen out of fashion in previous decades.” This attempt to reintroduce private confession aligns Andrewes with other avant-garde conformists in the English Church.

In several court sermons, Andrewes’ support of private confession and absolution nevertheless created controversy. The sermon “Of the Power of Absolution,” delivered at Whitehall in March 1600, elicited a widespread reaction at court. Reporting in a letter to Robert Sidney, Rowland White explains how

> Dr. Andrews made a strange sermon at court on Sunday … touching the forgiveness of sins upon earth. That contrition without confession and absolution, and deeds worthy of repentance, was not sufficient. That the ministers had the two keys of power and knowledge delivered unto them; that whose sins soever they remitted on earth, should be remitted in heaven. The court is full of it, for such doctrine was not usually taught here.

In many ways, though, Andrewes’ sermon reinforces the Church of England’s established teachings on the doctrinal place of confession and absolution. He supports, for example, its

94 Andrewes 11: xxxvi-xxxvii.
95 Andrewes 11: 184.
97 Andrewes 11: lxi.
position that only ordained clergy, “Ecclesiastical persons,” have the ability to absolve sins and that, in special circumstances, God can “bestow it on whom or when Him pleaseth.” Moreover, he supports the Established Church’s rejection of confession as a dominical sacrament.

While Andrewes’ evocation of “the power of the keys” in this sermon corresponds to the orthodox doctrine of the Church of England, his emphasis on the necessity of private confession and the power of absolution opposes the Calvinistic elements in the church. Instead of relegating auricular penance to extraordinary circumstance, as the Elizabethan Prayer Book instructs, he states that “there are divers acts instituted by God and executed by us, which all tend to the remission of sins … and in all and every of these is the person of the minister required, they cannot be dispatched without him.” Peter Lake asserts that Andrewes’ “full-blown doctrine of priestly absolution” resulted from his “dislike of their [Calvinists’] hypocritical subjectivism”: “Arguing that repentance could only be known from its fruit Andrewes denied that individual Christians should be left alone to determine which penitential acts best suited their particular sins. That was a task best left to the clergy.” Andrewes’ eschewing of the opinion that the self-examination involved in private confession to be an undue burden to an individual’s conscience, as Luther and Calvin maintained, supports this anti-Calvinist interpretation. As does his accentuation on the limitations of an individual’s faith due to scrupulousness and doubts:

“Sometimes men have good minds, but know not which way to turn them or set themselves

---

98 Andrewes 5: 92.
99 In his Two Answers to Cardinal Perron, he asserts that the issue of the number of sacraments is a moot point: “The whole matter is a mere λογομαχία. If the thing were agreed upon, we should not strive for the name” (11: 26). On Andrewes’ support of the general position of the Church of England, see Lee W. Gibbs, “Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes on Priestly Absolution,” Richard Hooker and the Construction of Christian Community, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Tempe: Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 1997) 262-74.
about it…. For most usual it is for men at their ends to doubt, not of the power of remitting of sins, but of their disposition to receive it.”¹⁰² To overcome these obstacles, Andrewes stresses the ability of auricular confession to immediately effect “strong consolation and perfect assurance, [and] not waver in the hope which is set before them.”¹⁰³ Rather than elevate the individual’s ability to overcome sin, then, he addresses the necessary intervention of a priest.

In later sermons, Andrewes further emphasizes the centrality of auricular confession in Christian life and thereby indicates its transformation in certain areas of the Established Church. In “Of the Sending of the Holy Ghost,” which he delivered before King James at Whitehall in 1612, he explains:

A third necessity there is we receive Him, for that with Him we shall receive whatever we want, or need to receive, for our soul’s good. And here fall in all His offices. By Him we are regenerate at the first in our baptism. By Him after, confirmation in the imposition of hands. By Him after, renewed to repentance, ‘when we fall away,’ by a second imposition of hands [a reference to the priest’s laying on hands in the rite of penance].¹⁰⁴

For Andrewes, an individual’s interior disposition is inadequate to reconcile with God and requires auricular confession. Opposing traditional Calvinist attitudes, he instructs, as Nicholas Lossky notes, “baptismal repentance can and must be renewed by the Holy Spirit received at confession at absolution (‘a second imposition of hands’), which is very clearly taken in continuity with baptism.”¹⁰⁵ The rite of confession that culminates in priestly absolution provides the means to achieve regeneration, for “the house will not stand empty long. One spirit or another, holy or unholy will take it up. We see the greatest part of the world by far are entered upon and held, some by the ‘spirit of slumber’ [Isa. 29: 10]…. Others by ‘the spirit of error,’ [1

---

¹⁰² Andrewes 5: 101.
¹⁰³ Andrewes 5: 102.
¹⁰⁴ Andrewes 3: 191.
¹⁰⁵ Lossky 261.
Andrewes’ treatment of confession created a controversy because he implied the necessity of auricular confession to salvation. Andrewes’ views on the sacramental quality of the rite of confession, though they never drew extensive criticism or reprobation, function as a counterpoint to the more Calvinist inflected teachings of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Established Church.

The issue of auricular confession also reappeared in the summer of 1600, during the divinity disputation at Cambridge Commencement in 1600, which H.C. Porter describes as “the most bad-tempered within living memory.” At the center of the controversy were the disputation questions: “1. Confessio auricularis Papistica non [m]ititur verbo Dei. 2. Anim[ae] piorum fuerunt in c[oe]lo ante Christi ascensum” (1. Papist auricular confession is not sent by the word of God. 2. The souls of the pious were in heaven before the ascension of Christ).

In a letter dated June 14, 1600, Archbishop Whitgift approved both questions: “Which questions I like very well and know them to be true, if in the first question by auricular confession there be meant Confessio Papistica.” Whitgift’s condition regarding the meaning of the question may leave room for the administration of private confession as allowed by the Elizabethan Prayer Book, but reflects its marginalized place in the English Church. However, John Overall, Regius Professor of Divinity and later Bishop of Norwich, dissented from the rest of his colleagues by refusing to approve either question. Overall’s position on auricular confession points to his

---

106 Andrewes 3: 191.
107 Milton 19, identifies Andrewes as an avant-garde preacher who came under fire for his apparent crypto-popery. For a brief discussion of Andrewes’ position at the end of the sixteenth century, see Lossky 12-25.
110 Cecil Papers (Salisbury MSS.) vol. 139, fol. 122. For a summary of events, see Historical Manuscripts Commission, Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, pt. X (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1904) 208-12. The translation of the Latin is my own.
111 Cecil Papers (Salisbury MSS.) vol. 139, fol. 122.
general opposition to Calvinist groups at Cambridge, a position for which he “was to face fierce
criticism that summer.”\textsuperscript{112} The willingness of English divines such as Andrewes and Overall
willingness to dissent from the Elizabethan status quo regarding auricular confession
demonstrates a doctrinal shift occurring within the English Church.

Positive interpretations of private confession, moreover, continued to increase in the
Jacobean and early Caroline period. In \textit{Meditation vpon the Lords Prayer} (1619), for instance,
King James recalls the importance of private confession: “For my part, with \textit{Caluine}, I commend
Confession, euen priuately to a Churchman, as I said before. And with all my heart I wish it were
more in custome amongst vs then it is, as a thing of excellent vse, especially for me to receiue
the Sacrament worthily.”\textsuperscript{113} For John Donne, as I detail in Chapter 5, private confession also
stands as a vital, though underused, means for reconciliation in the ecclesiastical body. As he
explains in \textit{Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions}: “The use of this spirituall \textit{Physicke} can
certainly do no harme; and the Church hath alwaies thought that it might, and, doubtlesse, many
humble soules, have found, that it hath done them good.”\textsuperscript{114} Likewise, in the \textit{Priest to the Temple}
(composed 1632, published 1652), George Herbert describes the utility of “particular
confession” in a parson’s comfort of the sick: “Besides this, in his visiting the sike, or otherwise
afflicted, he followeth the Churches counsel, namely, in perswading them to particular
confession, labouring to make them understand the great good use of this antient and pious
ordinance, and how necessary it is in some cases.”\textsuperscript{115} Given the Calvinist tradition in the early

\begin{footnotes}
\item[112] Nicholas Tyacke, “Lancelot Andrewes and the Myth of Anglicanism” 17. For a discussion of Overall’s
theological position, see Nicholas Tyacke, \textit{Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism}, c. 1590-1640 (Oxford:
\item[113] King James, \textit{A Meditation vpon the Lords Prayer} (London, 1619) 66.
Expostulation 20.
\item[115] George Herbert, \textit{A Priest to the Temple or The Country Parson, The Works of George Herbert}, ed. F.E.
Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1941) 249, italics in original. Citing Herbert’s doubts regarding outward displays
of repentance, Michael C. Shoenfeldt, \textit{Prayer and Power}, writes: “Yet he also suggests that one must exercise
\end{footnotes}
modern Church of England, such arguments in favor of private confession only intensified the
divisions within the Church, and these would become even more divisive in the reign of Charles
I and the administration of Archbishop Laud. Indeed, in 1637 controversy again broke out
regarding auricular confession when both Sylvester Adams and Anthony Sparrow delivered
sermons advocating the practice. The sermons led Cambridge Puritans to attack the sermons, and
sparked a concerted defense from divines sympathetic to the rite to defend Adams. The desire
of Laud and other divines, as Maurice Reidy notes, to return to “the full devotional life of the old
Church” intimates that such a position on auricular confession demonstrated larger tensions
between the Calvinist and avant-garde and later Laudian strands within the Church of
England. Early modern English literature consistently engages these larger tensions by
representing the complex and often difficult series of relationships between individuals and ritual
practices.

constant suspicion toward this ordinance” (50). Herbert’s caution against outward penitential actions does not,
however, detract from his support for private confession. On the contrary, both are positions are consonant with his
claim that “repentance is an act of the mind, not of the Body” (Herbert 279).

116 These included John Cosin, master of Peterhouse and later vice-chancellor of the university, Richard Sterne,
master of Jesus and ex-chaplain to Laud, and Edward Martin, Laud’s ex-chaplain and president of Queen’s College;
see Tyacke, Anti-Calvinists 221-22; Milton 74-75; Carlson, “Confession and Absolution in Caroline Cambridge”;
and Milton’s entry for John Cosin in the National Dictionary of Biography. On confessional practices after Laud,
see Levy-Navarro 43-56; and Rowell 100-16.

117 Maurice F. Reidy, S.J., Bishop Lancelot Andrewes: Jacobean Court Preacher: A Study in Early Seventeenth-
Century Religious Thought (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1955) 142.
Chapter 2

“From point to point, as is before exprest”:

Protestant Confessional Models in Spenser’s Legend of Holiness

In Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser makes confession a central component of the Redcrosse Knight’s quest for holiness. The House of Holiness in canto 10, where Redcrosse “is taught repentance, and / The way to heauenly blesse” by Caelia, Fidelia, Patience, and others, stands as Spenser’s definitive statement on the value and efficacy of confession in Christian life.\(^1\) Spenser also presents two other points at which Redcrosse performs confessional acts: in canto 9, when the knight unwillingly confronts his past sins in Despaire’s cave, and in canto 12 where he relates his autobiographical narratives at the Court of Eden. These three confessional moments illustrate Spenser’s incorporation of St. Augustine’s conception of the relationship between memory, confessional speech, and salvation; the medieval Catholic understanding of the efficacy of penitential rituals; and contemporary Reformation debates on the place of confession within early modern England.

Previous criticism on the rite of private confession in the Legend of Holiness has been episodic, concentrating primarily on penitential rituals in the House Holiness, to the exclusion of a sustained interpretation of the rite’s importance in Redcrosse’s overall spiritual development. On the one side, critics have argued that Spenser’s depiction in the episode of ritual confession and penance in the House of Holiness illustrates his retention of medieval penitential practices.\(^2\) On the other side, critics have contended that the correspondence between Redcrosse’s

---

\(^1\) Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1.10.Arg.3-4, *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and J.C. Smith, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1912). All quotations from Spenser are taken from this edition and subsequent references will be noted parenthetically in the text. Except where noted, italics are present in the original.

penitential regimen in the House of Holiness and Protestant writers places the episode in a distinctively Reformation context. Both sides reveal the complex and diverse theological doctrines informing the presentation of confession in the House of Holiness, but neither analyzes the significance of the three confessional episodes in the Legend of Holiness nor addresses fully Spenser’s synthesis of Augustinian, medieval, and early modern discourses on confession.

In this chapter, I take as my starting point the intersection in Spenser of these three discourses of confession in Book 1, arguing that Spenser presents a syncretic model of confession that aims to harmonize recuperated ritual practices and individual faith. I further contend that Spenser’s presentation of Redcrosse’s sexual transgression, memorial struggles, and confessional experiences shares many of the same anxieties that St. Augustine sets forth in *Confessions* and thereby signals a continuity rather than a rupture in the understanding of the confessional subject. In what follows, I first examine Spenser’s reliance on St. Augustine’s writings to frame Redcrosse’s quest in the Legend of Holiness. Second, I analyze Spenser’s representation of Recrosse’s spiritual development in the light of medieval and post-Reformation writings on confession. Finally, I concentrate on Redcrosse’s problematic narrative omissions at the Court of Eden to illustrate the vital place of confession in Spenser’s treatment of holiness, particularly its insistence on the regulation of memory. This approach offers a new perspective on Spenser’s theological program in the Legend of Holiness, one positing that his syncretic representation of confession reflects his larger pastoral concerns over the personal and social effects of sin and the means through which consolation may be achieved.

---

Memories of Sin: Spenser and Augustine

Spenser represents the Redcrosse Knight’s sexual encounter with Duessa as his most memorable sin. Failing to regulate his seminal fluids, Redcrosse “[p]ourd out in loosnesse on the grassy ground, / Both carelesse of his health, and of his fame” during his transgression with Duessa (1.7.7.2-3, emphasis added). The knight’s discharge points to the relationship between sexual chastity and public and private virtues: Redcrosse’s physical and spiritual health as well as his fame suffer as a result of his unchaste relationship. Spenser’s use of the term “carelesse” signals a degradation of the knight’s control of his reason and will. His carelessness leads to his “loosnesse” and indicates his emulation of the sexual and spiritual duplicity of Duessa, whom Spenser refers to later in the stanza as “his looser make” (1.7.7.8). This breakdown of Redcrosse’s physical and spiritual state could be interpreted as simply one instance of his moral backsliding after he abandons Una at Archimago’s hermitage. Instead of blending Redcrosse’s sexual transgression into the complex structure of the Legend of Holiness, however, Spenser continually returns to Redcrosse’s sin to consider the persistent tension between the quest for holiness and sexual sins. In particular, Spenser grounds these narrative glances backward in Redcrosse’s struggles with his memories of past sins during confessional moments. In the Legend of Holiness, then, confession takes on a vital importance for the negotiation of sexual sins in the development of Redcrosse’s spiritual virtue. In this sense, Redcrosse’s sexual transgression not only contaminates his private and public virtues, but also perverts his memory by leading him back to his sexually transgressive past rather than toward holiness. The success of Redcrosse’s quest for holiness requires his active manipulation of the memory through repentance: memories of past sins must be regulated and replaced with a forward-looking perspective that marks the knight as one of the elect saints in heaven.
Redcrosse’s difficulties in overcoming the memorial effects of past sins correspond to Augustine’s understanding of memory as he outlines it in *Confessions*. Spenser would have studied Augustine during his undergraduate and graduate education at Cambridge. And the overarching authority of Augustine during the sixteenth century influenced Spenser’s intellectual formation.  

Spenser’s knowledge of Augustine has long been known, but there has been no critical commentary of Augustine’s discussion in *Confessions* regarding the relationship between sexual sins, the work of memory, and the confessional subject in relation to Book 1, even though Spenser renders these issues in Augustinian terms.

This critical neglect is notable given Sean Kane’s observation that “there are special reasons for identifying the works of Augustine, the exemplar of the Christian philosophical tradition, as an essential context in which *The Faerie Queene* should be read,” including Augustine’s treatment of history, moral action, grace, and free will. Augustine thus stands as an important philosophical and theological authority for England’s “new Poete” (*The Shepheardes Calendar*, Epistle 19). During the medieval and early modern periods, various and often divergent interpretations of Augustine’s thought emerged. He was evoked, for instance, by different theologians and divines—including Luther and Calvin on the Continent and Thomas Cranmer in England—to defend the Reformation. Spenser could have followed one of the

---


6 Kane, “Fathers, Latin” 303.
various strands of Augustinian thought, but his treatment of memory, sexuality, and confession in Book 1 points to his direct access to Augustine’s *Confessions*.  

Augustine’s discussion of memory in Book 10 of *Confessions* offers a unique resource for Spenser’s treatment of the interrelationship between memory and holiness in Book 1. 8 What pertains most directly to Spenser’s representation of memory is Augustine’s claim that memory possesses the ability to lead the individual toward God and, related to this spiritual ascent, his awareness of the long-lasting, debilitating effects of sexual sins on the mind and its governance of the body. For Augustine, memory plays a crucial role in the exercise of intellect and will because it directs the individual either away from or toward God. 9 As Carl C. Vaught summarizes, “As Augustine understands its structure, memory is the mind’s way to God (10.17.27) and forgetfulness is a cognitive and volitional reflection of the fall from Paradise that separates us from God.” 10 The desire to be united with God stems from the fact that the image of God is imprinted on every individual and, as such, instills in each man and woman the memory of true happiness and the desire to cleave to and rest in God even though some “pursue another

---


8 Augustine’s interest in memory extends throughout his writings; see Book 5 of *On Music*, Book 12 of *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, and the later books of *On the Trinity*. While Spenser had access to these works at Cambridge, I am most interested in how he approached Augustine’s autobiographical confessions of his personal difficulties with memory.

9 On the relationship between knowledge and memory, see Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) 17. I am indebted to Garrett Sullivan for bringing this study to my attention.

joy, which is not the true one [ipsum verum].”\textsuperscript{11} For Augustine, memory is thus connected with desire, as is cognition generally.

By the same token, for those who concentrate on more immediate concerns, true happiness becomes occluded and God, “who art the Truth,” is almost forgotten (10.23.33). The failure of memory can, in turn, lead to anxiety and despair. For Augustine, memory assumes a soteriological dimension because ascent to God becomes a type of memorial process—a search for God that begins in, but ultimately transcends memory. He states, “Yea, I will pass beyond [transibo] this faculty of mind which is called memory, desirous to touch thee, whence thou mayest be touched; and to cleave fast unto thee, whence one may cleave to thee…. I will soar beyond my own memory, that I may find thee” (10.17.26). The search for God in memory facilitates the “typical Augustinian move from the exterior to the interior and from the interior to the superior,” whereby the individual strives toward rest in the transcendent godhead.\textsuperscript{12} In this sense, Augustine provides a general framework that Spenser deploys in his treatment of the value of memory in Redcrosse’s quest.

Augustine’s account of his trials with the memories of past sins is also closely aligned to Spenser’s concerns. From a general perspective, Augustine’s desire to confess his own weaknesses to his readers so that their faith might be strengthened threatens to be undermined by the obtrusion of former sins, because to be “[a]ffrighted thus with mine own sins and the burden of mine own miseries” almost leads him to flee “into the wilderness” (10.43.70). But more specifically it is the memory of sexual sins that continues to plague Augustine. Under ordinary


circumstances, according to Augustine, his reason and will are able to control sexual memories. He insists that once God commanded him to be chaste and “contain myself from the lust of the flesh,” he has been obedient, stating, “it was done [factum est]” (10.30.41). Nevertheless, Augustine reveals that he continues to experience nocturnal emissions:

But yet there still live in my memory [vivunt in memoria mea], (which I have now spoken so much of) the images of such things as my ill custom had there fixed; and they rush into my thought (though wanting in strength) even whilst I am broad waking: but in sleep they come upon me, not to delight only, but even so far as consent, and most like to the deed doing [sed etiam usque ad consensionem factumque simillimum]. (10.30.41)

The influence of dreams, which Augustine describes as “false visions,” continues to bring his unchaste past into the present (10.30.41). Augustine’s former ill custom poses a continual challenge to the maintenance of chastity while awake. The false visions that “rush into my thought” in dreams recall those thoughts that “start forth” during the search of memory that Augustine must “drive away with the force of my hand of my heart from the face of my remembrance [et abigo ea manu cordis a facie recordationis meae]” (10.8.12). The power contained within the memory of sexual sins, according to Augustine, cannot be overcome independently. The Christian individual must turn toward faith in God’s grace to neutralize the effects of such memories.

In the Legend of Holiness, Spenser inverts the chronological narrative of Confessions by leaving out any indication of Redcrosse’s sexual history. Yet under the influence of Archimago’s spright Redcrosse suffers the same negative effects as Augustine. His “dreame of loues and lustfull play” cause “his manly heart … [to] melt away, / Bathed in wanton blis and wicked ioy” (FQ 1.1.47.4-6). This circumlocutional description of Redcrosse’s wet dream follows Augustine’s discussion about concupiscence in dreams. Just as Augustine’s attempt to minimize agency in dreams (he describes wet dreams as “something some way or other done in us [factum
esse”), Spenser submerges Redcrosse’s somnial desires upon waking underneath his chaste and martial posture toward the false Una and his admonishment that seeks to displace the dangers posed by his nocturnal emission (Conf. 10.30.41). Like Augustine’s inability to demarcate absolutely the will’s response to the intrusion of memories during waking and sleeping, Spenser connects nocturnal emissions to a failure of masculine wholeness. The image of Redcrosse’s “manly heart” melting suggests the penetration of lustful dreams into his chaste response to the false Una. In this sense, Harry Berger, Jr. notes, Archimago “actualizes” the “potentiality for self-division between the anonymous protagonist and his Redcross identity” by “altering the hero’s consciousness.” Redcrosse does not suffer from Augustine’s memories of actual sexual sins, but the result is identical. Spenser inscribes this image in sexual terms in the knight’s subsequent failure of manliness in his sexual encounter with Duessa at the enervating spring—a waking encounter that intensifies the memorial obstacles separating the knight from holiness.

The entrance of sexual desire into memory, for both Spenser and Augustine, creates a crisis of regulation that can be resolved only through a combination of confession and faith in God’s grace. Like Augustine’s famous prayer for rest in God (1.1.1), the knight’s promised reward of rest in the “new Hierusalem,” the telos of his quest for holiness, depends on his ability to govern the memory of his sinful desires (FQ 1.10.57.2).

By using Augustine’s understanding of memory and confession as a basis for Redcrosse’s struggles with sexual sins, Spenser diverges from many theologians and divines in early modern England. For most Protestant writers in the sixteenth century, Augustine stood as a powerful authority for confession directly to God and against private, auricular confession. The evidence often cited for proving the inadequacy of private confession comes from Book 10.3.3 of Confessions: “What therefore have I to do with men, that they should hear my confessions, as if...”

they would cure all my infirmities? … Why do they desire to hear [quaerunt audire] from me what I am, who will not hear [nolunt a te audire] from thee what themselves are?” (10.3.3). From this perspective, Spenser’s anti-Catholic polemic in the Legend of Holiness situates Redcrosse’s confessions within Protestant discourses on the status of confession in early modern England.

However, Spenser’s representation of the need for Redcrosse to confess to others to regulate the memory of his sinful past indicates a departure from typical Protestant applications of *Confessions* 10.3.3. Indeed, when considered in the context of *Confessions*, the reformers’ citation of Augustine as part of their program to diminish the value of confession to others is shown to be a misreading for polemical purposes. Augustine in fact clarifies his concerns regarding the potential limitations of confession to others by stating that he must rely on the charity of his audience to believe his confessions. Further, he justifies open confession by noting its potential for spiritual edification: “For the confessions of my past sins … whenas they read and hear, they stir up the heart that it may not sleep in despair [desperatione], and say: I cannot” (10.4.3). Spenser’s treatment of Redcrosse’s confessions is consonant with Augustine because it advances the stated general purpose of *The Faerie Queene*, that is, “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (*FQ*, “Letter to Raleigh”). Redcrosse’s confessions function as a model for accounting for the memorial fallout of sexual sins. Spenser also uses Augustinian memory and confession to frame his engagement with the polemics surrounding the decline of the rite of private confession in early modern England. He includes a syncretic confessional model capable of assuaging Redcrosse’s struggles with the memorial effects of sins in order to justify the benefits of a reformed model of confession. Aiming to harmonize recuperated confessional rituals and individual faith, Spenser concentrates on
Redcrosse’s physical mortifications, complete confession of sins, and outward displays of shame and guilt.

**Forms of Confession in the Legend of Holiness**

From the beginning of the Legend of Holiness, Spenser presents Redcrosse as bearing the marks of a repentant Christian in need of confession. For an early modern audience reading in the wake of Erasmus’ Greek edition of the New Testament, Spenser’s frequent use of the English term “repentance” indicates the importance of internal conversion—metanoia—rather than external penance. Yet the emphasis on interior repentance in Reformation theology preserves an outward dimension to the penitential practice through which individuals could manifest their reconciliation with God. The Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer (1559) repeatedly emphasizes the role of outward penitence in Christian life. “The order for the administration of the Lordes Supper, or holy Communion,” for instance, illustrates the regular integration of penitential signs into liturgical life, for the priest exhorts those receiving Holy Communion to “[d]raw nere, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort: make your humble confession to almighty god before this congregacion here gathered together in his holy name, mekely kneling vpon your knees.”¹⁴ Contemporary readers first approaching The Faerie Queene, then, would not be surprised by the importance of repentance and penitential actions in Spenser’s fiction. Yet Spenser’s focus on confession to others rather than directly to God distinguishes his text from normative discussions of Protestant forms of confession. And this disjunction highlights the question of how the Christian individual should be able to confess his or her sins.

The first of the three confessional episodes in the Legend of Holiness involves not Redcrosse, but rather Una, whose penitential progress casts into relief Redcrosse’s confessional moments. Paradoxically, Una appears to be a confessional subject who does not need to confess. The identification of Una as “Truth” and her allegorical association with the one Christian Church seem to preclude any need for Una to confess anything (1.2.Arg.2). Richard Mallette supports this view: “Una’s conscience has, of course, no cause for recrimination.” Yet Caroline McManus’ contention that “Una’s authority and decisiveness … may derive from her own struggle with despair in 1.7 and Arthur,… [who] helped restore her faith,” calls attention to Una’s inward struggles and reliance on external spiritual guidance for assurance. Further, Una’s struggles point to the distance between her assigned allegorical significance and the legend’s narrative in which “Truth” is overcome with doubt.

The clearest illustration of Una’s spiritual and emotional imperfection is her complaint after she sees the Dwarf carrying Redcrosse’s armor. In a moment that foreshadows Redcrosse’s attempted suicide in Despaire’s cave (1.9.51), Una states that she longs for her heart to be riven: “Now let the stony dart of senselesse cold / Perce to my hart, and pas through euery side, / And let eternall night so sad sight fro me hyde” (1.7.22.7-9). The suicidal themes become more pronounced as the complaint progresses: “For earthly sight can nought but sorrow breed, / And late repentance, which shall long abyde” (1.7.23.7-8, emphasis added). Una’s use of the phrase “late repentance” underscores the extent of her sadness, because it connotes ineffective or

---

17 Referring to Una’s inability to recognize Archimago’s disguise, Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966), insightfully notes: “Una, too, is a creature, and does not equal Truth but shadows Truth so far as may be; she is not God Himself come down from heaven, the only perfect Truth” (122).
insufficient repentance near or at the moment of death.\textsuperscript{18} The prominent Cambridge divine William Perkins, writing shortly after Spenser, describes late repentance in a manner germane to its use in Una’s complaint: “Late repentance is seldome or never true repentance. For if a man repent when he cannot sinne as in former time, as namely in death: then hee leaves not sinne but sinne leaves him: wherefore the repentance which men frame to them selues when they are dying, it is to be feared least it die with them.”\textsuperscript{19} Una’s evocation of late repentance reveals that her excessive sorrow over Redcrosse losing his armor (indicative of his forsaking the Christian faithfulness) threatens to foreclose the possibility of redemption either for herself or her knight. Una envisages life as restricted entirely by the “deadly meed” of “earthly sight” and thereby focuses on the corporeal inevitability to the exclusion of the possibility of spiritual regeneration (1.7.23.9). Faith, the virtue Una repeatedly evokes to assist Redcrosse, becomes submerged underneath materiality. Rather than merely figurative, Una’s three faints that follow the end of her complaint—“Thrishe did she sinke adowne in deadly swownd”—advance her capitulation to and inability to extricate herself from her sorrows (1.7.24.3).

With the medical and psychological interventions of her Dwarf, Una does swerve away from the paralytic, self-destructive despair expressed in her complaint and realized in her fainting. However, she does not displace her sadness with happiness or renewed hope about her knight’s misadventures. On the contrary, Una strives to manage her sorrow with “constant carefull mind” (1.7.28.5). And she displays this striving for emotional regulation in her interaction with the Dwarf. Una prepares herself for listening to the Dwarf’s narrative by

\textsuperscript{18} Spenser uses the phrase similarly in \textit{Colin Clovts Come Home Againe} to express Colin’s experiences abroad: “Then hauing learnd repentance late, to mourne / Emongst those wretches which I there descryde” (675-76).
\textsuperscript{19} William Perkins, \textit{Tvwo Treatises: I. Of the nature and practise of repentance. II. Of the combat of the flesh and spirit.} (Cambridge, 1593) 56. On the danger of late repentance, see also the Geneva Bible’s gloss to Matt. 27: 5.
proverbially explaining that one “[w]ho hath endur’d the whole, can beare ech part” (1.7.25.5).

Furthermore, Spenser narrates:

She heard with patience all vnto the end,
And stoue to maister sorrowfull assay,
Which greater grew, the more she did contend,
And almost rent her tender hart in tway.

(1.7.27.1-4)

Una reconfigures her sorrows from a cause for the suicidal *contemptus mundi* in her complaint to an internal *agon* between emotion and intellect that can be managed through perseverance. The goal is not to extinguish her “heauy plight” or to slake her sorrow permanently (1.7.25.3); rather, it is to transform debilitating sorrow into a productive emotion that can be controlled and put into the service of driving her onward in search of her knight. Indeed, her “careful constant mind” functions as an internal switching mechanism to regulate the flow of her sadness with which “[s]he fed her wound with fresh renewed bale” (1.7.28.6). The sorrow that led Una to abandon hope now serves as the emotional source for her renewed hope in locating Redcrosse.

Una’s regulation of sorrow, though productive, cannot satisfactorily function as a permanent solution for her loss of Redcrosse, because the “whole” of his narrative risks overshadowing the only genuine completeness available to Christians, that is, the promised contemplation of heavenly Jerusalem. At the same time, such an Orphic perspective conflicts with Spenser’s description of true love earlier in Book 1: “true is, that true loue hath no powre / To looken backe; his eies be fixt before” (1.3.30.7-8). Arthur’s intervention in the Legend of Holiness thus attempts to restore Una to the appropriate viewpoint on spiritual and romantic matters. Arthur initially displays his dual role as a chivalric knight and spiritual adviser, but, perceiving that “[s]ome secret sorrow did her distraine” (1.7.38.4) through the sadness permeating her “bleeding words” (1.7.38.9), he begins his assistance of Una as a form of “the
descent of grace and the condescension of the Word.”

Arthur’s offer to Una does not, of course, lead to a ritual confession. His assumption of the role of a caring, learned spiritual counselor who entreats Una “to unfold the anguish of your hart,” so that he might offer “advice discrete” (1.7.40.5-7), corresponds to the sort of spiritual intervention prescribed by the Elizabethan Prayer Book and English reformers as diverse as Richard Greenham and Lancelot Andrewes.

Una does not respond by unfolding her grief, but rather by testing Arthur through a stichomythic interchange in which she rhetorically questions the value of revealing “great griefe” to another (1.7.40.4, 1.7.41.1), connects the discussion of unassuaged grief to despair (1.7.41.5-6), and stands on guard against religious or sexual deception in Arthur’s appeals to faith (1.7.41.8-9). Although Arthur’s “goodly reason, and well guided speech” ultimately persuade Una to “disclose the breach” (1.7.42.1-3), she still expresses concern over revealing her secrets: “I hope good hap hath brought / You to inquire the secrets of my griefe” (1.7.42.5-6). While Una, like Redcrosse, cannot conceal her sorrowful emotions, her protectiveness over her internal state stands as a model for guarding inwardness. Offering a corrective to her position toward her ongoing sadness, Arthur advises that “[t]he things, that grievous were to do, or beare, / Them to renew, I wote, breeds no delight” and recommends instead that “th’only good … / Is to be wise, and ware the like agein” (1.8.44.2-6). Arthur thus substitutes a forward-looking perspective, which he reinforces through his proverbial “ensample” on the imperfections of earthly existence, for Una’s previous method for processing sorrow (1.8.44.7). This advice corresponds to that of

---

20 Nohrnberg 37.
contemporary writers who warn against reviewing past sins because it can potentially lead to despair. John Woolton, for instance, cautions: “Never let the remembrance of sins lead a man to despair.” According to Arthur, previous sorrows, which can in the case of Redcrosse be extended to previous sexual transgressions, should act only as memorial safeguards that contribute to prudent and faithful actions in the future. Of the three confessions in Book 1, Una’s interaction with Arthur acts as Spenser’s application of a normative form of desacralized and deritualized early modern Protestant confession, because it accomplishes the prescribed ends of such spiritual guidance—consolation for previous sorrows and assurance of heavenly bliss.

The second confessional episode in Book 1, which begins with Redcrosse’s inverted confession to Despaire and concludes with his penitential regimen in the House of Holiness, contrasts with the first because it enacts the destructive effects of revealing grief that Una warned of in her interaction with Arthur. In this sense, the entire Despaire episode can be interpreted as a sustained exposition of Una’s proverb that “griefe … does greater grow displeaid, / If then it find not helpe, and breedes despaire” (1.7.41.5-6). Spenser’s representation of Redcrosse’s behavior in this episode stands as an inversion of Una’s cautious interchange with Arthur. Whereas she tests Arthur’s qualities as a spiritual counselor, Redcrosse displays carelessness in every aspect of his behavior. He rushes into Despaire’s cave to avenge Trevisan and Terwin and naively confronts Despaire, even though he cannot account for, and, at this point, perhaps even acknowledge, his own sinful behavior. Moreover, the knight unquestioningly accepts Despaire’s role as a “parodic preacher” rather than recognizing him as an insidious confessor figure whose method functions as a perversion of Arthur’s earlier entreaty to Una to unfold her sorrows.

24 King 213. Despaire’s rhetorical method and misreading of Scripture has been the subject of numerous studies; see A.C. Hamilton, The Structure of Allegory in The Faerie Queene (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1961) 80-81; Patrick Cullen,
In the Despaire episode, Spenser shifts the register from sadness emerging out of separation to a form of despair caused by the memory of sexual sins—a type of sorrow never experienced by Una. He thus explores the pessimistic side of Augustinian memory by presenting its danger when directed toward unregenerative materiality (rendered in the episode as Law and flesh) rather than the infinite godhead (Spirit and grace). Spenser depicts Redcrosse as incapable of employing memory to find God; instead, as Harold Skulsky observes, “the cave of Despaire is likely to be one of the antris et cavernae of Augustinian memory, ‘a something full of horror’ [Conf. 10.17],” which presses him downward into personal recollection instead of toward God. Despaire, whom Spenser describes as “[t]hat cursed man, low sitting on the ground, / Musing full sadly in his sullein mind,” thereby seeks to instill his own debilitating inwardness on his victims (1.9.35.2-3). In so doing, he subverts the Augustinian emphasis on memory as being an essential faculty for recognizing the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Despaire effectively assumes control of Redcrosse, first by recognizing the fissure in Redcrosse’s conscience between past sins and professed Christian identity and then by disrupting the knight’s corporeal integrity. It is an important point, I want to emphasize, that Despaire knows that Redcrosse “sold thy selfe to serue Duessa vile” because Spenser never explains how Despaire gathered such complete knowledge of an apparently private event (1.9.46.8). On the one hand, Spenser illustrates the manner by which Despaire learned the cause of Terwin and

---


25 Harold Skulsky, “Spenser’s Despair Episode and the Theology of Doubt,” *Modern Philology* 78 (1981): 228. Despaire disrupts the medieval understanding regarding the intellectual ascent caused by desire with which Spenser would have been familiar. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), writes: “The emotions (affectus) are the starting-point, as they must be in order to engage memoria and cogitatio…. Desire begins the ascent to understanding by firing memory, and through memory’s stored-up treasures the intellect is able to contemplate; the higher its understanding, the more desire flames in love as it both gets and gives more life” (201).

Trevisan’s sadness. Trevisan explains how Despaire, “[s]o creeping close, as Snake in hidden weeds, / Inquireth of our states, and of our knightly deedes” (1.9.28.8-9) and subsequently persuaded them to “dye, to stint all further strife” (1.9.29.8). On the other hand, in the case of Redcrosse, Despaire accurately describes Redcrosse’s sexual transgression without any questioning and thereby evinces the notoriety of the knight’s relationship with Duessa. Despaire does not possess supernatural powers, but rather capitalizes on the circulation of the sexual scandal to press the disjunction between Redcrosse’s outward appearance as a Christian knight and his inward sinfulness. In the fissure caused between Redcrosse’s Christian ideal and experienced reality, Despaire is able to “ma[k]e a secret breach” in the knight’s “conscience” (1.9.48.3) by “reuers[ing]” or bringing back into “fresh remembrance” (1.9.48.5) Redcrosse’s sexual sins. He uses the knowledge of Redcrosse’s sins as a means of forcing the knight to engage unwillingly with memory. Despaire’s confessional method thus becomes an inverted or parodic penitential exchange. Rather than creating a space for the individual to process his or her shame and guilt, Despaire substitutes his version of the sinner’s transgression, always pressing the harshest interpretation in an effort to lead his victims to suicide. Despaire fulfills the confessor’s role to instill shame in a penitent, but omits the confessor’s equally important need to effect consolation.

In this manner, Despaire effects a memorial reenactment that recalls Redcrosse’s reaction to his dream at Archimago’s hut and the enfeebling spring. Just as the knight’s wet dream causes “his manly heart … [to] melt away” (1.1.47.5) and the spring “his manly force to fail” (1.7.6.5), Despaire’s speech causes “his manly powers … [to] disperse” (1.9.48.7). The memory of past sins, Spenser underscores, remains a source for mental and physical instability because it originates in transgressive sexuality. Redcrosse’s loss of control over his manly powers (with its
implicit connotation of uncontrolled ejaculation) points not only to a “careless” disposition that reinforces despair, but also to a disruption of masculinity. Redcrosse’s dispersion of his manly powers destabilizes the masculine wholeness toward which he strives and which Archimago, Duessa, and Despaire seek to frustrate. Spenser registers the tension between wholeness and dispersion in his use of the word “resolu’d” in Redcrosse’s attempted suicide: “At last resolu’d to worke his finall smart, / He lifted vp his hand that backe againe did start” (1.9.51.8-9). “Resolu’d” indicates Redcrosse’s apparent determination, but at the same time plays on the Latin resolvere (to loosen, relax, enfeeble) to indicate the dissipation of the knight’s exercise of reason. Importantly, it is Una, present though silent throughout the episode, rather than Redcrosse himself, who restores the knight to wholeness through, to use David Lee Miller’s phrasing, the reassertion of “the broken link between justice and grace.” As in the Errour episode, Una does this through an evocation of the knight’s singular, individual spiritual destiny: “Why dost thou despeire, that chosen art?” (1.9.53.5).

By again placing Una in an intercessory role, Spenser reinforces the necessity of spiritual correction by external figures to assist the loss of spiritual and bodily regulation. In terms of the poem’s theological allegory, this evinces the Christian individual’s reliance on grace for salvation. Yet Spenser’s frequent representation of the importance of intermediary figures intimates a deeper historical concern with an appropriate balance between individual faith and external intervention in governing action and achieving spiritual ends. For Spenser, liberation from despair and the assurance of God’s grace cannot be achieved solely on an independent

29 Miller 78.
realization of faith and predestination, but depends on direct external guidance by virtuous figures.

Spenser underscores the necessity of external intercessors by representing the House of Holiness as a site wherein spiritual counselors not only correct Redcrosse’s inverted confession in the Cave of Despaire, but also effect his spiritual and memorial rehabilitation. In this episode, Spenser intensifies Arthur’s advice on placing memory in service of prudential action by offering a sustained concentration on the memory and subsequent extirpation of Redcrosse’s sins. The stress on remembering and forgetting throughout the episode indicates that Redcrosse’s spiritual recovery is grounded in his relation to memory. More specifically, the conditions for grace are not Redcrosse’s memories, but the significance of those memories to the present. This figuring of memory draws on Augustine’s understanding of memory and time: “a long time past is merely a long memory of the past time [longa memoria praeteriti est]” (*Conf*. 11.28.37). Accordingly, Fidelia centers on the Scriptures (“her sacred Booke”) and other Christian truths (“heauenly documents”) as part of an effort to redirect Redcrosse’s attention to the period before his sexual transgression, in which he suffered no disjunction between outward identity as a Christian knight and inward faithfulness (*FQ* 1.10.19.1, 4).  

Fidelia’s teachings cause Redcrosse to become “[g]reeu’d with remembrance of his wicked wayes” (1.10.21.6); however, the weight of the knight’s memory of past sins is so great that Speranza, recalling Una’s intervention in Despaire’s cave, “gaue him comfort sweet / Els had his sinnes so great, and manifold / Made him forget all, that *Fidelia* told” (1.10.22.4-5). If Redcrosse forgets Fidelia’s teachings, he will remember his sexual transgression with Duessa. The “secret breach” in the knight’s conscience will thus be filled with memories of his pre-transgressive condition.

---

31 Spenser thus connects Fidelia’s instruction of Redcrosse to Despaire’s rhetoric through his emphasis on memory; for similarities between the two episodes, see Thomas A. Dughi, “Redcrosse’s ‘Springing Well’ of Scriptural Faith,” *Studies in English Literature* (1997): 37.
The solution to overcoming the memory of past sins, Spenser indicates, is a complete physical and mental regime of confession and penance. Caelia, who “wisely comforted all” (1.10.23.4), recognizes Recrosse’s “secret breach” and sends for a “Leach, the which had great insight / In that disease of grieued conscience, / And well could cure the same; His name was Patience” to assist the ailing knight (1.10.23.7-9). Anthony Low concentrates on Spenser’s renaming of the traditional allegorical figure Confession to Patience and concludes: “In The Faerie Queene confession has disappeared altogether from the penitential process, along with the presence of an officiating priest or confessor…. Spenser’s Patience is not a priest, but an internal virtue. His House of Holiness is not a church, but a site of inward regeneration.”

32 Spenser’s suspension of Patience’s identity until the end of the stanza—“His name was Patience”—does suggest his deliberate alteration of his reader’s expectations about the identity of Redcrosse’s spiritual physician (1.10.23.9). Yet in substance Patience follows in the medieval poetic and dramatic tradition, exemplified by Gower’s Confessio Amantis and by Everyman, of a ghostly confessor. The intervention of Patience thus evinces that in Spenser’s theological program inward regeneration can only begin from without.

Spenser further qualifies the inward origin of the knight’s recovery through his representation of Patience’s method of rehabilitation, which in many ways follows the Elizabethan instructions on administering the rite of confession. To rehearse the ritual briefly: Patience, upon “comming to that soule-diseased knight, / Could hardly him intreat, to tell his griefe”; after Redcrosse “all that noyd his heauie spright / Well searcht,” Patience then “gan to

---

32 Low 18-19. On Patience’s religious identity, see also Jennifer C. Vaught, “Spenser’s Dialogic Voice in Book 1 of The Faerie Queene,” Studies in English Literature 41 (2001): 80. In her discussion of Patience’s role in the House of Holiness, Hume contends that “Spenser’s imaginative realization of the theme [care for a “wounded conscience”] is best understood against a background of the Puritan writings which defined it, well represented by a work by Richard Greenham, A Most Sweete and assured Comfort for all those that are afflicted in Conscience” (99). While Hume’s argument elucidates Spenser’s possible use of Greenham, it passes over his non-Puritan, markedly traditional representation of confessional and penitential rituals. For Spenser’s use of Greenham, see also Darryl J. Gless, Interpretation and Theology in Spenser (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 150-51; and Mallette 44.
apply reliefe / Of salues and med’cines”; finally, Patience “added words of wondrous might” (1.10.24.1-6). The reference to the totality of Redcrosse’s sins (“all that noyd” [troubled]) establishes a connection between the completeness of the confessional act and the achievement of inward consolation. Further, the efficacy of Patience’s confessional ritual, which Spenser describes as “passing prief,” that is, proved or tested power, demonstrates that the success of Redcrosse’s confession emerges not only from his actions preceding and contained within the penitential rite, but also from the ritual form of Patience’s method (1.10.24.6). The conclusion of the rite with “words of wondrous might” alludes to the priest’s rite of absolution in Sarum use and sixteenth-century editions of the Book of Common Prayer. Rather than elevating Redcrosse’s self-sufficiency in this process, the grammatical construction describing the effects of Patience’s absolution reduce him to a passive role: “By which to ease he him recured briefe, / And much asswag’d the passion of his plight” (1.10.24.7). By the same token, Spenser depicts Redcrosse undergoing an externally imposed physical mortification under the direction of Patience (1.10.25-26), Amendment (1.10.26), Penance, Remorse, and Repentance (1.10.27). Like Patience’s absolution rite, the knight depends on the successful extirpation of his physical maladies from skilled spiritual physicians instead of from any independent recovery. Spenser’s treatment of the formal efficacy of this rite therefore evinces, as Paul Alpers observes as a

34 A.C. Hamilton, ed., The Faerie Queene, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2001), glosses “recured” as “Through absolution the knight is recured, i.e. restored to health,” which demonstrates the extent to which Patience’s words effect Redcrosse’s internal transformation (128). Redcrosse’s passivity suggests Spenser’s minimization of avoids any appearance of semi-Peganism, which was a Protestant criticism of medieval confessional practices.
35 Spenser’s model of mortification corresponds to “An Homilie of Repentance and of true reconciliation vnto God,” The seconde Tome of Homilies (London, 1563) 273. For another example of Spenser’s positive depiction of another positive model of physical mortification, see Britomart’s experiences in the Temple of Isis (5.7.9).
general feature of the House of Holiness, that “a desperate person … is rescued from himself.”

In depicting the efficacy of the absolution and penance, Spenser identifies Redcrosse’s penitential experiences in the House of Holiness as a reformed model of private confession grounded in conventional penitential ritual that, in turn, stands as a positive addition to the normative Protestant confessional model he presented in Una’s interaction with Arthur. In the process, Spenser distinguishes Redcrosse’s penitence from early modern Protestant writers who limited the penitential rite to a declaratory function. The strong ritual component of Patience’s method elucidates the contrast between Spenser’s conception of the rite of private confession and penance and those of its early modern detractors.

Spenser also resists many reformers’ polemics against confession by incorporating medieval penitential elements in the House of Holiness. In particular, he describes Redcrosse’s confession of sins as complete: “all that noyd his heauie spright / Well searcht” (1.10.24.3-4, emphasis added). This comprehensive survey of Recrosse’s conscience follows *confessio integra* outlined in medieval penitentials, and counters Luther and several other Continental and English reformers who attacked such enumeration of sins on the grounds that they were intrusions into a confessant’s conscience and that the impossible recounting of every offense God only leads to despair. By contrast, Spenser, drawing on Augustine’s willingness to lay open every sin before

---


God and his audience, identifies the knight’s complete memorial accounting of past sins as an effective avenue through which inward consolation can be achieved. The incorporation of Redcrosse’s complete confession thus demonstrates the diversity of Spenser’s engagement with traditional and Reformation beliefs, a diversity that resists attempts to read into the episode a definitive shift from a ritual-based Catholicism to faith-based Protestantism. Spenser marks the external dimensions of confession as vital to his theological program because they alone can satisfactorily rehabilitate Redcrosse’s memory after sexual transgression. In the House of Holiness, then, ritualized confessional and penitential interventions function as a necessary bridge from the knight’s transgression with Duessa to the fulfillment of his identity as St. George.

The Redcrosse Knight’s Narrative Lacunae at the Court of Eden

If Spenser uses the House of Holiness to outline a confessional and penitential program for Redcrosse to regulate the memory of sins, he presents the third confessional episode in the Legend of Holiness—Redcrosse’s open confession at the Court of Eden—as a sustained opportunity for the knight to prove the success of his rehabilitation through public penitence (exomologesis) and autobiographical narration. Spenser stresses the importance of memory by centering the episode on Redcrosse’s autobiographical narration of his past adventures. At the “demaund” of the King of Eden, Redcrosse, “with vtt’rance graue, and count’nance sad, / From point to point, as is before exprest, / Discourst his voyage long, according his request”

P, 2005) 121; see also W. David Myers, “Poor, Sinning Folk”: Conession and Conscience in Counter-Reformation Germany (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996) 162-71. For examples of sixteenth-century English texts opposed to the enumeration of sins, see Gracious Menewe (also attributed to Thomas Becon), A plaine subuersyon or turnyng vp syde down of all the argumentes, that the Popecatholykes can make for the maintenaunce of auricular confession with a moste wholsome doctrine touching the due obedience (Wesel?, 1555?) Dv†; and “An Homilie of Repentance” 281°.

39 The Court of Eden functions as a space for Redcrosse to display his faith publicly. Spenser identifies confession as the only available, though problematic, means by which inward faith can be demonstrated outwardly. See Claire McEachern, The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590-1612 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 76.
Spenser does not indicate what episodes Redcrosse includes in his narrative; but the use of the phrase “point to point” creates the impression of a complete narration of events. It is clear that Redcrosse emphasizes his sufferings at the hands of fortune, for Adam, the King of Eden, sympathetically remarks: “For neuer liuing man, I weene, so sore / In sea of deadly daungers was distrest” (1.12.17.5-6). Yet Spenser withholds any indication of whether Redcrosse touches on his own transgressions with Duessa, Orgoglio, or Despaire. The question of whether Redcrosse left out any details of his adventures in his narrative is soon answered when Archimago delivers a letter from Fidessa / Duessa, in which she accuses the knight of being a “[f]alse erraunt knight, infamous,” who committed “bold periury” against and “polluted oft of yore” burning Altars by abandoning her and breaking their “sacred pledges” (1.12.27.3-7). Her insistence on enumerating the gravity and number of Redcrosse’s sins not only operates as a counter “point to point” narrative to Redcrosse’s sympathetic and incomplete autobiographical retelling of his adventures, but also casts into doubt his intentions and spiritual progress.

The lacunae in Redcrosse’s narration can readily be interpreted as an attempt to distort the truth, a distortion that detracts from his worthiness as a knight and betrothed to Una. Indeed, the King of Eden’s response to Duessa’s letter reveals that he does feel deceived by Redcrosse’s narrative omissions, for he exhorts the knight to make a full disclosure: “Let nough t be hid from me, that ought to be exprest” (1.12.29.12). And he goes on to reiterate Duessa’s accusations: “But if your selfe, Sir knight, ye faultie find, / Or wrapped be in loues of former Dame, / With crime [perjury] doe not it couer, but disclose it the same” (1.12.30.7-9). In contrast to the King of Eden’s indictment of Redcrosse’s failure of disclosure, Una remains silent, even though she is

---

40 The phrase “from point to point,” meaning “in all particulars” or “in every way,” frequently recurs in medieval literature (see MED point, def. 6d); see Gower, Confessio Amantis 1.220-27, 6.2321-22, 8.1725-26; and Chaucer, “The Physician’s Tale” 150.
well aware of his involvement with Duessa. If Redcrosse deliberately misrepresents himself in his narration, through her silence Una conspires with him. The contention over narrative and memory raised by Duessa’s letter evidences the two conflicting models to the knight’s past in *The Faerie Queene*: on the one side, characters such as Archimago, Duessa, and Despaire insist on accurate and repeated reporting of the knight’s moral failings as part of an effort to paralyze his quest; on the other side, characters like Una, Arthur, Fidelia, Patience, and, by this point in Book 1, Redcrosse himself concentrate on the past only insofar as it contributes to attaining future spiritual ends.

By including Archimago and Duessa’s intrusion into the celebration at Eden, Spenser shifts Redcrosse’s victory over the dragon toward the knight’s moral failings in Duessa’s letter. Spenser thereby signals the persistence of the disruptive connection between the past and the present—the continual Orphic temptation for the knight to look backward and relapse into sin. The King of Eden’s demand for Redcrosse to narrate his adventures thus functions as a test of whether the knight possesses the ability to comport himself in relation to his previous sins or whether he will lapse again into despair. In the context of public confession, Redcrosse must now verify to the court his rehabilitation and renewed faithfulness. Redcrosse does not offer a confident, more complete second narration, but rather offers a story filled with linguistic slippages and self-corrections. In response to Duessa’s letter and Adam’s demand, for instance, he reveals that he had not forgotten his past mistakes:

> It was in my mishaps, as hitherward  
> I lately traveild, that vnwares I strayd  
> Out of my way, through perils straunge and hard;

42 Hamilton, ed., *The Faerie Queene* 153, offers a third possibility for explaining the knight’s narrative omissions, that is, forgetfulness.  
43 I am indebted to Paul Suttie, “Edmund Spenser’s Political Pragmatism,” *Studies in Philology* 95 (1998): 74, for this model of approaching the past in *The Faerie Queene*. On Redcrosse’s reasonable omission of narrative material, see Gless 173.
That day should faile me, ere I had them all declard.
(1.12.31.7-9)

The knight remembers “all” of his mistakes, but the intention behind the lacunae in his story nonetheless remains unclear; the phrase “vnwares I strayd” may be read as an attempt to mitigate misdeeds, because it could mean “unconsciously, unintentionally, inadvertently” (OED def. 1.a.). Spenser uses “vnwares” in this sense in his description of Furor, who “oft himselfe chaunst to hurt vnwares” (2.4.7.6). Yet “vnawares” can also be interpreted as a sudden or unexpected event; it appears in this sense also in the Furor episode where Guyon “ouerthrew himselfe vnwares, and lower lay” (2.4.8.9). To counterbalance the ambiguity or possibility for mitigation introduced by “vnwares,” however, Redcrosse includes “all” in his narration, not to mitigate his sinfulness, but rather to stress for the court his immeasurable sinfulness and depravity in relationship to the divine.⁴⁴ Redcrosse thereby places himself in the traditional role of a repentant sinner who received the grace of God.

Although Redcrosse assumes responsibility for his past sinfulness, his second narration nevertheless does not proceed unambiguously “point to point”; on the contrary, the first line contains an immediate qualification in his narration of how he first met Duessa “[t]here did I find, or rather I was fownd / Of this false woman” (1.12.32.1, emphasis added). This narrative self-correction recalls the ambiguous usage of “vnwares” in the previous stanza because the knight initially identifies himself as entirely culpable in his dalliance with Duessa, but then modifies his agency to a more passive position. Berger reads Spenser’s deployment here of the rhetorical figure of correctio or epanorthosis as evidence that Redcrosse misogynistically and

“blatantly elides his own active participation in linking up with Duessa.” But such a sharp critique neglects the knight’s confessional struggle over the memory of his previous sins with Duessa. Spenser registers this penitential context through the rhetorical figure of *correctio*, which is the Latin rendering of the Greek *metanoia*, meaning, to use Erasmus’ contentious translation in the early modern period, repentance. In *The Arte of English Posie* (1589), George Puttenham makes the connection clear between the rhetorical figure and repentance in the marginal notation—“*Metanoia, or the Penitent*”—and in his definition:

Otherwhiles we speake and be sorry for it, as if we had not wel spoken, so that we seeme to call in our word againe, and to put in another fitter for the purpose: for which respects the Greekes called this manner of speech the figure of repentance: then for that vpon repentance commonly followes amendment, the Latins called it the figure of correction, in that the speaker seemeth to reforme that which was said amisse. I following the Greeke originall, choose to call him the penitent, or repentant.

Through the use of the figure of *metanoia*, Spenser gestures toward Redcrosse’s change of mind and heart and suggests that the knight corrects his narration because he now recognizes Duessa as a wicked interloper and has distanced himself from his desperate thoughts in the Despaire episode. The rhetorical figure, however, is problematic because it employs the same general rhetorical structure as part of Duessa’s letter, which states: “To me sad mayd, or rather widow sad / He was affiaunced long time before” (1.12.27.1-2, emphasis added). Duessa’s use of *metanoia* to establish her marital status—she first describes herself to Redcrosse as a “virgin widow”—signals her duplicitous self-fashioning that seeks to elide her true identity (1.2.24.8). Redcrosse thus corrects his narration in an effort to establish an antithetical relationship between

---


himself and Duessa.

Rather than confuting or correcting Duessa’s narrative inconsistencies, Redcrosse’s deployment of the figure of *metanoia* recapitulates and reinscribes its instability and disruptiveness through his own speech. By rewording Duessa’s duplicitous rhetoric in Redcrosse’s confession, Spenser demonstrates how the knight continues to be influenced by his sexual transgression even after the confessional and penitential rituals in the House of Holiness. And the repetition of “vnwares” in the stanza reinforces this ongoing tension between sinner and penitent (1.12.32.8). These linguistic instabilities do not, however, demonstrate that he remains locked in the same relationship with his past sins that he did in the Despaire episode. On the contrary, Redcrosse exhibits a willingness to admit his faults. He confesses that he was not only “inueigle[d]” by his “weaker sight” during his time with Duessa, but also previously over-reliant on “earthly skill” rather than on grace (1.12.32.5-7). Spenser thereby signals that despite the knight’s rehabilitation, the need for repentance and conversion is never satisfied because the memorial and linguistic effects of sin cannot be completely extirpated from the sinner.

Yet even though Spenser’s treatment of Redcrosse’s narrative indicates the knight’s improved relationship to the memory of past sins, the instabilities surrounding and contained within his storytelling advance a persistent tension between holiness and sexual transgression in the Legend of Holiness. Redcrosse only mentions briefly that his sight was “inueigle[d]” and concentrates instead on how Duessa caused the knight to be captured by Orgoglio (1.12.32.5). Notable for its absence is any mention of their sexual transgression. Likewise, Una, assuming her characteristic role of a spiritual guide, seeks to neutralize the disruptive potential of Duessa’s letter by entreatng her father to allow her “to showe / The secret treasons, which of late I know /
To haue bene wrought by that false sorceresse” (1.12.33.5-7). Yet her supposedly fuller version of Redcrosse’s misfortunes focuses exclusively on Redcrosse’s imprisonment in Orgoglio’s dungeon: “She onely she it is, that earst did throw / This gentle knight into so great distresse / That death him did awaite in dayly wretchednesse” (1.12.33.7-9). Unlike her previous narration to Arthur, moreover, she omits any reference to Redcrosse’s sexual sin. Recounting Redcrosse’s travels, she relates to Arthur how the knight

chaunced false Duessa meete,
Mine onely foe, mine onely deadly dread,
Who with her witchcraft and misseeming sweete,
\emph{Inueigled} him to follow her desieres vnmeete.

(1.7.50.6-9, emphasis added)

In this earlier instance, Una connects Duessa’s beguilement of Redcrosse with her transgressive sexuality—Duessa’s “desieres vnmeete” constitute the primary reason for the knight’s fall into pride.

At the Court of Eden, Una’s shift in emphasis from Duessa’s sexual temptations to her ability to overthrow Redcrosse and lead him to wretchedness underscores that the solution to disruptive sexuality is its management in individual memory and effacement from the public sphere. Spenser’s treatment of the King of Eden and the court’s ready support of Redcrosse and Una’s explanation and the imprisonment of Archimago indicates the degree of complicity needed to neutralize the recurrent threat of past sins. Redcrosse’s dalliance with Duessa functions as an open secret in Faeryland that can be contained though narrative and submerged beneath the normative bonds of ritualized marriage. By performatively forgetting who he was, Redcrosse demonstrates that he is fit to become who he is meant to be—“Saint \emph{George} of mery England,

\footnote{See Gless 173-74.}
the signe of victoree” and Una’s husband (1.10.61.9).49

In the Legend of Holiness, therefore, Redcrosse’s successful development is grounded in ritual structures which allow for an objectification of selfhood and experience and a recovery of identity through a symbolic retreat from transgressive desire. In the sexual politics of The Faerie Queene, Spenser shows that disordered masculine sexuality must be contained through physical and mental mortification in ritual confession and penance, and, following the conventional Pauline understanding, bridled in ceremonial marriage.50 Spenser thereby marks ritual confession as a vital means for the management of the memorial effects of non-normative, unregulated sexuality.

By representing Redcrosse’s confessions as essential to his successful moral rehabilitation, Spenser demonstrates the importance of the various forms of confession in Christian life during a period when confession became either standardized in liturgical practice or increasingly relegated to private life. Despite the religious polemic of the Legend of Holiness, Spenser’s treatment of penitence established multiple means by which individuals may confess satisfactorily. This differs from the perspective of many Protestant writers, including several Calvinist-influenced Cambridge divines with whom Spenser could have come into contact while at Pembroke. Identifying preaching as the means by which the faithful “be made partakers of the keyes,” for instance, William Fulke, who was elected a fellow of St. John’s before becoming the chaplain to the Earl of Leicester and later president of Pembroke, writes: “Wherefore although

49 On the performativity of remembering and forgetting, see Garrett Sullivan, Memory and Forgetting in English Renaissance Drama: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).
50 Misogynistic undertones are present in Spenser’s representation of disordered feminine sexuality. In contrast to Redcrosse’s ability to find rehabilitation, Duessa’s “desires vnmeete” must be revealed as duplicitious, rejected outright from private and public memory, and displaced by Una’s pre-transgressive form of chaste matrimonial sexuality. On misogyny in the Legend of Holiness, see the series of recent articles by Harry Berger, Jr.: “Displacing Autophobia in Faerie Queene I: Ethics, Gender, and Oppositional Reading in the Spenserian Text,” English Literary Renaissance (1998): 163-82; “Archimago: Between Text and Countertext”; and “Sexual and Religious Politics in Book 1 of Spenser’s Faerie Queene,” English Literary Renaissance 34 (2003): 201-42.
wee vrge not auricular confession, neither make we a Sacrament of repentance, because it hath no visible signe proper unto it, yet the benefite of the keyes of the Church is not lost, but such as truly convertible from Papistrie, with an inestimable comfort to be found in our Church.”

Likewise, Perkins seeks to limit the uses of the private confession: “As for confession of sinne to men, it is not to be used but in two cases. First, when some offence is done to our neighbour: secondly, when ease and comfort is sought for, in trouble of conscience.” Although neither writer completely proscribes the practice of private confession, thereby conforming to the teachings of the Elizabethan Prayer Book, their negative emphasis on the rite contrasts with Spenser’s elevation of its spiritual, psychological, and memorial benefits. Consequently, Spenser’s representation of the forms of confession in *The Faerie Queene* identifies the possible means for repentance present in the Christian tradition and, in so doing, suggests an alternative model to the Calvinistic theology that influenced the early modern English Church.

---

51 William Fulke, *A briefe confutation, of a popish discourse: lately set forth, and presumptuously dedicated to the Queenes most excellent Maiestie: by John Howlet, or some other birde of the night, vnder that name Contayning certaine reasons, why papistes refuse to come to church, which reasons are here inserted and set downe at large, with their seuerall answeres* (London, 1583) N

52 Perkins 38.
Chapter 3

“Try what repentance can”:

*Doctor Faustus, Hamlet, and the Failure of Confession*

After the Thirty-nine Articles abolished the sacrament of penance as instituted by Christ and eliminated the Fourth Lateran Council’s (1215) mandate that the faithful confess annually, the practice of private, auricular confession nearly disappeared from the religious life of post-Reformation England. On the early modern English stage, however, the traditional rite appeared with noticeable regularity. Indeed, Shakespeare represents ritual confession and refers to it more than any other sacrament.¹ Early modern playwrights incorporated the sacrament of confession in almost every genre, ranging from early modern history plays (Peele’s *Edward I* and Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*) to comedies and tragedies set in Catholic countries (Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure, Romeo and Juliet, Much Ado about Nothing*, and Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*) to anti-Catholic polemical dramas (Bale’s *King Johan*, Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*).

Either in terms of England’s religious past or contemporary examples on the Continent, the connection between ritual confession and Roman Catholicism constitutes the common theme in the majority of early modern dramatic representations of the rite. The presence of the sacrament of confession in these plays often signals religious, historical, and social differences between Protestant England and Catholic countries. In *Doctor Faustus* and *Hamlet*, however, Marlowe and Shakespeare depict confessional rites in a Protestant context: Calvinist Wertenberg (Württemberg) in the A-Text of *Doctor Faustus* and Lutheran Wittenberg in the B-Text of *Doctor Faustus* and *Hamlet*. The representation of confession in the plays thus corresponds to developments in penitential practices that occurred during the English Reformation: on the one

hand, a general shift away from sacramental auricular confession toward an unmediated, faith-centered confession to God, but, on the other, a retention of remnants of traditional confessional practices.

In so doing, Marlowe and Shakespeare illustrate that in the absence of confessional rites, an individual must negotiate the Christian demand to repent his or her sins apart from the traditional ritual structure. At the center of this reorientation of confessional practices, then, is the issue of how or, in the case of the Calvinist theology of election and reprobation, if an individual can confess satisfactorily his or her sins and find assurance of forgiveness. In the space of the theater, as Doctor Faustus and Hamlet demonstrate, this issue assumes an additional valence of how individuals and audiences can confirm the authenticity of another’s confession. Recent literary critics have observed the importance of confessional rites in Doctor Faustus and Hamlet, but when discussing their place in these plays in particular and early modern drama in general, they have generally followed Foucault’s connection of the rite to a power relationship between the individual and authority figure and the development of individual subjectivity.²

Foucault’s interpretation of confession is nevertheless historically tendentious because it neither attends to pre-Lateran confessional practices nor acknowledges the reality that most medieval and early modern Christians made poor confessants.³ Given pastoral constraints, such as the annual Lenten rush for confession leading up to Easter, traditional confessional practices offered little opportunity for a sustained imposition of ecclesiastical control over private life or an extended exploration of interiority, except for a small minority of the faithful.⁴ Furthermore,

---

² For a survey of recent criticism on confession in early English drama, see Chapter 1, n7.
⁴ Even in the Catholic Counter-Reformation, regular confession was relegated to the elite; see R. Po-Chia Hsia, The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770, New Approaches to European History 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 199. On pre-Reformation confessional practices in England, see A.E. Nichols, “The Etiquette of Pre-
Foucault’s argument regarding confession points to the practice’s capacity for social discipline and control, but his grafting of the consolatory potential of confession onto a power relationship forecloses the capacity for the penitent’s genuine belief in the assurance of forgiveness.

Against the Foucauldian emphasis on the connection between confession and social control, in this chapter I posit that confessional rituals and language point to the diffuse tension between traditional rituals and inwardness that persisted throughout the early modern period and continued to be enacted on the English stage. Focusing on Judas’ repentance, which stands as the traditional exemplum of insufficient penitence, I first concentrate on medieval and early modern analyses regarding the difficulties of determining confessional speech in order to trace the historical anxieties regarding the limitations of confession. Next, I contend that Doctor Faustus’ failure to make a genuine confession manifests Marlowe’s treatment of the inherent inaccessibility of the inward self and the impossibility of confirming an individual’s spiritual relationship with the divine. Approaching the inscrutability of individual conscience from the outside, I then consider how Hamlet’s problematic assumption of the dual role of avenger and father confessor guides his attempts to negotiate the inherent tensions between inward thoughts and outward actions. Finally, I posit that the failure of confession in Hamlet and Doctor Faustus signals the spiritual crisis caused by the effectual disappearance of traditional penitential rites and the shift toward inward repentance in early modern England.

Ritual Confession and the Problem of Assurance

Confession could be undercut by a lack of genuine repentance, which could result from a range of failings: from insincerity and dissimulation to an absence of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. For medieval writers, Judas represented the most famous failed confession, for

he demonstrated remorse (the Vulgate translates the Greek *metameleia* as *poenitentia*) for his betrayal of Christ, but hanged himself in despair (Matt. 27: 3).\(^5\) St. Thomas Aquinas explains that Judas’ “penitence was not true penitence: however it possessed something of penitence: for penitence must be a mean between hope and fear: Judas indeed had fear and sorrow because he lamented his past sin; but he did not have hope. And such is the penitence of the wicked.”\(^6\)

In the early Tudor period, John Fisher uses Judas’ lack of hope in his exposition of Psalm 38 (1508) as evidence of the necessity of hope in a fruitful confession, arguing that Judas fulfilled the three parts of penance—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—but still remained unrepentant because of despair. As Fisher asks: “I befeche you what more bytter and Shameful kynde of satysfaccyoin might haue fortuned hym? veryly none. And yet bycaufe he wanted hope and defspayred of forgyuenes, all thefe dyde no thynge profyte hym.”\(^7\) Judas’ suicide indicates the necessity of trusting in God, for mercy would have been available even to Christ’s betrayer if only he had turned toward God.

Protestant reformers continued to identify Judas as lacking true repentance, but also connected his failure with criticism of the traditional tripartite division of confession. Most often, they argued that Roman Catholic confession only assured the outward performance of penitence, but failed to verify any inward change of heart or *metanoia*. “An Homilie of Repentaunce and of true reconciliation vnto God” (1562) states:

> Therefore they that teache repentaunce without a liuely faythe in our Sauiour Jesu Christ, doo teache none other, but Judas repentaunce, as all the scholemen do, whiche do onlye allowe these three partes of Repentaunce: the contirion of the


hart, the confession of the mouth, and the satisfaction of the worke. But all of these things we fynde in Judas repentaunce, whiche in outeward appearaunce, did farre excede and passe the repentaunce of Peter.  

The homily instructs that the exteriors should be distrusted, that “liuely faythe” is the true measure for gauging true repentance, and that anyone who teaches “repentance without Christ … doe onlye teache Cains or Judas repentaunce.” In so doing, the homily cautions against what St. Augustine calls the “deceptive resemblance” between a virtuous appearance and inward vice. Like Peter, true penitents “must be cleane altered and chaunged, they must become newe creatures, they must be no more the same that they were before.” Likewise, in 1610 Richard Stock questions, “Others thinke it [repentance] only to bee confession, contrition and satisfaction; but then what should let that Judas repented not;,” and goes on to affirm that genuine repentance requires the change of the “outward and inward man.”

English Protestantism’s distrust of exterior rituals registers, on the one hand, an impulse to cast off remnants of medieval Catholicism and, on the other, a traditional suspicion regarding the possibility of dissimulation in apparently virtuous actions. In both instances, however, Judas’ outward actions, namely, the visible signs of despair and suicide, provide the only means for gauging the sincerity or insincerity of his repentance, even though both stress that exterior signs are inherently unreliable markers of an individual’s inward state. Apart from emphasizing the faults of medieval scholastic teachings on repentance and the primacy of faith in Christ in

---

9 “An Homilie of Repentanne” fol. 282’.
11 “An Homilie of Repentaunce” fol. 282’.

74
Protestant repentance, neither “An Homilie of Repentaunce” nor Stocke offers a more executable strategy for proving another’s faith than pre-Reformation theologians, for both rely on a practical recourse to exteriors. In the process, the problem of Judas’ confession continues in English Protestant thought because the faithful Christian must depend on unreliable signs that defined the fallen apostle’s failed repentance.

Although Judas’ repentance accrued a polemical dimension during the Reformation, early modern Roman Catholic and Protestant writers nevertheless agreed on the central issue: Judas lacked inward repentance despite his “horror of conscience” over betraying Christ, and his suicide indicates the inadequacy of his professed sorrow, confession, and restitution of thirty pieces of silver before the priests. Judas may have “abhorre[d] his sins,” to use the Geneva Bible’s gloss to Matthew 27: 6, but his suicide evinces his inability to amend his life, the conventional proof of an unsuccessful repentance. This interpretation of Judas’ suicide, as Alexander Murray notes, appears as early as William of Nottingham’s fourteenth-century commentary on Judas’ suicide, in which Pope Leo the Great (d. 461) adduces that “the suicide, the end damned all before it.” By this logic of post hoc ergo propter hoc, Judas’ repentance cannot be valid because his suicide proves the invalidity of his repentance. Indeed, Murray notes, “The modern reader may feel it is less that Judas’ hanging made a fitting end to his previous acts than vice versa, that is, that William has coloured his reading of Judas’ betrayal and repentance by the final suicide…. [H]ere, horse and cart are reversed in order to uphold … the curse on self-

13 A similar logic may be observed in Calvin’s understanding of self-examination, see William James Bouwsma, John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 180.
14 William Perkins, Two Treatises: I. Of the nature and practise of repentance. II. Of the combat of the flesh and spirit. (Cambridge, 1593) 67.
16 Murray 2: 367.
murder.”

By attempting to secure an orthodox interpretation of Judas’ suicide, William and other medieval and early modern writers intimate that the inefficacy of repentance can be determined through actions made after a professed repentance—though “how one would know they were not truly contrite [they] do not tell us.”

Like English reformers, William’s interpretation of Judas’ failed confession depends on a distinction of Judas’ intent that presupposes access to his interior conscience through outward actions, though Judas’ struggle with his conscience after his penance in front of the priests is absent in the scriptural accounts (see Matt. 27: 3-8, Acts 1: 16-20).

Following in this tradition, in the morality or proverbial play *All for Money* (1578), Thomas Lupton offers a dramatic rendering of Judas’ suicide that removes the ambiguities surrounding his spiritual fate. Appearing “like a damned soule, in blacke with painted flames of fire,” Judas expresses his wish “that I had had grace to be with the rest in saluation” and exhorts members of the audience to repent their faults because “God will haue mercy.”

In language that anticipates Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Lupton’s Judas explains:

```
I wanted Gods grace and his especiall fauour,  
  Whereby I hanged my selfe and dyed in despaire.  
And nowe the time is past anie mercie to craue,  
  One halfe houre to liue I would desire but to haue.  
Well it will not be, nothing will helpe me nowe,  
  Where euer I do go Damnation doeth me followe.
```  

The theatrical Judas confirms the insincerity of his scriptural repentance through a posthumous confession, validated with the costume of a damned soul and the assurance that eternal damnation now produces sincerity.

---

17 Murray 2: 367.
18 Tentler, *Sin and Confession* 261, referring of Godesclac Rosemontdt’s interpretation of Judas’ repentance in his 1518 *Confessionale*.
19 Thomas Lupton, *A moral and pitieful comedie, intituled, All for money. Plainly representing the maners of men, and fashion of the world noweadayes* (London, 1578) Eii
20 Lupton Eii
By contrast, in *Othello* Shakespeare represents the logical and spiritual dilemma posed by Judas’ repentance in more ambiguous terms. Throughout the play’s final act, Shakespeare closely aligns Othello with Judas: Othello kisses Desdemona, likens himself to “the base Iudean … [who] threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe,” and then kills himself (5.2.347, Folio Text). These connections lead Daniel J. Vitkus to observe: “Like Judas, Othello exhibits a self-destructive remorse (as opposed to true repentance and humble submission to God’s will); like Judas, Othello is damned for his betrayal of innocence.”21 By drawing a parallel between Othello and Judas, then, Shakespeare demonstrates how outward actions take precedence over speech, for, as Gratiano declares after Othello stabs himself, “All that is spoke is marr’d” (5.2.357). Gratiano’s remark prepares the audience not only for interpreting Othello’s suicide as the fitting tragic end to his fall from virtue, but also for providing a means for determining his interior disposition based on outward actions. Just as Othello distrusts Desdemona’s professions of innocence, so the audience casts suspicion on Othello’s self-exculpatory claim that his interlocutors “speak / Of one that lov’d not wisely but too well” (5.2.343-44). Othello’s “Judas repentance” confirms the audience’s expectations regarding tragic convention, but, at the same time, unsettles its confidence in the ability to trust the tragic protagonist’s final confession before death.

Coupled with the tradition of Judas’ repentance, the ambiguities surrounding dramatic representations of confession reinforce early modern concerns over self-doubt and scrupulosity in the penitential process. The Elizabethan Prayer Book acknowledges this difficulty, and recommends that if an individual “cannot quiet his own conscience, but requireth further comfort

---

of counsel,” he or she should seek “some further comfort or counsel” in private confession.\(^{22}\)

Richard Hooker similarly observes,

> Now there are on the contrarie side others, whoe doubting not of Gods mercie toward all that perfectly repent, remains notwithstanding scrupulous, and troubled with continued feare, least defects of their owne repentance bee a barre against them. These cast themselves first into verie great and peradventure needlesse agonies through misconstruction of things spoaken, about proportioning our greifes to our sinnes: for which they never thinck they have wept and mourned enough.\(^{23}\)

With the English Church’s move away from private, auricular confession, however, self-examination became in practice the usual method for discovering and confessing sins and achieving reconciliation with God. Alan Sinfield argues that this change increased, rather than diminished, anxiety in the faithful: “Protestant self-examination is in a way confession, but it shifts the whole business inside the consciousness…. This made the whole process more manipulable, for since there was no external resistance there could be no external reassurance.”\(^{24}\)

This description creates the impression that Luther’s famous, though atypical, anxieties surrounding the sacrament of penance extended into and increased in the practice of private introspection.\(^{25}\) Yet Sinfield’s observation regarding the transformation of confession rightly advances the degree to which the practice became internalized and situated within individual consciences. William Perkins’ development of a form of English Protestant casuistry, which

---


emphasized the laity’s self-application of cases of conscience rather than priestly administration, provides further evidence for this confessional shift.  

The Protestant internalization of confession reflects the Christian tradition’s privileging of interiority rather than exteriority in matters of faith because of the potential for outward dissimulation that originates as early as Christ’s warning against the “hypocrisie and iniquitie” of the Scribes and Pharisees, whose virtues exist only in outward appearance (Matt. 23: 28). This conception of interiority, particularly in terms of conscience and repentance, follows the orthodox interpretation regarding the inscrutability of the divine will. To presume the salvation or damnation of another would impinge on God’s special providence and mercy. Nathaniel Woodes’ Conflict of Conscience (1581), a dramatic rendering of the spiritual struggle and mysterious death of the Italian lawyer Francis Spira (Francesco Spiera) in 1548, contains variant conclusions that advance the uncertainty surrounding Spira’s famous renunciation of Protestantism: one in which the protagonist is damned, the other in which he is granted forgiveness. In the case of the controversial death of Spira, however, early modern writers argued for and against his damnation, despite the accepted theological teaching regarding the impossibility of knowing the mind of God. These attempts to interpret Spira’s death point to early modern assumptions regarding the connection between interiority and exteriority.

Although in Acts and Monuments John Foxe admits in the case of Sir James Hale, a Protestant who committed suicide, that “certain divines” doubted “whether he were reprobate or saved,”

---

Foxe nevertheless readily attributes signs of grace to the martyrdoms of Thomas Cranmer and other Protestants and reprobation to the deaths of Roman Catholics. In the search for self-assurance and assurance of another’s spiritual state, the orthodox reservation of determining inward faith became secondary to practical theological, social, and political concerns.

The emphasis during the early modern period on confessions and recantations during public executions further signals the functional importance of repentance and confession. Ecclesiastical and magisterial recourse to torture in order to secure confessions offers one example of the putative authority granted to confession. Cranmer’s initial recantation to the Marian authorities and his subsequent disavowal of it on the day of his execution stand as a prominent example for demonstrating not only the imputed and expected veracity of confession, but also the contested nature of its reception. The stakes for both Catholics and Protestants were high: the Marian authorities celebrated Cranmer’s rejection of Protestantism and return to Catholicism as a blow against the Protestant cause in England; Protestants trumpeted his actions during his final day as evidence of his adherence to the true faith. However, when confronted by Fray Juan de Villagarcia, Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford and the official who succeeded in obtaining Cranmer’s recantation, that he received the sacrament of penance before

---

31 On the connection between confession and torture, see Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 59. On early modern subjectivity and torture, see Elizabeth Hanson, Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 24-54. Early modern writers noted the limitations of confession under torture; see Donne’s Fourteenth Meditation in Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions.
his execution, Cranmer asks: “What if the confession is no good?”33 In so doing, Cranmer questions the ability of the authorities to access his interiority and depends instead on his actions during his death as the finis coronat opus.34 Catholic and Protestant accounts of his death, Bishop Cranmer’s Recantacyons (attributed to Nicholas Harpsfield, c. 1556) and John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments (1563, reprinted in 1570, 1576, 1583), are surprisingly similar in describing the events of his death, but they differ widely in their interpretations.35 For Catholics, Cranmer relapsed into Protestant heresy; for Protestants, he died a martyr of the true faith. Undergirding each position is the conviction that Cranmer’s true beliefs and, by extension, the true Christian faith can be adduced from his final confession.36 The staging and representation of scaffold confessions in turn signals a more generalized confessional phenomenon in early modern England: the semiotic incompleteness of confession necessitates some form of a public account or, in Hamlet’s terms, “story” (5.2.354) to situate and interpret interior beliefs and motivations.37

Instead of remaining hidden in the conscience, then, confession in early modern England functioned as an inward spiritual change that invited a social component to evince its authenticity in order to satisfy both the individual and the community of his or her spiritual state. The assurance of an effective confession thus contains two performances: an inward spiritual

---

35 On confession in Foxe as a “privileged kind of discourse” that reveals the conscience, see Marsha S. Robinson, Writing the Reformation: Actes and Monuments and the Jacobean History Play (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) 62.
performance accessible only to the individual and God, and an outward social performance intended to reassure both the individual and others in order to facilitate a reintegration of the penitent into the community.  

The scriptural account of Christ’s healing of the leper advances the social performance of confession by concluding with Christ’s command: “Go, sayeth he, and shew thy selfe to the Priest, and offer for thy clensing, as Moses hath commanded, for a witness vnto them” (Luke 5: 14). In the medieval administration of confession, penitents could ideally find inward assurance of the effectiveness of their spiritual performance of confession in its ritual form, especially through the priest’s speaking of the rite of absolution and laying on of hands, and then demonstrate their repentance through the social performance of penance or satisfaction.  

The English Reformation’s reorientation of traditional penitential practice resulted in a shift from private to public ritual. As such, in the early modern Church of England, assurance of sins came to be situated in the general absolution given during the liturgy, except in special cases of scrupulosity or doubt.

Confession thus became an intensely personal spiritual performance because, under ordinary circumstances, only the individual rather than a confessor needed to determine whether or not his or her inward penitence was authentic. Hence Perkins’ claim that “it is a grace peculiar to the man Elect, to trie himselfe whether he be in the state of grace or not” indicates that self-assurance begins and concludes in the individual conscience. However, confession continued to have a socially performative dimension because it depended on an individual’s

---

38 On amendment of life being a requirement of a good confession in the late medieval period, see Tentler, Sin and Confession 120-23, and 132.  
41 William Perkins, A treatise tending vnto a declaration whether a man be in the estate of damnation or in the estate of grace (London, 1590) A3”, the original is printed in italics.
participation in common worship and reception of the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{42} The required ritual and social performance of confession in the Church of England indicates the continuities between traditional and reformed penitential practices. Private confession and the office of father confessor were anachronisms that became more diffused and “internalised fully” by the middle of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{43} At the turn of the seventeenth century, however, the reemergence of debates surrounding their place in the Established Church and their ongoing presence on the stage indicates that they remained in transition. In the muddied theological world of \textit{Doctor Faustus} and \textit{Hamlet}, Marlowe and Shakespeare offer a sustained engagement with these shifts in penitential practices.

\textbf{Confession and Anti-Confession in \textit{Doctor Faustus}}

Doctor Faustus’ penitential false starts and unsatisfactory declarations of repentance evoke the problem of assurance and the tradition of Judas’ failed confession. Marlowe never explicitly refers to Judas in the tragedy, but he nevertheless draws upon the tradition of Judas’ inadequate repentance to frame his treatment of confession. In the \textit{English Faust Book} (1592), P.F., the anonymous English translator, writes: “Doctor Faustus was ever pondering with himself how he might get loose from so damnable an end as he had given himself unto, both body and soul; but his repentance was like to that of Cain and Judas, he thought his sins greater than God could forgive.”\textsuperscript{44} In their edition of \textit{Doctor Faustus}, David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen similarly interpret Faustus’ relationship to Judas in terms of despair: “In despairing, Faustus re-enacts the crime of Judas, who sinned like many a frail mortal in selling Christ but then refused to accept that he could be pardoned for his crime. And if Judas’ crime of selling the Lord was forgiveable,

\textsuperscript{42} The Prayer Book instructs ministers to exhort the congregation to receive communion and thereby reinforces the ecclesiastical expectation of receiving communion; see \textit{The booke of common praiyer} Mvii’.

\textsuperscript{43} Jeremy Tambling, \textit{Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject} (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) 92.

then Faustus’s must be also.” Yet Marlowe, I posit, does not draw from the tradition of Judas’ failed repentance simply to position Faustus as an orthodox exemplum of despair that results from sinning against the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, at the heart of the matter in both the A-Text (1604) and the B-Text (1616) is Marlowe’s staging of the threat posed by Judas’ repentance—the encroachment of doubt into confession—in a distinctly Reformation context.

Repentance and damnation comprise the central theological themes of both versions of Doctor Faustus. The tragedy’s theological richness has led literary critics to chart the doctrinal underpinnings of Faustus’ attempt at repentance. Concentrating on Marlowe’s treatment of grace and free will, critics have posited a range of theological parallels, including Puritan, moderate Calvinist, anti-Calvinist, or a combination of beliefs. Recently, critics commonly argue that the A- and B-Texts of Doctor Faustus differ in their theological outlooks and, as Leah Marcus states, “carry different ideological freight.” The difficulty in interpreting with precision the ideological freight of a particular text lies in Marlowe and his subsequent revisers’ conspicuous imprecision. The clearest example of this occurs during the exorcism scene in the Pope’s chambers. Mephistopheles and Faustus’ reference to “bell, book, and candle” (3.2.82-83), and the Friars’ repetition of “Maledicat Dominus!” (3.2.91-97) in their dirge confuse “the office of excommunication … with that of exorcism.” And Faustus’ description of the parts of the confessional rite—“Contrition, prayer, repentance—what of them?”—evokes the traditional

45 Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus: A- and B-Texts, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993) 20. Subsequent quotations from Doctor Faustus are taken from this edition and noted parenthetically. Passages in which the A- and B-Text differ will be accordingly noted.


48 Rasmussen and Bevington 166.
tripartite division of the sacrament of penance, but substitutes “prayer” for confession and “repentance” for satisfaction. These substitutions point to the play’s (and audience’s) Protestant context but do not correspond to penitential practices either in England or other European countries—either in evangelical Wittenberg or reformed Wertenberg. Instead of aligning the tragedy along doctrinal or ideological lines, of offering either an orthodox or subversive reading of the tragedy, I am more interested in following what Edward A. Snow calls the “phenomenological contours of the world of the play” to examine the traceable effects of Marlowe’s representation of repentance. From this perspective, the question of whether or not Faustus will or can confess and be redeemed after abjuring God and entering into an infernal pact with Lucifer becomes not so much a matter of the tragedy’s affinities with a particular theology’s understanding of penitence, but of the dramatic repercussions stemming from the more diffuse and problematic nature of confession in the play and early modern English culture. In short, regardless of the Lutheran or Calvinistic themes present, Marlowe presents Faustus as believing that he can confess his sins and, as such, the doctor repeatedly attempts to repent.

Throughout Faustus, heavenly as well as demonic figures advertise forms of confession as the unique means for manifesting Faustus’ interior disposition to others, himself, and God. On the one side, the Good Angel identifies the traditional form of penitence as the “means to bring [one] unto heaven” (2.1.16). More specifically, the Old Man states that confession is the surest way to demonstrate repentance and obtain forgiveness:

    I see an angel hovers o’er thy head,
    And with a vial full of precious grace
    Offers to pour the same into thy soul.
    Then call for mercy and avoid despair.

49 “An Homilie of Repentaunce,” for instance, outlines four parts of repentance—contrition of the heart, unfeigned confession, faith, and amendment of life (fol. 281v–88r).
Even Faustus gestures toward the effectiveness of Christian confession when he compares himself to the Good Thief: “Tush! Christ did call the thief upon the cross” (4.1.143). On the other side, Faustus’ blasphemies function as what could be termed anti-confessions, which express his allegiance to hell. These anti-confessions simultaneously reveal his rejection of Christianity and his desire for demonic power. Consequently, Faustus’ dismissal of Christian penitence, “Contrition, prayer, repentance—what of them?,” indicates the dual-trajectory of his blasphemous utterances: they evacuate Christian penitential practices of their efficacy, reducing it, like marriage in Mephistopheles’ opinion, to a “ceremonial toy” (2.1.154-5). In the process, Faustus aligns his beliefs with the rhetoric of the Evil Angel, who describes parts of penance as “illusions, fruits of lunacy, / That makes men foolish that do trust [B-Text, “use”] them most” (2.1.18-19). Faustus’ anti-confessions reinforce his faith in the powers conferred upon him by Lucifer to satisfy his desires, even though he continues to look toward the potency of Christian repentance throughout the tragedy. Christian confession and demonic anti-confession demonstrate the assumed power of confessional speech operating in the world of the tragedy.

Confession and anti-confession occupy such an important place for Faustus because they both promise resolution. More than any other desire, Faustus longs for resolution and pursues its various forms—ravishment, consummation, finality. In the opening soliloquy, Faustus commands himself, “Settle thy studies, Faustus, and begin / To sound the depth of that thou wilt profess” (1.1.1-2). But Faustus’ first lines set forth the conflicting impulse that he never overcomes: the desire to “settle” his studies at the apparent end of his education inevitably entails that he “begin” anew his search for a definitive profession. Faustus’ display of his consumptive acquisition of knowledge throughout the opening soliloquy reveals that his desire to
“level at the end of every art” carries with it the destructive implication that his “leveling” will eviscerate the object of study and necessitate new learning (1.1.4).

After bidding “adieu” (1.1.50) to the limited arts of logic, medicine, law, and divinity, Faustus turns to necromancy to “[r]esolve me of all ambiguities” (1.1.82) and to satiate his desire to have his “joys in full possession” (1.1.154). For Faustus, necromancy promises complete resolution because he believes that it possesses the capacity of circumscribing all known arts. In a self-reflexive revision of the Augustinian concept of rest, “All things that move between the quiet poles / Shall be at my command,” Faustus projects himself into an active space beyond the “quiet poles” of the world—a space in which he will be detached from the mutable world even as he controls it (1.1.58-59). Faustus is thus “resolute” (1.1.37) to become a “conjurer laureate” because, unlike other professions, necromancy offers unlimited, perpetually satisfying power to contain the object of desire (1.3.33). Necromancy possesses this power by collapsing the distinction between intentionality and speech. In other words, conjurations resolve all ambiguities by effecting what they signify. Hence Faustus’ claim that “there’s virtue in my heavenly words” (1.3.28) and his warning to the scholars: “Be silent then, for danger is in words” (5.1.25). Faustus’ attraction to necromancy also contains an erotic dimension that is closely connected with resolution. His exclamation, “’Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me” (1.1.112), signifies a form of sexual consummation that carries with it an additional self-reflexive, potentially onanistic dimension of conjuration: a magician’s conjurations realize

51 Faustus' desire for resolution intersects with his identity. As Karen Cunningham, “Renaissance Execution and Marlovian Elocution: The Drama of Death,” PMLA 105 (1990), writes: “Despite Faustus’ profound desire to be ‘resolved of all ambiguities,’ Marlowe makes it quite clear that, in the theater, to be without ambiguity is not to be” (216). This usage of resolve recalls Meander’s description of Tamburlaine: “He dares so doubtlessly resolve of rule / And by profession be ambitious” (1 Tam. 2.6.13-14).

52 On Faustus’ desire to contain his desires, see Patrick Cheney, Marlowe’s Counterfeit Profession: Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997) 208.
magic’s potential for ravishment.53 For Faustus, intellectual, spiritual, and sexual resolution begins and concludes with necromantic speech.

The signing of the contract with Mephistopheles functions as the clearest example of Faustus’ faith in his ability to achieve resolution. In this much discussed parody of the Eucharist and the Crucifixion, Faustus inverts Christ’s final words on the Cross, “Consummatum est. / This bill is ended,” in an attempt to fix himself spiritually (2.1.73).54 This inversion of the most profound of Christian mysteries, notes Stephen Greenblatt, “is the culmination of Faustus’ fantasies of making an end, and hence a suicide that demonically parodies Christ’s self-sacrifice. But in the Gospel … the words are a true end; they are spoken at the moment of fulfillment and death. In Doctor Faustus they are rather a beginning, spoken at the moment Faustus is embarking on his bargain.”55 Faustus intends the contract to liberate him from mutability for it allows him to assume the spiritual status of the fallen angels, who have chosen absolutely to reject God and thereby achieve final, demonic resolution.

Yet fissures appear in Faustus’ trust of the ability of necromantic speech to accomplish his desired ends. He intends to “dominate through enclosure” by means of his “conjuring circle,” but intimates his suspicions about its effectiveness when he reassures himself, “[f]ear not, Faustus, but be resolute, / And try the uttermost magic can perform” (1.3.14-15).56 Moreover, during the Latin incantation Faustus reiterates these doubts by asking: “Quid tu moraris” (“Why do you delay?”) (1.3.20). The appearance of Mephistopheles and his obedience in dressing as a Franciscan friar momentarily satisfy Faustus’ perception of the abilities of magic; he attributes

54 On Faustus as an inverted Christ figure, see Robert Ornstein, “Marlowe and God: The Tragic Theology of Dr. Faustus,” PMLA 83 (1968): 1384.
Mephistopheles’ “obedience and humility” to “the force of magic and my spells” (1.3.30).

Significantly, Mephistopheles’ assumption of the role of a Franciscan, a religious order traditionally associated since its inception in the medieval period with administering the sacrament of penance, reinforces the confessional theme of the tragedy. Faustus’ demands of Mephistopheles become anti-confessional interchanges that aim at resolution through forms of sin rather than Christian repentance.

Yet Faustus’ first exchange with Mephistopheles further reveals that his desire for power and resolution remains unfulfilled and, in turn, intimates the limitations of magic:

*Faustus.* Did not my conjuring speeches raise you? Speak.
*Mephistopheles.* That was the cause, but yet per accidens.

Therefore, the shortest cut for conjuring
Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity
And pray devoutly to the prince of hell.

(1.3.46-55)

Mephistopheles, if he may be considered trustworthy in this instance, advances that the “uttermost magic” possesses no innate power in controlling spirits and that blasphemy surpasses necromancy in attracting spirits. In so doing, the demon indicates, as D.J. Palmer observes, the “sense of emptiness of Faustus’ ambitions,” deflating magic of its ability to control others.57 In identifying necromancy as a form of blasphemy, moreover, Mephistopheles positions conjuration merely as a form of blasphemy, an inverted confession to Lucifer, which signifies the power not of the magician, but of Lucifer and his demons. The juxtaposition of Faustus’ summoning of Mephistopheles with that of Robin and Rafe, who prove equally successful in attracting Mephistopheles through their blasphemous, if nonsensical, conjurations, further demonstrates the

---

limitations of the supposedly unlimited art of magic. Faustus becomes not simply a “conjurer laureate,” but a confessant dependant on the will of Mephistopheles and Lucifer.

Mephistoephes’ description of hell further undercuts Faustus’ confidence in the possibility of achieving resolution through the dark arts by signaling the impossibility of exercising complete control outside of heaven. As Mephistoephes explains, hell is defined in negative opposition to heaven:

Faustus. Where are you damned?
Mephistoephes. In hell.
Faustus. How comes it then that thou art out of hell?
Mephistoephes. Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

Think’st thou that I, who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal joys of heaven
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
In being deprived of everlasting bliss?

(1.3.75-82)

Marlowe draws this presentation of hell as a psychological state in part from Aquinas, who concludes that “it must be said that although the demons are not actually bound within the fire of hell while they are in this dark atmosphere, nevertheless, their punishment is not lessened, because they know that such confinement is their due. Hence it is said in a Gloss upon Ja[mes] iii. 6: *They carry the fire of hell with them wherever they go.*”58 Yet the closest contemporary analogue to Marlowe’s treatment on the nature of hell occurs in Calvin’s commentary on the Epistle of John 1: 9—“If we acknowledge our sinnes, he is a faithful and iust, to forgiue vs our sinnes, & to clense vs from all vnrightousnes.” Calvin writes: “It is very important to be quite sure that when we have sinned there is a reconciliation with God ready and prepared for us.

Otherwise we shall always carry hell about within us. Few consider how miserable and unhappy is a wavering conscience. But in fact, hell reigns where there is no peace with God.59 Following Aquinas and Calvin, then, Marlowe defines hell as a space of internal spiritual restlessness and irresolution. Faustus, however, responds to Mephistopheles’ description of the deprivations of hell not only by proclaiming with bravado his “manly fortitude” (1.3.87), which places him above the passions, but also by reiterating his faith in Lucifer’s power: “Had I as many souls as there be stars, / I’d give them all for Mephistopheles” (1.3.104-5). Faustus thereby attempts to realize his unlimited desires through the simultaneous projection of, on the one hand, his physical wholeness and, on the other, the imagined boundlessness of his interiority. Faustus continues to identify himself as the site of resolution. He proclaims that “I have obtained what I desire,” but the use of the perfect tense signals the disjunction between his perception and reality: instead of having found satisfaction through the acquisition of power over Mephistopheles, he has scaled back his desires and momentarily settled for the limited success of the necromantic arts (1.3.114). By returning to his books of necromancy to “live in speculation of this art / Till Mephistopheles return again,” Faustus intimates to himself that he remains unconsummated though still faithful to the power of magic (1.3.115-16).

Yet Faustus indicates his internal dissatisfaction when he first considers repenting. To shore himself up against backsliding, he focuses on his resolve: “Now go not backward. No, Faustus, be resolute” (2.1.6). Furthermore, he situates himself as the beginning and end of his desires: “The god thou servest is thine own appetite, / Wherein is fixed the love of Beelzebub” (2.1.10-11). Faustus identifies Beelzebub as the recipient of his offering of “the lukewarm blood

---

of new-born babes,” but in effect situates his own appetite as the end of this demonic piety (2.1.14). In so doing, he radically inverts the Christian understanding of Christ as the beginning and end of all things. Despite these attempts to reassert unequivocal resolution, however, Faustus’ thoughts of repentance, which Marlowe dramatizes in the exterior voice that “soundeth in Faustus’ ears: / ‘Abjure this magic, turn to God again!,’” demonstrate this divided self (2.1.5-6). This interior division intensifies Faustus’ need for certainty of resolution and leads him to vacillate between thoughts of repentance and the fruits of sin. He confesses to God and imagines ever more vivid images of Christ’s forgiveness. At the same time, however, he increasingly places greater confidence in Mephistopheles and Lucifer for resolution, and his anti-confessions assume a frenetic energy as the play progresses. In the second scene with the Good Angel and the Bad Angel, for instance, Faustus follows the encouragement of the Good Angel and repents: “Ah Christ, my Savior, / Seek to save distressed Faustus’ soul” (2.3.82-83). Faustus appears to satisfy the Good Angel’s promise, “Never too late, if Faustus can repent,” but he nevertheless fails to achieve reconciliation with Christ because Lucifer succeeds in directing his thoughts away from God and back toward his appetite (2.3.79).60 Indeed, after witnessing the pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins, Faustus announces his desire to satisfy himself: “O, this feeds my soul!” (2.3.166).

Like Judas’ repentance, then, the failure of Faustus’ confession is confirmed by his subsequent behavior. Yet Faustus exhibits the failure of his penitence not through action, but rather through further expressions of interior desires and inclinations. Marlowe indicates that confession and anti-confession only demonstrate the intentionality, however fleeting, of Faustus’ interior disposition rather than the action of his will. The underlying failure of confession recurs

---

60 In the B-Text, however, the Good Angel deserts Faustus an hour before his death (B-Text, 5.2.112-20), thereby introducing an internal contradiction in the text’s presentation of the theology of repentance. Yet this contradiction suggests that the possibility for repentance remains fluid rather than fixed in the world of the play.
in Faustus’ expressed confidence in Lucifer’s ability to fulfill his desires. The pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins effects no more resolution for Faustus than his failed confession, but, like the other diversions that occupy the middle of the play, can only create a limited, transitory sense of satisfaction. From an orthodox Christian perspective, Faustus’ lack of satisfaction results from the intrinsic incompleteness of earthly goods and sinful desires. In other words, Faustus’ Christian confessions and demonic anti-confessions have identical effects. Just as disputing with Mephistopheles or witnessing of the pageant or embracing Helen offers Faustus temporary fulfillment, thoughts of Christ forgiving the thief upon the cross allow him to “[c]onfound these passions with a quiet sleep” after eight nights of insomnia (4.1.142). In *Doctor Faustus*, then, Marlowe depicts confessional speech, for all its expected potential for effecting resolution, as essentially parallel to Faustus’ academic and carnal ambitions.

Yet Faustus never wavers in his confidence in the power of confessional utterances. More than any other lines in the tragedy, Faustus’ admission, “I do repent and yet I do despair / Hell strives with grace for conquest in my breast,” demonstrates how his faith in confessional speech produces contrary movements within his interiority (5.1.64-65). Equally assured of the veracity of his repentance as well as his despair, he paradoxically affirms the presence of these mutually exclusive spiritual states. But this self-contradictory statement signals the instability of the authenticity of confessional speech.

In the final scenes of the tragedy, Marlowe stages Faustus’ failure of confessional speech by rapidly juxtaposing his penitential impulses with thoughts of desperation. Marlowe underscores the limitations of Faustus’ confessions by representing them as utterances that question spiritual disposition as much as they signify interior change. The more faith Faustus places in confession and the more penitential gestures he makes, such as those to the Old Man,
the scholars, and during his final soliloquy, the more they lose their efficacy. Concurrently, his turnings toward Lucifer and Mephistopheles fail to communicate any genuine allegiance toward hell. Faustus’ conflicted confessions reveal that the only resolution available to him dissipates with the end of each utterance. He pleads for more time to “breathe a while” because it is only in the act of confessing that Faustus achieves momentary resolution (5.2.121). And Faustus’ final confession, “Come not, Lucifer! / I’ll burn my books. Ah, Mephistopheles,” stands as the last testament to the impotency of his fractured interiority (5.2.122-23). His promise to abjure his magic becomes simply another attempt to attain consummation—one that remains unrealized, bound by the limitations of his confessional speech. In contrast, the audience achieves resolution through the finality of the chorus’ moral, “Faustus is gone” (Epilogue 4), as does the reader through the closing tag: “Terminat hora diem; terminat Author opus” (“The hour ends the day: the author ends the work”). Yet Marlowe’s treatment of Faustus’ failed confessions indicates that this resolution applies only to Faustus’ corporeality, by its absence in the A-Text and dismemberment in the B-Text, rather than his interiority. In the end, Faustus’ spiritual status and his interior disposition remain beyond his confessions.

**Hamlet, Confession, and the Extraction of Interiority**

Whereas in *Doctor Faustus* Marlowe stages the failure of confession to communicate interiority and achieve resolution, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare approaches confession’s limitations and instabilities from without through the Prince’s attempts to penetrate the consciences of others. In other words, Faustus becomes a failed confessant incapable of finding inward assurance of his spiritual state, while Hamlet assumes the problematic role of a father confessor determined to gain access to the interiority of others even while occluding his own.
Beginning as early as A.C. Bradley, literary critics have long recognized the connection between Hamlet and a confessor. In his discussion of Hamlet’s exhortations of Gertrude to repent her sins, Bradley concludes, “No father-confessor could be more selflessly set upon his end of redeeming a fellow-creature from degradation, more stern or pitiless in denouncing the sin, or more eager to welcome the first token of repentance.” Subsequent literary scholars have posited that Hamlet takes on the role of a “Black Priest,” a “priest/king,” and a “priest manqué.” And in his film adaptation of Hamlet (1996), Kenneth Branagh underscores the confessional themes present in the play by placing two scenes in a confessional box. In the first scene, Polonius interrogates Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet—an interaction that reinforces the common association of the confessional with an obsession over female sexuality. In the second scene, Hamlet listens to Claudius’ penitential prayer and becomes, as Mark Thornton Burnett notes, “an unpunctual but unconsoling father confessor.”

These critical interpretations of Hamlet as a father confessor call attention to another more conspicuous and charged religious anachronism present in Shakespeare’s play. More specifically, the anachronistic rite of private or auricular confession to a priest permeates Hamlet even though the rite effectively disappeared in early modern England. Like the connection of the Ghost with the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, Shakespeare’s concentration on private confession signals a type of doctrinal simultaneity in which vestiges of the traditional religion coexist, trouble, and even threaten to undermine the current belief system.

Shakespeare represents the transitional state of ritual confession through the Ghost’s contradictory positions on the rite. At the opening of the play, the Ghost avers that he would not suffer supernatural torments in his “prison-house” if his last rites, including final confession (i.e., “disappointed”), could have been completed satisfactorily:

> Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
> Unhousel’d, disappointed, unanel’d,
> No reck’ning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head.\(^{64}\)

\(^{(1.5.76-79)}\)

These remarks signal the Ghost’s faith in the efficacy of the traditional sacramental system.\(^{65}\) Yet in *Hamlet* only vestiges of this system remain, and they are always relegated to the background, to a state of unrealized possibility. Likewise, in Act 5 the Doctor of Divinity implies the efficacy of ritual through his prohibition of singing a “requiem” at Ophelia’s funeral, lest “[w]e should profane the service of the dead,” but the results of the ritual are left to speculation (5.1.229-30). In addition, the Ghost intimates that a transformation of confession has occurred when he commands Hamlet to “[l]eave her [Gertrude] to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (1.5.86-88). Instead of emphasizing penitential rituals, the Ghost elevates unmediated, interior repentance and implicitly repudiates the rituals that he considered necessary for his salvation. The Ghost holds these contradictory positions in tension without ever reconciling them. This suspension indicates that Shakespeare’s Denmark experiences a type of doctrinal simultaneity in which competing theological beliefs coexist.

Like his father, Hamlet reveals a striking degree of doctrinal heterogeneity. As a student at the University of Wittenberg, he is closely connected with the Lutheran rejection of the

\(^{64}\) On the connection between “disappointed” and sacramental confession, see Jenkins 200.

\(^{65}\) For a discussion the Ghost’s faith in the Catholic sacrament of extreme unction, a traditional rite that contains sacramental absolution, see Andrew Gurr, *Hamlet and the Distracted Globe* (Sussex: Sussex UP, 1978) 71.
dominical status of the sacrament of penance. For Roland Mushat Frye, “The Prince ‘smites’ his mother in the ways that might be expected of one who was educated at Wittenberg,” that is, as part of the Protestant understanding of the “priesthood of all believers.” Yet Hamlet’s emphasis on auricular confession contradicts the Reformation context of the play. Even though Hamlet reveals a general Christian desire to bring his mother to repentance, I would argue that he assumes the role of father confessor intent on extracting the consciences of others in order to assure himself not only of their guilt or innocence, but also to achieve support his role as avenger. Hamlet’s adoption of the role of father confessor becomes a subversive action that realizes all of the Protestant concerns about Roman Catholic intrusions of confessors into individual consciences and the arcana imperii of royal authority, demonstrated with striking effect in Hamlet’s eavesdropping on Claudius’ private confession to God. At the same time, this role establishes a means to negotiate the prison of Denmark. Father confessor and avenger merge into mutually constitutive roles that allow Hamlet to penetrate through the network of secrets, lies, and half-truths that circulate in Claudius’ court. And cross-fertilization occurs between these roles, for the avenger’s aim to fulfill the Ghost’s “dread command” collapses into the confessor’s exercise of binding and loosing of sins (3.4.109). For Hamlet, the scriptural validation of priestly authority over the spiritual states of others to which he lays claim throughout the play becomes radically literalized and, in the process, destabilized when yoked into the service of revenge.

Hamlet’s fulfillment of his dual role as father confessor and avenger depends on the occlusion of his own interiority until he can successfully extract the conscience of others. When discussing his mournful appearance and behavior with Gertrude, he states:

```
Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc’d breath
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and suits of woe.
```

(1.2.76-86)

Hamlet’s distinction between outward seeming (“trappings and suits of woe”) and inward being (“within which passes show”) signals the limitations of external appearances to convey interior thoughts and thereby injects suspicion into the direct correspondence between the visible signs and interior disposition. The “inky cloak” reflects Hamlet’s internal state and suggests a form of inexpressible sadness over his father’s death, but the limitations of these outward appearances to “denote me truly” evinces the existence of a disjunction between them. Put differently, Hamlet intimates that only he possesses access to the fullness of his interiority, and suggests that, though remaining “unspeakable” in its entirety, it can be willfully revealed or concealed.\(^68\) The language of the theater accordingly indicates the artificiality and limitations of that which can be shown and Hamlet’s presumption of the capacity to manipulate those “actions that a man might play.” His revelation to Horatio and Marcellus that he intends to “put an antic disposition on” manifests his confidence in being able to manipulate exteriors and mask his true motives (1.5.180).

Hamlet’s insistence that his companions not reveal “aught of me” implies that he considers the

---

\(^68\) Maus 1.
only possibility for revealing the inauthentic nature of his madness comes from without
(1.5.187). For Hamlet, his “mind’s eye” functions as an interior space over which he believes
that he exercises dominion and controls access (1.2.185). Nevertheless, at the conclusion of his
first soliloquy, “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue,” Hamlet reveals that inward and
outward exist in a tension in which the heart desires to be revealed, but must be held in check by
the tongue (1.2.158). Significantly, Hamlet most frequently identifies this resistant, sometimes
volatile interiority with conscience, and employs the term not only to refer to a set of divine
moral imperatives (as in the case with the prohibition against suicide), but also to function as a
semiotic passkey to that within which passes show.

Through speech as well as voluntary and involuntary actions, Hamlet affirms that the
consciences of others can be accessible if properly interpreted, extracted, or triggered. In his
initial encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he declares his suspicions about friendship
being the purpose of their visit: “Anything but to th’ purpose. You were sent for, and there is a
kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour. I know
that the good King and Queen have sent for you” (2.2.278-81). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s
“guileless revelation of some occulted guilt” contrasts them with Hamlet’s theatricality, but it
also reveals Hamlet’s assurance in his abilities to bridge the divide between non-verbal
confession and internal motivations. He further displays this assurance by supplying the reason
for which his childhood companions were summoned, once Guildenstern confesses, “My lord,
we were sent for” (2.2.292). Hamlet’s behavior during this encounter implies that he

69 This tension between Hamlet’s inward feelings and speech is not registered in the First Folio’s version of
Hamlet’s first speech which Jenkins adopts in his conflated text. Instead of the Folio’s reading of “good mother,” the
Second Quarto reads “coold mother” and thereby suggests that Hamlet struggles to contain his true feelings
regarding her marriage with Claudius (1.2.76).
70 Paul A. Kottman, “The Limits of Mimesis: Risking Confession in Shakespeare’s Hamlet,” Shakespeare Studies
(Japan) 42 (2004): 57.
distinguishes his own inwardness from non-theatrical individuals who cannot hide their consciences. Indeed, he confronts Guildenstern with attempting to “pluck out the heart of [his] mystery” and then stymies any efforts to gain access into his interiority: “Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me” (3.2.356-63). Hamlet is aware of Claudius and others’ capacity for dissimulation, explaining “one may smile, and smile, and be a villain—/ At least I am sure that it may be so in Denmark,” but he identifies himself as the only one capable of preventing an unwanted revelation of his true state (1.5.108-9). Hamlet remains confident that even Claudius’ interiority can be extracted once the appropriate external device triggers a verbal or non-verbal confession. He accordingly designs The Mousetrap to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.601) and declares that his uncle’s conscience will be outwardly detectable: “I’ll observe his looks; / I’ll tent him to the quick. If a do blench, / I know my course” (2.2.592-94).

Hamlet does not act alone in this conviction, for Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern attempt to determine the motives for Hamlet’s antic disposition. Claudius may initially gesture toward the direct correspondence between inward and outward by declaring that “Hamlet’s transformation” indicates that “nor th’ exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was” (2.2.5-7). But his employment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to discover “aught to us unknown” about Hamlet’s antic behavior and belief that it may be “open’d” displays his suspicions regarding the potential for separating inward motives and outward appearance (2.2.17-18). In response to Claudius’ frustration over their failure to determine the reason for Hamlet’s aberrant behavior, moreover, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern similarly reply:

*Ros.* He does confess he feels himself distracted,
  But from what cause a will by no means speak.
*Guil.* Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
  But with a crafty madness keeps aloof
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

(3.1.5-10)

The description of Hamlet’s disposition as “crafty madness” suggests Guildenstern’s perception of what Hamlet later reveals to Gertrude in the closet scene, that is, “I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft” (3.4.189-90). By developing Rosencrantz’s language of confession, Guildenstern indicates his awareness that present beneath Hamlet’s initial confession of being distracted is a “true state” that could be uncovered if he could penetrate through external posturing. Even though Hamlet claims that his interiority cannot be expressed or accessed beneath its seeming exterior, his reference to its very existence in the opening act presupposes the potential for discovery and propels attempts to uncover the secrets that continually circulate throughout Claudius’ Denmark.  

Hamlet, however, stands apart in the play because he alone desires to uncover and judge the conscience of others. Claudius may obsess over discovering the cause of Hamlet’s antic disposition, but his concerns are grounded in self-interested, political pragmatism and contain no concern over the Prince’s spiritual state. Hamlet adopts the role of father confessor because his obligation to revenge his father’s murders depends on verifying the truth of the Ghost’s story. Moreover, Claudius provides Hamlet with a predetermined role for enacting revenge by assuming the part of a perverse father confessor. Claudius’ penetration of the orchard and poisoning of the king through “the porches of [his] ears” functions as an inverted image of auricular confession that evokes Reformation anti-Catholic polemic against the malign effects of

---


72 On the confessional aspects of King Hamlet’s murder, see Tambling 73-76 and Freeman 253.
“confession in the eare” (1.5.63). While Claudius may have bound King Hamlet to a purgatorial existence “[t]ill the foul crimes done in [his] days of nature / Are burnt and purg’d away” (1.5.12-13), political and romantic motivations fueled the murder. For Hamlet, however, the confessional resonances of Claudius’ poisoning of the king initiate a role to be emulated and imitated. Consequently, Hamlet seeks to overgo Claudius by transposing the confessorial role from the secular to the spiritual, securing his uncle’s damnation. Hence, Hamlet spares Claudius’ life in the prayer scene not because of the tension between Christian and vengeful impulses, but rather because of the spiritual imperative governing his conception of revenge. Unlike Laertes, who declares his willingness “[t]o cut his [Hamlet’s] throat i’th’ church” (4.7.125) and thereby implies that satisfaction can be accomplished in natural actions, Hamlet considers Damnation necessary for satisfying the Ghost’s dread command, for to slay his uncle in penitential prayer would be “hire and salary, not revenge” (3.3.79). Consequently, he aims to catch the conscience of the king in the sense not only of extracting his interior conscience, but also of trapping it in a state of sin.

In so doing, Hamlet rightly perceives Claudius’ reaction to The Mousetrap as evidence of guilt, but wrongly interprets the sincerity of his uncle’s repentance in the famous failed prayer scene. In many ways, the private setting of the scene gestures toward the relationship between Claudius’ interior and exterior state. Claudius believes himself to be alone during his penitential prayer, and Hamlet assumes that his uncle remains unaware of his presence. For Hamlet, private penitential prayer would thus avoid the necessary cautions regarding the equivocations and dissimulations present in public speech. Yet Shakespeare manifests the limitations of Hamlet’s

---

73 John Bale, *The seconde part of the image of both churches after the most wonderfull and heavenly revelacyon of Saynt Johan the Evangelyst* (Antwerp, 1545) 135v.
faith in the relationship between interior and exterior through the dramatic timing of the scene: Hamlet does not overhear Claudius’ mental wrangling over his inability to repent, but only the King “a-praying”; and Claudius remains unaware of Hamlet’s presence and unknowingly saves his own life by attempting to repent sincerely (3.3.72). Given Claudius’ remark that “my words fly up,” he presumably prays audibly rather than silently (3.3.97). Hamlet therefore bases his judgment that his uncle is “in the purging of his soul” (3.3.85) and “is fit and season’d for his passage” (3.3.86) on “[w]ords without thoughts,” as Claudius reveals after Hamlet exits (3.3.98).

Hamlet thus demonstrates a hermeneutic naïveté by accepting Claudius’ penitential prayer as satisfactory because of his awareness of his uncle’s characteristic adeptness at concealment and manipulation. Hamlet may suspect Claudius’ insincerity elsewhere, but identifies private penitential prayer as a privileged discourse in which words and intentions exist in direct correspondence. If the absence of the content of the prayer in printed editions of the play corresponds to its formulaic nature or its ambiguity on stage (Claudius’ prayer was meant to be spoken aloud but unintelligible to the audiences) on stage, it reinforces the rashness of Hamlet’s willingness to overlook the possibility of Claudius’ inability to repent.

Claudius’ prayer thus becomes a lacuna into which Hamlet reads his uncle’s successful repentance in terms of Protestant penitential practices. In accepting Claudius’ prayer as authentic, he demonstrates his assumptions regarding the efficacy of unmediated penitence, an attitude germane to his studies at Wittenberg. He believes that Claudius is able to and does receive forgiveness for the murder of King Hamlet and Gertrude through metanoia. According to Anthony Low, Hamlet’s perspective on repentance differs from that of Claudius, who identifies penitence with the traditional confessional rite:

---

Yet Claudius never refers to ritual in the prayer scene; on the contrary, when Because he belongs to the older generation of King Hamlet, Claudius understands that if only he were to consent to give up his ill-gotten gains—his queen and his kingdom—he could repent, confess his sins, and receive absolution. In contrast, Hamlet and Horatio, although their spiritual state is not depraved like Claudius’s, have forgotten what Claudius knows but cannot put to use.  

Claudius debates, “Try what repentance can. What can it not? / Yet what can it, when one can not repent?,” the language of ritual present in the Ghost of King Hamlet’s speech is absent (3.3.65-66). Claudius may display a remnant of traditional beliefs in beseeching angels for help (“Help angels!”), but he attempts to offer a satisfactory penitential prayer rather than seek a priestly mediator (3.3.69). By refraining from killing Claudius, Hamlet simultaneously reveals a Protestant belief in the sufficiency of private repentance and a traditional conception of the spiritual powers conferred on priests in the sacrament of confession through his evocation of the priestly role of binding sins.

Under the burden of the Ghost’s dread command, however, Hamlet departs from the role of a conventional father confessor because the revenge narrative leads him to base his determination of the moral state of others not on divine law, but on his conscience’s judgment of their involvement in King Hamlet’s murder. Once he discovers Claudius’ intent to kill him, he argues that his revenge against Claudius is supported by “perfect conscience” (5.2.67).

Furthermore, Hamlet condemns those whom he deems supporters of Claudius because they would prevent him from enacting vengeance. Hence, without compunction, Hamlet dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death “[n]ot shriving time allow’d” because he judges

---


78 Hamlet judgment of others is more forceful in the First Folio: he justifies his treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by remarking, “Why man, they did make loue to this imployment” (5.2.57); and he explicitly connects his “perfect conscience” to the killing of Claudius by rhetorically asking, “is’t not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arme?” (5.2.67-68).
them as Claudius’ agents and thus implicated in his uncle’s crimes (5.2.47): “They are not near my conscience, their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow” (5.2.58-59). Conscience functions for Hamlet as the central point of reference for determining the sinfulness or virtue of others through the position as father confessor that in turn justifies his actions as an avenger.

The most explicit association of Hamlet with a father confessor occurs in the closet scene with Gertrude. His determination to confront his mother with her sins in many ways corresponds to the traditional instilling of shame in an unrepentant sinner. Further, the Ghost commands Hamlet to “step between her and her fighting soul … / … / Speak to her” and take on the part of a spiritual mediator (3.4.113-15). The similarities between Hamlet’s treatment of Gertrude and the sacrament of confession lead Harry Morris to conclude that Hamlet “uses directly the terms of the sacrament: ‘Confess yourself to heaven [confession], / Repent what’s past [contrition], avoid what is to come [satisfaction]’” (3.4.151-52). Yet Hamlet’s remark, “And when you are desirous to be blest, / I’ll blessing beg of you,” suggests not only a deferral of the rite of absolution, but also an indeterminacy regarding the agency of who will bless (that is, absolve) Gertrude (3.4.173-74). The question of whether he means himself, God, or even a minister remains unclear, and thus registers the theological uncertainties that govern the world of the play. In this sense, Hamlet’s role as avenger supports his role as father confessor insofar as it confirms his ability to bind his victims to damnation. However, this same conviction does not transfer to securing the forgiveness of others. Like the Ghost, then, Hamlet holds competing doctrines regarding repentance in a suspension that renders them already deferred and lacking resolution. Yet despite the incompleteness of Gertrude’s repentance, Hamlet accepts her exclamation of contrition, “thou has cleft my heart in twain” (3.4.158), and the fact that he never again mentions

79 Morris, 56, brackets in original. For a precursor of this interpretation, see J. Dover Wilson, What Happens in Hamlet (New York: Macmillan, 1935) 256.
Gertrude’s incestuous relationship with Claudius—even at her death—suggests his confidence that she has “[a]ssume[d] a virtue” and avoided further sexual relations (3.4.162).  

Hamlet’s faith in the success of Gertrude’s repentance therefore reinforces his role as an avenger because it redresses Claudius’ usurpation of the royal marriage by fulfilling the Ghost’s command to “[l]et not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest” (1.5.82-83).

By framing the closet scene with the death of Polonius and the removal of his body offstage, though, Shakespeare points to the tensions caused by Hamlet’s roles as father confessor and avenger. After mistakenly killing Polonius, Hamlet initially calls him a “wretched, rash, intruding fool” and treats his death as completely justifiable (3.4.31-32). But Hamlet then takes responsibility for the killing, “I do repent,” only to abandon this position and again attempt to exculpate himself by imputing responsibility to his role as a revenger: “but heaven hath pleas’d it so / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister” (3.4.175-77).  

By further shifting from assuming of culpability (see 3.4.179) to mistreating Polonius’ corpse (see 3.4.214) to jocularly referring to Polonius’ spiritual fate (see 4.3.19-25), Hamlet manifests his ongoing conflict of conscience. These shifts reflect the tensions inherent in his theatrical roles as avenger and father confessor, for the impulse to revenge his father’s murder overrides his Christian concern for repentance. The killing of Polonius in fact unwittingly condemns Hamlet to the spiritual irresolution that marked his father’s death. In response, Hamlet capitulates to ignorance and the indecipherability of Polonius’ spiritual status by declaring him “now most still, most secret, and most grave” (3.4.216)—language that parallels his description

---

80 The meaning of “assume” in this line has been the subject of critical debate. Interestingly, the Oxford English Dictionary uses it to illustrate the meaning of “assume” as “To take to oneself in appearance only, to pretend to possess; to pretend, simulate, feign” (def. 8). For a reading of “assume” as a reference to the practice of virtue, see Jenkins, 326.

81 For a discussion of the significance of Hamlet’s roles as scourge and God’s minister, see Fredson Bowers, Hamlet as Minister and Scourge and Other Studies in Shakespeare and Milton (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989) 98.
of his father: “And how his [King Hamlet’s] audit stands who knows save heaven?” (3.3.82). For Hamlet, then, death forecloses access to interiority. This confrontation with the uncertainties surrounding Polonius’ death pressures Hamlet to recognize that in his roles as both father confessor and avenger his conscience must couple oppositional impulses that cannot be reconciled, except through “answer[ing] well / The death I gave him” with a type of atonement through death (3.4.178-79).

Instead of withdrawing from his earlier confidence regarding his capacity to exact vengeance on those he considers damnable, however, Hamlet responds to Polonius’ death in the final act by reinforcing his role as an avenger and father confessor. In the final act, Hamlet may accept the orthodox Christian position on the inscrutability of the “special providence” of God; but, like his early modern contemporaries, he acts with assurance regarding the damnation and salvation of those around him based on external evidence (5.2.215-16). Indeed, once Laertes declares, “The King—the King’s to blame” (5.2.326), Hamlet wounds Claudius and proclaims with certainty his uncle to be a “damned Dane” at the moment of death (5.2.330). Laertes’ revelation of Claudius’ involvement in poisoning Gertrude and Hamlet provides the prince with the opportunity for confirming his uncle’s damnable state—the very opportunity frustrated by his misreading of Claudius’ penitential prayer. Hamlet momentarily experiences self-assurance in his role as an avenger through the outward assurance of Laertes and, moreover, fulfills his role as father confessor by “exchang[ing] forgiveness” with Laertes through a type of mutual absolution:

Laer. Mine and my father’s death come not upon thee,  
Nor mine on me!  
Ham. Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee.  
(5.2.334-36)

This interchange places Hamlet in the role of father confessor loosening Laertes’ sins through a deathbed absolution. Yet Hamlet’s statement, “I follow thee,” indicates that he still does not
consider himself free from the tension inherent in these roles and his crimes because he uses the imperative form of “follow” at the moment of Claudius’ death, exclaiming, “Follow my mother!” (5.2.332). In this context, the term most likely refers to death rather than a spiritual state. In contrast with Laertes’ apparent acceptance of Hamlet’s absolution, moreover, Hamlet does not apply Laertes’ absolution to himself, but only requests that “Heaven make [him] free of it!” By denying the adequacy of his satisfaction for Polonius’ death and maintaining the inexpressibility of his interiority, Hamlet reconciles himself to the incompleteness of his confession and the impossibility of resolution: “Had I but the time—as this fell sergeant Death, / Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you— / But let it be” (5.2.341-43). In this transition from confessor to confessant, Hamlet gestures at the possibility of explaining his part in “this chance” and “act,” but this revelation remains deferred and unresolved (5.2.339-40). Hamlet’s “true story,” as Michael Neill observes, is “tantalizingly glimpsed only as Hamlet himself is about to enter the domain of the inexpressible.”

82 The disjunction between Hamlet’s presentation of the inscrutability of his interiority and his attempts to extract the interiority of others signals the underlying tension between Christian repentance and revenge tragedy.

By excluding others from his true inward state, Hamlet succeeds in exacting his revenge and satisfying the Ghost’s command, but his retreat into silence leaves his own spiritual state uncertain. His final confessional speech offers the promise of complete revelation, but remains beyond reach, finding resolution only in the substitution of his “wounded name” (5.2.349) for his impenetrable identity and the circulation of Horatio’s posthumous presentation of Hamlet’s “story” (5.2.354). Hamlet’s “dying voice” (5.2.361), which concentrates on Fortinbras’ election to the Danish throne, withdraws his interiority behind the veil of death and “silence” (5.2.363).

This turn toward posthumous fame and the political future of Denmark evinces Hamlet’s conviction regarding the impossibility of fully expressing his own story through a deathbed confession. Moreover, for Hamlet the problem of confession is identical to the problem of inwardness: he professes the belief that neither can be expressed in its entirety. At the same time, this turn demonstrates Hamlet’s deathbed attempt to overwrite the silence of interiority and death through the translation of his story into public narrative. Horatio’s prayer that “flights of angels sing thee to thy rest,” drawn from the Catholic prayer for the dead In paradisum de deducant te angeli, begins this process by joining Hamlet’s spiritual state to the traditional ritual system espoused by his father’s ghost (5.2.365). And Fortinbras’ declaration of Hamlet’s fortitude as a soldier and proclamation to let the “rite of war / Speak loudly for him” further indicates the transformation of Hamlet’s interiority to a comprehensible public figure (5.2.404-05).

Yet given the ineffective coexistence of conflicting theological rituals and doctrines in the world of the play, this announced presentation of Hamlet leaves the audience doubtful if not “unsatisfied” (5.2.344). Between Hamlet’s inwardness and Horatio and Fortinbras’ public narrative exists a breach that cannot be filled through a return to the traditional rites of “a much older cosmos,” to use Catherine Belsey’s terminology. Indeed, the different doctrines coexisting in the play effectively cancel each other out, for the only rituals enacted in the play are, in the words of Laertes, “maimed,” either through insincerity (Claudius’ penitential prayer), deferral (Gertrude’s repentance), doubt (Ophelia’s death), or parodic inversion (Eucharistic themes in the final act) (5.1.212).

Yet given the ineffective coexistence of conflicting theological rituals and doctrines in the world of the play, this announced presentation of Hamlet leaves the audience doubtful if not “unsatisfied” (5.2.344). Between Hamlet’s inwardness and Horatio and Fortinbras’ public narrative exists a breach that cannot be filled through a return to the traditional rites of “a much older cosmos,” to use Catherine Belsey’s terminology. Indeed, the different doctrines coexisting in the play effectively cancel each other out, for the only rituals enacted in the play are, in the words of Laertes, “maimed,” either through insincerity (Claudius’ penitential prayer), deferral (Gertrude’s repentance), doubt (Ophelia’s death), or parodic inversion (Eucharistic themes in the final act) (5.1.212). The frequent recourse to these traditional rituals manifests

---

83 Catherine Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama (London: Methuen, 1985) 42.
84 In his recent literary biography of Shakespeare, Stephen Greenblatt imagines a situation somewhat analogous to the doctrinal tension present in Hamlet, hypothesizing that John Shakespeare may have been simultaneously both a Catholic and Protestant; see Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare (New York: Norton, 2004) 102. If Greenblatt’s theory is correct, the collapse of the effectiveness of ritual in the Hamlet suggests that
the vestigial traces of their former function in society. Nevertheless, the ambiguity, failure, or deferral of resolution promised in both the traditional sacrament of confession and the Protestant confessional forms indicate that they have become ineffectual in the larger social, political, and theological upheavals affecting Hamlet’s Denmark. As Steven Mullaney observes, “Whether sacred or secular, ritual acts upon and produces a certain consensus of belief; although highly dramaturgical, it functions effectively only in a relatively stable hierarchical society.”

However, the only stability present in *Hamlet* exists in its ritual past, the world of sacraments and confessors, or in its martial future, a world of the avenger-warrior Fortinbras—two worlds in which Hamlet can participate, but cannot inhabit fully.

* * *

By situating *Hamlet* and *Doctor Faustus* in the context of the Protestant Reformation, Shakespeare and Marlowe deploy the space of the theater to signal the spiritual and emotional repercussions resulting from the Church of England’s reorientation of the traditional means for achieving assurance and consolation. Theatrical space intensifies rather than resolves the difficulties of determining inward and outward sincerity, for it accentuates the limited points of access into the conscience through a fundamental reliance on visual and auditory externals. Even the audience, which occupies a privileged perspective by witnessing the performance in its entirety, remains dependent upon what is revealed and concealed on- and offstage. Marlowe’s depiction of Doctor Faustus’ vacillations between anti-confession and confession evinces the inability of fully communicating interiority. Similarly, Shakespeare’s presentation in *Hamlet* of

---

Shakespeare considered such a position to be ultimately untenable. A realization that John Shakespeare, if his so-called “spiritual testament” is to be held as authentic, had arrived at before his death.

the hazards of misinterpretation advances the inherent risks of determining another’s conscience and suggests the possibility of misreading the signs of one’s own salvation or damnation. In this sense, Shakespeare and Marlowe withhold the anticipated resolution promised by traditional and Protestant confessional acts to illustrate that they could not guarantee assurance and consolation in Wittenberg or Wertenberg, in England’s Catholic past, or in the seventeenth-century Established Church.
Chapter 4

Will and the “reconciled maid”:

Rereading Confession in *Shake-speares Sonnets*

The 1609 quarto *Shake-speares Sonnets*, which includes a sequence of 154 sonnets and *A Lover’s Complaint*, is a collection of confessional poems and a collection of poems about confession. In the sonnet sequence, Shakespeare presents a first-person narrator who repeatedly uses confessional language and tropes in his struggle with the repercussions of transgressive sexual desire. In *A Lover’s Complaint* Shakespeare recapitulates this confessional dilemma, but from the perspective of an anonymous narrator recounting a “fickle maid[’s]” confession to a “reverend man.”¹ The *Sonnets*-speaker’s and fickle maid’s confessions, though they differ in form, reveal that they share and are constituted by a similar object of desire—a young man. When considered as a linear narrative, the confessions of sexual shame and guilt stemming from their respective relationships with a young man create a mutually constitutive poetic space in which Shakespeare explores the emotional, psychological, and spiritual effects of seduction and desire.² In this sense, confessional utterances function as introspective moments that reflect on

---


² Based on the absence of gendered pronouns in many of the sonnets, the traditional grouping of the *Sonnets* into those addressed to the Friend (Sonnets 1-126) and the Dark Lady (127-152) has recently been challenged by Heather Dubrow, “‘Uncertainties now crown themselves assur’d’: The Plotting of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47 (1996): 291-305. In Sonnets 33-34, the first sonnets to emphasize confessional and penitential language, the poet nevertheless uses specifies a masculine object of desire (see 33.6, 11, and 13). From this original moment of estrangement and loss, moreover, the poet continues to turn inward to negotiate the repercussions of transgressive desire, in those sonnets addressed to both a masculine friend and “my mistress” (127.9). The thematic repetition in these sonnets leads those readers who approach the 1609 quarto in its entirety back toward the initial betrayal.
the series of seductions, betrayals, avowals, and acts of forgiveness that compose the Sonnets-
speaker’s and the fickle maid’s problematic relationships with the young man.

By incorporating the traditional rite of private confession in A Lover’s Complaint, however, Shakespeare also calls attention to the disjunction between the failed confessional form of the female complaint and confession’s putative ability to reconcile penitents. Instead of distancing her from the source of sin and moving toward amendment of life, the fickle maid’s unsatisfactory confession leads her back toward the attractiveness of the young man. To underscore the problematic nature of her confession, Shakespeare repeatedly uses the rhetorical figure correctio or metanoia, which Puttenham defines as a figure used when “we speake and be sorry for it, as if we had not wel spoken, so that we seeme to call in our word againe, and to put in another fitter for the purpose.”

The fickle maid’s various corrections culminate in the decisive use of correctio in the final couplet of the penultimate stanza, which confirms her inability to separate herself from the young man: “Ay me, I fell, and yet do question make / What I should do again for such a sake” (321-22). Instead of deploying correctio to lead herself to the realization that she “must be totally remade, not merely mended, by God,” the fickle maid uses this last correction to transfer the fitter purpose of her complaint from repentance to unsatisfied desire.

Shakespeare uses the figure of correctio at the conclusion of A Lover’s Complaint to invite readers to approach the complaint as a circular narrative in which confessional utterances and transgressive desires constitute and dismantle themselves. The fickle maid’s corrections lead

---

the reader not only to concentrate on the failure of her confession, but also to reconsider the significance of the Sonnets-speaker’s troubled confessions.

Using Shakespeare’s deployment of the rite of confession in A Lover’s Complaint to approach penitential themes in the Sonnets, in this chapter I argue that Shakespeare’s Sonnets stands as Shakespeare’s most sustained poetic excursus of the ways in which transgressive desires infect and destabilize the penitential process. To demonstrate how the female complaint casts into relief the Sonnets-speaker’s confessional moments and signals the significant intersections between the 1609 quarto and early modern penitential practices, I begin with an analysis of how the fickle maid deploys but also seeks to subvert the logic of confession. In so doing, I expand Ilona Bell’s contention that the female complaint “provide[s] a commentary on and reader’s guide to the drama enacted by and concealed within the Sonnets,” showing how A Lover’s Complaint intensifies the confessional moments in the Sonnets.5 Turning to the Sonnets, particularly the sonnets concentrating on the young man’s betrayal (Sonnets 33-36) and the Sonnets-speaker’s self-accusation (Sonnets 62 and 134-36), I then trace how the speaker’s interior conflict between his penitential impulses and his idealized objects of desire result in a suspension of emotional and spiritual resolution. Finally, I consider how Shakespeare’s representation of this fractured interiority indicates the limitations of self-examination in the Christian economy of sin and grace.

The Confessional Form of A Lover’s Complaint

In A Lover’s Complaint, Shakespeare registers concerns about a penitent’s inability to overcome the effects of sin and emphasizes the importance of auricular confession. Critics have long recognized that the poem resembles a “would-be confession,” but often diminish its significance

---

by arguing that the fickle maid overreacts to her situation, or that she comes to terms with the young man’s sexual betrayal. Even John Kerrigan, who provides an exceptional study of the poem’s religious and confessional context, minimizes its theological dimension: “As the title insists *A Louer’s Complaint* is amorous. Whatever the importance of ‘confessioun’ and repentance elsewhere, this poem is about love.” Nevertheless, Shakespeare, relying on charged theological language throughout the poem, makes no distinction between sexual or romantic desire and the religious economy in which the fickle maid operates. On the contrary, he connects desire to ritual to emphasize their intertwined and problematic relationship.

Shakespeare establishes the confessional form of *A Lover’s Complaint* in the opening narrative frame. His description of the reverend man and his interaction with the fickle maid indicates the poem’s confessional substructure in three ways. First, the epithet “reverend” had been used to describe clergymen in England since the late fourteenth century. Second, Shakespeare’s presentation of the reverend man as “[s]ometime a blusterer that the ruffle knew / Of court, of city, and had let go by / The swiftest hours, observed as they flew” suggests a minister who journeyed for a temporary ecclesiastical position and had returned to the country

---


7 Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe* 41.

8 The *OED* (def. 2.a) defines reverend as “a respectful epithet applied to members of the clergy” and cites Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* 4.2.1—“The reuerend Abbot With all his Couent honourably received him”—as a representative usage of the word in the early seventeenth century.
(58-60). Third, the specific identification of the reverend man as a “blusterer” (a braggart) also reinforces his occupation as a clergyman; for the verb “to bluster” often had negative religious connotations in the early modern period, particularly in reference to the preaching of false Christian doctrine. Accordingly, the reverend man began his time in the court and the city as a braggart, but he “observed” the “swiftest hours” and learned from the experience. As “Sometime” in line 58 illustrates, the reverend man was formerly a blusterer in the court and town; now he is “privledg’d by age” (62). Following the tradition of the shepherd-priest depicted most famously in Spenserian poetics, Shakespeare presents a reformed clergymen who has retired to the country to “graz[e] his cattle” as well as to care for his spiritual flock (57).

The reverend man’s actions towards the fickle maid further evince his role as a priestly figure. This identification is not meant to suggest that the reverend man represents either a minister in the Church of England or a recusant Catholic priest. For in contrast to Shakespeare’s other religious figures, such as Friar Lawrence in Romeo and Juliet or Isabella in Measure for Measure, this figure’s religious denomination is not identified. Nevertheless, the reverend man’s reaction to the maid’s lamentations simultaneously advances his role as a confessor capable of

---

9 The economic difficulties facing the lower clergy in the late Elizabethan period was substantial and often caused ministers to seek various types of employment, such as university fellowship, assistant curate, or reader. See Rosemary O’Day, The Professions in Early Modern England, 1450-1800: Servants of the Commonweal (Harlow: Longman, 2000) 50-102, esp. 70-72.

10 All of the sixteenth-century examples given in the OED (def. 4) of the verb bluster—“To utter with a blast, or with stormy violence or noise”—have religious connotations. The citation from Thomas Cranmer’s Catechism illustrates this clearly: “These more then deullish swerers … do blowe & bluster oute of theyr ungodly mouthes such blasphemies.” The OED cites A Lover’s Complaint as the first example of blusterer, which is defined as “One who utters loud empty boasts or menaces; a loud or inflated talker, a braggart.” This definition does not undercut the reverend man’s religious occupation; rather, it indicates his previous shortcomings as a minister.

11 As Colin Burrow, ed., Complete Sonnets and Poems, Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) notes in his gloss to lines 59-60: “who had allowed the rapidly passing days of youth to slip away, but who had drawn instruction from them (observed)” (699).

12 The primary meaning of age is, of course, elderly; see OED def. 6. But it also fits OED def. 3: “Such duration of life as ordinarily brings body and mind to full development, years of maturity or discretion, or what by law and custom are fixed as such.”

13 The parallels between the reverend man and Spenserian poetry have long been recognized; for a summary of the criticism, see Patrick Cheney, Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 245-49. The reverend man’s occupation as a cattle herder does not preclude him from religious occupation. In fact, rural clergy regularly supplemented their income through raising livestock; see O’Day 99-101.
exercising the power of absolution and distinguishes him from the more extreme English Calvinist positions regarding private confession. As such, upon finding the maiden “shriking undistinguish’d woe, / In clamor high and low” (21-21) he approaches her “fastly” (61) and “desires to know/ In brief the grounds and motives of her woe” (62-63). After this first entreaty, he proceeds to initiate the traditional form of private confession by “comely distant sit[ting] by her side” (65). This corresponds to the etiquette of ritual confession, which dictated “that when a woman comes to confess, the priest should place her at his side so that he cannot look into her face.”\(^{14}\) Once the reverend man is seated, he again “desires her … / Her grievance with his hearing to divide” (67). The technical language of “to divide” underscores his role as a confessor who will distinguish and classify her woes.\(^{15}\) Moreover, the conditional nature of his assistance highlights the fact that the reverend man possesses the ability to loosen or bind the fickle maid’s sins: “If that from him there may be aught applied / Which may her suffering ecstasy assuage, / ‘Tis promis’d in the charity of age” (68-69). In other words, he cannot absolve her before determining the cause of her “grievance” and her present spiritual condition. “For it is not enough,” reminds Lancelot Andrewes in the sermon “Of the Power of Absolution,” “to be sorry for sin past, or to seek repentance, no though it be ‘with tears’ … if there be in our purpose to retain and hold fast our old sin still.”\(^{16}\) The reverend man must be certain about the fickle maid’s contrition and sincere repentance to God before he can “assuage” her “suffering ecstasy” (69).


He does not intentionally withhold spiritual comfort from her; on the contrary, “in the charity of age” he wants to assist her, but cannot determine whether he should administer the rite of absolution or, if she remains unrepentant, exhort her to be contrite (70).

The fickle maid’s responses to the reverend man’s entreaties similarly demonstrate her entrance into the confessional rite. For instance, she refers to him as “Father” (71) and explains that “[n]ot age, but sorrow, over me yet hath power” (74-75). Her revelation of her “too early” (78) relationship with “a youthful suit” also follows a penitent’s naming of sins (79). Instead of justifying her actions, she admits that unlike “the general bosom … / Of young, of old, of sexes both enchanted” (127-28), she remained “in freedom” (144). And her admission that she “was my own fee-simple” illustrates that she recognizes her culpability (144); she freely “threw [her] affections in [the young man’s] charmed power” and “gave” him “all [her] flower” (146-48). After briefly revealing “the grounds and motives of her woe,” expressing through her sorrow and self-accusations her contrition, and indicating her desire for God’s forgiveness, the fickle maid’s confession has fulfilled not simply the reverend man’s initial requests, but also the conventional teachings on making a satisfactory confession. As the Caroline divine Anthony Sparrow instructs: “1. [Confession] must be humilis accusans nos ipsos. We must accuse our selves, not laying the blame on others. 2. It must be penitens et cum dolore, with grief and sorrow for them. 3. Integra et perfecta, we must confess all our sins we know, not willingly concealing any. 4. Cum proposito obediendi, with a purpose of obedience for the time to come.” As such, the fickle maid’s confession appears to have reached its ritual and narrative conclusion.

---

17 Kerrigan, ed., The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint, writes: “Not a melodramatic revelation of identity but – as at line 288 and, for instance, Coriolanus 5.1.3 – a title of respect used of old and venerable men. Arguably, the maid’s predicament, the reverend man’s care, and the confessional nature of what is to follow make the ‘ghostly father, confessor’ contribute to the vocative’s ring” (404). Given what precedes the fickle maid’s confession, I would further posit that “Father” simply confirms the reverend man’s religious identity.

18 Anthony Sparrow, A Sermon Concerning Confession of Sinsnes and the Power of Absolvltion (London, 1637) 10. Sparrow reiterates several of the common conditions of an effective confession; see Tentler 106-08; and Desiderius
Instead of ending, though, the fickle maid’s confession doubles back on itself and is complicated by her doubts and self-justifications. Shakespeare emphasizes this regressive movement through the fickle maid’s use of correctio: “Yet did I not as some my equals did / Demand of him, nor myself being desired yielded” (148-49, emphasis added). Now the fickle maid returns to the difference between herself and “proofs new bleeding which remained the foil / Of this false jewel” (153-54), a graphic description of the other virgins deflowered by the young man, not to emphasize her responsibility, but to evince how she her “honor shielded” (151). This contradictory movement between contrition and self-justification causes her confession to waver and apparently collapse when she transfers the motive of her transgression from her free will to the young man’s “subduing tongue” (120): “And long these terms I held my city, / Till thus he began to besiege me” (176-77).

While the fickle maid condemns the young man’s “foul adulterous heart,” her rewording of his seductive rhetoric emphasizes her shift from repentance to exculpation, from the regulated space of confessional narrative to storytelling (175). By repeating the young man’s “art of craft,” she offers a justification for her capitulation to his seductive rhetoric (295). Rather than acting freely, she outlines her participation in a duplicitous religious economy in which grace stems not from God, but from the young man. She thus conforms to the young man’s resignification of grace on himself and his false system of devotion. In short, he substitutes himself for God as an object of religious devotion: “Religious love put out religion’s eye” (250). He thus receives “tributes” and redistributes them, for, as he explains, “Nature hath charged me that I hoard them not, / But yield them up where I myself must render” (220-21). Because the young man elevates the fickle maid to the role as the “origin and ender” (222) in this theological

Erasmus, *A lytle treatise of the maner and forme of confession, made by the most excellent and famous clercke, M. Eras. of Roterdame* (London, 1535) Hvi”.

19 On concerns about confession lapsing into storytelling, see Tentler 108.
system, her refusal of the young man—her “minister” (229)—would deleteriously affect the other women—“broken bosoms”—who rely upon him (254). She would reject not only his “holy vows,” but also those of the women who “[h]ave emptied all their fountains in [the young man’s] well” (255). They, too, will feel his heartache: “Feeling it break, with pleading groans they pine, / And supplicant to your sighs extend / To leave that batt’ry that you make ‘gainst mine.” (275-77). According to this logic, the fickle maid’s decision to “sh[ake] off my sober guards and civil fears” did not result from selfishness, but rather from sympathy (298).

Therefore, even though she condemns the young man’s dissimulation, that “hell of witchcraft lies / In the small orb of one particular tear” (288-89), she nevertheless explains her inability to resist his request: “But what with the inundation of the eyes / What rocky heart to water will not wear?” (290-91). Since “not a heart which in his level came / Could scape the fail of his all hurting aim,” she intimates that she cannot be entirely to blame for her transgression (309-10).

The fickle maid cannot, however, completely excuse her actions, for she admits the hollowness and theatricality of the young man’s seductive rhetoric. Once she finishes rewording his speech, she clearly recognizes that she is no longer “mighty” (253) and “o’er [him] strong being” (257). She details his insincerity and laments her fallen state: “When he most burnt in heart-wish’d luxury, / He preach’d pure maid, and prais’d cold chastity” (314-15). Moreover, she associates herself with Eve—stating, “I fell” (321)—and then compares the young man to Satan: “merely with the garment of a grace / The naked and concealed fiend … cover’d” (316-17). Yet any resolution or contrition remains impossible because of the fickle maid’s appropriation and internalization of the young man’s seductive rhetoric. Her continued use of the young man’s

---

reoriented concept of grace illustrates that despite her proclamation of “O father, what a hell of witchcraft of lies / In the small orb of one particular tear!” she remains situated within his false religious economy (288-89).\textsuperscript{22}

The fickle maid’s retelling of the young man’s seduction of a “sacred nun” demonstrates the extent to which she uses his duplicitous rhetoric (260). Just as the nun forsook her “die[t] in grace” (261) for the young man, so too does the fickle maid place herself into this system in which “all these hearts … on [his] depend” (274). For both women, as Patrick Cheney observes, “[s]exual desire evaporates Christian faith, instantly. This is a haunting idea, and must have been specially so to readers during the Reformation.”\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, when the fickle maid begins to retell her sorrows to the reverend man, she identifies her seducer—not Christ—as the source and depository of grace. She explains that others “[p]iec’d not his grace but were all grac’d by him” instead of attributing any sin to him (118-19). This description reiterates the young man’s explanation that his former loves did not affect him: “Harm have I done to them, but never was harmed / Kept hearts in liveries, but in mine own was free, / And reign’d commanding in his monarchy” (194-96). The fickle maid accepts that his “offenses … / Are errors of the blood, none of the mind” (184-85) and applies this reasoning to her own transgression: “His poisoned me, and mine did him restore” (301). In so doing, she furthers the young man’s deceptive theological program even as she uncovers the “fiend” beneath “the garment of a grace.”\textsuperscript{24}

At the conclusion of \textit{A Lover’s Complaint}, moreover, the fickle maid remains infected by the young man’s seductive theological rhetoric. Her final instance of self-justification—“Who,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] Stressing the emotional situation of the fickle maid, Duncan-Jones, ed., \textit{Shakespeare’s Sonnets}, notes: “[T]he ‘fickle maid’ is already touched by ‘seared age’ (14), and finds that she is unable to free herself from emotional dependence on the betraying words of her lover[,]… And though poetic language may beautify, promote or redefine desire, in the process of so doing it, too, becomes infected” (95).
\item[23] Cheney, \textit{Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright} 261-62.
\item[24] Bell relates that the male lover “brags shamelessly about his ability to project his ‘shame’ onto his lovers” (467).
\end{footnotes}
young and simple, would not be so lover’d?” (320)—is undercut by her subsequent lament: “Ay, me, I fell, and yet do question make/ What I should do again for such a sake” (321-22, emphasis added). Neither capable of unequivocally confessing her transgression nor rejecting the shame of her fall, she continues to languish in the young man’s deceptive economy of grace. After cataloguing the young man’s tempting attributes, however, Shakespeare reveals that despite the fickle maid’s seemingly failed confession and continual attempts to rationalize her actions, she has been “reconciled”: “Would yet again betray the fore-betray’d / And new pervert a reconciled maid” (327-28, emphasis added). In this context, the meaning of “reconciled” could range from a formal reentry into the church to a feeling of consolation. Yet Shakespeare’s decision to conclude the poem before closing the narrative frame excludes the possibility that the fickle maid achieves consolation. This ending, as Kerrigan notes, “raises as many problems as it solves…. Are we to think that the maid’s finding an audience has helped purge her lapse, or should we conclude that in line 329 she is merely salving herself?”

If the young maid’s reconciliation is not a “self projection,” but a genuine reconciliation to God, then Shakespeare offers *A Lover’s Complaint* as an interrupted, maimed rite. According to this reading, the fickle maid’s confession accomplishes its spiritual purpose—it allows her to articulate her sorrows and experience contrition. However, it leaves her in a state of uncertainty because her withdrawal into “rapt subjectivity” precludes the reverend man’s completion of the confessional rite.

By collapsing the rite of penance, Shakespeare asserts that the fickle maid’s interiority cannot provide any distance from which to separate herself from the taint of sin. At the start of

---

25 Rollins, *Poems* notes: “reconciled] LEE (ed. 1907) A repentant maid, one who has expiated her sin. — POOLER (ed. 1918): Readmitted to the Church after excommunication” (366). Similarly, Burrow glosses reconciled as “reformed, repentant. *OED* sense 5a of ‘reconcile’ may be germane, given that the ‘father’ to whom the confession is made has priestly overtones (he is a reverend man at l.57): ‘To bring back, restore, or readmit to the Church, spec. the Church of Rome.’”

26 Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint* 425, emphasis in original.


the poem, her “plaintive story” (2) is “reworded from a sist’ring vale” (1) and the narrator
describes her tears as “[l]aund’ring the silken figures in the brine / That seasoned woe had
pelleted in tears” (17-18). The fickle maid first appears in the poem as locked within melancholic
repetition—a state representative of her interior subjectivity. And her subsequent recourse to
interiority merely causes her to vacillate between self-doubt and guilt and, in the process, to
reinscribe herself within the young man’s seductive rhetoric. Consequently, she cannot
experience consolation even though she is “reconciled” (329). Without the fulfillment of the rite
of penitence, namely, the reverend man’s absolution, the fickle maid remains infected by the
seductive rhetoric of the young man regardless of her apparent spiritual resolution.

Confessions of Will: Penitence and Desire in the Sonnets

The fickle maid’s position at the conclusion of A Lover’s Complaint recapitulates the poet’s
repeated exculpations of the young man’s sinful actions in the Sonnets. In this sense, by
appending the female complaint to the Sonnets, Shakespeare amplifies the seductive power of the
young man on men and women. Instead of creating sufficient grounds for condemning the young
man, the Sonnets-speaker’s accusations and confessions serve only to increase his transgressive
desire and to divide further his conscience. In Sonnet 40, the poet cautions the friend against
deception—“But yet be blamed if thou thyself deceivest” (40.7)—but this admonitory gesture
gives way to a rededication of attraction: “yet we must not be foes” (14). “The Sonnets-speaker,”
writes Katherine Duncan-Jones, “finds himself ultimately trapped in a web of his own poetic
fabrication…. The maid, analogously, in attempting both to justify her sexual fault and to purge
herself of the weakness that led to it, discovers that in rewording the youth’s wooing speeches
she is captivated by them all over again.”29 Desirous to preserve his relationship with the young
man, the poet transforms the youth’s transgressive sexual actions into a sign of grace; the

29 Duncan-Jones, ed., Shakespeare’s Sonnets 94.
friend’s “lascivious grace” (40.13) produces the same effect in the speaker as the “garment of a grace” does on the fickle maid (ALC 316).  

At the same time, however, the failure of the fickle maid’s confession provides more than Shakespeare’s extension of the themes introduced in the sonnet sequence. More specifically, Shakespeare’s representation of the destabilizing power of the fickle maid’s backward glance provides an interpretive lens through which to read the poet’s confessional moments. The figure of correctio in A Lover’s Complaint thus informs subsequent rereadings of the sonnet speaker’s corrective moments. Paul Hammond has observed that “on some readings it seems that the most important word in the Sonnets is ‘but,’” yet these corrections assume an even greater significance in relation to the conclusion of the female complaint. The “double voice” (ALC 3) of A Lover’s Complaint effectually “reword[s]” the sonnet speaker’s confessional language of blame and forgiveness (1). By returning the reader to the Sonnets-speaker’s confessional utterances, Shakespeare invites a reconsideration of the ways in which the speaker recognizes that confessions of desire lead to neither spiritual reconciliation nor psychological resolution, but rather, in the phrasing of Margreta De Grazia, “a rededication to, rather than a repudiation of, error.” At the same time, Shakespeare also demonstrates how this irresolution results from the speaker’s attempts to preserve his idealized image of his object of desire. From this perspective, the ritualized form of confession in A Lover’s Complaint indicates how the poet, like the fickle maid, inhabits the logic of confession even as he attempts to resist it. In particular, those sonnets centered on the young man’s betrayal and those involving the poet’s self-accusations present a series of penitential moments in which the speaker exhibits awareness of the spiritual and

30 Duncan-Jones, ed., Shakespeare’s Sonnets 190n13, notes this parallel between the Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint.  
psychological consequences of betraying his conscience at the expense of sustaining transgressive desire.

The sonnets focused on the young man’s betrayal structurally recapitulate the speaker’s interior conflict by oscillating between accusation and exculpation. In the process of condemning the friend’s “disgrace” (33.8), which the poet describes only as “sensual fault” (35.9), he intimates the lasting effects of their estrangement. In Sonnet 33, for instance, he evokes the language of “my sun” (33.9) in order to situate the disgrace in terms of separation and absence: “But out alack, he was but one hour mine, / The region cloud has masked him from me now” (11-12). However, the repeated description of the young man’s beauty—advanced through such language as “golden face” (33.3), “celestial face” (6), and “triumphant splendour on my brow” (10)—indicates that the speaker’s attraction to the friend outweighs the negative effects of this estrangement. Further, the verbal play between “son and sun” points to the “gracious’ quality of the young man’s life … with all the religious connotations the phrasing carries” and denudes the force of the poet’s accusations. And the correction in the final couplet evinces this transition from blame to praise: “Yet him for this, my love no whit disdaineth: / Suns of the world may stain, when heaven’s sun staineth” (13-14). In so doing, the poet submerges the magnitude of the disgrace in naturalistic imagery, namely, through a clarification of “my son” as one of the “Suns of the world” as opposed to “heaven’s sun.” This anticipates the logic of Sonnet 35, particularly the explanation that “Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud; / … / And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud,” insofar as it demonstrates the poet’s desire to reinterpret the young man’s faults as following the laws of nature (2-4). The poet diffuses even the more pessimistic undercurrent of these lines, namely, the reduction of the friend to “a morally corrupt worldling,

---

not a divine being.” More specifically, the repetition of “stain” and “staineth” intimates that the friend’s “moral blot” results from some corruption originating in “heaven’s sun.” The speaker’s turn toward an external source of comparison thus gestures toward blame, but his perspective on the cause of the friend’s disgrace cannot alter his idealized image of the object of desire.

A similar structure governs Sonnet 34, in which the poet initially diminishes the power of the young man’s “salve” (7) and “shame” (9) and presents the betrayal as unforgivable: “Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss” (10). This refusal to grant forgiveness demonstrates the inability of “[t]h’offender’s sorrow” to bring relief and, in turn, casts doubt on the sincerity of the friend’s contrition (11). But the sight of “those tears,” much like the seductive power of the “small orb of one particular tear” in A Lover’s Complaint, removes any reluctance the poet may have to withhold absolution. Rather than consider the possibility of the young man’s dissimulation, the speaker remains content to accept the surface meaning of the friend’s tears, and considers them to be an unmediated sign of perfect contrition, for “those tears are pearl which thy love sheds” (34.13, emphasis added). Put differently, by imputing “thy love” as the source of the tears, he reinforces his idealized projection of his relationship with the friend. The assigning of a redemptive value to the tears—“And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds”—reflects this inflated interpretation of the object of his desire (14). In effect, the poet forms a distorted perspective wherein the source of and absolution from the betrayal comes from the friend, even though in actuality the speaker himself “heals the wound” and “the disgrace” caused by the friend through a process of self-deception (8). This interior process demonstrates

34 Duncan-Jones, ed., Shakespeare’s Sonnets 176.
36 On the disturbing effects of the poet’s self-deceptions, see Heather Dubrow, “Shakespeare’s Undramatic Monologues,” Shakespeare Quarterly 32 (1981): 65. The process of self deception begun in the sonnets involving the young man continue into the sonnets of triangulated desire; see, for instance, Sonnets 138 and 152.
the power of the poet’s corrections to establish a momentary resolution to the disjunction between ideal and reality, the young man’s faults and the poet’s idealized conception of him.

However, the ransom promised by the young man’s tears gives way to the poet’s recognition that forgiving the young man’s faults comes at the expense of self-deprecation and self-corruption. Whitewashing “that which thou hast done” (35.1) with “compare” (6) may protect the friend from blame, but it forces an internal division within the speaker:

All men make faults, and even I, in this,
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,
Excusing these sins more than these sins are.

(35.5-8)

This language of self-deprecation and self-reproach maintains the speaker’s capacity to authorize, salve, and excuse the friend’s faults—all of which depend on the possession and exercise of authority. He still reserves the ability to act as “thy advocate” even as he “gainst myself a lawful plea commence” (10-11). At the same time, this authorization of the young man’s failings effects a radical reorientation of the language of guilt and forgiveness. “In making figures,” writes Lisa Frienkel, “the poet has made fault beautiful, a thing pertaining to all beauty—and further, a thing of all flesh, as if flesh were beautiful precisely insofar as it fails to live up to the ideals of the spirit…. He has excused away sin itself.” However beautiful the poet may make the young man’s fault, however much the friend may “[make] faults graces,” the speaker fails to separate himself from feelings of sin and guilt (96.4; see also 92.9-14). While he may “to thy sensual fault … bring in sense” and free the friend from blame, this same logic leads him to accept the lawfulness of the plea against himself (35.9). Neither willing to withhold authorization nor to conform to the law, the poet uses antithetical coupling not to resolve the

---

37 Lisa Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare’s Will: The Theology of the Figure from Augustine to the Sonnets* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002) 214.
conceptual and moral tension through the actualization of his penitential impulses, but rather to achieve resolution through indefinite suspension. Hence he does not bring “civil war … in my love and hate” to an end (12). Rather, he transforms himself into an “accessory” to that “sweet thief which sourly robs from me” (35.13-14). This yoking of “sweet thief,” much like the oxymoron “lascivious grace,” demonstrates an epistemological refusal to admit the friend’s faults. Presaging the poet’s later admission, “Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not” (92.14), and the repeated perjuries of the sonnets addressed to “my mistress” (127.9), these antithetical couplings function as outward indicators of the speaker’s inward crisis of conscience.

This inward crisis stems from the poet’s obsessive insistence of the relationship between himself and the friend in which “my friend and I are one” (42.1; see also Sonnet 22.7-14). Within this unitary identity, however, there exists a seeming point of difference: the poet attributes likeness insofar as he receives grace and love from the friend, but he “confess[es] that we two must be twain” because “those blots … with me remain / Without thy help, by me be borne alone” (36.3-4). This distinction leads the speaker to conclude that “[i]n our two loves there is but one respect, / Though in our lives a separable spite” (5-6). For the poet, however, united “loves” trump dissimilar “lives” insofar as the potential shame in the public sphere affects only reputation rather than essential identity. The repetition of the final couplet in Sonnets 36 and 96—“But do not so; I love thee in such sort, / As thou being mine, mine is thy good report”—registers that the object of public disapprobation may change, but the poet’s identification of their identical nature does not.

Furthermore, the contrast between “you alone are you” (84.2; see also 84.8) and “I am that I am” (121.9) does not collapse the poet’s conception of his unitary relationship with the friend. An underlying oneness exists within the apparent difference of the poet’s attempt to
contrast his imperfections with the virtues of the young man. The poet’s identification of himself as “I am that I am,” which most critics interpret as a semi-blasphemous reference to the Tetragrammaton (see Ex. 3: 14), in fact serves the inverted hierarchy of grace in which he operates. Consequently, the speaker’s use of “I am that I am” finds a closer parallel to St. Paul’s description of his absolute dependence on grace: “But by the grace of God, I am that I am: and his grace which is in me, was not in vaine: but I laboured more abundantly then they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which is with me” (1 Cor. 15: 10, emphasis added). This figuration evinces how the poet’s willingness to assume a subservient position in relation to the friend enhances, rather than undermines, their sameness. By identifying himself as an inferior subject striving for sameness with the object of desire, the poet reinforces the transformative quality of this reoriented economy of grace—the act of desiring the young man brings the poet into greater likeness with him. Just as Astrophil’s claim of self-alienation, “I am not I,” effectively “signal[s] no real self-loss of painful self-denial” and is in fact designed to bring him closer to Stella, the Sonnets-speaker’s description of himself as “I am that I am” reveals his alignment of himself with the idealized form of the young man.

The Sonnets-speaker may reprimand the young man, warn him that “lascivious comments” (95.6) threaten to undermine his reputation, and claim that “your trespass now becomes a fee” (120.13). Nonetheless, the poet’s desire to preserve the antithetical coupling, the “lascivious grace” upon which their unitary relationship depends, never remains in doubt (40.13). As a result, the poet inverts the Pauline and Augustinian understanding of the

38 See Booth 410n9; Kerrigan, ed., Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint 342; and Duncan-Jones, ed., Shakespeare’s Sonnets 352.
transformative quality of love, for, as Etienne Gilson writes, “In the case of love, the object loved reacts in some way on the loving subject so as to transform it into its own image and thereby assimilate it. To love material things is to be materialized and doomed to perish; to love the eternal is to become eternal; to love God is to become God.”⁴¹ The poet, of course, recognizes the mutability of the friend’s physical beauty, but the yoking of his identity to the friend, much like the reconciliation of grammatical opposites, demonstrates the extent to which he experiences a cognitive dissonance between ideal and reality. The intimation of disbelief in the poet’s rhetorical question—“How can I then be elder than thou art”—evinces this willingness to suspend disbelief (22.8).

The poet’s relationship with the young man remains subject to instability because of the poet’s recurrent penitential impulses. In Sonnet 62, which Bruce Smith describes as “read[ing] like a religious confession,” the Sonnets-speaker casts doubt on the nature of his desire.⁴² The sonnet begins with an admission of sinfulness that intimates inward penitence: “Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye, / And all my soul, and all my every part” (1-2). By alluding to what Christ identifies as “the first and greatest commandment,” namely, “Thou shalt loue the Lord thy God with all thine heart, with all thy soule, and with all thy minde,” the speaker reveals his awareness regarding the magnitude of the sin of self-love (Matt. 22: 37; see also Luke 10: 27 and Deut. 6: 5). In so doing, the poet effectively admits that his narcissism has become a substitute of love for the divine, that “mine eye” is directed exclusively toward “my self.”⁴³ Such an internalization of self-love indicates that the poet’s narcissistic desire functions as a closed system of desire. Instead of continuing this penitential movement, though, he states that “for this

⁴³ On the equation of “mine eye” and “my self,” see Booth 242.
sin there is no remedy, / It is so grounded inward in my heart” (3-4). This image recalls the Collects after Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer*: “that the wordes which we haue herd this daye wyth our outward eares, may through thy grace be so grafted inwardly in our hartes, that they may bryng foorth in us the fruite of good liuing.” The poet’s description of his self-love as a “sin” demonstrates his awareness of its violation of the “greatest commandment” and inversion of the Prayer Book’s exhortation to internalize the Word of God. Even so, the speaker’s subsequent elaboration on his “gracious” (5) and “true” (6) attributes that “all other in all worths surmount” functions as an extended exculpation of sinfulness and, in the process, disables the force of the identification of his sin (8). Using himself as the only point of reference, “for myself mine own worth do define,” the poet concludes that he is a fitting subject and object of love (8).

This self-referential perspective can sustain the speaker’s idealized vision only as long as it excludes external reference. For once he turns to “my glass,” the mirror image counteracts his previous claims:

> But when my glass shows me myself indeed,  
> Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,  
> Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;  
> Self, so self-loving, were iniquity.

(62.9-12)

The use of the corrective “but” reveals that the mirror image initiates a moment of crisis between inward ideal and exterior reality that pressures a reconsideration of the nature of self-love. And the reference to “when” suggests a definite temporal point at which the poet moves from the impenitence of the octave to the beginnings of a form of contrite recognition. By describing his

---


131
face as “[b]eated and chopped with tanned antiquity,” the poet now emphasizes the absurdity and hollowness of his exculpatory claims. At the same time, he undercut his previous, albeit conditional, resolution that the union between his projected identity and the friend’s youthfulness could suspend self-doubt: “My glass shall not persuade me I am old / So long as youth and thou are of one date” (22.1-2). From the revised perspective, the glass stands as ocular proof of his physical age and thereby does not risk intensifying the poet’s self-love in the manner of Narcissus’ “watrie glasse” or “mirrou perilous.”

On the contrary, this “unmagical mirror” recalls the tradition of the penitential mirror of man’s life, what was termed the speculum peccatoris or speculum humanum in medieval and early modern devotional writings, in which the viewer recognizes his or her sinful condition. Calvin evokes the tradition when he explains: “If a man is smudged, everybody will make fun of him but he won’t see a thing; but when he comes to the mirror and sees that his face is all smeared, he will hide and go wash himself.” In the literary tradition of confessional poetry, the Sonnets-speaker’s glass evokes the “wonder Mirour” that Venus gives to Amans near the conclusion of Confessio Amantis. Instead of confirming Amans’ idealized conception of himself, the mirror reveals to Amans

---

45 Sidney, Astrophil and Stella 82.4.
48 The term speculum peccatoris was the abbreviated title of the pseudo-Augustinian tract Speculum Aliiud quod dicitur Peccatoris, which circulated in the medieval period as “The Mirror of Sinners” (see Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole, an English Father of the Church, and His Followers, 2 vols. [London, 1896] 2: 439), and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as The Glass of Vain-glory. Speculum humanum is taken from Stephen Gosson’s short poem “Speculum Humanum,” which was appended to Pope Innocent III, The mirror of mans lyfe Plainely describing, what weake moulde we are made of: what miseries we are subiect vnto: howe vncertaine this life is: and what shal be our ende, trans. H. Kirton (London, 1576) Kvi-Kvii.
Myn yhen dymme and unglaide,
Mi chiekes thinne, and al my face
With elde I myhte se deface
So riveled and so wo besein,
That ther was nothing full ne plein.

(8.2826-30)

The wonder mirror thereby confirms Venus’ earlier counsel, “Remembre wel hou thou art old,” and leads to Amans’ comparison of himself to the months of the year (8.2439). For Amans, the mirror brings his confession to a satisfactory conclusion and facilitates his transformation from Amans into the penitent John Gower. For the Sonnets-speaker, a similar transformation begins to occur in the final couplet of the third quatrain: whereas the repetition of “mine own self-love” recalls Will’s earlier praise of his “worth” and thereby indicates a continued resistance to repenting his inward sin, the chiastic structure of the rest of the couplet—“Self, so self-loving, were iniquity”—demonstrates a transformed perspective that gestures toward the recognition of the disordered nature of self-love (12).

Yet any confessional resolution promised in the third quatrain gives way to a form of narcissistic substitution in which the poet grafts his self-love onto the object of the young man. The poet seeks to elide the “iniquity” and “inequity” of self-loving by introducing a fitter object of desire that “possesseth” his inadequate subject—a desire that he reiterates in the triangulated relationship with the friend and the mistress (135.5-6). Consequently, the penitential effect of the speaker’s glass may result in a momentary reversal, but his redefinition of “myself” in terms of “thee (myself)” justifies his narcissistic desires (13). By syntactically juxtaposing “thee (myself)” (13), the poet reinforces his earlier claim that “my friend and I are one” (42.13) and his willingness to extend forgiveness of the friend’s faults to his own sinfulness. This juxtaposition...
thus allows the poet to refigure his self-praise as praise of the young friend’s beauty and thereby suspend the mirror’s proof against his own physical appearance. Consequently, he replaces the now reproachable narcissism of the previous statement “for myself mine one worth do define” with a corrected version of praise: “’Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise” (62.13). These ongoing evasions and refusals to reject the sin of self-love reveal the poet to be, as Helen Vendler observes, in a state of “habitual sin.”52

The image of cosmetics in the final line nevertheless calls into question the authenticity of this revised mode of praise. Rather than producing a reflection of the youth’s beauty, as the friend himself “art thy mother’s glass,” the speaker confesses the artificiality of his borrowed appearance (3.9). In this sense, he aligns himself with the condemnable “false borrowed face” of his mistress (127.6) by “[p]ainting my age with the beauty of thy days” (62.14; see also Sonnets 68-69). This recourse to the language of concealment advances exterior beauty to be a satisfactory equivalent of the self. Unlike Spenser’s exhortation that his beloved view in “my inward selfe … / most liuely lyke … your semblant trew,” the poet grounds comparison only in outward appearances.53 The “beauty of thy days” in fact takes priority over the sin “so grounded inward in my heart,” so much so that the irremediable sin of self-love has apparently become forgotten in the process of redefinition. The framing of the final line suggests that the poet’s penitential impulse continues to intrude into the apparent reconciliation of his narcissistic desires. The temporal and visual difference between “my age” and “thy days” questions the unitary identity of “thee (myself).” The reference to “my age” signals that the moment of recognition resulting from the mirror prevents a return to the language of an idealized self-referentiality. Contained within the speaker’s redefined self-love, moreover, there exists a form

of self-reproach that cannot sever completely the original admission of sinfulness. The divine object of love signified in the absent-present of the poet’s blasphemy can only be concealed within the fabricated beauty of the young man. When coupled with this blasphemy, the penitential moments of the sonnet indicate the poet’s subversion of the Christian prohibition against transgressive self-love still operates within the inherited Christian economy of sin and guilt. In this sense, the speaker’s attempted substitution with the love of the friend cannot sufficiently effect resolution because it remains grounded in the penitential logic that connects self-love with the restlessness of sin.

Given his insistence on maintaining a unitary identity with the young man, the poet’s negotiation of the Christian moral imperative and his transgressive desire leads him to identify more completely with sin. With the poet’s concentration on the triangulated form of desire that includes the young man and “my mistress” (127.9), what Fineman has described as the shift from “the unity of folie à deux to the duality of ménage à trois,” the Sonnets-speaker assumes an increasingly self-alienating posture. He “gradually loses himself in various ways” in order to preserve his connections with his masculine object of desire. In this sense, the relationship with the mistress intensifies rather than diminishes the poet’s sense of oneness with “my friend” (2). In protesting the mistress’ enslavement of himself and the young man, for instance, he claims:

Me from myself thy cruel eye hath taken,
And my next self thou harder hast engrossed:
Of him, myself and thee I am forsaken,
A torment thrice threefold thus to be crossed.

(133.5-8)

Reiterating the confessional opening of Sonnet 36, “Let me confess that we two must be twain” (36.1), the poet admits that he has become separated from the young man as a result of the

54 Fineman 21.
mistress: “So now I have confessed that he is thine” (134.1). In response, the poet moves away from language that intimates a disjunction between idealization and recognition to a self-refashioning that seeks to preserves the unity relationship with the friend: “And I myself am mortgaged to thy will / Myself I’ll forfeit, so that other mine / Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still” (133.2-4). The phrase “thy will” recalls the poet’s earlier subservient praise of the young man—“So true a fool is love, that in your will, / Though you do anything, he thinks no ill”—but in this context reveals an absence of desire and a reluctant mortgaging and forfeiture of identity to the mistress (57.13-14, emphasis added). Indeed, he corrects this wishful thinking: “But thou wilt not, nor will be free, / For thou art covetous, and he is kind” (134.5-6). The speaker’s interpretation of the friend’s character, which effaces all traces of previous betrayals, indicates the degree to which recognition of sinful self-love and the debilitating effects of their relationship have given way to the desire to overcome loss. In the final couplet, moreover, the poet transfers the sense of spiritual estrangement that follows physical consummation to the separation caused by the mistress’ “unkind abuse” of the friend (12).

The complex punning in Sonnets 134-36 signals, however, that the poet paradoxically seeks to reconcile the interior conflict between penitential impulse and transgressive desire by metonymically merging his identity with various meanings of “will.” Concordant with the poet’s antithetical coupling of sin and grace, this crisis of projected identity leads him to participate in a mode of desire wherein separation is dissolved in physical union with the mistress: “Will will fulfill the treasure of thy love, / Ay fill it full of wills, and my will one” (136.5-6; see also 135.5-6). In so doing, the speaker expresses the belief that his self-subjugation to the mistress would reinforce his union with the friend, as though the mistress acts as an object of desire that palimpsestically contains his idealized unity with the young man. The sexual connotations of
“will,” which Booth identifies as including carnal desire, the male sex organ, and the female sex organ, indicate that the poet’s wordplay nevertheless centers on the form of transgressive desire that troubled the poet’s relationship with the young man. Indeed, in Sonnet 151 the poet’s punning on conscience as the knowledge between right and wrong and “cunt knowledge” and his oxymoronic description of his mistress as “gentle cheater” (151.3), a phrase that recalls identification of the young man “gentle thief,” reveals the extension of his previous form of desire for the young man in this triangulated relationship. As such, the poet’s dual-naming of himself as love and will—“Make but my name thy love, / And then thou lov’st me, for my name is Will”—functions as the culmination of his paradoxical effort to extricate himself from the economy of sin and grace by coupling himself with sin itself (136.13-14).

By merging his identity with what Augustine terms “disordered will” or voluntante perversa, the poet recalls the medieval tradition in which allegorical representations of sins destabilize their identity through confessional speech. In his discussion of the confession of the Seven Deadly Sins in Piers Plowman, Lee Patterson posits that “[b]y subverting the contrition that would annul them, the Sins succeed in prolonging a life of anguish, condemning themselves to damnation, a death without death and an ending without ending.” In the same manner, the poet’s assumption of the name Will functions as a revelation of identity and, at the same time, an admission of sinful desire. Following the allegorical tradition, the poet’s dual-naming of himself

---

56 Booth 466-67.
57 Booth 526.
59 Lee Patterson, “Chaucerian Confession: Penitential Literature and the Parson,” Medievalia et Humanistica n.s. 7 (1976): 157-58. Shakespeare recalls this tradition in his dramatic works, such as Richard III’s admission, “Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word” (3.1.82-83).
promises, on the one hand, resolution to the fractured unitary relationship, but, on the other, condemns him to a form of incessant desire. In Sonnet 153, in one of the poet’s final acts of correction, this ongoing irresolution becomes evident; the speaker admits that “I sick withal the help of bath desired” (153.11), but recognizes in the final couplet: “But found no cure; the bath for my help lies / Where Cupid got new fire: my mistress’ eye” (13-14). Locked between the recognition that transgressive desire is “[e]njoyed no sooner but despised straight” and the promise of consummation with the young man and mistress, he recurrently moves between fleeting glimpses of ideal union with his reoriented source of grace and feelings of contrition (129.5). The confessional moments in the Sonnets reveal a speaker incapable of expressing desire outside of the language of Christian sin and guilt and, at the same time, of separating penitence from the reoriented economy of grace stemming from the young man. The poet thus cannot dismiss the Christian moral imperative, admitting that “[n]o want of conscience hold it that I call, / Her ‘love,’” yet he remains unable to conform to it (151.13-14). Instead, he holds desire and penitence in abeyance, finding resolution only in transitory moments of satisfaction.

The Limits of Self-Examination

In the Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint, Shakespeare represents confessional speech as incapable of separating the speaker from the sinful object of desire. The speaker of the Sonnets and the fickle maid’s willingness to deceive themselves and accept their projected ideals of the young man inhibit resolution. However, whereas in the Sonnets the poet transforms the various anxieties and sufferings stemming from his relationship with the young man and mistress into an opportunity for poetic introspection, the fickle maid is paralyzed by her sexual transgression. To use Lars Engel’s terminology, she fails where the poet does not to establish a “resistant
interiority” that uses shame “to clear evaluative space.” Yet evaluative space for poetic introspection provides no psychological or spiritual remedy for the speaker of the Sonnets. He remains locked in irresolution by the idealized image of the young man and the imputed unity of their relationship. In A Lover’s Complaint, moreover, Shakespeare undermines the apparent sites of poetic stability established by the Sonnets-speaker. The fickle maid’s destruction of the young man’s “folded schedules” (43) and “deep brained sonnets” (209) exposes the fundamental instability underlying the poet’s confidence about the permanence of his “powerful rhyme” (55.2).

By effacing the speaker of the Sonnets’ interior development in the female complaint, Shakespeare indicates the limitations of the mode of individual subjectivity and poetic expression established in the Sonnets. Rather than finding a point of external reference against which to counterbalance the infectious rhetoric of the young man, both speakers remain in a recursive form of desire. Shakespeare’s presentation of the Sonnets-speaker and fickle maid’s interior discord corresponds in many ways to Calvin’s discussion of the divided heart of Christians, which Debora Shuger describes as “contain[ing] within itself intense and contradictory emotions … [that result] from the Pauline ‘division of flesh and spirit.’” In this light, both speakers’ anxiety and self-abasement conforms to the Protestant tradition of self-examination as well as the medieval penitential tradition. For example, the early modern translation of the pseudo-Augustinian Speculum Peccatoris titled The Sinner’s Glass instructs: “Know thy self, know from whence thou commest, and whither thou shalt, how thou liuest, how much good thou dost or failest therein, how farre thou art from God, or how neare, not as in

---

60 Lars Engel, “‘I am that I am’: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the Economy of Shame,” ed. Schiffer, 195-96.
space betweene places, but in the likenes and vnlikenes of good life and behauior.” Yet
Shakespeare’s presentation of the Sonnets-speaker and the fickle maid’s idealized projection of
the young man’s grace advances that they inhabit the “space betweene places” that undermines
self-knowledge and the possibility of turning away from sin. Their transference of grace to the
imperfect young man forecloses a unified point of reference—“likenes and vnlikenes of good life
and behauior”—against which to establish a stable identity. Accordingly, their self-corrections
produce not a movement toward productive self-examination, but rather a duplication of the
contrary impulses that they seek to process. Thus, in A Lover’s Complaint Shakespeare
intensifies the connection between the destructive “errors of the blood” (184) and the “mind”
(184) introduced in Sonnet 147: “Desire is death” (8). In so doing, he indicates little confidence
in the ability of individuals to extricate themselves from this destructive system of desire and
self-deception.

Emphasizing the extent to which the speakers remain infected by their distorted
interpretation of the young man’s grace, Shakespeare also depicts external interventions—such
as the reverend man’s entreaty or the external voice that “saved my life” (145.14)—as unable to
effect lasting resolution. He thus transposes in a penitential register the failure of the narrator of
Spenser’s Daphnaida, who “proves powerless to enact one of the cardinal virtues of Spenserian
art, the therapeutic use of speech and art to work through the grief of mourning.” Yet the
confessional form of A Lover’s Complaint intimates that ritual may provide a way out from the
recursive form of desire shared by the Sonnets-speaker and the fickle maid. Although the fickle

---

62 The sinners glasse collected out of Saint Augustine and other ancient fathers (London, 1609) F2.
63 On the significance of this passage for Shakespearean desire, see Jonathan Dollimore, “Desire is Death,” Subject
and Object in Renaissance Culture, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge:
157.
maid and reverend man fail to complete the rite of penitence, the initial productiveness of his entreaties suggests that ritual, particularly his reorientation of her sorrows into confessional space, offers the possibility of reprieve from “heaven’s fell rage” (ALC 13). Shakespeare’s decision to omit the administration of the rite of absolution therefore demonstrates not the inherent inadequacy of penitential rites, but rather the limits of self-examination and unmediated confessional speech. The omission of the concluding frame signals the debilitating effects resulting from the lack of heavenly grace and the inability of the individual subject to negotiate the Christian imperative to repent and the attractiveness of sinful objects of desire.
Chapter 5

“I look back upon the sins”:
Confession and Memory in Donne’s Sermons on the Penitential Psalms and Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions

Donne opens his sermon on Psalm 32: 5, “I acknowledged my sin unto thee,” with the striking declaration: “This is the Sacrament of Confession.”\(^1\) Donne’s opening remark advances the medieval and, in the context of the seventeenth-century, post-Tridentine identification of confession as one of the seven sacraments of the Church necessary for salvation. Anticipating the shock of the beginning of the sermon’s *exordium*, Donne immediately adds, “we may call it in a safe meaning; That is, The mystery of Confession: for true Confession is a mysterious Art” (9.296.1-3).\(^2\) In so doing, he aligns himself with the English Church’s rejection of confession as a dominical sacrament. By emphasizing the sacramental quality of confession, however, Donne engages the contentious debate surrounding the status of confession and absolution in the Jacobean period.\(^3\)

---

2. Donne employs similar language to clarify his discussion of prayers for the dead: “Men might pray for the dead as those Fathers did, and as the Lutherans doe, *safely enough* without assisting the doctrine of Purgatory, if that were all that were to be said against such prayers” (*Sermons* 7.181.642-45, emphasis added).
3. Because the majority of Donne’s sermons on the Penitential Psalms are undated, it is impossible to identify their precise relationship to changes in the Church of England. The California editors assign the sermons on the Penitential Psalms as follows: the series of five sermons preached at Lincoln’s on Psalm 38: 2-4 and 38: 9 to spring or summer 1618 (*Sermons* 2: 6, 13-14); the sermon on Psalm 41: 7 and series of sermons on Psalm 6: 1-5 to the period before Donne’s illness in 1622-23 (5: 29-31); the sermon on Psalm 6: 8-10 to April, May, or June 1623 (6: 2); the sermon on Psalm 6: 6-7 to the printed date in *LXXX Sermons* of 5 Apr. 1628; and the series on Psalm 32: 1-11 (most likely preached at St. Paul’s) to the winter of 1624-25 (9: 34-37). Against this interpretation, P.G. Stanwood, “Donne’s Earliest Sermons and the Penitential Tradition,” *John Donne’s Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway: UCA, 1995) 366-79, has argued that Donne’s sermons on the Penitential Psalms belong to Donne’s time at Lincoln’s Inn between 1616-19. If the California editors are correct, then Donne’s interest in the Penitential Psalms and, more importantly, his development of his penitential theology is sustained over the course of his career. In addition, if Stanwood’s early dates for the series on Psalm 32: 1-11 is correct, then Donne’s commendation of auricular confession indicates an affinity with the avant-garde conformist or ceremonialist position in the early seventeenth-century Church of
Despite the potential controversy of Donne’s opening remark on Psalm 32: 5, critics frequently diminish its significance, and instead concentrate on the “safe meaning” of his penitential theology, to emphasize his conformity with the teachings of the English Church. In the recent study *The Theology of John Donne*, Jeffrey Johnson reads Donne’s remark on confession as potentially controversial and offers a cautious interpretation of what he describes as Donne’s “rather shocking contention”: “Whether he does so merely to seize the attention of his auditors or actually to challenge the accepted teachings of the Church of England is not entirely clear, primarily because he does not identify confession as sacramental in the strictest sense, of a divinely ordained seal of God’s promises.” Instead of pursuing further the contemporary polemics implied in Donne’s opening statement, Johnson asserts that Donne’s “doctrine of repentance can properly be understood” in the context of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which requires that “individuals … enact their words of repentance publicly.” For the majority of critics, auricular confession remains on the periphery to Donne’s penitential theology and far removed from his treatment of public confession in the liturgy and Divine Office.

This conventional interpretation presupposes, however, a fundamental stability of the confessional practices—especially those surrounding auricular confession and private

---

4 See *Sermons* 9: 34-41. Stanwood raises the question of whether Donne’s favorable attitude toward auricular confession could have been a contentious issue, but argues that “his point of view is familiar and entirely consistent with the reformed emphasis on pastoral consolation as opposed to discipline” (370). But in his notes, he completely dismisses any possibility that Donne’s discussion of penance conflicts with the Established Church’s teachings: “He is not interested in the details of sacramental confession, but agrees with the Reformation emphasis (of Luther and others) on God’s unconditional offer of forgiveness and the free gift of grace to all who believe in absolution, whatever the process leading to it” (375n8). In Donne’s sermons on the Penitential Psalms, however, Donne details the different effective processes leading to forgiveness and grace and emphasizes the ecclesiastical dimension on the penitential process.


6 Johnson 94.
absolution—in the Jacobean and Caroline Church.\(^7\) While the Church of England had significantly diminished the importance of confession in the Prayer Book by relegating it to “The order for the visitacion of the Sycke,” and officially rejected penance as a dominical sacrament in Article Twenty-five of the Thirty-nine Articles, the debate surrounding the place of private confession in Christian life and its soteriological status reemerged at the beginning of the seventeenth century and intensified during the Jacobean and Caroline period. During this period, English writers accentuate that the English Church’s retention of auricular confession differed significantly from post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism insofar as they considered it neither a mandatory practice nor a sacrament. But the degree to which private confession and absolution were important to salvation became a conspicuous point of difference. Instead of a unified position on auricular confession and private absolution, members of the seventeenth-century Church of England advocate a variety of teachings: divines such as Lancelot Andrewes, William Barlow, and Anthony Sparrow emphasize the importance of private confession and absolution; King James offers a positive, though decidedly noncommittal stance, on the practices; and writers like John Gee stress the rite’s historical and contemporary abuses.\(^8\) The presence of


several conflicting positions on the rite of private confession reflects the general composition of the early seventeenth-century Church of England, for, as Peter Lake observes, “[t]he Jacobean church scarcely possessed a unitary official religious ideology. James himself saw to that.”

The variety of positions on confession within the Established Church indicates how Donne could draw from a variety of theological viewpoints without falling under a rigid category such as avant-garde, moderate Calvinist, or moderate Puritan. Such designations of Donne’s religious belief can, of course, offer important insights into his attitudes toward a particular theological practice or doctrine. Yet such interpretations often focus on Donne’s personal beliefs and history rather than on the public persona that he constructs in sermons or writings published in his lifetime. For instance, the critical tendency to use preaching, prayer, and sacraments as criteria for determining Donne’s religious beliefs merely creates a problematic distinction, especially since he stresses all three as necessary for salvation. As he explains in a sermon preached at Greenwich on April 30, 1615: “Christ Jesus … supplies us with grace, and feeds us with his Word, and cloaths us with his Sacraments, and warms us with his Absolutions, against all diffidence, which had formerly frozen us up” (Sermons 1.154.102-09).

In the case of auricular confession, the disjunction between Donne’s representations of penitential rituals in poems circulating in manuscript and more public religious writings makes defining these beliefs even more difficult. In the verse epistle “To the Countess of Bedford.


Begun in France but never perfected” (1612), for example, Donne offers a representation of ritual confession in which he confesses to Lucy, the Countess of Bedford, “This season as ’tis Easter, as ’tis spring, / Must both to growth and to confession bring / My thoughts dispos’d unto your influence; so, / These verses bud, so these confessions grow” (7-10). While Donne’s apology may be read either as sincere or “gently ironic,” his confession to his patroness instead of God indicates a tailoring of theological concepts to a more secular audience. Further, Donne’s Holy Sonnets evoke confessional tropes, but tend toward irresolution and lack of consolation rather than its normatively prescribed effects. By contrast, in his public religious writings Donne presents auricular confession as a practice involved in the complex interplay of memory and ritual penitence, an efficacious rite sanctioned by the Church, and a powerful means for consoling penitents. However, the contrast between Donne’s representations of the rite in manuscript poetry and public religious writings does not mark the sermons and Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions as nonliterary, orthodox texts that simply reflect the accepted doctrines of the seventeenth-century English Church. On the contrary, Donne’s enactment of the penitential process through the use of literary strategies, such as dialogue and dramatic personae, indicates a shift away from the gentle irony of the verse epistle to the Countess of Bedford toward a more concentrated application of discursive forms and literary devices to the changes in ritual practices during the period.

Instead of examining the possible personal causes for Donne’s religious views, in this chapter I trace how his conception of the rite of private confession informs his penitential theology, and, more broadly, intersects with seventeenth-century debates surrounding the place of the rite in the Church of England. I posit that Donne’s treatment of auricular confession in his sermons on the Penitential Psalms and in Devotions demonstrates his sustained development of the rite in a penitential theology centered on the acts of remembering and forgetting. At the same time, Donne’s emphasis on ritual confession indicates an attempt to reintegrate a reformed model of the rite in the sacramental life of the Church of England. I first examine ways in which Donne grounds his penitential theology in the Christian memorial economy of salvation and the Augustinian understanding of memory in order to outline his position on the place of auricular confession in the penitential process. I then consider Donne’s presentation of the positive effects of private confession in Christian life, with particular emphasis on how he distinguishes reformed auricular confession from the Roman Catholic model and defends the rite within the Church of England. Finally, I show how Donne elevates private confession in Christian life to signal the relationship between individual subjects and ecclesiastical authority.

**Remembering and Forgetting in the Christian Economy of Salvation**

Remembering and forgetting constitute foundational actions in the Christian understanding of grace and sin. They form an economy of reciprocal exchange that unfolds in a variety of transactions: the individual’s remembering or forgetting God determines whether or not God will remember the sinner and extend grace to him or her. Framing salvation in terms of remembering and forgetting originates in the covenant theology of the Hebrew Scriptures (see Deut. 4: 23 and

---

16 At the conclusion of her excellent article, “John Donne and Memory as ‘the art of Salvation,’” Huntington Library Quarterly 43 (1980): 261-74, Achsah Guibbory sketches the relationship between Donne’s understanding of memory and his emphasis on confession, but does not explore the historical or ecclesiastical context regarding his penitential theology.
4: 31), and is a recurrent theme in the Penitential Psalms. For instance, Psalm 106, “Prayse ye the Lord,” succinctly equates damnation with forgetfulness: “They forgate God their Saviour….

Therefore he said that he would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen stood before him in the breach: to turne away his wrath (Ps. 106: 21-23). In his sermon on Psalm 6: 4-5, Donne outlines this memorial economy: “But if God can finde no such time, that they never remembred him, then he seales their former negligence with a present Lethargy; they neglected God all their lives, and now in death there is no remembrance of him, nor there is no remembrance in him; God shall forget him eternally” (Sermons 5.386.222-26). From this perspective, divine remembrance or forgetfulness determines individual salvation.

In the Christian tradition, an inverse correlation also exists between the individual’s forgetting sins and God remembering them, and, conversely, remembering sins in confession leads to God’s forgetting them. Advancing both sides of this relationship, Donne questions, “[A]re not their [sinners’] occasions of sorrow the more for their forgetting, the more for Gods remembering?” (9.395.142-43); and he states, “whereas God himselfe, if I have repented to day, knowes not the sins that I that I did yesterday. God hath rased the Record of my sin, in Heaven” (5.319.25-27). Donne’s use of economic language to describe the memory of sin underscores the transactional nature of this soteriological economy. Just as he describes penitence as “an Audit, a casting up of our accounts, a consideration, a survey, how it stands between God and our soule ” (5.297.36-37), he depicts God’s forgiveness as a canceling of debts from memory: “when we put out into the boundlesse Sea of the blood of Christ Jesus … there remaines no record against us; for God hath cancelled that record which he kept, and that which Satan kept

17 All scriptural quotations are taken from The Holy Bible: A Facsimile in a Reduced Size of the Authorized Version Published in the Year 1611 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1911).
God nailed to the Crosse of his Son” (5.318.17-21). This memorial economy rests on the concept of divine justice that necessitates a type of penitential satisfaction for sins. In *Essays in Divinity* (completed c. 1614), Donne explains that “though Christ have paid aforehand for us all, and so we are rather then put to satisfaction; yet we are bound at Gods tribunal to plead out pardon, and to pay the fees of contrition and penance.”

Donne considers the act of forgetting sins as amounting to a failure not only to satisfy one’s debt to God, but also to recognize the paramount act of satisfaction—Christ’s atonement for humanity’s sins at the Crucifixion. By the same token, he treats the act of remembering as enabling the satisfaction of divine justice because it recalls the imperative to repent sins and thereby activates the process of penitence.

In addition to this reciprocal economy, memory acquired a uniquely Christian valence after St. Augustine departed from the classical rhetorical tradition and incorporated memory into his understanding of God and the image of God in the human soul. In *On the Trinity*, Augustine explains, “Behold! the mind, therefore, remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself; if we perceive this, we perceive a trinity, not yet God indeed, but now finally an image of God” (14.8.11). For Augustine, memory, understanding, and will constitute an internal trinity that reflects the Divine Trinity, in which memory possesses a likeness to the Father, understanding a likeness to the Son, and will (which Augustine frequently terms love) a likeness to the Holy Spirit (15.23.6). Similar to the interconnectivity of the Divine Trinity, the three faculties of the soul cannot be separated because they function cooperatively (see 14.7.9, 15.7.12-13), engaging human things through knowledge (*scientia*) and divine things through wisdom (*sapientia*) (see

---

20 The classical rhetorical traditional includes memory as one of the attributes of prudence; see Cicero, *De Inventione*, ed. and trans. H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1949) 2.53.
The contemplation of divine things reveals the relational existence between the trinitarian image of God in the human soul and the Divine Trinity:

Hence, the trinity of the mind is not on that account the image of God because the mind remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself, but because it can also remember, understand, and love Him by whom it was made. And when it does so, it becomes wise; but if it does not, even though it remembers itself, knows itself, and loves itself, it is foolish. Let it, then, remember its God, to whose image it has been made, and understand Him and love Him. (14.12.15).

The proper exercise of memory, understanding, and will allows for the turning away from temporal goods in the hope of union with the Divine Trinity. In *On the Trinity*, Augustine’s discussion of the internal trinity of the human soul thus clarifies his discussion in *Confessions* regarding how memory enables the mind to ascend through sensory perception to memory itself and finally beyond it to a form a mystical contemplation of God (see *Conf.* 10.17.26). Addressing the series of questions in Book 10 of *Confessions* about where God may be found in memory, in *On the Trinity* Augustine rejects the Platonic concept of reminiscence and introduces in its place the doctrine of illumination. He states: “But we ought rather to believe that the nature of the intellectual mind is so formed as to see those things which, according to the disposition of the Creator, are subjoined to intelligible things in the natural order, in a sort of incorporeal light of its own kind” (12.15.24). The doctrine of illumination specifies how memory possesses the ability to be reminded of God. Since the mind “remembers nothing” of knowing God through Adam or the body, “it is reminded that it should turn to the Lord as to that light by which it was touched in some way, even when it was turned away from Him” (14.15.21). Consequently, Augustine’s outline of the doctrine of illumination requires a deliberate turning to the Lord.

---


illumination signals how memory, like the other faculties of the human soul, cannot be extinguished entirely (14.14.19). In so doing, Augustine’s doctrine expands his meditation in *Confessions* that the image of God in the mind cannot be effaced completely through forgetfulness (see *Conf.* 10.16-19, and 10.23). Drawing on Psalm 22: 27, “All the ends of the earth shall be reminded, and shall be turned to the Lord,” for evidence, he concludes that the act of forgetting may obscure the memory of God, but cannot extinguish it entirely, since

> [t]hese nations, then, had not so forgotten God that they did not remember Him when reminded of Him. But by forgetting God and, as it were, forgetting their proper life, they had been turned to death, that is, to hell. But when reminded they are turned to the Lord, as though coming back to life, by remembering the proper life which they had forgotten. (14.13.17)

Since Augustine considers that the act of forgetting something precludes the possibility of being reminded of it, he posits that remembering God always remains within reach in the Christian economy of salvation, because the image of God remains indelibly imprinted on the human soul.

Augustine’s doctrine of the internal trinity in the human soul and, more broadly, his conception of memory permeate Donne’s sermons on the Penitential Psalms. Critics have long realized that “Donne’s conception of memory as a faculty of great spiritual significance derives directly from the Augustinian tradition.”²⁴ In a 1618 sermon preached at Lincoln’s Inn on Psalm 38: 3, “There is no soundnesse in my flesh,” he deploys the Augustinian correspondences between the faculties of the soul and the Divine Trinity by assigning understanding to the Father, will to the Son, and memory to the Holy Spirit: “As the three Persons of the *Trinity* created us, so we have in our one soul, a *threelfold impression* of that image, and, as Saint *Bernard* calls it, *A trinity from the Trinity*, in those *three faculties* of the soul, the *Vnderstanding*, the *Will*, and the

Memory” (Sermons 2.72.21-73.24). Focusing the Augustinian engrafting of memory to Christian salvation, Donne famously concludes: “The art of salvation, is but the art of memory” (2.73.52). This equation reorients the classical concept of ars (skill, technique) along a Christological axis and accentuates the relationship between the proper exercise of the faculty of memory and the reciprocal memorial economy in the Christian tradition. More specifically, it underscores the dependence of human faculties on grace, first through their susceptibility to grace, and then as “instruments of grace” (9.85.637). As Donne prays in Devotions, “enable me by thy grace to look forward to mine end, and to look backward too, to the considerations of thy mercies afforded me from the beginning” (Pr. 1.). This cooperative relationship between nature and grace anchors Donne’s fundamental understanding of the penitential process: “so in our repentances and reconciliations, though the first grace proceed only from God, yet we concur so, as there is a union of two Hypostases, Grace, and Nature.” Participating with grace, then, memory enfolds on itself to lead an individual toward memory “imprinted in us,” recognition of the image of God in the soul, and repentance for sins (Sermons 2.72.19).

Donne’s treatment of memory differs from the Augustinian tradition by emphasizing the primacy of the faculty of memory over the Augustinian interpretation of the inherent interconnectivity of the faculties of the soul. Concordant with Augustine, Donne considers the understanding and the will to be susceptible to perversion: “Of our perverseness in both

---

25 In his 1620 Lincoln’s Inn sermon on Trinity Sunday, Donne similarly cites Bernard of Clairvaux’s conception of the Trinity—“Let us therefore, with S. Bernard, consider Trinitatem Creatricem, and Trinatetem Creatam, A Creating, and a Created Trinity; A Trinity, which the Trinity in Heaven, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, hath created in our soules, Reason, Memory, and Will” (3.144.395-145.399). This suggests his adherence to Bernard and the Cistercian tradition’s identification of memory with the Son; see also William of St. Thierry, The Golden Epistle, The Works of St. William of Thierry, trans. Theodore Berkeley, OSCO, vol. 4 (Spencer: Cistercian P, 1971) 12.242. Later in the sermon, however, Donne clarifies his own conception of memory’s connection with the Holy Spirit with his exhortation that his auditors “finde impressions of the Trinity, in the three faculties of thine owne soule, Thy Reason, thy Will, and thy Memory” (3.154.751-53).

26 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Devotions upon Emergent Occasions are taken from John Donne, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1975).

27 Donne, Essays in Divinity 80.
faculties, understanding, and will, God may complain”; however, he separates memory from the understanding and the will by identifying it alone as resistant to perverseness: “for the rectifying of the will, the understanding must be rectified; and that implies great difficulty: But the memory is so familiar, and so present, and so ready a faculty, as will always answer, if we but speak to it, and aske it, what God hath done for us, or for others” (2.73.46-52). The closest that Donne comes to suggesting that the faculty of memory can be subject to disruption occurs in Devotions: “I cannot feare, but that thou wilt reckon with me from this minute, in which, by thy grace, I see thee; whether this understanding, & this will, and this memory may not decay, to the discouragement, and the ill interpretation of them, that see that heavy change in me, I cannot tell” (Ex. 5). Yet the penitential movement in Donne’s autobiographical narrative suggests that the faculty of memory has not decayed, for he remembers to turn again toward God through his confession.

Memory assumes this position in Donne’s penitential theology because the rectification of the will and understanding depend on recollecting Christian truths. In a 1619 Lincoln’s Inn sermon, “A Sermon of Valediction at my going into Germany,” Donne situates memory as the primary faculty of the soul for rehabilitating the will and the understanding. Drawing on the mnemonic image of paintings hanging in a gallery, he states: “And as a well made, and well plac’d picture, looks always upon him that looks upon it; so shall thy God look upon thee, whose memory is thus contemplating him, and shine upon thine understanding, and rectifie thy will too” (Sermons 2.237.93-96). “Behind this passage,” writes Achsah Guibbory, “lies the

---

28 Donne’s elevation of memory also departs from the medieval Augustinian tradition, which considers the memory as a susceptible to perversion. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, comments on the contamination of the soul: “[The contamination] is something in the soul: as the memory, which is tainted, as the very will which injects it. For, in fact, the soul itself is nothing but reason, memory, and will” (Sermons on Conversion, trans. Marie-Bernard Said, O.S.B [Kalamazoo, Cistercian P, 1981] 45). See also see Daniel K. Griggs, “Augustine’s Influence on Bernard of Clairvaux’s Teaching on Memory,” Cistercian Studies Quarterly 32 (1997): 475-85. On Donne’s treatment of Bernard’s theology of the Trinity, see Johnson 10.
Augustinian notion that God resides in memory. If man looks toward the image of God in his memory, God himself will illumine the rest of his rational soul. There is almost a sense that this process is inevitable, once man rightly uses his memory. In this sense, Donne identifies the faculty of memory as the first means through which the individual returns to God and, at the same time, the last guarantee against turning completely away from God. By contrast, Augustine conceives of memory, understanding, and will as an interconnected inner trinity; however, as Janet Coleman observes, Augustine has “burdened the will alone with the greatest power: to bring man back to God, in the final resort, by getting him to forget himself.” Donne similarly advances the need for positive self-forgetting in the “redintegration” of the self into God’s “mysticall body”—a dissolution of the self in relation to the Divine Trinity—but posits that the memory effects this transformation (5.310.522). The differences between Donne and Augustine therefore relate to the means rather than the ends of their understanding of the human soul’s relationship with God.

Donne advances his position on memory to stress how the memorial faculty present in the human soul reflects the Holy Spirit as well as the Church’s relationship to the individual—ever-present and capable of offering immediate intervention “if we will but speak to it” (2.73.51). Put differently, to admit the possibility of the perversion of the faculty of memory, rather than its improper deployment by will or understanding, would deny the possibility of penitence and lead to despair. Consequently, Donne posits that even the “impenitence” of “an Atheist” cannot remove the memory of God in the human soul in an effort to preserve the possibility of effectual

29 Guibbory, “Donne and Memory” 270.
penitence for even the most hardened of sinners (5.388.305-7). Hence, Donne continues to maintain Augustine’s emphasis on the impossibility of completely forgetting God; but he elevates the invulnerability of memory to perversions of the will and the understanding in order to draw a specific pastoral application of memory, that is, the exhortation of his auditors to penitence and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Augustine, of course, focuses on the pastoral application of his writings and their potential benefits on the human soul. When discussing *Confessions* in the *Retractions*, he explains the positive effects of reading it on “both the affection, and understanding of man towards him [God].”^{32} But Donne calls attention to the immediate connection between hearing sermons and memory. This connection reinforces the duties of the auditors toward remembering their obligations as Christians as well as preachers, whom Andrewes describes as “the Lord’s *Rememberancers*.^{33} In the sermon of Psalm 38: 3, a “*Psalmus ad Recordationem*, a Psalm of Remembrance” (2.72.13-14), Donne explains that he possesses the ability to “awaken” his auditor’s memory and thereby lead them to recollect Christian truths: “So have I let you in, into the whole Psalm, by this key, by awaking your memory” (2.75.105-6).^{34} This accent on memory creates the expectation that his auditors will respond to this memorial cue by reforming their will and understanding and, in turn, conform to the teachings of the Church. Donne thus uses memory to establish a penitential pattern: preaching activates the proper exercise of the faculty of memory; memory leads to recollecting the necessity of penitence; penitence completes the work of memory by preparing the individual

---

^{32} Qtd. in Sir Tobie Matthew, trans., *The Confessions of the Incomparable Doctor S. Avgvstine* (St. Omer, 1620) 24. Unless otherwise notes, all quotations from *Confessions* are taken from Matthew’s edition, which was the first complete English translation of the text.

^{33} Andrewes 2: 76.

for the reception of the Eucharist; and receiving the Eucharist fulfills Christ’s imperative at the Last Supper that Christians remember Christ’s atonement of humanity’s sins.

Donne also draws on the Augustinian tradition in his incorporation of a syncretic model of memory that combines the reciprocal memorial economy mandated in Scripture with a Christianized form of Platonic reminiscence that expands memory from the past to include the present and the future. By citing Plato’s concept of reminiscence without qualifying its applicability to Christian truths, Donne relies on Augustine’s earlier adherence to Platonism rather than his subsequent doctrine of illumination.\textsuperscript{35} Donne explains that “Plato plac’d all learning in the memory; wee may place all Religion in the memory too: All knowledge, that seems new to day, says Plato, is but a remembering of that, which your soul knew before”; yet echoing the Augustinian tradition, he immediately adds that the act of remembering involves an engagement with God’s continual unfolding in the present: “All instruction, which we can give you to day, is but the remembring you of the mercies of God, which have been new every morning” (2.74.67-72). In addition, he states that every individual possesses the entirety of Scripture imprinted in memory: “Nay, he that hears no Sermons, he that reads no Scriptures, hath the Bible without book; He hath a Genesis in his memory,” and “He hath all in his memory, even to the Revelation” (2.74.72-79). Donne develops Augustine’s innovation of expanding temporal boundaries of time to include the present and past in order to demonstrate the “hermetically sealed soul[‘s]” reflection of the “aporetic ecstatic inter-involvement between past, present, and future” of the Divine Trinity.”\textsuperscript{36} When properly exercised, the faculty of memory engages in an

\textsuperscript{35} In so doing, Donne simply reiterates the early seventeenth-century identification of Augustine as a Platonist or a Neoplatonist. In his marginal note to Conf. 10.11, for instance, William Watts, St. Avgvstines Confessions (London, 1631), writes: “He appears to be of the Platonist mind, and that to Know was nothing but to Remember” (605). On Donne’s reliance on Augustine’s expansion of memory to include the present and future, see Guibbory 268-69.

\textsuperscript{36} Milbank 91. For Augustine’s application of this temporal conception of memory see On the Trinity 14.11.14 and Confessions 10.20. On Augustine’s temporal expansion of memory, see also Etienne Gilson, The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine, trans. L.E.M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960) 103; and Roland Teske,
ongoing striving for comprehending the past, present, and future accessible in the image of God in the human soul. Donne explains how this memorial action remains insufficient until it is “Crowne[d] … with action”; “so all goodnesse is in remembring, all goodnesse, (which is the Image of the holy Ghost) is in bringing our understanding and our assenting into action” (9.84.606-85.622).

Donne argues, moreover, that forgetfulness inhibits action by creating a temporal crisis that simultaneously relegates the individual to the present and separates his or her internal trinity from its divine referent.\(^37\) This temporal descent into the present stems from the spiritual descent from the nature of sin:

> It is one of Saint Augustines definitions of sinne, *Conversio ad creaturam*, that it is a turning, a withdrawing of the man to the creature.... And man may not decline, and every thing, except God himself, is inferiour to man, and so, it is a *declination*, a *stooping* in man, to apply himselfe to any Creature, till he meet that Creature in God; for there, it is above him. (2.132.39-54)

Donne uses David’s lament in Psalm 6: 3, “My soule is also sore vexed,” to illustrate the correspondence of this temporal and spiritual crisis. The infection of David’s “the faculties of soul,” including his faculty of memory and his “soule it selfe,” isolates him from past and future goods: “His bones are shaken, he dares not stand upon the good he hath done, his soule is so too, he cannot hope for any good he shall do: He hath no merit for the past, he hath no free-will for the future; that is his case” (5.356.656-59). Locked in present sinfulness, David’s memory attempts to cover his past sins and future punishments. He has become what Henri Bergson terms the “man of impulse,” who remains fixed in present events and the temporal limitations of

\(^{37}\) On Donne’s reworking of Plato in a Christian context, see Sullivan 70-73.
creaturely or worldly goods.\textsuperscript{38} By limiting memory to the present, the individual forces himself or herself to inhabit an inferior state of constant instability rather than the assurance of the fullness of time: “Creatures of an inferiour nature are possest with the present: Man is a future Creature” (8.75.458-59). Emphasizing the limitations of the present further, Donne rhetorically asks in Devotions, “that which you call present, is not now the same that it was, when you began to call it so in this Line, (before you [s]ound that word, present, or that Monosyllable, now, the present, & Now is past,) if this Imaginary, halfe-nothing, Tyme, be of the Essence of our Happinneses, how can they be thought durable?” (Med. 14).\textsuperscript{39} The “incurvation” of the faculty of memory toward the present exposes the individual subject to ceaseless mutability and insubstantiality (Sermons 2.132.60).

Along the same lines, Donne posits that remembering the delight of past sins presents a temptation to narrow the temporal focus of memory. Memories of an individual’s delight experienced in past sins can lead him or her to concentrate on the attractiveness of sins to the exclusion of their impermanence and in opposition to divine commandments. These memories encroach upon the present and inhibit the transformation of the faculty of memory into action, for, as Bergson writes, “he who lives in the past for the mere pleasure of living there, and in whom recollections emerge into the light of consciousness without any advantage for the present situation, is hardly better fitted for action: here we have no better than a man of impulse a dreamer.”\textsuperscript{40} Bergson’s terminology calls attention to the frequent early modern association of the state of sin with a sleepy conscience or what Donne describes as “spirituall Lethargies, that make


\textsuperscript{39} Raspa identifies Confessions 11.28.23 and 11.27.34 as sources of this passage, and reads “found” instead of “sound.” The 1624 printed edition suggests either reading; see Devotions vpon emergent occasions and severall steps in my sicknes digested into I. Meditations vpon our humane condition, 2. Expostulations, and debatements with God, 3. Prayers, vpon the seuerall occasions, to him (London, 1624) 317.

\textsuperscript{40} Bergson 198.
a man forget his name; forget that he was a Christian, and what belongs to that duty” (5.386.212-14). Delighting in past memories of sin in effect establishes an alternative memorial system stripped of its temporal referents, in which the individual locates not the Christian history imprinted on the human soul, but rather his or her sinfulness as the object of memory. Donne maintains that “[t]here may be enough in remembering our selves; but sometimes, that’s the hardest of all; many times we are farthest off from our selves; most forgetfull of our selves” (2.74.82-84). This form of self-forgetting results not in forgetting the self in relation to this sinful past, but rather of the self in relation to the image of God. In other words, the close connection between forgetfulness and sinfulness separates the individual’s perceived self from his or her intended self.

For Donne, self-forgetting works against the divine and natural order by radically inverting the nature of the individual’s relationship to sin. Alluding to the amnesia induced by submersion in the river Lethe, he states that “our memory is drown’d, we have forgot there belongs a repentance to our sins, perchance forgot that we have done those actions; and forgot that there is a law, even in our own hearts, by which we might try, whether our actions were sins, or no” (2.110.566-70). Effectively, memory focused on the past becomes opposed to the divine and natural order because it functions as a limited, closed, and inherently circular system.

The most famous example of the persistent temptation of the memory of past sins is Lot’s Wife, who looked back toward the destruction of Sodom and was transformed into a pillar of salt, and whom Christ evokes in the memento: “Remember Lots wife” (Luke 17: 32). Augustine evokes the fate of Lot’s wife as a warning against taking delight in past sins: “Do not cast lingering looks at what is past, like Lot’s wife who was left behind on the way, but look back in

---

contempt.” Augustine’s caution, on the one side, illustrates the negative consequences of looking back at past sins with longing and, on the other side, advances a template in which past sins should be reinterpreted and remembered with contempt in order to conform to the Christian economy of salvation. Indeed, in *Confessions* Augustine identifies himself as subject to the same temptations Lot’s wife: “yea I am swallowed vp with my ill customes; and I am held thereby; and I bewayle my selfe with many teares; but still I find my selfe held fast. Such meanes hath the burden of ill habits to ouerload a man” (10.40.65). Early modern preachers advance both sides of Augustine’s warning against imitating Lot’s wife. Donne reiterates Augustine’s interpretation of her example, explaining that “some reclinations, some retrospects we have, a little of Lots wife is in us” (2.57.315-16). He attributes Lot’s wife’s punishment to the fact that she “turned her selfe” rather than depended on God to keep her turned toward her divine end (6.60.768). Hence Donne cautions how sinful memories act as ever-present temptations that paralyze spiritual progress. Lot’s wife is emblematic of the backward-looking sinner who is “held prisoner to a past that refuses to become past” and cannot experience a lasting conversion or *metanoia* back toward God.

With sinful memories defining the axis of memory, Donne states that individual sins become habitual and self-reinforcing: whereas “sinne is heavy” (2.120.25), in “[a]n habituall

---

42 St. Augustine, “Third Discourse on Psalm 36,” *On the Psalms*, trans. Dame Scholastica Hebgin and Dame Felicitas Corrigan, 2 vols. (New York: Newman P, 1961) 2: 321-22. In *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (New York: Macmillan, 1958), Augustine similarly writes: “Is it when the Lord shall be revealed that these commandments are to be observed lest anyone look back, that is, seek the past life which he has renounced, or, rather, is it at this present time that a man should obey them so that when the Lord shall be revealed he may find retribution for those things which he has observed or scorned” (3.36.54).

43 In the preface to his 1620 translation of *Confessions*, Matthew repeatedly insists of Augustine’s capacity to resist such temptations. In a marginal note adjoining a catalogue of Augustine’s accusations against himself, Matthew writes: “The unspeakable purity of S. Austines soule; not, that many of these things were any sins at all, but only they were of less perfection” (36). Yet Matthew’s glosses demonstrate an acute awareness to the potential risk of past sins; in his notation to 10.43, he writes: “How he looked backe vpon his former life, with great feare: euen now, when he was in a way, of great vertue, and penance” (575).

sinner [it] is a naturall place, the Center of sinne, and he feels no weight in it” (2.120.30-32). Like the inherent instability of present, Donne emphasizes that substituting sin for the center of existence exalts the individual and overturns his or her relationship with God, who “is the Center” (9.406.569) and before whom all wicked and virtuous desires meet “in the Center, in the eye of God” (2.153.343). Efforts to supplant God as the center of existence in fact achieve the inverse effect, for “Man hath no center but misery; there, and onely there, hee is fixt, and sure to finde himselfe” (Devotions, Med. 21). Donne’s habitual sinner thus becomes the Bergsonian dreamer who inhabits a false reality in which the image of God has been distorted. Indeed, Donne explains that when preachers “offer to awaken that conscience farther,” the sleepy conscience complains: “whence comes this troublesome singularity now? pray let me sleep still, says this startled conscience” (Sermons 2.108.505-109.510). By existing in the memory of past sins, the habitual sinner seeks to shore himself or herself against the instability of sin. Yet the example of David, who “thought to sleepe out the night, came to weepe out the night,” demonstrates that such an attempt at submerging sinful anxieties in sleep effects no consolation (8.202.370-71). The “habits of these sins” (8.208.590) lead the individual to “[pursue] all his [or her] former sinfull pleasures, and every night, every houre [to sin] over all the sins of many yeares that are past” (8.209.617-19).

The ongoing attractiveness of the memory of past sins, what Donne repeated terms “sins of youth,” has the effect of destabilizing the penitential process because they continually attempt to pull the penitent backward toward his or her perceived self. He argues that a penitent

---

45 The transference of the center from God to man recalls Augustine’s deployment of the image in On the Trinity, “But through the desire of proving his own power, man by his own will falls down into himself, as into a sort of center. Since he … wishes to be like God subordinate to no one, then as a punishment he is also driven from the center, which he himself is, into the depths, that is, into those things in which the beasts delight” (12.11.16).
46 Donne takes this expression from Psalm 25: 7 and Job 20: 11. Examples in the sermons include 2.104.335-51, 5.296.23, and 5.358.743-47. In Devotions, Donne divides life into three states of sin: youth, middle years, and “our age after them” (Ex. 23).
“forces a divorce from that sinne ... yet he surfets upon cold meat, upon the sinfull remembrance of former sins, which is a dangerous rumination, and an unwholesome chawing of the cud” (2.64.558-62). The use of “rumination” in this passage offers insight into Donne’s conception of the relationship between memory and penitence because it draws on two traditional associations between the memorial and digestive processes. Augustine, though he exhibits caution about drawing too close of a parallel, establishes the two traditions by comparing first the process of committing emotions to memory to the digestion of food and second the act of remembering to the way “cattle bring up food from the stomach when they chew the cud” (Conf. 10.14.22). By connecting rumination to the memory of past sins, Donne draws on the common homiletic association of the act of confession to the vomiting of sins (see Sermons 9.304.306) and the sin of relapse to a dog returning to its vomit (see 2 Peter 2: 22), warning that memories of sin often cause penitents to relapse and “returne to their vomit” (Sermons 5.305.353-54). Donne’s evocation of both traditions points to the same treatment of memory, namely the need to expel sinful memories and to avoid the danger of solipsism in which the mind ruminates on itself rather than divine truths. Whether contained internally through rumination or expelled and reingested through the consumption of vomit, former sins constitute a memorial matter that must be purged or, at the very least, contained. Like Augustine, Donne considers such memories to be very difficult to forget entirely and, consequently, posits that the memory of past sins, much like concupiscence caused by Original Sin, continue to haunt the present (see 5.353.555-57). These memories detract from virtuous actions: “my best actions, now in mine age, have some taste.

47 Donne uses the image of rumination in a positive context to emphasize the importance of examining prayer: “All good resolutions … must pass a rumination, a chawing of the cud, a second examination, whether that prayer were so conditioned or no” (Sermons 6.52.471-77).
48 Coleman 182 notes that Bernard of Clairvaux similarly deploys the connection between the memory and the stomach in De Conversione, but with a greater emphasis on the filling of the stomach with sinful memories. On the tradition of the association of memory to digestion, see Douwe Draisma, Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas About the Mind, trans. Paul Vincent (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 33-34.
some tincture from the habit, or some sinfull memory of the acts of sin in my youth” (5.358.745-47). In sickness, the memories of past delights threaten the salvation of the individual. In *Devotions*, Donne applies this concept to himself, explaining how “when his body is unable to sinne, his sinfull memory sinnes over his old sinnes againe; and that which thou wouldest have us to remember for compunction, we remember with delight” (Ex. 21). Memories of past sins effectively turn the faculty of memory against itself, transforming its inherent readiness to an intrusiveness that attempts to efface the individual’s memory of his or her proper relationship with God.

For Donne, the response to these temporal crises begins with remembering the soteriological dimension of time and, more specifically, recognizing the connection between the temporal present and timeless present of the Divine Trinity. The narrowing of memory into the past or the present necessitates the faculty of memory’s perpetual “re-engraving” of the image of God in the human soul and the concomitant alterations in understanding and will. This process involves the act of remembering that true happiness exists only in the Divine Trinity who exists outside of time and the consequent removal of the appeals of the transitory happiness in this “Imaginary, halfe-nothing Time” (*Devotions*, Med. 14). The stripping away of such temporal distortions foregrounds the essential position of penitence as the intermediary between the art of memory and the art of salvation. Donne accordingly states that the remedy against “sinfull remembrance of former sins” is to “continue in those means, which may advance our repentance…. Thou must doe, and leave undone many things” (*Sermons* 2.64.560-72). Stressing the vigilance of penitence, he similarly teaches that “thou must not take thy rest” if temptations of past or future sins remain (8.203.419). Penitential actions thus counter the temporal effects of sin on the present by cooperating with the faculty of memory. This in turn satisfies the
fundamental Christian teaching that life *in media via* must be filled with constant penitence.

Donne draws on the classical mnemonic image of the wax tablet to connect confession with the improvement of the art of memory: “But if we lay them [our sins] open, by our free confessions, he returns againe … that he may refresh and re-engrave his Image in us againe, and put it in a richer and safer Tablet” (5.371.266-70).\(^49\) Donne similarly exhorts that his auditors must reduce sins “to thy memory and contemplation of his Agony” in order to prevent further sins (2.159.559-60). This reengraving paradoxically expands the memory by narrowing it into the memory of Christ because it joins the penitent to infinitude of the Divine Trinity. Donne revisits and redefines the transitory nature of the present, but from an entirely different perspective—when viewed in terms of penitence, the fleeting nature of the present offers a continual opportunity to turn away from previous sins and toward God again.\(^50\) In this manner, Donne describes the present as offering the possibility for repentance:

\[
\text{[W]hensoever thy conscience tells thee he calls to thee; for, a rectified conscience is the word of God; If that speake to thee now this minute, now is thy time of finding God. That \textit{Now}, that I named then, that minute is past; but God affords thee another \textit{Now}; he speaks againe, he speaks still, and if thy conscience tell thee that he speaks to thee, now is that time. This word of God, thy conscience will present unto thee, but that one condition, which \textit{Moses} presented to Gods people, and that is, \textit{That thou seeke the Lord with all thy heart, and all thy soule}. (9.327.498-504)\]

By concluding this passage with an emphasis on the contractual relationship between the individual and God, Donne describes a penitential process in which the Augustinian understanding of memory as a means to the Divine Trinity reinforces the reciprocal economy undergirding the Christian economy of salvation.

\(^{49}\) Donne commonly uses the image of the seal of the sacrament and the image of God; see Winfried Schleiner, *The Imagery of Donne’s Sermons* (Providence: Brown UP, 1970) 104-21.

Private Confession and Absolution in Donne’s Penitential Theology:

“woe unto me if I be alone”

In the sermons on the Penitential Psalms and Devotions, Donne upholds the efficacy of public and private penitential rituals in the Jacobean and Caroline Church and presents “medicinall Absolution” as important for assuaging consciences and effecting consolation (Sermons 5.349.422). Ritual confession continues the memorial process begun in the penitential process because it rehabilitates the temporal crisis of sin and assists in the reunion of the individual with God. For Donne, penitence culminates with the momentary participation of the individual in the eternal present and presence of God. This reunion becomes manifest whenever an individual recognizes, however brief, the Image of God and the Divine Trinity’s presence. Consequently, Donne prays toward the end of Devotions: “let mee always so apprehend thee, as present with me, and yet to follow after thee, as though I had not apprehended thee” (Pr. 22). Ritual confession supports the life of constant repentance by indicating the presence the God’s mercy and, more immediately, preparing for the culmination of the penitential process through the reception of the Eucharist.

Like his contemporaries in the Church of England, Donne considers public confession to be a sufficient form of penitence, yet he consistently identifies private confession as a complementary form. In many ways, however, Donne’s penitential theology corresponds to Andrewes’ discussion of priestly absolution as a “third necessity” in which the penitent is renewed “by a second imposition of hands.”51 Furthermore, Andrewes accentuates the importance of memory in the penitential process, cooperation of the penitent with divine grace,

---

51 Andrewes 3: 191
and the necessity of a life of continual repentance.\textsuperscript{52} These similarities do not demonstrate Donne’s active participation with avant-garde or anti-Calvinist currents in the Church of England, but rather the affinities between different figures in the early modern Church of England who shared common ground on a historically divisive issue.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, that Donne’s emphasis on the importance of priestly absolution and private confession in his sermons between 1616 and 1628 and the 1624 \textit{Devotions} elicited no extant reactions, as compared to Andrewes’ controversial Whitehall sermon “Of the Power of Absolution” in 1600 (see Chapter 1), implies a larger change regarding the practices within the English Church. For Donne, private confession primarily stands as a practice in need of revival for the assistance of individual consciences and evidence against Roman Catholic critics, who often attached the Church of England’s rejection of the sacrament of confession and its reorientation of penitential practices. Before turning to Donne’s treatment of the rite of private confession, however, it is necessary to outline briefly the three different forms of confession that he treats: 1) confession directly to God; 2) public confession in a liturgical setting; 3) private confession to a minister. In his penitential theology, Donne follows the Christian tradition and attributes all remission of sins to God, who is “the universall Confessor, the generall Penitentiary of all the world” and to whom every person must confess to or “dye in the guilt of their sins, that goe not to Confession to him” (\textit{Sermons} 6.57.683-84). Any absolution of sin by an individual functions as a conduit of God’s forgiveness. Like his discussion of the reflection of the Holy Spirit in memory that activates the ascent toward God, Donne also identifies the Holy Spirit as the beginning of the penitential


process that leads to a turning toward the godhead. He develops this concept in the Tenth Expostulation in *Devotions*: “thy Spirit returns to my Memory thy former sinnes, that being so recollected, they may power out themselves by Confession” (Ex. 10). Donne defines repentance as fundamentally relational to God: “In one word, (one word will not do it, but in two words) it [repentance] is *Aversio*, and *Conversio*; it is a turning from our sins, and a returning to our God” (*Sermons* 7.162.777-79).54 Donne thus underscores the absolute dependence of the individual on divine assistance in the penitential process. Indeed, as the example of Lot’s wife indicates, to turn toward oneself inevitably results in a turning away from God.

Even though Donne points to God’s ultimate role in the penitential process, he nevertheless departs from many of his contemporaries by emphasizing the communal aspect of confession and the importance of the seal of absolution administered by a minister in the Morning and Evening Prayers and the Order of Holy Communion prescribed by the *Book of Common Prayer*. He argues that sins confessed to “Indeed, a confession is directed upon God, though it be made to his Minister: If God had appointed his Angels, or his Saints to absolve me, as he hath his Minister, I would confesse to them” (9.309.490-93). He underscores that the salve for the “concupiscencies” of the soul comes not from “immediate Revelations, for private inspirations from God,” but through the three seals of the Church: “the medicinall preaching of the Word, medicinall Sacraments, medicinall Absolution” (5.349.405-22). This combination of internal faculties and external ecclesiastical aids demonstrates Donne’s conception of the necessity of engagement with the visible Church as well as the balance of private and public in Christian life. He lauds the effects of the liturgy of the Church: “Nothing in this world can send me home in such a whitenesse … as Gods Absolution by his Minister, as the profitable hearing of a Sermon, the worthy receiving of the Sacrament do” (5.314.666-69). In contrast with Calvin

54 For Donne’s similar definition of repentance, see *Sermons* 8.213.794-214.808.
and Hooker, Donne contends that a direct confession to God should be made only in extraordinary circumstances, stating that “sinnes are not confessed, if they be not confessed to him [God]; and if they be confessed to him, in case of necessitie it will suffice, though they be confessed to no other” (9.309.488-90). “In other words,” writes Johnson, “Donne expresses here that a private [unmediated] confession of one’s sins is to be considered the rare exception rather than the rule.” Furthermore, Donne insists on the ministerial administration of the seal absolution, for “as it is by his Commission to his Minister, in his Church, and there onely, in the absolution given by his Ordinance to every penitent sinner” (9.322.330-32). In Donne’s penitential theology, then, the minister assumes a necessary role in the restoration of the penitent through the “mystery of Confession” (9.296.2).

Like earlier English reformers, Donne seeks to retain a reformed model of ritual confession and routinely criticizes Roman Catholic penitential doctrine and practice. In his exegesis of Psalm 32: 1-2, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,” Donne upholds the traditional tripartite division of the rite into contrition, confession, and satisfaction, but situates them within the doctrine of the English Church. Donne states that reconciliation with God requires

[a] perfect, intire repentance; And to the making up of that, howsoever the words and termes have been mis-used, and defamed, we acknowledge that there belongs a Contrition, a Confession, and a Satisfaction; And all these (howsoever our Adversaries slander us, with a Doctrine of ease, and a Doctrine of liberty) we require with more exactnesse, and severity, then they doe. (9.266.576-82)

---

55 Johnson 97.
56 In reference to Donne’s sermon on Psalm 32: 5, Johnson argues: “Donne departs in his analysis from the Scholastic tripartite division of repentance into contrition, confession, and satisfaction, and instead identifies two parts, David’s preparation for repentance and the execution of his confession” (96). In the context of the sermons on the Penitential Psalms, Donne does offer several descriptions of the manner by which repentance occurs, and he sometimes offers contradictory definitions regarding what constitutes the act of repentance. In terms of the rite of public and private ritual confession, however, Donne reorients rather than departs from the traditional tripartite model.
First, he rejects the Roman Catholic distinction between attrition, which he describes elsewhere as “quendam tenuem dolorem internum, A little slight inward sorrow, and that’s enough” (1.203.752-53), and emphasizes the necessity of contrition: “For, for Contrition, we doe not, we dare not say, as some of them, That Attrition is sufficient” (9.266.582-83; see also 8.210.640-211.698). Second, he defends that the necessity of confession—“And then for Confession, we deny not a necessity to confesse to man”—but implies a division of this requirement into public confession in a liturgical context and auricular confession to a priest: “There may be many cases of scruple, of perplexity, where it were an exposing ourselves to farther occasions of sin, not to confesse to man” (266.587-90). In addition, he connects “a particular detestation of sin” (9.266.591) in the act of confession to the “feare of God” required in contrition (9.266.585). Third, he supports the general concept of satisfaction, thereby maintaining the necessity of restitution and the efficacy of “the fruits of repentance” such as physical mortifications and fasts. But Donne narrows the concept of restitution so that the penitent gives satisfaction “to every person damnified by him” rather than the Roman Catholic teaching that satisfaction is made to God (9.266.598). This treatment complements the discussion of satisfaction in “The order for the administration of the Lordes Supper, or holy Communion” in the Prayer Book that any “open and notorious evyll liver” who has offended the congregation cannot receive the Eucharist untill he haue openly declared him selfe to haue truely repented and amended hys former naughtie life, that the congregaxion may thereby be satisfied, which afore were offended; and that he haue recompensed the partyes, whom he hath done wronge vnto, or at least declare him selfe to be in ful purpose to do, as soone as he conueniently may.

---

57 For a further discussion of Donne’s views on repentance, see Peterson 504-7. Donne also rejects the Roman Catholic distinction between venial and mortal sins; see Sermons 2.100.185.
58 Donne further criticizes the faults of the Roman Catholic doctrine of satisfaction in Sermons 8.213.699-217.940.
59 The booke of common praier, and administration of the Sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Churche of Englande (London, 1559) Mi’.
Donne accordingly rejects in an earlier sermon the Roman Catholic separation of punishment and guilt (*poena et culpa*) as in service of the corrupt practice of buying and selling of indulgences (8.212.735-217.940).

Like many Protestant reformers, Donne also attacks the Roman Catholic intrusion into the consciences of penitents. He declares that penitents are “brought in chains … in the Roman Church, by a necessitie of an exact enumeration of all their sins,” and contrasts this practice to the Church of England: “But to be led with that sweetnesse, with which our Church proceeds, in appointing sicke persons, if they feele their consciences troubled with any weighty matter, to make a speciall confession, and to receive absolution at the hands of the Priest” (9.309.498-309.503; see also 2.160.591-95). Donne commends the practice of private confession to and absolution from a priest, which corresponds to the Prayer Book, but advocates the rite’s expanded administration through his description of the connection between the reception of the Eucharist:

> And then to be remembred, that every comming to the Communion, is as serious thing as our transmigration out of this world, and we should doe as much here, for the settling of our Conscience, as upon our death-bed; And to be remembred also, that none of all the Reformed Churches have forbidden Confession, though some practise it lesse then others. (9.310.503-9)

By describing every confession before communion as though it could be the last, he reiterates a common fear surrounding the suddenness of death in the early modern period. Yet the juxtaposition of this emphasis on private confession and its status in the Reformed Churches demonstrates the disparity between Donne’s advocacy of the rite and the seventeenth-century Church of England. Donne stresses that the administration of private confession “is limited by the law of God” and must avoid “that torture of the Conscience, that usurpation of Gods power, that spying into the counsails of Princes, and supplanting of their purposes, with which the
Church of Rome hath been deeply charged” (9.310.514-519). Nevertheless, citing Leviticus 14: 2, “That he [the leper] shall be brought unto the Priest,” he accepts that “Men come not willingly to this manifestation of themselves,” and must “be led with that sweetnesse” of the Church’s promise of consolation and reconciliation (9.309.497-500). Always careful to delineate that private confession does not entail Roman Catholic sympathies by attacking Roman abuses, Donne nevertheless evinces a degree of insistence on the administration of private confession that marks him as proponent of revitalizing a traditional penitential practice.

In the sermons on the Penitential Psalms and Devotions, Donne provides an extensive treatment of private confession and underscores its importance by advancing the typological relationship of his auditors and readers to his biblical exegesis and treatment of religious practices. More than any other biblical figure, David stands in the sermons as the representative example of the negative consequences of sin, the struggles with penitence, and eventual reconciliation with God. For Donne, David’s “example is so comprehensive, so generall, that as a well made, and well placed Picture in a Gallery looks upon all that stand in severall places of the Gallery, in severall lines, in severall angles, so doth Davids history concerne and embrace all” (Sermons 5.299.115-118). The multiple applications of David’s example demonstrates that the “mystery of Confession … is not delivered in one Rule, nor practised in one Act” (9.297.21-

---

60 In addition, Donne defends the seal of confession, but qualifies the absolute secrecy of confession: “In religious seals, not to discover those things which are delivered us in Confession, except in cases excepted in that Canon” (9.282.294-96). This exception refers to Canon 113 of the 1603 Canons, which mandates that ministers must respect the secrecy of a penitent’s confession “except they be such crimes as by the laws of this realm his own life may be called into question for concealing the same.” A modern edition of the canon may be found in The Anglican Canons, 1549-1947, ed. Gerald Bray (Woodbridge: Boydell P, 1998).

61 By advancing the “sweetenesse” and consolations stemming from the rite, though, Donne reiterates the Council of Trent’s defense of the sacrament of confession. The 14th session, chapter 5, of the council states that “in persons who are pious and who receive this sacrament with devotion, is wont to be followed by peace and serenity of conscience with an exceedingly great consolation of spirit”; furthermore, it “condemns the opinions of those who maintain that faith and the terrors that agitate conscience are parts of penance” (Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, ed. H.J. Schroeder, OP [St. Louis: Herder, 1941] 91).

22). The universality of “Davids Method” of penitence harnesses the homiletic application of
David’s particular sinful history by submerging his auditors’ own sins within the memorial and
penitential pattern established within the Psalms (9.308.460). The Davidic model does not
impose a monolithic set of requirements, but it does create an ideal model through which
Christians should strive in their pursuit of holiness. Not every Christian needs to emulate the
entirety of David’s confessional model, but rather place his or her faith in God’s grace and God’s
mandated rites and ordinances within the Church. According to Donne, moreover, David
presents himself as an exemplary penitent: “Therefore David thought it not enough, to have said
to his Confessor, to Nathan in private … he proposes himselfe, for an Exemplary sinner, for a
sinfull Example” (9.280.213-217). And Donne’s inclusion of David’s private confession to
Nathan, though David determines that he needs to confess publicly as an example to others,
demonstrates the efficacy of private confession to and absolution from a priest. Indeed, Donne
points to the readiness with which David sought Nathan for hearing his confession: “After he had
deliberated, and resolved upon his course, what he would doe, he never stayed upon the person,
to whom; His way being Confession, he stayed not long in seeking his ghostly Father, his
Confessor, Confitebor Domino” (9.308.462-309.465). Importantly, Donne then applies David’s
private confession to an exposition on the divine mandate for priestly absolution and importance
of the rite in the Church of England. In the sermons on the Penitential Psalms, then, Donne
scrupulously avoids what he perceives as the procrustean restrictions of post-Tridentine
Catholicism’s “one Rule” and, at the same time, redefines the rite of private confession through a
Davidic model. By joining the rite of private confession to David, this strategy uses a typology of
intertextuality that elides Donne’s direct confrontation with those opposed to reviving the rite in
the Church of England.
In *Devotions*, however, Donne intensifies his engagement with late Jacobean and early Caroline discourses on private ritual confession by applying an analogous method of exemplarity to his autobiographical narrative of his spotted fever. In the Fourth Prayer, Donne asks God that “for my temporall health, prosper thine ordinance, in their hands who shall assist in this sicknes, in that manner, and in that measure, as may most glorifie thee, and most edifie those, who observe the issues of thy servants, to their owne spirituall benefit.” This method of exemplarity recalls those moments in *Confessions* where Augustine presents his confession as efficacious for the spiritual development of his audience. This type of self-presentation also corresponds to places in the sermons where Donne assumes a confessional stance. In his sermon on Psalm 32: 3-4, “When I kept silence,” he teaches: “When the Preacher preaches himselfe, his owne sins, and his owne sense of Gods Mercies, or Judgements upon him, as that is intended most for the glory of God, so it should be applied most by the hearer, for his own edification” (*Sermons* 9.280.207-10). The sustained development of this confessional persona in *Devotions*, one of the few works authorized by Donne for publication during his lifetime, demonstrates that moments of personal revelation must be balanced by the method of exemplarity, which places individual history in the service of the inculcation of Christian truths.

The use of a persona, adherence to established traditions of meditation, and nuanced development of doctrinal concerns further advance that the Donne represented in *Devotions* is no more the historical Donne than the Augustine depicted in *Confessions* is the historical Augustine. On the contrary, given Donne’s incorporation of Augustinian time and memory in

---

64 On the connections between *Devotions* and Augustine’s *Confessions*, see Kate Narveson, “Piety and the Genre of Donne’s *Devotions,*” *John Donne Journal* 17 (1998): 127.
65 On the relationship of *Devotions* to the traditions of public devotional literature and spiritual autobiography, see Kate Frost, *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne’s Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 3-38. On Donne’s use of similar rhetorical strategies in the *Sermons* and
his penitential theology, the narrator of *Devotions* reviews his past sins, recounts his experiences during his sickness, and details his physical and spiritual rehabilitation through a didactic perspective grounded in the temporal present of the text and, more broadly, Christian time. Donne’s review of the seven days in Expostulation 14 in which he “consider[s] seven daies, seven critical daies, and judge[s] my selfe that I be not judged by thee,” imbues each day with a Christological significance that translates his individual sickness into a generalized Christian example. Moving from particular examples, such as “thy visitation by sicknes” on the first day, Donne broadens each subsequent day to universal experience (Med. 14). Hence the “I” in the seventh day who shall enjoy “my Everlasting Saboth in thy rest” speaks as Donne’s projected future self in which he has become a representative Christian fused with the Divine Trinity (Med. 14). Donne therefore “places himself in confessional postures while actually revealing very little” because the confessional accent in *Devotions* falls not on Donne’s personal life, but rather on his spiritual and physical sickness in the context of ecclesiastical and Christian life. The confessional moments in *Devotions*, many of which refer to sins of youth, thus complement the Davidic method in the sermons on the Penitential Psalms. Unlike David, who depends on his confessor Nathan but could also “bee his own spiritual physician” (*Sermons* 8.213.760-61) at certain points of the penitential process, Donne confesses a greater reliance on the assistance of his physicians to cure his physical and spiritual sickness: “Without counsell, I had not got thus farre; without action and practise, I should goe no farther towards health” (*Devotions*, Med. 20). The representation of “The order for the visitacion of the Sycke” in the autobiographical narrative of *Devotions* thus places a more specific emphasis on private ritual confession and

66 Conti 147.  
67 For a similar discussion of an individual acting as his or her own physician, see Donne, *Essays in Divinity* 76.
absolution than the Davidic model. This connection stems from the explicit connection between the two rites in the Prayer Book that, in turn, provides a compelling reason for Donne’s willingness to put representations of personal confessional moments in support of the rite.68

Donne heightens the ritual dimension of confession by following the traditional Christian teaching that collapses the distinction between physical and spiritual sickness.69 Just as in sin “many times we are farthest off from our selves; most forgetfull of our selves” (Sermons 2.74.83-84), so in sickness “I lack my self” (2.80.288). He routinely equates physical maladies and cures with the act of confession. For instance, Donne compares the way in which the physic prescribed by his doctors “draws the peccant humour to it self, that when it is gathered together, the weight of it selfe may carry that humour away” to “thy Spirit [who] returns to my Memory my former sinnes, that being so recollected, they may powre out themselves by Confession” (Devotions, Med. 10). Furthermore, he connects the uncovering of spots “by the strength of Nature, by voluntary confession ... or by the vertue of Cordialls” as participating in the penitential process and joining sins to the atonement offered through Christ’s sacrifice (Ex. 13). Yet Donne offers his most sustained and detailed treatment of the physical and spiritual effects of confession in the Twentieth Expostulation, “Id agunt. Upon these Indications of digested matter, they proceed to purge.” Using the metaphysical conceit of a compass reminiscent of “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning,” Donne describes the circular process of separation and reunion with God that confession effects:

As hee that would describe a circle in paper, if hee have brought that circle within one inch of finishing, yet if he remove his compasse, he cannot make it up a perfit circle, except he fall to worke again, to finde out the same center, so, though setting that foot of my compasse upon thee, I have gone so farre, as to the

---

68 In this sense, Devotions provides a meditational extension of Andrewes’ A Manual of Directions for the Sick in that both seek to revive penitential practices that had fallen into disuse in the Church of England.
69 In On the Trinity, Augustine records that “physician, which in Hebrew is Jesus, in Greek, Soter, but in our language Salvator” (13.11.14).
consideration of my selfe, yet if I do depart from thee, my center, all is imperfit. This proceeding to action therefore, is a returning to thee, and a working upon my selfe by thy Physicke, by thy purgative physicke, a free and entire evacuation of my soule by confession. (Ex. 20)

The image of returning to God through the assistance of “thy purgative physic” situates the process in the administration of private absolution and confession, for, within the context of Devotions, Donne’s physicians function as divine representatives who hear his confession and apply the ordinances of the Church through absolution.\(^7\) Alone, the individual cannot provide self-assistance and even becomes an enemy to himself or herself (Med. 21). In turn, this necessitates the spiritually and physically infirmed’s dependence on the physician for rehabilitation: “I cannot rise out of my bed, till the Physitian enable mee, nay I cannot tel, that I am able to rise, till hee tell me so…. [H]ow impotent a peece of the world, is any Man alone” (Med. 21). The equation of physical and spiritual disease transforms Devotions into an extended encounter between the individual and the rehabilitative penitential ritual sanctioned by the Established Church.

Donne’s stress on the need of spiritual physicians results from his understanding of confession as unnatural, what he depicts as a “purgative physicke, [that] is violent and contrary to Nature” (Ex. 20). In reality, however, the contrary nature of confession attests to its spiritual value because, as Donne states in the sermon on Psalm 32: 5, “For, still the Adversum me, is Cum Deo; The more I say against my selfe, the more I vilifie my selfe, the more I glorifie my God” (Sermons 9.310.526-28). For Donne, as Debora Shuger interprets this passage, “God’s honor

\(^7\) Mary Papazian, “Donne, Election, and the Devotions upon Emergent Occasions,” Huntington Library Quarterly 55 (1992), traces the theme of reunion with God and the image of the divine compass in the Devotions and the Sermons; she writes: “The speaker appears to recognize his own beginning and end will mirror God’s circular nature and similarly join together … which occurs in eternity and reaches the same point at the end, at the Resurrection” (609).
requires human guilt” and a diminishment of the self.\textsuperscript{71} As part of the rehabilitation of the self afflicted by sin, Donne stresses the role of spiritual physicians in the execution of the power of the keys and the consolation of consciences: “O Lord, I decline not that \textit{method} in this \textit{physicke}, in things that burthen my \textit{conscience}, to make my \textit{confession} to him, into whose hands thou hast put the \textit{power} of \textit{absolution}” (\textit{Devotions}, Ex. 20).\textsuperscript{72} Central to Donne’s penitential theology, then, is the presence of ministers capable of leading the spiritually infirmed to confession and reconciling them through the rite of absolution. This is the method used by Moses, Saul, the Prophets, and the one that the “\textit{Lord commanded}” (Ex. 20). In this manner, Donne elevates the Church of England’s administration of private confession even as he denies that the rite burdens the conscience as a torturous imposition as in the Roman Catholic Church, declaring, “I am not submitted to such a \textit{confession} as is a \textit{racke} and \textit{torture} of the \textit{Conscience}” (Ex. 20).

Nevertheless, he writes that confession need not rack the conscience, but it necessarily contains shame and difficulty: “I am not exempt from all…. The use of this spirituall \textit{Physicke} can certainly do no \textit{harme}; and the \textit{Church} hath alwaies thought that it might, and, doubtlesse, many humble \textit{soules}, have found, that it hath done them good” (Ex. 20).\textsuperscript{73} Freed from Roman Catholic abuses, private confession provides a vital, though underused, means for reconciliation.

By emphasizing the benefits of private confession, Donne aligns his penitential theology with the ascendant ceremonialist or anti-Calvinist position in the seventeenth-century Church of England. Indeed, Donne interprets David’s penitential method, which includes private confession


\textsuperscript{72} Raspa interprets Donne’s use of absolution in this passage to refer to that “administered by the presiding minister to a congregation at the general confession during the Daily Office,” yet the ritual context of \textit{Devotions} and the concomitant defense of the virtue of confession indicates that the subject here is private absolution and confession (182).

\textsuperscript{73} In Meditation 13, Donne prepares the reader for his discussion of voluntary private confession in the Established Church as avoiding the torture of conscience: “In intestine conspiracies, voluntary confessions do more good than confessions upon the rack…. [W]hen all is by the strength of cordials, it is but confession upon the rack, but which, though we come to know the malice of that man, yet we do not know whether there be not as much malice in his heart then as before his confession; we are sure of his treason, but not of his repentance” (84).
to a priest, as an illustration of the necessity of conforming to the rites of the Church, stating that no one becomes reconciled with God except through the Church: “The way is the Church; no man is cured out of the way” (9.314.663). For Donne, penitents achieve reconciliation with God not through private introspection or freedom of thought and action, but rather through the deployment of ritual to recover their relationship with God. In many ways, Donne’s stress on conforming to ecclesiastical ordinances and deferring to the authority of ministers corresponds to the penitential theology of Andrewes. Compare Andrewes’ claim in 1600 that God “doth associate His Ministers, and maketh them ‘workers together with Him’…. And to exclude them is, after a sort, to wring the keys out of their hands to whom Christ had given them,” with Donne’s statement around 1624 that “the Remittuntur peccata, Thy sinnes are forgiven thee, is too high a note for any creature in earth or heaven, to reach to, except where it is set by Gods own hand, as it is by his Commission to his Minister, in his Church, and there onely, in the absolution given by his Ordinance to every penitent sinner” (Sermons 9.322.327-32). Unlike Andrewes, however, Donne’s treatment of private confession never became the subject of controversy and reflects the increasing support for the rite in the late Jacobean and early Caroline Church.

* * *

Donne’s stress on the conformity of the individual to ecclesiastical ordinances nevertheless extends beyond contemporary developments in the English Church, and points to a broader connection between ritual and identity in the early modern period. Donne’s incorporation of Augustinian memory into a ritual-based penitential theology functions as a sustained attempt to establish a means for achieving reconciliation through the dissolution or “redintegration” of the self (Sermons 5.310.522). At the conclusion of Devotions, Donne attempts to stave off his fears

74 Andrewes 5: 93.
about relapsing into sin with a prayer for dissolution: “Since therefore thy Correction hath brought me to such a participation of thy selfe ... to such an intire possession of thee, as that I durst deliver myselfe over to thee this minute, if this minute thou wouldest accept my dissolution, preserue mee” (Pr. 23). Furthermore, Donne associates the culmination of the penitential process—the reception of Holy Communion—with the submergence of identity: “such sins as were truly sins, and fearfull sins, but are now dead, dead by a true repentance, and buried in the Sea of the blood of Christ Jesus, and sealed up in that Monument, under the seale of Reconciliation, the blessed Sacrament” (Sermons 9.306.368-71). The burial of sins in the “blood of Christ Jesus” reveals a form of self-negation grounded in the interconnectivity between the individual subject and ecclesiastical ritual. Donne’s figuration of union with God in terms of the dissolution of the self manifests the degree to which early modern individual subjectivity remained fixed in and constituted by the Christian economy of sin and grace. In Donne’s prayer, the juxtaposition “accept my dissolution” and “preserue mee” establishes the connection between self-negation and divine immutability.

For Donne, the dissolution of the self into the godhead provides a means for overcoming the loss of identity through sin. This orthodox response to the threat of mutability is thus anchored in a rejection of self and, to use Pauline terminology, a putting on of Christ; the mutability of the sinful flesh gives way to the permanence of spiritual rest in the godhead (Rom. 13:14). Donne’s conception of individual subjectivity demonstrates how resolution cannot be found in identity, conscience, or desire, but rather in the negation of the self. Reflecting this early modern context, his burial of the self in the “blood of Christ Jesus” depends on a form of self-negation that may be striking for those looking for evidence of proto-modern concepts of the
individual subject, but in his penitential theology this redemptive dissolution represents the fulfillment of Christian life.
Conclusion

The status of private confession continued to be a contentious subject throughout seventeenth-century England. After Laud’s translation to the archbishopric of Canterbury, ritual and ceremony attained a renewed importance in the Church of England. Reflecting this shift, the debates over the administration of the ritual of private confession and the power of the keys reemerged at Cambridge during the 1630s. In seventeenth-century Visitation Articles, the appearance of questions regarding ministerial willingness to visit the sick reinforces the episcopate’s interest in the availability of the rite of private confession.¹ Along the same lines, numerous defenses of the use of private confession in the Christian community, such as those by Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Dying* (1651) and Hamon L’Estrange’s *The Alliance of Divine Offices* (1659), developed the position of earlier ceremonialists like Lancelot Andrewes and Richard Hooker.² After the Restoration, the debate at the Savoy Conference (1661) between Presbyterians and bishops over the wording of the rite of absolution in “The order for the visitacion of the Sycke” in the *Book of Common Prayer* further demonstrates the range of debates centering on private confession.³

---

¹ T.T. Carter, *The Doctrine of Confession in the Church of England* (London, 1865) 188, cites Visitation Articles from Overall, Bishop of Norwich, 1619; Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, 1625; Cosin, as Archdeacon of York, 1627; the Bishop of Peterborough, 1636; the Diocese of Norwich, 1636; and Montague, Bishop of Ely, 1686. Additional examples include Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1635 (rpt. in Paul Elmer More and Frank Leslie Cross, eds., *Anglicanism* [London: SPCK, 1951] 702); the Bishop of Lincoln, 1641 (see *Articles to be enquired of within the Diocese of Lincoln* [London, 1641] A3); and the Bishop of Rochester, 1666 (see *Articles of visitation and enquiry concerning matters ecclesiastical, according to the laws and canons of the Church of England Exhibited to the Church-wardens and sidemen of every parish within the diocess of Rochester* [London, 1666] 4). Because of the abolition of the episcopate in 1646, visitations were not conducted during the English Civil War.


³ On the debate over the language of the Prayer Book, see Rowell 102. An overwhelming majority of seventeenth-century English writers were nonetheless in agreement regarding the abuse of private confession in the Roman Catholic Church.
Private confession also found advocates outside of the episcopate, though they often rejected arguments that would limit the rite’s administration to the clergy. In *The penitent pardoned* (1657), for instance, the Presbyterian minister Christopher Love recalls the Prayer Book’s instructions regarding private confession: “That you are not confesse sin needlessly to men, but when there is a great and an urgent necessity, when you are exceedingly troubled in conscience, and cannot be comforted; in such a case you may go to men to acknowledge what sins trouble your consciences.”

Likewise, in *Christian Doctrine* (c. 1655-60) Milton explains that many forms of confession may be used in the “certain progressive steps in repentance; namely, conviction of sin, contrition, confession, departure from evil, conversion to good” because “[c]onfession of sin is made sometimes to God…. Sometimes to men: and that either privately, as James v.16. ‘confess your faults one to another’; or publicly.”

He further develops the “progressive steps in repentance” by adding “[c]hastisement… [as] often the instrumental cause” and identifying “consolation” as the desired end of the penitential process.

Recalling the emphasis on consolation in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century debates regarding penitential practices, such as those by Luther, Calvin, and English reformers, Milton identifies private confession as one of many important means for reconciling individuals to God.

In his literary works, particularly *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, Milton also represents the close relationship between successful repentance and consolation. Like Spenser, Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Donne, Milton points to the strong connections between memory, desire, and penitence. Early in *Paradise Lost*, his presentation of the fallen angels as being unable to drink from the river Lethe functions as a photographic negative of the penitent’s ability

---

4 Christopher Love, *The penitent pardoned a treatise wherein is handled the duty of confession of sin and the priviledge of the pardon of sin* (London, 1657) E3.


to bring an end to desire through the reorientation of memory. Instead of being able to find a
respite to their misery, the fallen angels

ferry over this *Lethean* Sound
Both to and fro, thir sorrow to augment,
And wish and struggle, as they pass, to reach
The tempting stream, with one small drop to loose
In sweet forgetfulness all pain and woe,
All in one moment, and so neer the brink;
But Fate withstands, and to oppose th’attempt
*Medusa* with *Gorgonian* terror guards
The Ford, and of it self the water flies
All taste of living wight, as once in fled
The lip of *Tantalus*.\(^7\)

Underscoring the spiritual and emotional fallout of eternal impenitence, Milton uses the
restlessness of the fallen angels to signal the punitive effects of memory. Moreover, this image
figures Hell as a nightmarish vision of Augustine’s “innumerable fields, and dens, and caves of
my memory.”\(^8\) By the same token, Satan’s memory of the lost glory of heaven continues to
reinforce his “infinite despair,” forcing him to carry Hell within himself: “Which way I fly,
myself am Hell” (4.74-75). For Milton, separation from grace transforms memory into the
prisonhouse of the mind.

By contrast, Milton’s most concentrated representation of penitence in the epic poem
takes the form of a private confession, by which Adam and Eve can leave Eden “not
disconsolate” (11.113). More specifically, Michael’s intervention after Adam and Eve’s
penitential prayer functions as an idealized version of spiritual mediation and counsel that offers
a powerful image of the consolatory potential of private confession. By presenting Adam and
Eve’s prayer as being directly received by the Father, Milton appears to advance a form of
penitence centered on direct, private confession to God. Yet the introduction of Michael as a


divinely ordained spiritual and prophetic counselor intimates the importance of external counsel in effecting consolation. While Michael may differ significantly from the penitential guides of Spenserian allegory, his intervention achieves the same spiritual and emotional effect. Indeed, his revelation to Adam of the future and his administration of “gentle Dreams” (12.595) to Eve allow the couple to leave Eden with the ability “to choose / Thir place of rest” (12.646-47). In this sense, Milton figures an originary moment of spiritual counsel as providing the fundamental tools to “possess / A paradise within thee, happier farr” and confront the postlapsarian world with a certain degree of self-sufficiency (12.586-87).

Yet in *Samson Agonistes* Milton presents the incapacity of the individual mind to process the repercussions of shame and guilt. He centers the dramatic action in the first half of the play on Samson’s oscillations between despair and penitence. Like the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* restlessly traversing Hell, Samson describes himself as overcome with “restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm / Of Hornets arm’d, no sooner found alone, / But rush upon me thronging, and present / Times past, what once I was, and what am now” (*Samson Agonistes* 19-23). The effects of sin lead Samson to identify himself as a “[d]ungeon of [my]self” (156)—a striking image that manifests the extent to which “inward grief” (330) can lead to despair. Milton represents Samson’s progression toward regeneration not as coming from within, but rather from the Chorus’ and Manoa’s interventions. The Chorus’ statement that “counsel or consolation … may bring / Salve to … Sores; apt words have power to swage / The tumors of a troubl’d mind” reveals the extent to which spiritual guidance can adequately counter the mind’s generation of shame and guilt (183-85). In a recuperative process of discursive exchanges, the Chorus and Manoa’s chastisement and counsel allow Samson to recall his providential mission and, in sharp contrast to his sinful history, to act with “[n]othing dishonourable, impure, unworthy [to] / Our
God, our Law, my Nation, or my self” (1424-25). The cumulative effect of this process is to trigger an internal conversion in Samson through which righteousness replaces despair.

At the same time, these external interventions create a penitential role for Samson to inhabit, which he fulfills most strikingly in the rewording of the penitential language of the *Book of Common Prayer*. They also create a type of ministerial role by which he can reassert his providential identity. By assuming the role of a spiritual judge or casuist in his interaction with Dalila, Samson elicits a confession of her motives and, after judging it to be inadequate, the “sarcastic” forgiveness of her sins: “Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake / My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint. / At distance I forgive thee, go with that” (952-54). This role thus provides Samson with a means by which he can simultaneously distance himself from the memory of his past sins and condemn her to the judgment of public memory: “Bewail thy falseness, and the pious works / It hath brought forth to make thee memorable / Among illustrious women, faithful wives” (955-57). This emphasis on memory indicates his transition from desperation to renewed willingness in order to reinterpret his relationship to the divine will.

By the end of the drama, Samson may eventually exemplify a radical form of individuality and self-sufficiency, which the Semichorus foregrounds in the image of the phoenix, but this progression depends on the shift from imperfect penitent to spiritual judge. Samson’s adoption of these externally created roles signals how Milton conceptualizes private confession as an important means for effecting spiritual recovery and consolation.

---

9 Samson’s confession to Manoa—“Father, I do acknowledge and confess / That I this honour, I this pomp have brought / To Dagon” (448-50)—is taken from the minister’s exhortation to the congregation “to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickednes”; see “An order for Morning prayer daily throughout the yeare,” *The booke of common prayer, and administration of the Sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Churche of Englande* (London, 1559) A1.


The variety of seventeenth-century literary and theological discourses surrounding private confession indicates the ongoing importance of traditional penitential rituals in early modern England. Given the close association of private confession with Roman Catholicism, the semiotic shifts in the language of penitence, absolution, and the power of the keys sought to harmonize the biblical authorization of the practice with various Protestant theological currents in England. Yet the repeated emphasis on the consolatory potential of private confession in such a generically and chronologically diverse group of post-Reformation literary texts indicates a surprising degree of continuity from the late medieval to the early modern period. This continuity evinces the degree to which early modern English habits of thought were, to use Brian Cummings phrasing, “hybridized and mobile.”\textsuperscript{12} Despite the rise of spiritual autobiography and private diaries and the shift toward liturgical penitential practices and more spontaneous performances of penitence, then, the rite of private confession contained a semiotic charge that continued to exert a significant influence on the literary imagination. The repeated literary treatments of the relationship between private confession, memory, and desire point to a disjunction between representation and praxis, and gesture toward a type of hydraulic relationship between literature and its contexts.\textsuperscript{13} Yet the imagined confessions in early modern English literature lead not toward a closed system between reader and text, but constantly signal the spiritual and therapeutic value of hearing the words of forgiveness.

\textsuperscript{12} Brian Cummings, “Loving Lear,” Shakespeare and the Trace of Theology, Shakespeare Association of America, Sheraton Hotel, San Diego, 7 Apr. 2007.
\textsuperscript{13} I thank James Simpson for this terminology (personal communication, 2 Mar. 2007).
Works Cited


Allen, William. *A treatise made in defence of the laulf power and authoritie of priesthod to remitte sinnes of the peoples duetie for confession of their sinnes to Gods ministers: and of the Churches meaning concerning indulgences, commonlie called the Popes pardono[s].* Louvain, 1567.


*Articles of visitation and enquiry concerning matters ecclesiastical, according to the laws and canons of the Church of England Exhibited to the Church-wardens and sidemen of every parish within the diocess of Rochester*. London, 1666.

*Articles to be enquired of within the Diocese of Lincoln*. London, 1641.


Bagchi, David. “Luther and the Sacramentality of Penance.” Cooper and Gregory, eds. 119-27.

Bale, John. *The seconde part of the image of both churches after the most wonderfull and heavenly revelacyon of Saynt Johan the Evangelyst*. Antwerp, 1545.


---------. “Shakespeare’s Augustinian Artistry.” Battenhouse, ed. 44-50.


---------. “‘That which thou hast done’: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and *A Lover’s Complaint.*” Schiffer, ed. 431-54.


*The booke of common praier, and administration of the Sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Churche of Englande*. London, 1559.


“Confession and Absolution in Caroline Cambridge: The 1637 Crisis in Context.”
Cooper and Gregory, eds. 180-93.

“Good Pastors or Careless Shepherds? Parish Ministers and the English Reformation.”


Engel, Lars. “‘I am that I am’: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the Economy of Shame.” Schiffer, ed. 185-98.

Erasmus, Desiderius. A lytle treatise of the maner and forme of confession, made by the most excellent and famous clercke, M. Eras. of Roterdame. London, 1535.


Fulke, William. *A briefe confutation, of a popish discourse: lately set forth, and presumptuously dedicated to the Queenes most excellent Maiestie: by Iohn Howlet, or some other birde of the night, vnder that name Contayning certaine reasons, why papistes refuse to come to church, which reasons are here inserted and set downe at large, with their seuerall answeres*. London, 1583.


Hall, Basil. “The Early Rise and Gradual Decline of Lutheranism in England (1520-1600).”


---------. [The King’s Book.] *A necessary doctrine and erudicion for any chrysten man.* London, 1543.


Hillman, Richard. “Shakespeare’s Gower and Gower’s Shakespeare: The Larger Debt of


Innocent III, Pope. *The mirror of mans lyfe Plainely describing, what weake moulde we are made of: what miseries we are subiect vnto: howe vncertaine this life is: and what shal be our ende*. Trans. H. Kirton. London, 1576.


Kilroy, Gerard. “Requiem for a Prince: Rites of Memory in Hamlet.” Dutton, Findlay, and Wilson, eds. 143-60.


Love, Christopher. *The penitent pardoned a treatise wherein is handled the duty of confession of sin and the priviledge of the pardon of sin*. London, 1657.


----------. “Sin, Penance, and Privatization in the Renaissance: Redcrosse and the True Church.”


Right notable sermon, made by Doctor Martune Luther, vpon the twenteth chapter of Iohan, of absolution and the true vse of the keyes full of great co[m]forte. Ippeswich, 1548.


Matthews, Gareth B. “Knowledge and Illumination.” Stump and Kretzmann, eds. 171-85.


Menewe, Gracious. *A plaine subuersyon or turnyng vp syde down of all the argumentes, that the Popecatholykes can make for the maintenaunce of auricular confession with a moste wholsome doctryne touchyng the due obedience.* [Wesel, 1555].


Overell, M.A. “Recantation and Retribution: ‘Remembering Francis Spira,’ 1548-1638.” Cooper and Gregory, eds. 159-68.


---. *Tvvo Treatises: I. Of the nature and practise of repentance. II. Of the combat of the flesh and spirit*. Cambridge, 1593.


Schoenfeldt, Michael C. *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship.*


---------. *The Three-Text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio.*


*The sinners glasse collected out of Saint Augustine and other ancient fathers*. London, 1609.


Snow, Edward A. “Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and the Ends of Desire.” Kernan, ed. 70-110.


Southwell, S.J., Robert. *Short rule of good life. To direct the devout christian, in a regular, and orderly course. Newly set forth, according to the authors direction, before his death.* London, [1602-5].


[The Ten Articles.] *Articles devised by the kynges highnes maiestie, to stablyshe christen quietnes and vnitie amongst us, and to auoyde contentious opinio[n]s, which articles be also approued by the consent and determination of the hole clergie of this realme.*

London, 1536.


[Thirty-nine Articles.] Articles, whereupon it was agreed by the archbishoppes and bishoppes of both prouinces, and the whole cleargie, in the Conuocation holden at London in the yere of our Lorde God 1562. London, 1571.


[Vaux, Laurence]. *A brief fourme of confession instructing all Christian folke how to confesse their sinnes, [and] so dispose themselves, that they may enjoy the benefite of true pena[n]ce*. Antwerp, 1576.


CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

Ph.D., English Literature, The Pennsylvania State University, May 2007
M.A., English Literature, The Pennsylvania State University, August 2002
B.A., English Literature, University of San Francisco, Summa cum Laude, May 2000

ARTICLES


HONORS AND AWARDS

College of Liberal Arts Dissertation Award, Penn State, 2006
The Folger Institute Grant-in-Aid, The Folger Institute, 2005-2006
Rock Ethics Institute Fellowship and Research Award, Penn State, 2005-2006
Graduate Assistant Award for Outstanding Teaching, Penn State, 2005
Edwin Erle Sparks Fellowship in the Humanities, Penn State, 2002
Doctoral Research Fund Award, Penn State, 2002
Department of English Travel Grants, Penn State, 2002-2006
Alpha Sigma Nu (Jesuit Honor Society), 2000

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Research Assistant to Dr. Patrick Cheney, 2003-2004
Rock Ethics Institute Dissertation Research Group, Member 2005-2006
Graduate Council, Graduate Student Representative, 2004-2006
   Member of Committee on Student and Faculty Issues, 2004-2006
   Member of Committee on Committees and Procedures, 2005-2006
   Member of Committee on Programs and Courses, 2004-2005
Graduate Students Association, Departmental Representative, 2003-2005
English Department Mentor for Instructors of Freshman Composition, 2006-2007
Renaissance Reading Group, Directing Member, 2003-2005; Member, 2000-2007