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# Godly Fear, Sanctification, and Calvinist Theology in the Sermons and “Holy Sonnets” of John Donne

by Paul Cefalu

IN an influential interpretation of John Donne’s religious poetry, John Stachniewski suggests that doctrinal Calvinism underwrites the expressions of passivity, fear, and resentment in the “Holy Sonnets.” After tracing the influence of the Calvinist emphasis on total depravity, double predestination, and prevenient grace in the sonnets, Stachniewski concludes that “the sonnets reveal that Donne experienced tormented doubt of his salvation in a way not dissimilar to [the] Calvinist despairers.”<sup>1</sup> In response to such a one-sidedly Calvinist reading of the sonnets—a reading that Stachniewski shares with John Carey and, with certain qualifications, Barbara Lewalski—Richard Strier has argued provocatively that Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” are not consistently Calvinist in theology, and that throughout the “Holy Sonnets” Donne alternates between on the one hand an Erasmian belief in repentance as a means to salvation, and on the other hand a Reformation belief in passively received, justified righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

In advancing his argument, Strier suggests that Stachniewski and others have mistakenly linked the “Holy Sonnets” and Calvinism because Donne’s evident preoccupation with religious fear, broadly defined, is a preoccupation that runs throughout Reformation theology and Puritan sermons. Strier questions such an affiliation by pointing out that Calvinist theology, particularly the doctrine of justification by

<sup>1</sup> John Stachniewski, “The Despair of the ‘Holy Sonnets,’” *ELH* 48 (1981): 699. For an alternative, Augustinian interpretation of the “Holy Sonnets,” see Patrick Grant, “Augustinian Spirituality and the ‘Holy Sonnets’ of John Donne,” *ELH* 38 (1971): 542–61.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Strier, “John Donne Awry and Squint: The ‘Holy Sonnets,’ 1608–1610,” *Modern Philology* 86 (1989): 357–84.

faith, was meant to provide comfort: “contra Carey, the temptation to despair and the desire for assurance were good, not bad signs—‘comfortable’ ones, the preachers would have said.”<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging that the experience of theological fear is prominent in Donne’s poetry, Strier concludes that during his middle period, Donne did not see his religious experience in a distinctly Calvinist manner, and that Donne’s unabating expressions of doubt should be interpreted as doubt about the means to rather than status of salvation: “In the ‘Holy Sonnets,’ Donne clearly did not see his experience in a truly Bunyanesque way. It should be stated that there is a difference between being in doubt about your own salvation and being in doubt about the very means or method of salvation. I will try to demonstrate that the latter sort of doubt is present in many of the ‘Holy Sonnets.’”<sup>4</sup>

In the following pages, I argue that because Donne’s critics have not elaborated the nature of godly fear in relation to the Pauline distinction between justification and sanctification, they have not situated Donne’s “Holy Sonnets” in their proper theological context. The speaker in some of the more puzzling of the “Holy Sonnets” (sonnets 1, 6, and 19 in the 1635 edition) is not in doubt about the means of justification. The speaker is in doubt about his ability to maintain the status of his sanctification that has followed from his justification, and he often exploits the ambiguous nature of the differences between the two interfused stages of the *ordo salutis*. The speaker is concerned not with the proper means to attain the “new man,” but rather with the extent to which he has successfully abandoned the “old man” and grown in sanctified holiness. Since the circumstances leading to the “death” of the old man are routinely described by early modern theologians in terms similar to the death of the body as such, the speaker of the “Holy Sonnets” is able to provocatively blur distinctions between his impending physical death and the metaphorical death of his corrupt nature.

Godly fear enters into the saint’s life most prominently and influentially during the stage of regeneration, prompting the justified sinner to mortify the flesh as a means to avoid excessive confidence in his election. For Donne and English Calvinists generally, such reverential or “filial” fear, the elects’ fear of backsliding during sanctification, is ordinarily distinguished from “servile” fear, the fear of reprobation that predominates in unredeemed sinners but that may also be experienced by the saints. Since the speaker of the sonnets represents himself as well

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

advanced in the *ordo salutis*, but is unsure of the status of the relationship between his old and new natures, he exhibits primarily the filial fear of backsliding from his election rather than a servile fear of unrepentant death and damnation.

The scriptural source for much commentary on religious fear is Paul's remark in Philippians 2: "So then, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."<sup>5</sup> In his commentary on the passage, Calvin contrasts the Catholic and Reformed ways of interpreting Paul's exhortation to submit to God with fear and trembling. Calvin writes,

The Papists . . . pervert this passage so as to shake the assurance of faith, for the man that trembles is unsure. They, accordingly, take Paul's words as if we ought, during our whole life, to waver as to confidence of salvation. But unless we want Paul to contradict himself, he does not by any means exhort us to hesitation here, inasmuch as he everywhere recommends confidence and full assurance. . . . There are two kinds of fear; the one produces anxiety along with humility; the other hesitation. The former is opposed to fleshly carelessness and laziness, as well as to arrogance; the latter to assurance of faith. . . . Yet, so far is this fear from disturbing tranquility of conscience and shaking confidence, that it rather confirms it.<sup>6</sup>

Fear of God, which Calvin defines as a mixture of anxiety and humility, helps to maintain assurance by reminding the penitent of his potential for further sin in spite of his sense of election. In the *Institutes*, Calvin elaborates such a view of the role of fear in salvation, but he more precisely emphasizes the role of fear during the stage of regeneration (sanctification) in the *ordo salutis*. After a detailed discussion of the nature of faith, Calvin explains his decision to proceed with a discussion of sanctification prior to a discussion of justification:

The shortest transition [from a discussion of faith to one of free reconciliation and newness of life] . . . will be from faith to repentance; for repentance being properly understood, it will better appear how a man is justified freely by faith alone, and yet that holiness of life, real holiness, as it is called, is inseparable from the free imputation of righteousness. That repentance not only always follows faith, but is produced by it, ought to be without controversy.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, 12 vols. ([City of Publication]: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 11:253.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge ([City of Publication]: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 509.

Repentance or sanctification consists of both a mortification of the body (an abandoning of the “old man”) and a renewal of the spirit (a bestowal of the “new man”). While justification and sanctification are different in nature, they do not signify two discrete, chronologically unfolding stages in the order of salvation. Justification, which logically precedes sanctification, is a once-for-all, juridical or forensic act by which the sinner is imputed righteousness by God; sanctification signifies the gratuitous but gradual and continuous operation by which the Holy Ghost renews the nature of the justified sinner. As justification can be distinguished but not separated from sanctification, so “assured faith” can be distinguished but not separated from both justification and sanctification.

The important point for our purposes is that Calvin believes that godly fear is a necessary component specifically of sanctification. Calvin stresses that “repentance proceeds from a sincere fear of God,” and that “fear of God lies at the root of repentance.”<sup>8</sup> Calvin’s insistence that fear is a necessary condition and efficient cause of regeneration follows from his sense of the difficulty of managing habitual sin and mortifying the flesh:

As repentance begins with dread and hatred of sin, the Apostle sets down godly sorrow as one of its causes (2 Cor vii. 10). . . . It is not strange that this should be, for unless we are stung to the quick, the sluggishness of our carnal nature cannot be corrected; nay, no degree of pungency would suffice for our stupor and sloth, did not God lift the rod and strike deeper. There is, moreover, a rebellious spirit which must be broken as with hammers. The stern threatenings which God employs are extorted from him by our depraved dispositions.<sup>9</sup>

While religious fear (defined here as the penitent’s fear that he will not be able to “correct” his carnal nature) can serve as an efficient cause of godliness at different stages during the stages of salvation—to confirm assurance of faith, for example—it plays a primary role during the period after which faith and justification have been secured and just prior to a renewal of one’s inherently corrupt nature. When Calvin invokes godly fear, he ascribes such fear to the saints, those to whom God has imputed righteousness and who are just beginning to undertake the arduous process of moral renovation. While fear might enter into the picture earlier, Calvin stresses that godly fear does not play a primary role in causing the sinner to question either the status or means of his or her election.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Calvin's belief that fear is intimately connected to sanctification is a belief expressed by a number of early seventeenth-century English Calvinists. In *A Sermon of the Nature and Necessitie of Godly Feare* (1616), William Case distinguishes, as do most English Calvinists, between "servile" and "filial" fear: "the servile feare doth feare God because hee is just and powerfull, the filiall feare because hee is good and mercifull. The servile fear doth bridle sin, the filiall feare doth provoke unto righteousnesse."<sup>10</sup> Case then elaborates the relationship among filial fear, election, and sanctification, noting that while the justified elect should experience both servile and filial fear as components of regeneration, servile fear is simply a "preparative" to filial fear: "inasmuch as a Christian man is an Hypostasis, consisting of two natures, which the Scripture notes out by the Flesh and the Spirit, the Old Man and the New, and such like, therefore are both of these feares required, the one to restraints the power of sinne, the other to set forward the powers of righteousnesse."<sup>11</sup>

The stress on the importance of godly fear to regeneration frequently appears in seventeenth-century treatises specifically devoted to explaining the nature of the saint's ascent toward glorification, a state of virtue and perfection that can only be fully secured in the afterlife. In *The Right Use of Promises, or A Treatise of Sanctification* (1632), Jeremiah Lewis defines sanctification as a "growing up to perfect holinesse," and notes that "wee have the meanes how wee may doe this, The feare of God; Perfecting holinesse in the feare of God."<sup>12</sup> In *The Saint's Qualification, or A Treatise of Sanctification* (1637) John Preston closes his discussion of regeneration by exhorting his listeners to "learne to depend on Christ with much feare, to take heed of putting off the worke, when hee calls, take heed of denying him . . . you might be bold to put off your repentance, but take heed of that, when it is God that workes in you, when God must doe it, and hee doth when hee lists, when it is the Spirit that doth it, and it breathes when and where it lists; this may make you feare and tremble."<sup>13</sup> Later in the century, John Browne, following Calvin, cites Philippians 2 as a reminder that justified sinners should not proceed to grow in sanctified holiness with "too much self-confidence," since "God may, in justice and mercy, suffer corruption to break loose upon such . . . and tread them underfoot, to learne them afterward to

<sup>10</sup> William Case, *A Sermon of the Nature and Necessity of Godly Feare* (London, 1616), 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah Lewis, *The Right Use of Promises, or A Treatise of Sanctification* (London, 1632), 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> John Preston, *The Saint's Qualification* (London, 1637), 414.

carry more soberly; and to work out their salvation with fear and trembling."<sup>14</sup>

In the sermons, Donne follows Calvin and his contemporary English Calvinists in suggesting that godly fear helps to maintain assurance:

There is an ill security in the godly, when for the time, in their prosperity, they grow ill husbands of God's graces, and negligent of his mercies. . . . And there is a security of the faithfull, a constant perswasion, grounded upon those marks, which God, in his Word, hath set upon that state. . . . But yet this security is never discharged of that feare. . . . So there is no feare of God, though it have some servility. . . . but it is good. . . . Conceive no such feare as excludes spirituall joy, conceive no such assurance, as excludes an humble and reverentiall feare.<sup>15</sup>

Donne's comments here recapitulate Calvin's discussion of the role of fear in the assurance of faith. "Godly feare," for Donne, is "but a Reverance, it is not a Jealousie, a suspition of God."<sup>16</sup> While Donne does not offer in the sermons a detailed exposition of the moment at which fear becomes most formative during the stages of salvation, I believe that a fundamentally Calvinist view of the significance of filial fear as a precondition for the regeneration of the justified sinner runs throughout the "Holy Sonnets." More counter-intuitively, perhaps, I believe that in those sonnets in which the speaker superficially seems to be revealing a servile fear of reprobation, he actually is representing himself as an assured, justified sinner—he has already been called and elected—who is struggling with the manner in which he might free himself from the old man, mortify his flesh, and grow in holiness. But because the sonnets do not advance systematic theology in the manner of the seventeenth-century theological treatises on regeneration, the speaker of the sonnets is able to conflate playfully experiential distinctions between, for example, the death of the old man and his impending physical death, as well as conceptual distinctions between justification and sanctification.

As a preface to such an account, it will be helpful to review Barbara Lewalski's influential idea that the sonnets reflect the Protestant paradigm of salvation in programmatic, Pauline terms. For Lewalski, the sonnets should be interpreted as meditative exercises through which the speaker comes to terms with the interdependent, though discrete, stages of salvation, ordered as follows: election, calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Election refers to the pre-

<sup>14</sup> John Brown, *Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life* (Rotterdam, 1677), 93.

<sup>15</sup> John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 3:278–79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:125.

destinate status of every individual. Effectual calling “involves God’s awakening in him at whatever time God has appointed and by whatever means . . . such a sense of his desperate sinfulness.”<sup>17</sup> Justification refers to an imputation of righteousness. Adoption refers to the penitent’s awareness that he or she is a child of God. Sanctification “involves the actual but gradual repairing of the defaced image of God in the soul,” and glorification refers to the perfect restoration of the image of God in man.<sup>18</sup>

Lewalski then interprets the sequence of the 1635 sonnets according to the salvational sequence outlined above. Thus she argues that the first sonnet, “Thou hast made me,” “presents graphically the condition of anguish, terror, helplessness and despair accompanying the conviction of sin and guilt which is the first effect of God’s calling—the mollifying of hard and sinful hearts with which the Protestant spiritual drama begins.”<sup>19</sup> Her reading of the poem derives from her belief that the final couplet—“Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art / And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart”—represents the speaker’s awareness of his effectual calling.<sup>20</sup> Apart, however, from an emblem that depicts a heart drawn to a stone, Lewalski provides little evidence to support her notion that the couplet marks the speaker’s struggle with the earliest stage of effectual calling according to the Pauline scheme of salvation. The lines, in fact, bear a striking similarity to the following description of the justified sinner in Preston’s *Treatise of Sanctification*: “As soon as a man hath taken Christ, and is justified, there is a strong impression made upon his soule, by which he is caused to cleave unto him, and to long after him, as the Iron doth after the Load-stone, that cannot be at rest until it hath attained it.”<sup>21</sup> Although Preston specifically invokes a lodestone rather than the more generic “adamant,” he and Donne both suggest that the subject’s heart is effectually drawn to God as iron gravitates to an attracting agent. Preston explicitly describes the justified saint’s desire to continue the process of regeneration with God’s assistance; he does not describe the initial stage of the sinner’s struggle to accept and undertake an effectual calling. The implication is that Donne’s speaker, like Preston’s saint, is well on his way to regeneration and glorification according to Pauline soteriology.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Preston, *The Saint’s Qualification*, 295.

But how can we reconcile the notion that the speaker in “Thou hast made me” has already been turned to God, and is struggling to renew himself, with the speaker’s evident despair that death is imminent and that he needs to acquire God’s grace in order to die penitently? I would suggest that Donne’s critics have not appreciated the extent to which many of Donne’s meditations on death can be read as both descriptions of the speaker’s impending physical death and metaphorical accounts of the death of the speaker’s corrupt nature. In a 1624 sermon on the multiple significations of the term “resurrection,” Donne remarks that commentators have often interpreted resurrection too literally, and that a principal figurative meaning of the term describes the “death of sin,” from which follows a “resurrection from sin, by grace”: “sin is a death, and that needs a resurrection; and a resurrection is as great a work, as the very Creation it selfe. It is death *in semine*, in the roote, it produces, it brings forth death. . . . And in this spirituall death, and resurrection . . . Grace is the soule of the soule, and so the departing of grace, is the death, and the returning of grace is the resurrection of this sinfull soule.”<sup>22</sup>

Donne’s contemporaries typically invoke “death” and “resurrection” to describe regeneration and the death of the old man and resurrection of the new. In *A Sermon of Sanctification* (1608), Richard Crakanthorpe emphasizes the range of ways in which conversion is described in the Bible: “For which cause the Scripture calles our conversion unto God sometimes a resurrection from death, sometimes a new creation in Christ, but most usually a new birth, a quickening, or regeneration; to teach us, that as in our naturall birth and first creation, we are no agents at all to give life, will or motion to our selves, but all proceeds from him who breatheth life into a livelesse body.”<sup>23</sup> While Crakanthorpe suggests here that regeneration marks a “resurrection from death,” elsewhere he describes such a death as a death of sin: “God’s grace in our conversion is not only an excitant, but a . . . grace, whereby we are not wakened, but revived and quickened, as the Apostle saith, from the death of sinne.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Preston notes, “No man is ingrafted into Christ, but sin is crucified in him, he is dead thereto, that is, he is a dead man in regard of the life of sin, and is alive to God; as Christ rose from the dead, so is he raised to newnesse of life . . . we are ingrafted into the similitude of his death and resurrection.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, 6:64, 70–72.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Crakanthorpe, *A Sermon of Sanctification* (London, 1608), 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Preston, *The Saint’s Qualification*, 299.

If we read in a similar way Donne's meditations on death as both metaphorical references to conversion as well as descriptions of his impending death, we can make sense of some of the more difficult phrases and significations of "Thou hast made me." While the speaker's petition to have God "repair" him might be understood as the speaker's generic request for grace, the invocation of "repair" might also suggest a desire to be temporally reborn. That the speaker "runs" to death, and that death meets him "as fast," suggests further that the speaker actively pursues, in spite of his fear, the abandonment of his corrupt body. Lines 9–10 reinforce the point: "when towards thee / By thy leave I can look, I rise again."<sup>26</sup> Given that the speaker believes that God's compliance might enable him to "rise again," and given that such an act of rising would occur while the speaker is still alive, prior to his having been further tempted by "our old subtle foe," how can we say that the speaker is describing his imminent and unrepentant physical death? If "rise" implies resurrection, the most plausible referent, then the speaker has been experiencing an ongoing process of rising or resurrecting and then falling or "dying." Such a repetitive process of death and rebirth makes good sense if it refers to the incomplete process of temporal renewal that occurs following justification, a process during which the subject always possesses some remnant of the old body, "dead to sin," and the new nature that is able to rise in proportion as the sinful nature is repressed.

That Donne's references to death should be interpreted both literally and metaphorically is further suggested in sonnet 6, "This is my play's last scene." Given, as Lewalski, notes, the sonnet's familiar employment of biblical metaphors of life as a pilgrimage and an athletic race—"This is my play's last scene, here heavens appoint / My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race / Idly, yet quickly run" (ll. 1–3)—the sonnet seems to offer a straightforward account of the speaker's awareness of his impending death and his fear of God's judgment.<sup>27</sup> The problem, however, is that the sense of the couplet and the invocation of fear in the last line of the octave are not easily reconcilable with such an unproblematical account of the speaker's anxiety about his place in the afterlife. The couplet reads, "Impute me righteous, thus purged of evil, / For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devil" (ll. 13–14). Critics have puzzled over the precise meaning of the couplet. Lewalski, for example, finds it odd that

<sup>26</sup> All quotations are taken from *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Penguin Books, 1971). Line numbers will be cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>27</sup> Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, 268.

the speaker believes he will find salvation only if he is justified immediately before he dies: "The speaker hopes, with somewhat strained wit, that this justification might take place for him at the moment of death, for at that time (as not earlier) his soul will leave the body and his body will leave the world . . . [and] he can be said to leave 'the world, the flesh, and devill.'"<sup>28</sup>

Where Lewalski finds "strained wit," Strier finds a tension between Reformation doctrine and an anti-Reformation, "materialist" theology, suggestive of Erasmian nonsacramentalism: "The Reformation vocabulary does not correspond to the vision presented. . . . The whole point of the doctrine of imputation was to oppose the idea that one had to be 'purged of evil' to be saved. The sinner was saved not through being made righteous but through having Christ's righteousness counted as his ('imputed to' him) through the gift of faith in this 'alien righteousness.'"<sup>29</sup> Strier concludes that in this sonnet and others, "Donne's [Romanish] imagination hungered for actual purity, for imparted or attained not imputed righteousness."<sup>30</sup>

If we give careful attention to the language and syntax of the couplet, and then read the lines in the context of early-seventeenth century views on regeneration, I believe we will find that Donne is neither straining his wit nor espousing anti-Reformation doctrine. When Donne writes, "Impute me righteous, thus purged of evil" (l. 13), he seems to be playing on the notion of the inseparable but distinct nature of the relationship between justification and sanctification. An imputation of righteousness in its stark formulation suggests merely that the sinner's forensic status before God has been changed by Christ's saving intervention. Sanctification begins at the moment of justification but involves a growth in holiness over time, and hence can also be described as a state logically consequent upon justification. As Thomas Tuke writes in *The High-Way to Heaven, or The Doctrine of Election* (1609):

First . . . justification is out of a man; sanctification is within him. Secondly justification absolveth a sinner, and makes him stand righteous at the barrier of God's judgement; sanctification cannot do this. Thirdly justification brings peace of conscience, so doth not sanctification, but followeth that peace[.]<sup>31</sup>

Donne's reiteration of "thus" in the couplet suggests that consequent upon his justification he will become purged of evil, and then after such

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>29</sup> Strier, "John Donne Awry and Squint," 373-74.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Tuke, *The High-Way to Heaven, or The Doctrine of Election* (London, 1609), 182.

a purgation, he will be able to leave the "world, the flesh, and devil." He does not suggest that the act of imputation as such purges him of evil. Although the interval after which the sinner has been justified and purged of evil is not marked, the comma and pause following "righteous" leaves open exactly when such a purgative process begins and ends. The speaker's belief that as a consequence of justification he will be "purged of evil" is consistent with Reformation theology. Preston, for example, who emphasizes throughout his treatise that no regenerate individual is permanently purged of sin, has no trouble describing the regenerate subject as "free" of sin: "If Christ have accepted me for his, if he be mine, and will justifie me, and free me from my sins, then I will serve him in all things."<sup>32</sup> As Preston suggests, to the extent that the converted subject has acquired a new nature, he or she has been rendered "free" of evil. Since the process of cleansing and purgation is ongoing during creaturely life, this does not entail that the saint will not backslide and intermittently allow his residual old nature to reinstate sinful conduct. Thus Donne will draw a subtle comparison in a sermon on 1 and 2 Corinthians between purging the flesh of corruption during sanctification, and purging the "corruptibleness," the potential for corruption, only during glorification: "Our corrupt flesh must be purged by sanctification here, for the future kingdome, our naturall Corruptiblenesse must be purged by glorification there."<sup>33</sup>

Given that the sonnet closes with a compacted reference to the intimate relationship between justification and sanctification, we should be wary of assuming that the speaker one-sidedly describes a death-bed petition to have God savingly impute righteousness to him. The lines just as plausibly refer to the passing of one nature and an infusion of a new nature. While the final line's reference to the speaker's abandonment of the "world, the flesh, and devil" might be interpreted as a description of the prospect of his physical death, the lines might also be understood as metaphorical references to conversion. Preston, for example, directly invokes the "world, the flesh, and the devil" to describe the attachments of the old nature that the new nature subdues: "When the Spirit hath wrought this worke [regeneration], there is such a contrary inclination, such a propensnesse to God . . . that it over ballanceth all the Temptations that the world, the flesh, and the Devill can lay against it."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Preston, *The Saint's Qualification*, 286.

<sup>33</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, 3:117.

<sup>34</sup> Preston, *The Saint's Qualification*, 290.

If the couplet of “This is my play’s last scene” suggests that the speaker’s death signifies both his physical death and the death of sin, then we should consider whether the lines that precede the couplet should be interpreted literally and metaphorically. Here again, while some of the language no doubt suggests a literal death—“then, as my soul, to heaven her first seat, takes flight” (l. 9)—some of the language suggestively refers to the death of the speaker’s residually sinful nature, particularly the expressions of fear in the octave: “And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoint / My body, and soul, and I shall sleep a space, / But my ’ever-waking part shall see that face, / Whose fear already shakes my every joint” (ll. 5–8). In assessing these lines, Donne’s critics again express puzzlement. Strier notes, for example, that A. L. French “rightly finds it difficult to see ‘how we get from the face that is terrifying’ to the soul simply ‘taking flight’ to heaven, and he rightly finds the content of the vision ‘rather queer’—the idea of sins as somehow dissociated from the person who committed them, and as being ‘bred’ in a physical place external to the person in whom they perversely lodge.”<sup>35</sup> But given the efficiently causal relationship outlined above between fear and regeneration, as well as the tendency among English Calvinists to describe regeneration in terms of a figurative death and resurrection, Donne understandably shifts from an invocation of “shaking fear” to a resurrection of the speaker’s soul or new nature.

The focus on the terms “joint” and “unjoining” also can be seen as a description of the intricate process of regeneration. As Preston writes, “in the corruption of nature, there are the same naturall operations, but all is disordered and turned upside downe; thus was the confusion of man after the fall. But the New Creature doth worke the contrary, it sets up the house againe, and restirs us unto our first estate in Adam. When a man is made a New Creature, his soule is put in joynt againe.”<sup>36</sup> Through the experience of fear, Donne’s speaker’s corrupt body becomes further disjointed, until the successful mortification of the old nature and introduction of the new nature finally “unjoins” the two, which correspond in the sonnet, as they do in seventeenth-century sermons on regeneration, to the body and soul respectively. Donne does not suggest that the new nature, or soul, is “put in joynt,” but the implication is that the soul, once free of its “pressing” sins, can be rejoined and “purged of evil.”

One of the recurring themes in seventeenth-century treatises on sanc-

<sup>35</sup> Strier, “John Donne Awry and Squint,” 373.

<sup>36</sup> Preston, *The Saint’s Qualification*, 333.

tification, a theme, as I discuss below, that is pervasive in sonnet 19, "Oh, to vex me," is the inherently twofold and contradictory status of the nature of the regenerate subject. In *The Mystery of Mankind* (1619), William Loe writes that while "the godliest live in this world, they cannot attain to a full expulsion of the evill, and introduction of the good; but these two remaine like to opposite parties in a pittched field combating, and skirmishing the one with the other, that the most holy cannot do what they would."<sup>37</sup> Preston reiterates the point in *The Saint's Qualification*:

Two things thou shalt finde in thy selfe, if thy nature be changed, if thou have another nature in thee, though there be something in thee, that doth like the objects of thine own lusts, yet there is something in thee that abhors them, though there be an inclination that carries thee towards them, yet there is a contrary inclination that resists them, so there is something still that contradicts and opposeth them.<sup>38</sup>

"Oh, to vex me" makes clear Donne's preoccupation with the contradictory nature of the regenerate subject, as well as the relationship between sanctification and fear. It also introduces another preoccupation of Donne and his contemporaries, the nature of "habit" and its relationship to sin and virtue. The speaker complains, "Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one: / Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot / A constant habit that when I would not / I change vows, and in devotion. / As humorous is my contrition / As my profane love, and as soon forgot" (ll. 1–6). While much of this seems familiar and straightforward—the speaker is attempting to explain why he cannot settle on any single course, whether good or evil—the play on a "constant habit" of inconstancy extends Donne's intense preoccupation with the nature of habit that runs throughout the sermons. Never at a loss to find adequately lurid metaphors to describe the egregiousness of habitual sin, Donne admonishes, "We consider this plurality, this multiplicity of habituall sinnes, to bee got over our heads, as waters . . . that have stupefied us."<sup>39</sup> Donne remarks in another sermon, "When the multiplicity and indifferencie to less sins, and the habituall custome of some particular sin, meet in the aggravating of the burden: for then, they are heavyer then the sand of the Sea."<sup>40</sup>

Donne is at his most dogmatically Calvinist when he elaborates the

<sup>37</sup> William Loe, *The Mystery of Mankind* (London, 1619), 26.

<sup>38</sup> Preston, *The Saint's Qualification*, 376.

<sup>39</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, 2:114.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

nature of vicious habit (a preoccupation that appears throughout Augustine's *Confessions*, Calvin's *Institutes*, and seventeenth-century sermons) but refuses to allow, as a number of early modern Anglicans or Conformists do, a regimen of classically-inspired moral training, according to which the acquisition of virtuous habits can serve as counterweights to sinful habits. In the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Richard Hooker, drawing on Aristotelian and Stoic theories of moral habituation, writes, "The constant habit of well doing is not gotten without the custom of doing well, neither can virtue be made perfect but by the manifold works of virtue often practised."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Joseph Hall writes in *The Remedy of Profaneness*, "The Philosopher could say, and find that virtuous actions are delightful to well disposed minds, insomuch as it is defined for the surest argument of a good habit fully acquired, that we find contentment and delectation in good performances."<sup>42</sup>

In "Oh, to vex me" Donne suggests that the regenerate individual cannot benefit from the simple acquisition of virtuous habits, since the residual vicious habits of the old nature remain in constant tension with any new habits that the penitent might acquire. If the sanctified individual were to undertake a growth in holiness primarily by acquiring devout habits, as Hall and Hooker suggest, he or she would simply be acquiring a third, supervening habit, the habit of inconstancy. Donne's thoughts here are wonderfully clever, since late seventeenth-century latitudinarians often argue, as I describe elsewhere, that a sinful habit should be construed as a sin unto itself, added to the discrete sins of which the sinful habit is constituted.<sup>43</sup> By suggesting that the regenerate subject might unproductively acquire a habit of inconstancy, Donne seems to be parodying the classically-inspired belief in the efficacy of countervailing, virtuous habits, and anticipating a more benign version of the latitudinarian belief that an ingrained habit is more than the sum of its parts.

I would suggest that in "Oh, to vex me" godly or filial fear serves the function that virtuous habits serve for early modern Anglican theologians. The speaker finds resolution in the thought that even though his habitually inconstant devout fits "come and go away / Like a fantastic

<sup>41</sup> Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, book 5, in *The Works of Richard Hooker*, vol. 2, ed. John Keble (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 393.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Hall, *The Remedy of Profaneness*, in *The Works of Joseph Hall*, vol. 6 (Oxford: D. A. Talboys, 1837), 351.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Cefalu, "'Damned Custom . . . Habits Devil': Shakespeare's Hamlet, Antidualism, and the Early Modern Philosophy of Mind," *ELH* 67 (2000): 399–431.

ague" (ll. 12–13), "those days are my best days, when I shake with fear" (l. 14). Godly fear stands apart from habit to the extent that it does not, according to Donne, become an ingrained disposition or attribute of the regenerate subject. In a suggestive comment on the nature of godly fear, Donne addresses the case of the penitent who seeks ease and rest in any endeavor, however virtuous:

God does not onely not tell him, *who* shall have his riches, but he does not tell him, *who* shall have his soule. He leaves him no assurance, no ease, no peace, no rest. Here. This rest is not then in these things; not in their *use*; for they are got with labor, and held with feare; and these, labour and feare, admit no rest; not in their *nature*; for they are fluid, and transitory, and moveable, and these are not attributes of rest.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike habits, whether virtuous or vicious, which risk becoming second nature and hence taken for granted, the nature of fear is "transitory" and "moveable"; it defies rest. Such an account of the fluidity of godly fear is extended in "Oh, to vex me" to imply that fear is an integral feature of regeneration because it is universally incapable of being mastered or becoming second nature. In a 1624 sermon Donne warns that "there is a fear, which grows out of a second nature, Custome, and so is half-naturally, those men that have it. The custome of the place we live in, or of the times we live in, or of the company we live in. . . . The fear of the Lord is not a Topicall, not a Chronicall, not a Personall, but a *Catholique*, a *Canonickall*, a *Circular*, an *Universall* fear."<sup>45</sup> When the speaker concludes "Oh, to vex me" by remarking that "those are my best days, when I shake with fear," he is maintaining, given the open-endedness of the demonstrative "those," that the onset of fear is something that he cannot predict, something that is indeed "inconstant," but valuable precisely because it is not a settled habit or disposition. Defined thus, fear is truly a "virtue," as Donne suggests in a 1619 sermon: "Can any man make so ill use of so great virtues, as the feare of God and the hate of sinne?"<sup>46</sup> As in sonnets 1 and 6, in "Oh, to vex me," godly fear provides the regenerate subject with direction and consolation, not despair at the prospect of reprobation.

I have argued that Donne follows Calvin in emphasizing an intimate causal link between godly fear, defined broadly as reverence for God, and sanctification. For Donne, as for seventeenth-century English

<sup>44</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, 5:208–9.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, *Sermons*, 6:107.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, *Sermons*, 2:332.

Calvinists generally, fear enters most prominently into the order of salvation after the sinner has been deemed righteous by God. I have also argued that a selection of sonnets that seem to be overtly about the fear of damnation and the difficulty of deathbed repentance should also be interpreted as metaphorical accounts of the speaker's conversion experience. Since commentators like Stachniewski have not read Donne's meditations on death as accounts of the irresolvable tensions between the old and new nature of the penitent, they have mistakenly assumed that the sonnets' preoccupation with religious fear reflects the speaker's single-minded fear of reprobation. In the sonnets discussed above, however, the speaker's anxieties just as plausibly reflect his concern with the possibilities of either further perfecting his holiness or backsliding from his election. Although a full discussion of Donne's theory of virtue is beyond the range of this essay, I have suggested that Donne ultimately views godly fear as a virtue that is put to use by the moral agent, a virtue that should not be construed as a habit or settled disposition.

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