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Love's Rites: Performing Prayer in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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IN SEVERAL WELL-NOTED BUT UNEXAMINED DECLARATIONS OF DEVOTION addressed to the beloved in Shakespeare's Sonnets, the poet defends what seems like a penchant for rewriting the same poem over and over. Against the implicit accusations of his beloved, the poet compares his apologia in Sonnet 108 to a kind of spoken prayer, a highly ritualized and publicly performed devotional gesture:

like prayers diuine,
I must each day say ore the very same,
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine
Euen as when first I hallowed thy faire name.
(108.5–8)¹

Echoing the beloved's doubts, he asks whether repeated words have the capacity to express the depth of his love: "What's new to speake, what now to register, / That may expresse my loue, or thy deare merit?" (ll. 3–4).

These questions have bothered more than just the poet's friend. Generations of critics of the Sonnets have shared the beloved's concern over the repetitive nature of the sequence's devotional tropes, finding that the blandness of sentiment betrays a desire that expresses itself "monotheistically, monogamously, monosyllabically, and monotonously."² Moreover, the Sonnets' references to litur-

I thank my colleagues at the Renaissance Colloquium at Harvard University for their responses to an earlier version of this essay. In particular, Misha Teramura offered valuable insight about my historical treatment of the antitheatrical tradition. Stephen Greenblatt read a later version of the manuscript in its entirety and clarified and strengthened my argument. David Schalkwyk, Mimi Godfrey, and the anonymous readers at *Shakespeare Quarterly* provided suggestions at various stages of my writing and research. Finally, John Pitcher influenced my thinking about prayer in the Sonnets when I first began formulating this essay.

¹ I have taken all citations of the Sonnets from the 1609 Quarto edition, see *Shakespeare's sonnets Neuer before imprinted* (London: T[homas] T[horpe], 1609), STC 22353.

² Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986), 141. In a similar vein, Joseph Peguigney detects a "whiff of boredom" on the poet's part in Sonnets 105 and 108, two poems that "proffer various rationalizations for laxity in sonneteering." See *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985), 192, 193. John Kerrigan concludes that the poet's celebration of

gical performance have come under fire for more than purely aesthetic reasons. Critics such as Stephen Booth who have focused on the Sonnets' devotional language have understood the poet's performance of ritualized prayer as evidence of his hypocrisy, citing Christ's commandment to "vse no vaine repetitions as the heathen: for they thinke to be heard for their much babbling."³ Consequently, critics have been consumed with the question of why Shakespeare's poet commits the double offense first of writing bad poetry, and then of resorting to sacrilege to defend his lack of craftsmanship. Yet what critics have largely overlooked is the Sonnets' preoccupation with devotional processes that fail to produce genuine devotion on the part of the one who prays. The tropes derided as tautologous or dull speak directly to the interplay in the Sonnets between "outward forme" and "what's in the brain" (108.14, 1).

This essay poses a small corrective to the longstanding critical tradition of viewing prayer in the Sonnets as either a cause for suspicion or a mere backdrop to what the poet really wanted to say about something else entirely.⁴ We cannot understand the poet's arguments for his reiterated, public expressions of devotion apart from the wider early modern cultural practices in which reiterated utterance is elicited, or even required. Indeed, Shakespeare wrote his Sonnets when the practice of common prayer was revitalized and refashioned during Elizabeth I's reestablishment of the Anglican Church, which officially instated Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* for use by the Church of England

that which has already been said, in the end, conduces to an aesthetics of repetition and tautology, resulting in poems that are "scrupulously and Shakesperianly dull, but . . . dull nonetheless." See John Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets and "A Lover's Complaint"* (London: Penguin, 1986), 29.

³ Matthew 6:6–7. I have taken all references to the Bible from Laurence Tomson's edition of the Geneva New Testament, *The Newe Testament of Ovr Lorde Iesvs Christ* (London: Christopher Barker, 1586 [1560]), STC 2887. Noting the litany-like repetition of the quatrain ("thou mine, I thine") and the direct reference to the Lord's Prayer ("hallowed thy faire name") in Sonnet 108, Booth reads the lines as the poet's "apparent obliviousness to the implication of his words." Booth notes that the Lord's Prayer is prefaced in the gospel of Matthew by Christ's *Sermon on the Mount*, in which Christ explicitly associates public, ritualized prayer with hypocrisy. See Stephen Booth, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1977; repr., New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 349.

⁴ While Booth acknowledges the copious references to the Eucharist in his commentary on Sonnet 125, he nevertheless downplays the contribution the Eucharist makes either imagistically or as an analogy to gestures of erotic devotion: "None of the evidence is such as would lead a reader to think about the Eucharist while he reads the poem." Booth's comments on the sonnet's fundamental nonreligiousness resonate with longstanding views of Shakespeare as an essentially theologically neutral playwright. Both David Bevington and Roland Mushat Frye have suggested that Shakespeare's plays are inherently "non-theological," as Bevington has termed them, with all reference to religion merely comprising the backdrop to the dramatic coherency. See Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1968), 201–2; Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963), 265–71; and Booth, 430.

beginning in 1559. Contextualizing our readings of Shakespeare's Sonnets within early modern conceptions of common prayer enables us to move beyond readings of ritualized prayer as evidence of hypocrisy or feigned affection. On the contrary, devotion in the Sonnets, as in the secular theater houses and in the Anglican Church, is deeply informed by public performance.

The assumption that the public and the private self are separable agents deeply opposes the belief in the continuity between outward behavior and inward thought that surfaces in two seemingly discordant domains of Elizabethan society: the English Church and the Puritan opponents of the theater. In the Sonnets' preoccupation with the relationship between outward form and inward thought, we find one example of an early modern commitment to the belief that common forms of prayer afforded a devotional effectiveness that spontaneous prayer did not.

We can only perceive in full what critics have dismissed as either hypocrisy or aesthetic dullness within the contexts of contemporary early modern conceptions of both ecclesiastical and secular performance. In reading public gestures of devotion in the Sonnets, I start with historical conceptions of early modern performance—with respect to both the professional theater and the state church.⁵ The disparate and seemingly opposed domains of the Elizabethan Anglican Church and the secular theater house reveal powerful transfers and resonances between Anglican orthodoxy and the dissenting Puritan antitheatricalists. While the Puritans warned against the transformative powers of playacting, which threatened to alter the internal selves not only of professional actors but of their spectators, the Church reformers acknowledged communal prayer's comparable power to spiritually transform not only the one who prays but also those who hear his prayers. Co-opting the logic shared by Church orthodoxy and Puritan antitheatricalism, the Sonnets configure acts of devotion and praise as public performances that produce commensurate devotional states in the one who praises. In this configuration, the poet's individual experience of devotion in the Sonnets stands not so much in contrast to observable behavior and public acts of adoration but is, on the contrary, deeply correlated with performed gestures of praise.⁶

⁵ For several recent studies on the cultural transfers between the secular theater and the state Church, see Jeffrey Knapp, *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002), esp. 115–40; Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001); Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997); and Bryan Crockett, *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995).

⁶ Several recent studies propose that Anglo-Catholic practice of state-sanctioned public prayer blurred the distinctions between internal and external. See Targoff, 4–28; Judith Maltby,

I

In his book-length study, David Schalkwyk has rightfully pointed out an odd feature of the Sonnets' language of praise. Rarely does language in the Sonnets provide a descriptive function.⁷ Unlike Petrarch's Laura, Sidney's Stella, Daniel's Delia, or Greville's Caelica, we never learn what Shakespeare's young man looks like, much less his name. If praise in the Sonnets does not describe the beloved, then its performed speech acts have a forcefulness independent of information transmission. The Sonnets' acts of praise negotiate the sequence's rifts and ruptures, between inward and outward, poet and beloved, and performer and audience. The anxieties about the expression of eros within the Sonnets are animated by contemporary concerns about the role of repeated utterances in a variety of cultural contexts more generally.

A direct comparison between secular performance and religious liturgical rites comes early in the sequence in Sonnet 23, in which poet compares his inability to offer a public show of praise to a kind of stage fright, an inability to perform:

As an vnperfect actor on the stage,
Who with his feare is put besides his part, . . .
So I for feare of trust, forget to say,
The perfect ceremony of loues right.
(23.1–2, 5–6)

Although critics of the Sonnets have read a distinction between inward and outward in the sequence,⁸ the poet's display of devotion blurs our ability to determine inward experience from outward gesture. Like an overzealous actor "replete with too much rage" who fails to sustain a cohesive role for himself, the poet fears that his inability to sustain outward gestures of devotion threat-

Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 30; and Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Alters: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 15–39, 103–23.

⁷ David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 1–28, esp. 7–9.

⁸ In a reading of the role of sacrament in the Sonnets, Richard C. McCoy argues that the poet "seems intent on moving past outward signs" to an inward space that might be more genuinely touched by religious ritual. See "Love's Martyrs: Shakespeare's 'Phoenix and Turtle' and the Sacrificial Sonnets," in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 188–209, esp. 200. With respect to the early modern lyric more broadly, Louis Martz and Anne Ferry both posit conceptions of inwardness opposed to outward show; see Ferry, *The "Inward" Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, and Donne* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983); and Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973).

ens to "Ore-charge with burthen [his] owne loues might," causing his "owne loues strength . . . to decay" (23.3, 8, 7). The poet's immediate concern is that his inability to perform public gestures of devotion will threaten his ability to sustain his love for his friend. Preoccupied with the state of his love, the poet draws a causal connection between his failure to perform the proper rites of love and his inability to feel commensurate love for his beloved. The poet urges his beloved to subscribe to a view of devotion that is indistinct from performed gesture, claiming that his outward "looks" provide a fair index of what transpires in his heart:

O let my looks be then the eloquence,
 And domb presagers of my speaking brest,
 Who pleade for loue, and look for recompence,
 More then that tonge that more hath more exprest.
 (ll. 9–12)⁹

Here, inward expression is not opposed to theatricality but is coexistent with it. The melding of emotional states and public show in Sonnet 23 articulates a sense of interiority that evokes the model of inwardness implicit in the Puritan antitheatricalists' critique of the secular theater.

At the core of the antitheatricalists' invectives against the playhouses lay the belief that playacting blurred the boundaries between an actor's seeming and being. As Ramie Targoff argues convincingly in her study of theatrical and religious performance in early modern England, for the antitheatricalists, theatrical performance eroded the distinctions between internal states and outward show. It exercised transformative power over actors and audiences alike.¹⁰ For the Puritan polemicist Phillip Stubbes, not only did playacting constitute a form of idolatry, the affectation of vices on stage threatened to internalize those very vices in the audience:

Playes were first inuented by the Deuil, practiced by the heathen gentiles, and dedicate to their false ydols, Goddes and Godddesse. . . . Do they not maintaine bawdrie, insinuate foolery, & remembrance of hethen ydolatrie? . . . if you will learne falsehood, if you will learn cozenage: if you will learn to deceiue: if

⁹ Although the 1609 Quarto reading is *books*, most editors emend the line to read *looks*. In my reading, I have chosen to adhere to the more common editorial reading of *looks*. For a discussion of both readings, see Booth, 172.

¹⁰ See Targoff, 1–13. For the history of Puritan antitheatricalism, see also Diehl; Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981), 80–131; Elbert N. S. Thompson, *The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage* (New York: Henry Holt, 1903); William Ringler, "The First Phase of the Elizabethan Attack on the Stage, 1558–1579," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 5 (1942): 391–418; and Russell A. Fraser, *The War Against Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970).

you will learn to play the Hipocrit: if you will learn to playe the vice, to swear, teare, and blaspleme, both Heauen and Earth . . . you need to goe to no other schoole, for all these good Examples, may you see painted before your eues in enterludes and playes.¹¹

Appropriating the Platonic conception of mimesis as an ultimately transformative process, Stubbes believes that dramatic performance infuses performers and spectators with affected vice.¹² He defines hypocrisy not as a widening of the divide between a player's performance and his personal inclinations; on the contrary, hypocrisy entails the opposite transformation. Highlighting the connectedness of public gesture and intention, Stubbes concludes that the simple performance of vice holds the power to transform cognitive states, corrupting both the actor's behavior and moral resolve. Just as an actor internalizes vice through the performance of wicked deeds, so too does the poet in Sonnet 23 fear that by failing to properly perform the rites of love, he runs the risk of destroying his very capacity for devotion.

We can best understand the comparison between the secular theater house and religious rites in Sonnet 23 if we look at the culturally specific transfers that took place between the Elizabethan theater and the Anglican Church. Ironically, in the orthodoxy of the official state Church we detect a conception of inward experience, very similar to the view put forth by radical Puritan antitheatricalists like Stubbes, which rendered it profoundly contingent upon external gesture. In 1608, a clergyman in the Church of England named Samuel Hieron penned what was to become the influential private devotional handbook, *A Help unto Devotion*, which appeared in a new edition nearly every year for the first decade after its initial printing. The title page of the tract promises to instruct lay parishioners in "certain moulds or forms of prayer, fitted to seuerall occasions; & penned for the furtherance of those, who haue more desire then skil, to poure out their soules in petitions vnto God."¹³ The frontispiece inscription conveys the early modern belief that common forms of prayer reveal an effectiveness that spontaneous worship can often achieve. In the dedicatory epistle to his devotional, Hieron outlines his motivations for providing lay worshipers with the proscribed "moulds" and "forms" of common prayer, observing that a lack of artfulness in all too many lay worshipers has the debilitating effect of hinder-

¹¹ Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583), sigs. L7–L9.

¹² For a discussion of the Platonic underpinnings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan antitheatricalism, see Barish, 5–37; and Thompson, 9–26.

¹³ With the exception of the year 1609, Hieron's *Helpe* underwent subsequent print editions each year between 1608 and 1618, and enjoyed wide popularity well into the middle of the century. See Samuel Hieron, *A helpe vnto deuotion containing certain moulds or forms of prayer, fitted to seuerall occasions* (London, 1608).

ing sincere prayer: "For want of exercised wits, of knowledge in the Scriptures, and especially of experience in the power of godliness, and of a liuely sense and distinct conceiuing of their own personall necessities, they are not able to bee their owne messengers, not to doe their owne errand, in presenting the sacrifice of Prayer before the Lord."¹⁴ In his note to the Christian reader at the outset of the volume, Hieron contends that outward show of devotion plays a necessary role in proper worship by preparing the supplicant's mental and emotional states. Prescribed prayer is "but a means rather of quickening and stirring vp the spirit of him that prayeth . . . his spiritual feeling shall increase, enlarge any particular request, if it bee not so full to his present case."¹⁵ Paralleling Stubbes's critique of the theater, Hieron appropriates a conception of inward experience that is indebted to outward performance.

These conceptions of early modern inwardness that emerge from such disparate domains as the secular theater house and the state Church shed light on the poet's culturally specific announcements in Sonnet 23 that his outward show of devotion effectively and accurately serves as a signpost for his unarticulated internal states: "O learne to read what silent loue hath writ, / To heare with eies belongs to loues fine wit" (ll. 13–14). As far as the Puritan antitheatricalists and the defenders of Anglican orthodoxy were concerned, there was a direct correspondence between one's experience of devotion and the public show of that devotion. This is what Shakespeare co-opts when he asks his beloved to do what has seemed to modern critics to be the impossible: namely, to read his mind simply by observing his external comportment.

II

The poet provides a direct response to the implicit critical tendency to prioritize individual sentiment over public expression in Sonnet 108, which commences by echoing the queries of the beloved: "What's in the braine that ink may character, / Which hath not figur'd to thee my true spirit?" (ll. 1–2). We recall that Stephen Booth finds in the language of devotion—the poet's ritual of "each day say[ing] o'er the very same" laudatory tropes, like "prayers divine"—evidence for the poet's hypocrisy. In her reading of the sonnet, Helen Vendler, like Booth, remains committed to maintaining the distinction between devotional feeling and public performance. Vendler identifies what she calls the poet's "inner 'rebellion'" against the "young man's enslavement to novelty," as if devotional intensity in the sonnet must necessarily emanate from something imperceptible to spectators observing from without.¹⁶ Yet it is clear that the sonnet holds precisely the

¹⁴ Hieron, sig. A4v.

¹⁵ Hieron, sig. A7v.

¹⁶ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 460, 459.

opposite; in repeating the ancient forms of praise, the poet finds “eternall loue in loues fresh case,” a love weighed down neither by the “dust and iniury of age” nor one that succumbs to those “necessary wrinkles” that plague many another hackneyed phrase (108.9–11). The syntax of the final couplet of Sonnet 108 has contributed to the longstanding critical misreading that finds support in the sonnet for the distinction between genuine devotion and the ritual performance of empty praise. In seeking eternal love in the antique panegyrics, the poet finds “the first conceit of loue there bred, / Where time and outward forme would shew it dead” (ll. 13–4). Vendler interprets the final line of this Sonnet as an admission that, when judged according to time and outward form, ancient conceits of love indeed “appear dead.”¹⁷ Readings such as Booth’s and Vendler’s that seek to position outward form as antithetical to genuine devotion raise a problem with Sonnet 108. The poet’s means of “finding the first conceit of loue” indeed require him to resort to the very deference to “outward forme” that critics have read as a betrayal of individual conviction. There is a problem either with the poem or with the poet. Either the poem’s logic is faulty, or the poet is insincere.

I propose a way of thinking about performed prayer and real conviction in Sonnet 108 that enables us to resolve the seeming tensions between what the poet says in the initial two quatrains and then in the couplet. If we read the final line of the couplet as the protasis of a loosely constructed concessive clause, we might then reword the final couplet to mean the following: “Although my rivals think that time and outward form *would* (might be expected to) show ancient love dead, (on the contrary) I find in the repeated form of these ancient tropes the first conceit of love there bred.”¹⁸ When we read the final couplet to mean something like this, then the implicit problem raised by readings that posit public gestures against heartfelt devotion ceases to puzzle.

For those early moderns committed to the connectiveness of performance and devotional feeling, it was intuitive that the poet’s repeated panegyric tropes, uttered daily like “prayers divine,” would lead him not into hypocrisy but toward a fuller understanding of love. The poet assumes the role of performer in sonnet 108, but he undergoes a role reversal in Sonnet 85, in which he imagines himself not as performer but as spectator to his rivals’ utterances of praise. While the poet in Sonnet 108 justifies his proclivity to repeat himself over and

¹⁷ Vendler, 459.

¹⁸ Booth observes that one meaning of *would* in the couplet is anticipatory, that is, “might be expected to” (350). W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath’s paraphrase of the couplet similarly emphasizes the anticipatory valence of *would*: the poet finds “the original ideal of love still perpetuated in that formula which the passage of time and the pattern of the words might seem to render obsolete.” See *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (London: U of London P, 1964), 250.

over, in Sonnet 85 he apologizes for what some might qualify as an even greater transgression—his mimicry of the words of others. The poet, like an “vnlettered clarke still crie[s] Amen / To euery Himne that able spirit affords / In polisht forme of well refined pen” (85.6–8). He admits his penchant for freely assenting to unoriginal sentiment: “Hearing you praisd, I say ’tis so, ’tis true” (l. 9).

The trope has brought critical censure not only against the poet’s efforts to praise his beloved using well-worn phrases, but against various early modern liturgical traditions that critics have associated with the sonnet’s conceit. Booth has compared the “vnlettered clarke” to a priest lacking knowledge of Latin, and consequently casts doubt upon the poet-parishioner’s capacity for individual conviction.¹⁹ With Kerrigan and Hyder Edward Rollins, he finds the sonnet’s alluding to the apostle Paul’s warning against the dangers of praising in tongues, because the practice of glossolalia activates the spirit but not the mind:²⁰ “Els, when thou blesses with the spirite, how shall he that occupieth the roome of the vnlearned, say, Amen, at thy giuing of thankes, seeing he knoweth not what thou sayest?”²¹ Protestant critics of the Catholic liturgy leveled a similar argument against the Latin Mass. In his Preface to the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, Cranmer draws precisely this connection between Paul’s cautions against prayers in tongues and the Latin liturgy: “Wheras Saint Paul would have suche language spoken to the people in the church, as they might understande, and have profite by hearing the same: the service in this church of Englande (these many years) hath been read in Latine to the people, which they understand not: so that they have heard with their eares onely and their heartes, spirite, and minde, have not been edified thereby.”²² Cranmer did not counsel against the practice of communal prayer, which in itself did not pose the dangers of incomprehension that loomed paramount in the minds of the enemies of the Church, but rather against forms of worship that threatened to inhibit cognitive understanding.

Readings of Sonnet 85 that draw comparisons between the poet’s assent to the praises of others and either the Latin liturgy or the practice of speaking in tongues are problematic in one respect. Whether praying in Latin or in tongues, the lay parishioner cannot access the literal meaning of the words being uttered. In Sonnet 85, the “hymn that able spirit affords” (l. 7) is ostensibly composed in the English vernacular. Contrary to longstanding critical readings of reli-

¹⁹ Booth, 287.

²⁰ Booth, 287; Kerrigan, 280; and Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1971), 1:216.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 14:16.

²² Thomas Cranmer, “The Preface,” *The booke of common praier, and administration of the Sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Church of Englande* (London, 1559), STC 16292, sig. A5r.

gious allusion in Sonnet 85, we can surmise that the poet refers to neither the practice of the Latin Mass nor glossolalia in articulating his outward show of devotion for his beloved. The poet is *unlettered* because he cannot compose his own original and spontaneous verse; he is literally devoid of the constituent letters and words that come together in his rival's praises of his beloved. Nowhere does the poet indicate that he cannot understand the literal meaning of those words when they are uttered by others. The dangerous schism between the cognitive and spiritual faculties potentially introduced by the practices of either glossolalia or the Latin liturgy is rendered irrelevant to the conceit of Sonnet 85. Indeed, the sonnet alludes to neither prayers in tongues nor the Latin Mass, but to cultural practices that lay closer to Shakespeare's own historical moment: the performance of the Protestant liturgy and common prayer in the Anglican Church. That proper devotional sentiment must exist prior to the performance of public gesture is a modern critical assumption that has skewed readings of religious tropes in the Sonnets, giving rise to interpretations that read the poet's "amens" as evidence of ignorance, unoriginal sentiment, or even hypocrisy. But there is evidence that there were other early modern lyric and liturgical occasions in which giving assent to public, reiterated forms of speech had the effect of deepening spiritual devotion for those who participated with their "amens." The clergyman Christopher Harvey emphasized the devotional effectiveness of authorized common prayer in his 1640 collection of poems *The Synagogue*, an imitation of George Herbert's *The Temple* (1633). In a poem entitled "The Book of Common Prayer," an addition to the 1647 edition of the collection, Harvey writes that those who join in the practice of common worship need not fear that they blaspheme by giving their assent and contributing their "amens" to the collective voice:

They need not fear
To tune their hearts unto his tongue, and say
Amen; nor doubt they were betray'd
To blaspheme, when they should have pray'd.²³

Reminiscent of Samuel Hieron's belief that the proper practice of devotion has the power to hone devotional affect on the part of the one who prays, the *Synagogue* asserts that the early moderns saw nothing either shameful or hypocritical in giving assent—in saying "amen"—to prayers performed by others. Artful forms of common prayer might even do for the parishioner what original, spontaneous worship could not. Harvey's poem alerts us to the Anglo-Catholic

²³ Christopher Harvey, *The Synagogue, or, The Shadow of the Temple. Sacred Poems, and Private Ejaculations. In Imitation of Mr. George Herbert*, 2nd ed. (London, 1647), Wing H1045, sig. C3r.

belief that proper external comportment during communal worship might be a prerequisite for, and not just a manifestation of, genuine devotion. In the final stanza of the poem, Harvey emphasizes how the proper practice of prayer betters the one who prays:

Devotion will adde life unto the letter;
 And why should not
 That which Authority
 Prescribes esteemed be
 Advantage got?
 If the pray'r be good, the commoner the better.²⁴

Harvey articulates precisely the early modern view that engagement with external gestures of devotion invigorates the practitioner, enabling his devotional commitment.

Returning to the final couplet of Sonnet 85, we observe that the poet alludes to precisely the forms of worship Harvey, and Hieron before him, believed were best suited to producing devotional conviction on the part of the parishioner: "Then others, for the breath of words respect, / Me for my dombe thoughts, speaking in effect" (85.13–14). The *effect* through which the poet attests an observer might detect his unsung devotion for his beloved could simply mean "in fact, in reality," which would juxtapose the poet's actions against the mere "breath of words" spoken by his betters.²⁵ During the late sixteenth century, *effect* could also indicate outward manifestations, signs, tokens, or symptoms of otherwise undetectable phenomena.²⁶ The wit of the sonnet lies in its attempt to shift his readers' attitudes regarding the role of the perceptual faculties in the external expression of devotion. The poet's dumb show, the symbols and gestures that affect not only his own senses but those of his spectators, is the very reason for his esteem before his rivals and readers. As Schalkwyk has written, Sonnet 85 is testament to the fact that inwardness is not a state ultimately unknowable to observers looking from without, for it is the very performative force of the poet's language that makes intelligible his private thoughts.²⁷

²⁴ Harvey, sig. C3v.

²⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), s.v. "effect, *n.*," lists *in effect* as "in fact, in reality (opposed to *in show, in words*).²⁵ See also "effect, *n.*," 5b, "practical reality, fact, as opposed to name or appearance." *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, March 2012), <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/59664> (accessed April 23, 2012).

²⁶ *OED Online*, s.v. "effect, *n.*," 4a, "an outward manifestation, sign, token, symptom; an appearance or phenomenon in nature"; see *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/59664> (accessed 23 April 2012). Compare Shakespeare's use of the term in *Much Ado about Nothing* to describe Beatrice's alleged comportment she falls in love with Benedick: "What effects of passion shewes she?" (*OED Online*, 4a).

²⁷ Schalkwyk, 114.

The poet's decision to embrace the value of gestural tokens of his otherwise dumb thoughts, both mute and stupid, receives fuller attention later in the sequence in Sonnet 105, an apology for the poet's decision to express his devotion to his beloved in repeated tropes: "Faire, kinde, and true, is all my argument" (105.9). Sonnet 105 is one in a cluster of Sonnets that has drawn critical ire for its supposed enslavement to dull conceits and tautologous wit.²⁸ With respect to the latter, critics have pointed out that the poet provides an inadequate defense against implicit accusations of idolatry:

Let not my loue be cal'd Idolatrie,
Nor my beloued as an Idoll show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be
To one, of one, still such, and euer so.
(ll. 1–4)

Booth has pointed out the poet's "studiously inadequate understanding of idolatry"; that the object of the poet's devotions is monotheistic does not exonerate him from the charges of idolatry. Citing the 1571 homily *Against Peril of Idolatry*, Booth contends that "although all polytheism is idolatrous, it does not therefore follow that any and all monotheisms are orthodox as the speaker here pretends."²⁹ Likewise, Kerrigan has argued that the poet's defense of his devotional gestures is such "obvious sophistry" for the very reason that "idolatry is not necessarily polytheistic."³⁰ For Kerrigan, the tone of the sestet supports this, making it apparent that the poet thinks his friend is a "worldly god, an *idol*."³¹

Critical attention to the secular reappropriation of religious rites of devotion in Sonnet 105 certainly draws accurate conclusions about the erotic focus of the poems but not about their historical context. Yet the reasoning that the poet's likening of his beloved to Christ constitutes a form of blasphemy seems to be a criticism less of particular sonnets by Shakespeare than of the sonnet form itself. It was a common conceit among sonneteers to praise one's beloved by comparing her (or in Shakespeare's case, *him*) to a Christ-like figure.³² Disputes about the alleged idolatrousness of Shakespeare's Sonnets fail to acknowledge the core

²⁸ In addition to his remarks on Shakespeare's use of religious tropes in the Sonnets, Kerrigan claims that Sonnet 105 "is not particularly complex. Almost bare of metaphor, with a chaste rhetorical 'colour' scheme, it exemplifies in verbal terms the flatness of *constancy*" (310).

²⁹ Booth, 336; and John Jewel, *An Homily against Peril of Idolatry*, in *The Two Books of Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches*, ed. John Griffiths (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1859).

³⁰ Kerrigan, 309, 310.

³¹ Kerrigan, 310.

³² Indeed, the trope is ubiquitous and assumes various conceits in Petrarch's portrayal of Laura in *Il Canzoniere*. Sonnet 4 compares Laura's humble birth to Jesus's nativity at Nazareth, and Sonnet 16 positions Laura as the final instantiation of perfection—comparable to God

of the poetry's assertions. Idolatry in the Anglican orthodoxy came to embody a range of belief systems and religious practices inherited from the medieval Catholic liturgical tradition. Indeed, the Anglican Church during the sixteenth century often made little distinction between idolatry and superstition.³³ As a result, Reformation iconoclasm often manifested itself as an attack on magic. In 1541, the Edwardian bishop Thomas Goodrich, in response to a request issued by Thomas Cranmer, launched an assault on the worship of icons. Goodrich required all clergy in the Church of England to scour their parishes for images, bones, or monuments that their parishioners may have still worshiped in secret. Whether or not the Church clergy found any icons was irrelevant; the Anglican Church considered the performance of "superstitious practice," broadly interpreted, sufficient evidence for image worship, and such practices were to be immediately reported to the bishop.³⁴

The connection between idolatry and superstition was so powerfully intertwined in the minds of certain detractors of the Anglican Church that Richard Hooker, who with Cranmer established the founding tenets of Anglicanism, took it upon himself to dispel the misconception in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, a work providing the first sustained and exhaustive justification of the

himself. We can detect a similar argument inherent in the entire structure of Fulke Greville's *Caelica*. The sequence's opening poems reveal deep preoccupation with Caelica's/Myra's refusal to reciprocate erotic love, yet as the sequences progresses, *eros* and Christ-like *agape* assume a fusional relationship through Greville's application of the metaphor of Christian worship to courtly love. Thom Gunn notes in *Caelica's* later poems that "deprivation of the unkind absent mistress becomes deprivation of God's grace. The mistress had been an absolute, an ideal, and unchangeable, as contrasted to the flawed, fallen, and changeable particulars of creation: so is God." Simply to argue then that a sonnet is insincere or aesthetically displeasing because it resorts to potentially blasphemous conceits fails to acknowledge the particular way in which an individual sonneteer chooses to engage with the widespread comparison between the beloved and Christ. See Thom Gunn, ed., *The Selected Poems of Fulke Greville* (1968; repr., Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009), 35. On blasphemous implications of the association between Laura and Christ in *Il Canzoniere*, see Frederick J. Jones, *The Structure of Petrarch's "Canzoniere": A Chronological, Psychological, and Statistical Analysis* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 57–58, 214. For a sustained treatment of the interplay between sexuality and spirituality in the sonnet tradition from Petrarch to Shakespeare, see Danijela Kambaskovic-Sawers, "Carved in Living Laurel: The Sonnet Sequence and Transformations of Idolatry," *Renaissance Studies* 21 (2007): 377–94.

³³ In the *Winter's Tale*, for instance, we see the interchangeability of the practice of idolatry and superstition in the play's final scene. Kneeling before what is ostensibly a painted statue of Hermione, Perdita nevertheless sees it necessary to defend her behavior against charges of superstition: "And do not say 'tis superstition, that / I kneel, and then implore her blessing." See *The Winter's Tale*, ed. J. H. P. Pafford (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1999), 5.3.48–49. On the connection between idolatry and superstition, see Helen C. White, *Tudor Books of Private Devotion* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1951), 73, 92–93.

³⁴ Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974), 242.

Church's practice of common prayer. Against those who proceed from the "straunge conceipt, that to serve God with any set forme of common prayer is superstitious," Hooker replied that on the contrary, common molds and forms of public liturgy afford a devotional efficacy that spontaneous prayer cannot.³⁵ Common prayers "serve as a patern whereby to frame all other prayers, with efficacie, yeat without superfluity of words."³⁶ Prayers only qualify as superstition, Hooker added, if it is the case that they "be actions which ought to waste away them selves in the making; if beinge made to remaine that they may be resumed and used again as prayers."³⁷ Yet Hooker concluded that, unlike material objects or human words, the oldest forms of prayer, being divinely inspired, never ceased to be as relevant and as fresh as they were when first spoken by the first believers.

It was against this culturally specific charge of idolatry, enmeshed with the early modern understanding with the performance of magic, that the poet in Sonnet 105 crafts his defense of his devotional rites. The strength of the poem's wit derives from the fact that the poet affirms that his rites conform to the standards of orthodox, and thus effective, worship: "Let not my loue be cal'd Idolatrie, / Nor my beloued as an Idoll show, / Since all alike my songs and praises be" (105.1–3). If we read the poet's thesis as a causal clause—"My love is not idolatry *since* (or because) all of my gestures of devotion remain the same each time I extend praise"—then we see that it is precisely through the constant and measured uniformity of the poet's praises (and not so much the monotheistic nature of his worship) that the poet hopes to redeem the value of his devotion before the eyes of his beloved.

Most importantly for my essay, the poet recognizes the value of his observable gesture of devotion as evidence for his genuine devotion. Far from indicating something lesser than or even contrary to his true devotion for his beloved, the poet's public gestures are commensurate with his purest love for his beloved. Sonnet 105 garners its potency precisely because it assumes that outward show can operate as an accurate representation of desire:

Kinde is my loue to day, tomorrow kinde,
Still constant in a wondrous excellence,
Therefore my verse to constancie confin'de,
One thing expressing, leaues out difference.
(ll. 5–8)

³⁵ Richard Hooker, *The Fifth Book of Ecclesiasticall Pollity*, 1597 [1594], 5.26.1, Bodleian MS Add. C.165, fol. 43v.

³⁶ Hooker, 5.26.2; fol. 43v.

³⁷ Hooker, 5.26.2; fol. 43v.

In loving *kindly*, the poet stresses his *affection* toward his beloved, but more importantly, he points to the possibility that one day's love might be *kind* to another's.³⁸ Today's kind of love is *kin* to tomorrow's love, so that today's expressions of devotion, as Hooker contended, are just as suited to the present as they are to posterity.

III

While the relationship between uniform expressions of devotion and constant emotional states is only a correlation in Sonnet 105, the relationship assumes a strengthened causal connection in Sonnet 125. This may seem counterintuitive, considering that the sonnet's glance at the practice of religious rites has long been read as antithetical to the poet's genuine devotion to his beloved. Critical attention to the sonnet's allusion to the Eucharist has given disproportionate attention to the poet's dismissal of religious ritual as mere "pomp and circumstance," presenting the practice of public prayer as an "external accident" opposed to "inward essence."³⁹ Such readings of the sonnet's Eucharistic language associate the performance of religious ritual with theatricality, and consequently, these interpretations of the sonnet commence from the assumption that the engagement with *all* ritual is contrary to devotional feeling.⁴⁰ However, a problem arises when we attempt to associate the performance of all religious ritual in the sonnet with hypocrisy, precisely because the poet deploys the practice of public worship as a shared metaphor, ironically, for both his rivals' behavior and his own devotion to his beloved. If the performance of prayer is a

³⁸ See *OED Online*, s.v. "*kind*, *adj.*," 6, "Of persons, their actions, etc.: Affectionate, loving, fond; on intimate terms"; and 3d, "Related by kinship; of kin (*to*); one's own (people)." *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/103445> (accessed 20 April 2012).

³⁹ Greene contends that the poet's devotion "consists purely of uncalculated internal gestures and it leads to a genuine, unmeditated exchange," while others display their love by external gestures. See "Pitiful Thrivers': Failed Husbandry in the Sonnets," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 230–44, esp. 230. For Kerrigan, the poet defends his love for his friend "by insisting that he recognizes the vanity of pomp and circumstance and has been impressed in the past by the folly of those seduced by appearances" (348). Booth sees in the sonnet's allusions to Holy Communion "the contrast between external accidents and internal essence" (430); McCoy reads the poem's Eucharistic terminology as evidence that the poet holds "nothing but scorn for those preoccupied with 'outward honoring'" (199).

⁴⁰ Booth has noted that the sonnet commences with an allusion to formalized worship. A canopy was often carried over the Host in religious processions (429). That the poet seems to initially reject formalized, public expressions of devotion by equating the canopy procession to mere outward show—the "extern the outward honoring" (125.2)—had led critics to hold the performance of *all* public display of devotion as evidence of hypocrisy.

measure for his rivals' disingenuousness in the octet, it nevertheless doubles as a measure of the poet's real devotedness in the sestet.

The sonnet's most salient allusions to the *Book of Common Prayer* show that religious ritual in the poem serves a more complicated function than that which has been attributed to it by critics, namely, as evidence for the hypocrisy of the poet's rivals. The second quatrain provides two descriptions for the kind of worshipers whom the poet holds in disdain:

Haue I not seene dwellers on forme and fauor
Lose all, and more by paying too much rent
For compound sweet; forgoing simple sauor,
Pittifull thriurons in their gazing spent.
(125.5–8)

The poet's epithet for his rivals—those “dwellers on forme and fauor”—compounded with the sonnet's suffusion of Eucharistic language has led critics to conclude that the distinction the poet makes between his rivals' praise and his devotion is contingent upon the opposition between outward form and inward essence, between the dissembled and the genuine. The second descriptor—“Pittifull thriurons in their gazing spent”—is perhaps a direct allusion to the Holy Communion service in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Admonishing those believers who either neglect or refuse to perform the Communion rites, the service exhorts such parishioners not to compound their affront to God with further insult by merely engaging as spectators of the holy rites:

And whereas you offende God so sore in refusynge thys holye Banquet, I admonishe, exhorthe, and beseche you, that unto this unkindenesse ye will not adde anye more. Which thing ye shall doo, if ye stande by as gasers and lookers on them that doo Communicate, and be no partakers of the same your selves. For what thing can this be accounted els, then a further contempt and unkindnes unto God?⁴¹

The Holy Communion service chastises these “gasers and lookers” precisely because they expect to receive the benefits of Communion as spectators, without performing the rites for themselves. Indeed, John Jewell, Bishop of Salisbury, defended the Anglican Communion rites in 1562 against those reformist critics who equated the practice with idolatry. Jewell concedes that there are indeed certain prescriptions pertaining to the Holy Communion (namely, the Catholic

⁴¹ “The order of the administration of the Lordes Supper, or holy Communion,” in *The booke of common praier* (see n. 22 above), sig. M5r (emphasis added). The possible reference to the *Book of Common Prayer* has been noted by Booth (429) and Colin Burrow, ed., *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 630.

belief in transubstantiation) that degrade that sacrament to the level of a “stage-play . . . to the end that men’s eyes should be fed with nothing else but with *mad gazing and foolish gauds*.”⁴² Yet Jewell salvages the sacrament for the Church of England by demonstrating the participatory (as opposed to speculative) nature of the Anglican Eucharist. Against the practice of private mass, Jewell contends that from the primitive church onward, if ever “there had been any which would be but a looker on, and abstain from the holy Communion,” that individual would have rightfully been excommunicated “as a wicked person and as a pagan.”⁴³ Never “was there any Christian [during the time of the apostles], which did communicate alone, while others looked on.”⁴⁴ To assume the part of a spectator—a gazer—upon the holy rites was tantamount in the Church of England, as it had been in the time of the apostles, to sacrilege.

The *pitiful thrivers* of Sonnet 125, who exhaust their capacity to praise in their *gazing*, are indeed chastised by the poet for reasons similar to those outlined by Jewell and the Communion prayer book sermon. The poet faults his rivals not for their excess of theatricality, as critics have maintained that he does, but for the opposite offence. According to the poet, the rivals are gazers upon, but not participants in, the public performance of praise. The pitiful thrivers’ refusal to participate in the panegyric rites suggests that any attempt on their part to worship will necessarily prove insufficient. For those who gaze, the Communion is merely ritual; for those who engage with the holy rites, the Eucharist enables one to internalized and reenact Christ’s Passion.⁴⁵

Sonnet 125 does not abdicate all public ritual but rather reappropriates it as a measure of the poet’s desire. The sonnet’s sestet appropriates the relationship between Christ and his believers outlined in the Anglican Holy Commu-

⁴² Jewell initially published his *Apology for the Church of England* in 1562 in both Latin and English, and made significant changes to the English text in later years. Due to the significant variations among the earliest printed editions and copies, I cite all references to Jewell’s *Apology* from William R. Wittingham’s definitive modern edition, *The Apology for the Church of England and a Treatise of the Holy Scriptures* (New York: Henry M. Onderdonk, 1846), 62. On the Protestant comparison of the Catholic Eucharist and the secular stage plays, see Barish, 155–190, esp. 159–65.

⁴³ Jewell, 53.

⁴⁴ Jewell, 54.

⁴⁵ In both the Anglican and Catholic traditions, the participatory nature of the holy rites produced states of devotion commensurate to the public performance of praise. Maltby (3–30) has noted the parallels between the secular theater and Protestant common prayer, while Duffy suggests that the ritual prayers of the late medieval Catholic Candlemas celebration had “the tendency to turn liturgy into ‘sacred performance’” (26). In Anglo-Catholic orthodoxy, the performance of liturgical prayer had profound effects upon the parishioners, affecting equally those who prayed and those who were spectators to the holy rites. Spufford (239–40) demonstrates that in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, parishioners’ relationship with God was profoundly contingent upon the details—down to minute changes—of formal liturgical rites.

nion service in order to model the poet's own devotion to his beloved: "Noe, let me be obsequious in thy heart, / And take thou my oblacion, poore but free" (125.9–10). The poet conceptualizes his devotion by using the ritualized language of the common prayers performed in local Elizabethan parishes. His presentation of his devotion as a kind of oblation, a ritual offering, resonates with the Holy Communion sermon in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which likens Christ's Passion to an oblation presented to the body of Christian believers: "By hys one oblation of hymselfe once offered," Jesus Christ successfully carried out "a full, perfect and sufficient Sacrifice, Oblation, and Satisfaction for the synnes of the whole worlde."⁴⁶ The sermon outlines how parishioners were to go about returning Christ's oblation, instructing them to offer up their prayers to God in conjunction with outward show of their devotion: "We humbly beseche thee most mercyfullye to accepte oure almose, and to receyue these our prayers which we offer unto the diuine Maiestie."⁴⁷ As early as the mid-1400s, the term *oblation* could mean simply the performance of the Holy Communion rites by presenting the bread and wine to God during the Eucharist.⁴⁸ Anglican orthodoxy was deeply committed to the belief that the practice of performing outward devotional gestures would in turn produce commensurate states of devotion on the parts of worshippers. The printed marginal note accompanying the prayer makes the straightforward observation that "if there be none alms or oblations, then shall the words be left out unsaid."⁴⁹ Here, the marginalium underscores the same belief that a worshiper must actively participate in the Eucharistic rites if his prayers are to achieve maximum devotional effectiveness. As we have already seen, the belief that the performance of prayer produces commensurate states of devotion in the one who prays provides the basis for the poet's chastisement of his rivals, those pitiful thrivers who deplete their devotional capacities by remaining mere gazers upon the holy rites instead of partaking in the performance of worship for themselves. By contrast, the poet's oblations show a way to engage in religious ceremony that posits the poet as an active participant in the rites of worship, one that draws his spectators—in this case, his beloved—into his performance of praise.

⁴⁶ *The booke of common praier*, sig. M8v.

⁴⁷ *The booke of common praier*, sig. M4r. In the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, the passage was amended, with *alms* and *oblations* replacing *almose*, which by the late 1580s had become obsolete; see *OED Online*, s.v. "†almose, n." at <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/5601> (accessed 20 April 2012).

⁴⁸ *OED Online*, s.v. "oblation, n.," 3.a, "Christian Church." The action of offering or presenting the elements of bread and wine to God in the Eucharist; the whole office of the Eucharist, esp. the Eucharist understood as offering or sacrifice"; see <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/129667> (accessed 19 April 2012).

⁴⁹ The printed marginalia in the 1559 edition read, "If there be none almos given unto the pore, then shall the words of accepting our almes beleft out unsayd" (sig. M4r).

The Holy Communion sermon's intentional fashioning of the parishioners' prayers as a kind of oblation, one commensurate with the oblation Christ first bestowed upon his believers by sacrificing his life for their sins, hints at an equitable exchange that the poet appropriates to describe his own devotion in line 12 of Sonnet 125. Like Christ and the Church, the poet imagines that he and his beloved enter into a contractual relationship defined by equitable exchange; in extending his offering of praise, the poet says that he "knows no art, / But mutuall render onely me for thee" (125.11–12). The poet's fashioning of his devotion to his friend as a form of "mutuall render" echoes the economic language of line 6, which compares the rivals' loss of devotional potency to the financial losses of tenants who squander their wealth "by paying too much rent" (l. 6). Juxtaposing his own performance of praise with that of his rivals, the poet claims for himself the ability to sustain outward gestures of praise by which his beloved might accurately gauge his devotion. The poet neither indulges in extravagant worship, losing his devotional credibility by "paying too much rent," nor does he fail to engage sufficiently in the rites of praise, letting his capacity for praise wither like that of the "pittifull thriuors" who remain mere gazers upon the rites of worship. The poet's performance of praise, ostensibly equitable, is oriented outward and directed toward his community of spectators—his beloved, his rivals, and (as we will shortly see) the generations of readers yet unborn.

By pitting genuine devotion against ritualized praise, critics who harbor suspicions of the Sonnets' religious tropes fail to see that not only is the sestet of Sonnet 125 imbued with the language of communal prayer but that the poet nowhere extols the monadic sense of self they have read into the poem. On the contrary, the sonnet's wit lies precisely in its ability to resist an atomizing view of the individual worshiper. This is achieved by positing a *mutual exchange* between the poet and his friend that assumes a peculiar quality of fusion; in the exchange of *me for thee*, it is impossible to distinguish the separation between the poet's gestures of devotion, the real conviction that these gestures denote, and the transformative power these gestures hold for those who take in their performance as spectators. Oddly, the poet's entreaty "let me be obsequious in *thy* heart" imagines an engagement with the rites of worship conducive to particular states of devotion in others' hearts (125.9).⁵⁰ We expect the poet to demand recognition for being obsequious in *his own* heart, which would ostensibly mean that he exonerates himself from the duty of publicly and physically engaging in the gestures of devotion, insisting that he can achieve superior devotional effectiveness merely by worshiping silently and privately in his heart. But

⁵⁰ Burrow notes that *obsequious* insinuates a formalized devotion on the part of the poet, and as a noun form, could mean "one who follows after [another in either] mourning or respect" (630).

the line's substitution of the possessive *thy* for *my* suggests the *mutual exchange* that perfectly renders the poet's *me* for his beloved's *thee*. By this exchange, the poet asserts what would in any other context seem absurd: that he can publicly perform gestures of devotion in the interior of his beloved's heart. The pronoun substitution dissolves the distinctions between self and other, private and public, and inward and outer in its peculiar account of the poet's performance of praise. As a result, the witty knowledge of an intimacy—perhaps even a unity—with his beloved is one to which his rivals can never be privy. Importantly, it is precisely the language of common prayer that enables the poet both to make his startlingly original proclamation about his own access to his beloved and to maintain the value of formal gestures of devotion as recourse to familiarity.

IV

The distinction between individual and corporate worship was, for the early moderns, tenuous at best. Eamon Duffy has suggested that individual use of primers, devotionals, and prayer books during communal church services during the late sixteenth century did not necessarily indicate a preference for solitary worship but “may well have had the opposite effect of bonding the individual more tightly into the shared symbolic world of the community.”⁵¹ Judith Maltby has demonstrated that in subsequent centuries Protestant orthodoxy conserved the symbolic effectiveness of corporate worship, which was intended to engage not only the whole person, body and soul, but whole communities.⁵² In the acts of erotic performance in the Sonnets, the poet finds himself transformed not only by his own repeated utterance of “fair, kind, and true” in Sonnet 125, but by the devotional efficacy of those utterances performed by others. He finds value in his ability to cry “amen” in Sonnet 85 to his rivals' praises, enabling him to partake in and even add to the praises of others. Here, I argue that the poet likewise holds similar expectations for how his own readers will react to his praises, imagining the future generations who will find the dimension of their own erotic afflictions in the formal incantations of the poet's lines. The link between the devotional effectiveness of the Sonnets and performed prayer was

⁵¹ Duffy, 131.

⁵² Maltby, 117. When an individual worshipped alone in his own chambers, private prayer was virtually indistinct from its communal counterpart. Private prayer consisted simply of those forms of worship conducted in a solitary place, but did not indicate something more internal or otherwise different from public prayer. It was not uncommon for early modern believers to conduct solitary prayer aloud, such that it would have been possible for an observer to gauge a worshiper's conviction “if not with the mouth,” as Martin Luther observed, “yet with the hart and harty signs” or with “unspeakable gronings of the hart.” For a discussion of the overlap between the performance in private and public prayer, see Ferry, 53–54.

made over fifty years ago when C. S. Lewis wrote that “a good sonnet (*mutatis mutandis* and *salva reverentia*) was like a good public prayer”; if the performance was good, the audiences in either case could join in on the performance and internalize its forms: “It does not matter who is speaking to whom in ‘Since there’s no help’ any more than in ‘Oh mistress mine.’ Love poetry of this sort is transferable,” and consequently “the analogy of the public prayer holds good. The whole body of sonnet sequences is much more like an erotic liturgy than a series of erotic confidences.”⁵³ The shared belief in the effectiveness of erotic and liturgical performance affords the poet a fusional relationship with his beloved through the mutual rendering of *me for thee*. This same belief in the effectiveness of communal praise is at the core of the poet’s belief in immortal fame for himself and his beloved. Just as the poet notes that he might be obsequious in the heart of another, so too does he imagine that his own acts of devotion become internalized in distinctly corporeal terms.

In Sonnets 55 and 81, the poet outlines a poetics of immortality that rests upon a delicate interplay between written texts and the performed word. While critics have focused on the immortalizing power (and fragility) of texts preserved on paper,⁵⁴ written words and material documents are *not* the poet’s claim to immortality. Indeed, the poet acknowledges that the written record of his love cannot directly lead to the beloved’s commemoration and the poet’s fame:

But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Then vnswept stone, besmeer’d with sluttish time,
. . . Nor *Mars* his sword, nor warres quick fire shall burne:
The living record of your memory.

(55.3–4, 7–8)

At the octet’s close, it would appear that the *contents* about which the poet intimates are self-referential, pointing to the form of the poem itself. The same can be said about the poet’s decision to convey the beloved’s immortalization as a *living record* of memory. If we take this living record to mean the poem, then we must assume that the poet’s decision to imbue his writings with life has strictly metaphorical meaning. The sestet’s opening volta compels us to reconsider to what, precisely, the *contents* and *living record* refer: “Gainst death, and all obliuious enmity / Shall you pace forth, your praise shall still finde roome, / Euen in the eyes of all posterity” (ll. 9–11). Certainly, the poet imagines that this par-

⁵³ C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (1954; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 490.

⁵⁴ Booth suggests, “Even as [ll. 7–8] assert the immortality of the poem these lines remind a reader of the flimsiness and vulnerability of anything written on paper” (229).

ticular *content* is the type from which a long dead beloved might once again *pace forth*, as if he were bodily resurrected from the grave. The strangeness of the conceit acquires further oddity when the poet promises that, upon pacing forth, his beloved will find himself incorporated into the bodies, into the eyes, of others.

In Sonnet 81, the poet extends the corporeal conceit of Sonnet 55, imagining that when he is dead, his beloved will nevertheless remain “intombed in mens eyes” (81.8). The poet predicts that his unborn readers will respond in distinctly bodily ways to the formalism of his verse: “eyes not yet created shall ore-read, / And tongs to be, your beeing shall rehearse” (ll. 10–11). His readers’ acts of *over-reading* and *rehearsing* remain key to the poet’s vision of poetic immortality. Here again, we see the poet’s emphasis on the transformative nature of repeated acts of praise. For the beloved to become immortalized—both commemorated and resurrected—the “eyes not yet created” and the “tongs to be” must participate in acts of ritual repetition, *over-reading* and *rehearsing* the poet’s praise. In performing these acts of repetition, the beloved is both *re-hearsed* and *re-heard*, entombed and grieved anew but heard anew as if he were bodily resurrected from the grave. The conceits of Sonnets 55 and 81 are profoundly indebted to the poet’s conviction that oral reiteration of and repeated aural attention to words that are not strictly one’s own are devotionally effective in ways that spontaneous prayers are not. It is precisely through the repeated performance of praise that the poet can gain immortality for his friend: “When all the breathers of this world are dead, / You still shall liue (such virtue hath my Pen) / Where breath most breathes, euen in the mouths of men” (81.12–14).

In making this claim, the poet imagines that his own performances of praise have the devotional power to bolster the praises of others. Thus, in the relationship the poet imagines between himself and his readers, both parties derive profound advantages from joining in their voices in a chorus of praise. To return to Lewis’s analogy, like good common prayers, Sonnets 55 and 81 enable a whole host of readers to add their own voices to the chorus of praise. As the poet assents to the praises of his rivals, crying “amen” to his betters’ hymns, so too does he imagine that the form of his own acts of praise might in turn heighten devotional affect for his readers. Lewis succinctly captures the sonnet form’s capacity to draw in readers through its use of a common language of devotion when he observes, “The sonneteers wrote not to tell their own love stories, not to express whatever in their own loves was local and peculiar, but to give us others, the inarticulate lovers, a voice.”⁵⁵

I return now to the critical concern over the gap between inward and outward with which I opened this essay: Booth’s concern that Christ’s *Sermon on the Mount* might be suggestive of the hypocrisy of the poet’s gestures of devo-

⁵⁵ Lewis, 490.

tion was in fact already anticipated by certain early modern defenders of publicly performed prayer. In his 1533 *Exposition of Matthew*, Henrican Lutheran reformer and biblical translator William Tyndale offered an early Protestant justification for both the spiritual and cultural value of public worship. Tyndale emphasized the need to bolster the value of communal prayer over private worship by emphasizing the Protestant community's need for a public space to give thanks and praise for shared concerns:

Of entryng into the chamber and shuttinge the dore to, I saye as above of that the lefte hande shulde not knowe what the right hand doeth, that the meanynge is that we shulde auoyde all worldly prayse and profyte, and praye with a single eye and true entent accordynge to Goddes worde, and is not forbidden thereby, to praye openly. For we muste haue a place to come to gether to pray in generall, to thanke and to crye to God for the comune necessity.⁵⁶

By interpreting Christ's commandment to pray behind shut doors metaphorically, Tyndale paved the way for later Protestant thought on the value of communal liturgy. More than fifty years after Tyndale justified public worship in distinctly Protestant terms, Hooker found it necessary to continue the project of justifying the practice of public worship by arguing that liturgical practices had a place within Anglicanism.⁵⁷ Only when we contextualize the public performance of prayer within early modern understanding of communal worship can we understand the sonnet's culturally specific treatment of ritualized acts of devotion. Targoff demonstrates that Hooker conceived of communal forms of prayer as safeguards against the devotional weakness of individual parishioners.⁵⁸ For Hooker, liturgical practices performed in communal settings countered moments of spiritual weakness that might inhibit a parishioner who prayed in private. For Hooker, public devotion had a "force and efficacy . . . to help that imbecillitie and weakenes in us, by meanes whereof we are otherwise of our selves the lesse apt to performe unto God so heavenlie a service, with such affection of harte, and diposition in the powers of our soules as is requisite."⁵⁹ Expanding on Tyndale, Hooker contended that when parishioners prayed amid a community of fellow believers "thus much helpe and furtherance is more yielded" for their devotional efficacy: "if so be our zeale and devotion to Godward be slack, the alacritie and fervor of others serveth as a present spurre."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ William Tyndale, *An exposycyon vpon the v.vi.vii. chapters of Mathewe* (London, 1536 [1533]), STC 24441.3, sig. H8v.

⁵⁷ On Hooker's attempts to reclaim liturgical and public forms of worship for the Anglican Church, see Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 164–82.

⁵⁸ Targoff, 47–56.

⁵⁹ Hooker, 5.15.1; fol. 4Iv.

⁶⁰ Hooker, 5.24.2; fols. F3v–4Iv.

In constructing his vision of poetic immortality, Shakespeare's poet co-opts the early modern belief that the collective nature of public forms of praise served as an impetus to devotion on the part of those who join in on the panegyric rites. In the Sonnets, the poet's written praises of his beloved alone cannot resurrect the beloved from his entombment. For the beloved to live again, his praises must be sung by those who join together to form a community of worshipers. Simply to overread praise has the effect of repeating death, *intombing* the beloved *in men's eyes*. The poet's bold assertion about his beloved's immortality—"You liue in this, and dwell in louers eies" (55.14)—rests upon the belief that performance of praise had the capacity to transform those who partook in the panegyric rites. If his beloved dwells in lovers' eyes, the poet's acts of devotion powerfully affect the way lovers' perceive each other in their cultivation of intimacy. When lovers gaze into each others' eyes, the poet imagines that they will see not their own reflection but rather the image of the poet's beloved reflected in each other's pupils. The poet's performed praise thus informs the innumerable loves of those who overread and rehearse the panegyric rites. But the punning potentialities of Sonnet 55 enable us to hear in the line the suggestion of another way of understanding the devotional efficacy of communal praise. The performance of repeated praise deeply informs the lovers' *I*s, broadening not only their capacity to love but profoundly transforming their sense of self.

V

In this reading of the Sonnets, I have shown that performed prayer is a framework for a particular early modern view of the self, in which external comportment helps to animate a parishioner's feelings of devotion. Acts of public prayer reflect the relationships among a whole community of worshipers. The performance of prayer in the Sonnets takes place within a nexus of interweaving social relationships, involving the poet, his beloved, his rivals, and generations of as-yet-unborn readers. In the handful of Sonnets I have discussed, the poet navigates among his roles as both performer of praise and participant in the praises of others. Prayer in the Sonnets elucidates the interactions among self and others, revealing the capacity of both ecclesiastical and secular performance to act upon a spectator's sense of self. Far from modeling the private utterances of a lover alone with his own thoughts, the Sonnets reveal a sense of universal erotic affliction.

This community of lyric voices to which the Sonnets allude derives its potency from the spiritual and political negotiations spawned by contemporary debates over the Anglican practice of common prayer. I began this essay with a discussion of the way the *Book of Common Prayer* provided a devotional lan-

guage for both the one who performs the liturgy and for those who witness the performance. The 1662 prayer book marked the end of a century of the Church of England's efforts to develop the practice of common prayer. After the Church discontinued the production of new editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Church of England did not restore the widespread practice of the public liturgy until the twentieth century. Although Shakespeare wrote his sonnet sequence more than sixty years before the decline of the public liturgy in England, the apologetic tone of the Sonnets themselves reveals that the last decade of the sixteenth century was already subject to the tensions that would later prove successful in suppressing common prayer. In conclusion, I suggest that as early as Shakespeare's own time, the communal forms of devotion that, in the decades to come, would face religious and political censure in the public sphere were already honing a literary language of devotion that would underpin another century of lyric production. In tracing the interplay between performed public liturgy and performed expressions of devotion in the Sonnets, I have examined the complex transfers between political, spiritual, and literary practices in early modern England. Although the *Book of Common Prayer* would eventually lose cultural and political force in the seventeenth century, the ideological tensions inherent in this cultural moment's preoccupation with public performances of prayer continued to resonate in the lyric imagination.