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# “Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke”: Aspects of Drama and Performance in John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet* “Oh My Black Soule”

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**Abstract:** This article provides a close reading of John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet* “Oh My Black Soule” with regard to its dramatic and performative qualities. The opening line of the poem contains an allusion to the morality play *Everyman*; moreover, in this sonnet, the speaker addresses his soul as if he were on a stage; and, in the end, he finds a resolution to the inner conflict that is being described in the course of the poem. Drama is thus significant in three ways: the speaker witnesses a drama of the soul, which is summoned, and reacts to it; he takes part in the drama and its performance as the speaker of a soliloquy; and a drama (in the sense of conflict) goes on within himself. The sonnet is the enactment of a drama of salvation and an expression of the innermost fears and prayers of the speaker who, eventually, finds a resolution and comes to a happy ending. While these three dimensions are all equally linked to the dramatic and performative qualities of this poem, the focus will be on the second aspect and the question how the *Holy Sonnet* may add to our understanding of the soliloquy, the communicative form which became most popular on the stage at the time John Donne wrote this poem.

## 1 Introduction

It has become a commonplace in Donne criticism to talk about his poems’ “dramatic” and “performative” qualities,<sup>1</sup> but it mostly remains unclear in how

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “dramatic” and “performative” are generally used rather loosely and referring to all sorts of aspects (such as immediacy, action, role-playing, forms of speech, pathos, wit, effect, genre). See e.g. Austin (1992); Fetzer (2010a,b); Gardner (1971); Kullmann (1994); Leishman (1962); Müller (2010, 2011); Robbins (2010); Wall (1976); Wilcox (2006). See also Legouis, who comes to the conclusion “that general agreement upon the epithet ‘dramatic’ rather tends to confusion than enlightenment because no two critics seem to understand it in the same sense” (Legouis 1962, 47).

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far aspects of drama and performance contribute to the meaning of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* as expressions of the innermost fears of the speaker – and how exactly these poems “aspire [...] to the condition of drama” (Pfister 2005, 209). In his *Holy Sonnet* “Oh My Black Soule,” three dimensions of drama are relevant: The apostrophe at its beginning, followed by the observation that the soul is “summoned,” establishes the speaker as a spectator who witnesses the soul becoming the protagonist of a dramatic action that leads to death and beyond. This is an action familiar from medieval morality plays but provided with its very own *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. Furthermore, the spectator does not watch this drama passively but intervenes actively and tells the figure on the stage what to do. The speaker who exclaims “Oh my black Soule!” thus becomes aware of his situation – or, rather, the situation of his soul, which he addresses as in a dialog. This dialog, however, takes place within his own self and is therefore a soliloquy set on an inner stage on which the drama of salvation is enacted. Eventually, this drama arrives at the outlook of a happy ending in the final couplet.

Oh my black Soule, now thou art summoned  
 By Sicknes, Deaths Harold and Champion,  
 Thou'art like a Pilgrim, which abroad had don  
 Treason, and darst not turne to whence he'is fled,  
 Or as a thiefe which till death's doome be red 5  
 Wisheth himselfe deliuered from prison  
 But damn'd and haled to execution  
 Wisheth that still he might be'imprisoned.  
 Yet grace, if thou repent thou canst not lacke.  
 But who shall giue thee that grace to begin? 10  
 Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,  
 And red with blushing as thou art with Sin.  
 Or washe thee in Christs blood, which hath this might  
 That beeing red, it dyes red Soules to whight. (Donne 2005, 13)<sup>2</sup>

Donne has his speaker act the role of someone imagining that the moment of his death is imminent and has him address his soul. The personification of the soul in the opening line points to the allegorical mode of the poem as a whole: The sinful soul is “summoned” by sickness, who, in this sonnet, is “Deaths Harold and Champion.” In the first two quatrains, the speaker reflects on his soul's sinfulness, which is indicated by means of the adjective “black”: he compares the personified soul first to a pilgrim<sup>3</sup> (or rather to a traitor taking to flight) and

<sup>2</sup> Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are quoted according to the Westmoreland Sequence.

<sup>3</sup> The “pilgrim” can be read as another reference to *The Summoning of Everyman*, esp. lines 331–342; see also below, Section 2.

then to a thief who is threatened with execution. With the *volta*, however, he points towards the concept of grace<sup>4</sup> – and the granting of grace if the soul is repentant. The poem ends with the speaker admonishing his soul to seek salvation through Christ's blood that will make the soul clean again by turning it "to white." The three dimensions of drama, i.e. dramatic allusion, the communicative situation of the soliloquy, and the happy resolution of an inner conflict, in this *Holy Sonnet* are hence brought together in the drama of salvation that is the poem. The following reading will therefore focus on the poem as drama and performance, rather than try to categorize it along the lines of a poetic subgenre (e.g. "dramatic monologue," see below, Section 3), and address the question how Donne's poem may add to the concept and understanding of the soliloquy during the early modern period. After all, it was during the time John Donne wrote his *Holy Sonnets* (around 1609)<sup>5</sup> that the soliloquy became most popular and began to enter genres other than devotional literature, where it had its origin.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Dramatic Allusion

The "summoning" of the soul is a direct reference to the morality play *The Summoning of Everyman* (~1509–1519),<sup>7</sup> and hence to the topic of

<sup>4</sup> "Grace" provides the transition from the event (brought up by the simile of the thief) to theology. The reference of "that grace to begin" is Augustinian: "What is a human wretch to do? Who will free him from his death-laden body, *if not your grace*, given through Jesus Christ our Lord, whom you have begotten coeternal with yourself and created *at the beginning* of all your works?" (Augustine 1988, 7.21.27, my emphasis); see Bergvall (2001, 46). On readings of this sonnet with regard to the concepts of grace and repentance, see e.g. Herbold (1965); Halewood (1970); Sanders (1971); Altizer (1973); Blanch (1974).

<sup>5</sup> See Donne (1978, xxix; xxxvii–lv).

<sup>6</sup> On the development of the soliloquy during the early modern period, see e.g. Clemen (1955, 2005); Belsey (1985); Hillman (1997).

<sup>7</sup> On connections between *Everyman* and Donne's HS "Oh my black Soule," see Hester (1991). Hester's perspective is a slightly different one: "My focus of attention in the following pages is on the manner in which one of the most elusive of these poems, the sonnet beginning 'Oh my black Soule,' is better understood through comparison of its central paradox with the dramatic exposition of that [Roman Catholic] doctrine in *Everyman*. Such a perspective suggests that the achievement of Donne's sonnet derives in large measure from the manner in which it engages the doctrine of prevenient Grace as it is expostulated dramatically in the play, not in order to endorse explicitly the Catholic view of that doctrine but in order to explore the psychological and moral questions attendant to the application of the Protestant or Reformed view of imputation to that doctrine current at the time of the poem's composition. Such a perspective serves to underscore and identify the moral tensions that Donne's *Holy Sonnets* enact so well" (Hester 1991, 16).

death.<sup>8</sup> In the morality play, Death is sent to earth to summon Everyman and to call him to account for the sins he has committed.<sup>9</sup> This means that the “summoning” of the soul in Donne’s poem refers to morality plays on two levels: the poem’s action takes its point of departure from *Everyman*, and the soul is perceived by the speaker as a character with whom he interacts, a pattern also familiar from plays such as *Wisdom* and *The Castle of Perseverance*.<sup>10</sup> This character is summoned by sickness and enters an intermediate state: he is not dead yet but he knows that he will soon die. Similarly, Everyman must embark on his journey to his death from the moment he has been summoned. This summoning also refers to a legal context: one is summoned to court or to appear before a judge;<sup>11</sup> in the case of Donne’s sonnet, the soul is summoned by death to its final judgment. The personification of the soul hence leads to an allegorical reading of the poem which is reinforced by the allusion to the morality play.

In Donne’s *Holy Sonnet*, the soul is presented as a character and treated as a person that the speaker asks to “make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke.” Thus, the sonnet is dramatic in the action that is presented, the experiences of the soul, and it is performative in that it contains a command the speaker gives to his soul to act, drawing on “the power of words to do rather than merely say something” (cf. Fetzer 2010a, 190). The speaker hence becomes an interventionist spectator of the soul.<sup>12</sup>

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**8** Cf. Leimberg (1996, 140–141). Leimberg explains the development that took place in the period between *Everyman* and Donne: “Donne überbrückt mit seinem zitatartigen Rückgriff einen Abstand von mehr als hundert Jahren, in denen das Moralitätenspiel sich zur Tragödie gewandelt hat. *The Somonyng of Eueryman* wollte mit Ernst und Eifer auf die Vergänglichkeit des Menschenlebens hinweisen” (Leimberg 1996, 141). I disagree with Harris, who writes that “two allusions to *Tamburlaine* and the verses about *Volpone* are apparently Donne’s only references to any play, ancient or contemporary” (Harris 1962, 261). Stampfer writes that the beginning of the sonnet “smack[s] of dramatic confrontation” (Stampfer 1970, 245).

**9** On the “theme of the Summons of Death,” see Spivack (1958, 64–67).

**10** On the continuity of the genre of morality play well into the early seventeenth century, see Stevens (1995, 26); and Bevington (1962, esp. 1–7).

**11** See *OED*, “summon, v.”: “2.a. To cite by authority to attend at a place named, *esp.* to appear before a court or judge to answer a charge or to give evidence; to issue a summons against.” In the Early Modern period, the word was also used in the sense of “[t]o call upon to surrender” (*OED* 2014, 5.b.).

**12** The soul is treated as an instance of the self – *my* soul, comparable to “my body” and “my heart” – but also in terms of a *pars pro toto* of the self, similar to an expression like “so and so many souls were lost in a shipwreck.”

With regard to their overall plot structure, morality plays and Donne's *Holy Sonnet* can be identified as comedies (see also below, Section 4).<sup>13</sup> As a rule, in morality plays the initial situation of the protagonist is rather bleak: he is immersed in sin. In the course of the action, the soul recognizes this sinfulness and the dependence of its wellbeing on God's grace, and is eventually saved and may ascend to heaven.<sup>14</sup> The speaker in Donne's poem goes through a very similar process: he is called by Sickness, becomes aware of his sins, and then thinks of a way to salvation which, as the ending implies, may be achieved.

The sonnet is structured like a miniature drama, with a peripety and a happy ending. The *volta* – "Yet grace, if thou repent thou canst not lacke" – echoes another play that is indebted to the tradition of morality plays but focuses on an individual protagonist whose soul is very much in danger. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the Good Angel says: "Never too late, if Faustus will repent" (Marlowe 1998, B-text 2.2.82). Dramatic allusion creates suspense and lends *enargeia* to the speaker's reaction at the summoning of his soul.

### 3 Communicative Situation: The Poem as Soliloquy

When in Donne's *Holy Sonnets* the speaker utters an exclamation or apostrophe, this has a highly dramatic effect, and one can easily imagine the poem to be spoken on the stage. The speaker in the sonnets repeatedly analyzes the state of his soul as well as observes how others influence it; this communicative situation implies both the position of an onlooker as well as of someone involved in the situation.<sup>15</sup> The soul is at once "inside" the speaker as part of his self and

<sup>13</sup> The definition of comedy follows Heywood's in the *Apology for Actors* (1612): "Tragedies and Comedies, faith *Donatus*, [...] differ thus: in comedies, *turbulenta prima, tranquilla ultima*; in tragedies, *tranquilla prima, turbulenta ultima*, e.g., Comedies begin in trouble, and end in peace; tragedies begin in calms, and end in tempest" (Heywood 1973, Fv). See Donatus (1962, 1: 21).

<sup>14</sup> "Each of the plays begins as a potential tragedy and ends happily – not primarily because Mankind has learned his lesson in time, but because God's plan for Mankind's salvation is as strong as Mankind is weak. The emphasis on mercy is so pervasive in the plays that damnation seems almost an impossibility. [...] more than anything else, the moralities are entertaining celebrations of the power of God's limitless mercy, reminding their audiences that His mercy is the ultimate source of salvation" (Kelley 1979, 26–27).

<sup>15</sup> The soul is addressed in the *Holy Sonnets* three more times: In HS "If faythfull Soules," the speaker enters into a dialog with his soul and tells it what to do, while in HS "Wilt thou love God" and HS "What yf this present," he asks his soul to enter into a meditation. In each case, the communicative situation that involves the address of the soul lends the poem dramatic quality and turns each into a miniature drama in its own right.

“outside” of him in that it is made an object of observation.<sup>16</sup> This results in a double perspective. The speaker wavers between reflection and (self-)address, which is triggered by the ambiguity of the opening “Oh my black Soule”; it can either be read as an exclamation (on the state of his soul) or an apostrophe (a poetic address to an unhearing entity; cf. Waters 2012, 61) or an address of the soul, either dialogical or monological.<sup>17</sup> This wavering also becomes relevant when he *compares* this soul to a thief or traitor rather than *calls* it so.<sup>18</sup> His self-distancing through externalization and dramatization serves the purpose of self-reflection (as if the impending death concerned only the soul, not himself, and he was only a spectator of the drama of the soul that unfolds in the poem), while his involvement is expressed in an anguished exclamation about his soul (the repetition of “Oh”): he reflects *on* his soul while, apparently, speaking *to* it. The speaker does not deem himself, or rather his soul, ready and well-prepared for death, which becomes particularly evident when he calls his soul “black.” This indicates its state of sinfulness (cf. Willmott 1985, 66)<sup>19</sup> emphasized by the connection with “sickness” and its association with the plague, the “black death.” The speaker is aware of the sinfulness, the “disease,” of his soul.

The beginning of the sonnet contains various dichotomies that are (at least partly) based on ambiguities: the speaker is either addressing his own soul as an integral part of himself or as a separate entity; he is either emotionally involved, or he is emotionally detached; in short, the sonnet can either be read as a dialog between the speaker and his soul (who is perceived as an entity separate from himself) or as a soliloquy.<sup>20</sup>

**16** Cf. Oliver: “This split between speakers and their souls also contributes to the impression that Donne’s speakers watch and listen to themselves. They provide their own audiences [...] the speaker treats his soul as if it belongs to someone else or even to an entirely separate species” (Oliver 1997, 155).

**17** “Oh” reoccurs in line 10 of the sonnet: there, the following imperative “Make thyself” also may refer to both the soul and to the speaker himself.

**18** A strict identification of the soul with thief or traitor would imply an unequivocal labeling, while the comparison adds to the overall ambiguity of distance and involvement, observation and identification.

**19** The collocation “black soul” is listed by the *OED* with the entry “black-souled *adj.* (and *n.*)”: “1648 *Mercurius Impartialis* No. 1 6 A base perfidious, perjur’d, black-soul’d elfe, Who first destroy’d thy Country, then thy selfe.” See also Donne’s HS “I am a little world” and HS “If pois’nous minerals.”

**20** Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* have repeatedly been called “dramatic monologues” (see e.g. Sinfield 1977; cf. also Müller 1982), based on the communicative situation of a fictive speaker who “masquerades in the first person” (Sinfield 1977, 25) and the speaker’s “divided consciousness” (Sinfield 1977, 32). The generic label of “dramatic monologue,” however, was coined with reference to the poetry of Robert Browning in the nineteenth century and is, hence, ahistorical when

The communicative situation in this poem thus tells us something about the speaker and his mental state as well as about the object he is reflecting on: he can either be regarded as a reflective speaker, who is meditating on the state of his soul; or as an anguished soul; or as an interventionist speaker, who wants to bring about change.<sup>21</sup> The speaker addresses his soul, but his soul is himself, i.e. the soul in itself becomes ambiguous, and the poem becomes a stage upon which the soul is addressed as a character. In this sonnet one thus finds a meditation of the speaker about the soul, as well as an address of the soul and, hence, the soul as character. The apparent dialog is in fact a soliloquy: it is a "dialogue of one," to use Donne's own expression ("The Extasie"; see Bauer and Zirker 2013); the soul becomes the interlocutor in an inner dialog, which lends the communicative situation the quality of a performance on the stage of the poem.

This communicative situation of the soliloquy goes back to at least two older traditions. For one, to Senecan drama, where long monological speeches by the Chorus can be found and characters speak in soliloquy;<sup>22</sup> moreover, to an Augustinian tradition that lived on into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example in readings, translations, and interpretations of the Psalter,<sup>23</sup> in dialogs between the body and soul, and in devotional literature (cf. Narveson 2004). There is a major difference between these two strands of the tradition: while Senecan soliloquy aimed at "self-examination" (Cunliffe 1893, 17), in the religious sense soliloquy was always directed "ad solum deum." Augustine seems to have re-interpreted the meaning of "soliloquy" in that he was aware of the inherent ambiguity of "ad solum deum," which can refer to either "when I am alone with God" or "to God alone": when he has a part of himself (*Ratio*) enter into a dialog with himself in *Soliloquia*, he is speaking with a part of himself *and* is alone with God.<sup>24</sup>

This Augustinian definition is the notion of soliloquy that we find in devotional writings of the early modern period. The Protestant Thomas Rogers in 1592, for instance, substitutes Thomas à Kempis's fourth book – "De Sacramento – Devota

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it comes to the poetry of John Donne. Rather, his *Holy Sonnets*, because of their communicative situation, can be regarded as precedents of the poetic genre. For a more extensive discussion of genre and terminology, see Zirker (2015).

**21** Cf. Fetzer on Donne's poetry: "it is also performative in as far as the communicative situation of most of what Donne has written is theatrical. It is marked by role-play as well as by the interplay with an external communicative system" (Fetzer 2010a, 190).

**22** Cf. Cunliffe (1893, 16–17); Borgmeier (1978, 306); and Skiffington (1985, 11).

**23** See e.g. Cardelle de Hartmann (2007, 206); Larson (2001, 63–64); and Radcinowicz (1987).

**24** See Augustine (1990). For a more detailed elaboration on this aspect, see Zirker (2015).



exhortatio ad sacram communionem” (Kempis 2013, 406–493)<sup>25</sup> – with the *Soliloquium Anima: The sole-talke of the Soule. Or, A spirituall and heauenlie Dialogue betwixt the Soule of Man and God* (cf. Dibdin 1828, cv). Through the wordplay in the title of his work (the homophony of “sole” and “soule”), Rogers explicitly establishes a connection between soliloquy and soul; the form of the soliloquy is a mental exercise, not unlike meditation, and it is concerned mainly with the action that the soul ought to take in order to find salvation. Especially Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* can be read against the background of Rogers, who, in turn, was influenced by Augustine, with regard to the communicative situation but also the drama of salvation that the speaker experiences and gives expression to in these miniature dramas. Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* thus add to our understanding of the theory of the soliloquy, namely with regard to merging of soul and self – and the doubling of soul and speaker in mental discourses and scenes.

We find the soliloquy when characters are talking to themselves alone, or addressing some absent instance (in apostrophe) in “dialogues of one.” Within the stage tradition, we now come to the point when choric monolog becomes a dialog within a speaker’s soul. The Augustinian notion becomes productive for drama; the mimetic element, required by drama, added to the Augustinian notion is the speaker, a “fictional” character. This speaker is a double one: he addresses a part of himself as if it were a separate entity, while talking “to himself alone.” Soliloquies are illustrative of some inner division but also of the speaker’s attempt to stay rational (see Skiffington 1985, 87–97) – the examples of Hamlet and Richard III are probably those that immediately come to mind in this context: when Hamlet tells his soul to “sit still” (Shakespeare 1982, 1.2.255) in the soliloquy that ends the second scene of the play, he talks to his soul in order to stay calm in the prospect of seeing the ghost of his father. In *Richard III* (Q1 from 1597), the protagonist is likewise a character who expresses his inner condition in a soliloquy, and the play even begins with one in which he lays open his evil plans,<sup>26</sup> namely to destroy his brothers and become king himself. It is especially Richard’s final soliloquy (famously beginning with “Give me another horse!”) that helps shed light on the concept of the divided self in Early Modern drama and provides an additional frame of reference for a reading of Donne’s *Holy Sonnet* with regard to aspects of drama and performance.

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<sup>25</sup> See Habsburg: “With the removal of Book Four, the spirituality of the *Imitatio* remained focused entirely upon interior renewal without any allusion to the sacraments” (Habsburg 2013, 128).

<sup>26</sup> See Borgmeier (1978, 306): “Der Eingangsmonolog, in dem Richard seine böse Gesinnung und seine finsternen Pläne enthüllt, folgt dem Beispiel Senecas”; and Clemen on possible Senecan roots of this soliloquy (Clemen 1968, 10).



After his vision of the ghosts, when Richard is actually speaking in two voices, the soliloquy becomes the medium to express his divided self:<sup>27</sup>

[...]  
 What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.  
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I.  
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.  
 Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason why?  
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?  
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good  
 That I myself have done unto myself?  
 O, no. Alas, I rather hate myself,  
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.  
 I am a villain. Yet I lie; I am not. (Shakespeare 2009, 5.3.178–187)

The soliloquy begins with Richard being still asleep at first and haunted by his vision that is actually a foreshadowing of the events to come on the following day. He then awakens and addresses his "coward conscience" as "thou" (Shakespeare 2009, 175): like Donne's anguished speaker in the *Holy Sonnet*, Richard begins his exclamation with "O" – "O coward conscience" (Shakespeare 2009, 175). He is

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27 This is the first time in the whole play that Richard reflects on his deeds in a manner that can be related to his conscience and to the state of his own soul: "Until now Richard has never examined the workings of his own mind [...]. In a relatively short passage a psychological drama of great immediacy is enacted" (Clemen 1968, 20). See also Arnold: "The philosophical tone of the moralizing soliloquy becomes intimately introspective [...]. The serious presentation of argumentative reflection most closely approaches the original [i.e. Augustinian] meaning of soliloquy" (Arnold 1965, 156). But when Arnold goes on to write about the beginning of this soliloquy "Here feeling outweighs thought" (Arnold 1965, 154), this is only half the story: rather, Richard's attempt at being rational is being thwarted by his conscience, which might be related to thought. This is not about one item, e.g., conscience, outweighing the other, e.g., feeling, but the soliloquy performatively renders Richard's inner conflict. See also Müller: "Der Gewissenskonflikt in Richards letztem Monolog trägt dagegen keine allegorischen Züge [unlike Launcelot Gobbo's monolog]; er ist völlig internalisiert, zum reinen inneren Dialog geworden" (Müller 1982, 322). But this does not do justice to what is going on here: A sentence like "All several sins, all used in each degree,/ Throng to the bar, crying all, 'Guilty, guilty'" (5.3.198–199) very much resembles an allegorical drama within the self. The internalization thus takes place on the basis of allegory and becomes psychological. Olk reads this soliloquy in the context of Richard's conscience which "introduces a notion of the subject as intrinsically divided" (Olk 2012, 2). Although she argues that the "conceptual development of conscience can almost be seen as the invention of an inner person and as a precondition of early modern subjectivity" (Olk 2012, 2), she does not establish a link to the tradition of the soliloquy but even speaks of Richard's speech as a "monologue" (Olk 2012, 15).

addressing a part of himself,<sup>28</sup> and, simultaneously, apostrophizing his conscience very much as if it were a character in its own right, a notion that can be traced back, as we have seen, to Augustine as well as to the tradition of psychomachia in medieval allegory and morality plays.<sup>29</sup> In Richard's case, the pronoun "thou" and his address of conscience is telling with regard to his character as this identifies him to be a proper villain: it is the only time that he addresses another entity in the second person; in what follows he wholly focuses on himself with "I" and "myself," to then change to the third person singular, e.g., in "Richard loves Richard."<sup>30</sup> He is no longer able to address himself but presents himself as a split (or self-divided) entity instead.

Richard's inner debate is a way to find out who (or what) he is; it is marked by a high degree of psychological urgency.<sup>31</sup> The fact that he begins his soliloquy with an exclamation to conscience is conspicuous in this context: "conscience" is derived from Latin "con-scire" (cf. *OED*, "conscience" etym.). Cooper writes in his *Thesaurus* that it is "a testimonie or witsnesse of ones own minde: knowledge" (1595/1969).<sup>32</sup> Richard's conscience becomes his judge, and he imagines himself to be in a courtroom.<sup>33</sup> The imagined courtroom situation is an action that takes place within his soul, with conscience being the judge, deciding over his sins, which is a notion of judgment reminiscent of the "summoning" of the speaker in Donne's poem. Richard finally arrives at some sort of knowledge: he "shall despair," as predicted by the ghosts who visited him in his dream.

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**28** Clemen notes: "The very possibility of such a split within a person is a new and important phenomenon in sixteenth-century portrayal of character" (Clemen 1968, 219). The "split within a person" is, however, not "new" – it is Augustinian; what is new is that it is put on the theater stage.

**29** This self-address and -division was used repeatedly by Shakespeare, e.g., in Gobbo's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*; cf. the annotations by Drakakis (Shakespeare 2010) as well as Leimberg (2011, 77–78), who both refer to the origin of this scene in psychomachia and morality plays. See also Belsey: "the Renaissance soliloquy shows evidence of its own genealogy [...]. The repressed discontinuities of the allegorical tradition return to haunt the single voice which speaks" (Belsey 1985, 44); her example is *Doctor Faustus* (see 43–54).

**30** Although he speaks of "love" here, the third person pronoun still expresses distance towards the self, especially so as he continues with "that is, I am I" rather than "that is, I love myself."

**31** See e.g. Gerber, who calls this soliloquy "a masterpiece of psychological insight" (Gerber 1959, 294). Olk comments that it serves as a "dialogical unfolding of Richard's dramatic self" (Olk 2012, 15).

**32** "According to this definition conscience is a synonym of self-knowledge" (Leimberg 2011, 78), which is in line with the significance of *nosce te ipsum* from the Delphic Maxims in the period (cf. Ferry 1983, 41; see Leimberg 2011, 22–24).

**33** Siemon in his annotation speaks of an "imaginary courtroom" (Shakespeare 2009, 398n196–197). See also Olk: "Conscience is at the crossroads of discourses of subjectivity, religion, law, and the theatre" (Olk 2012, 2).

Richard's inner debate accordingly does not result in repentance but in despair: he recognizes that "no soul will pity me," not even his own soul.<sup>34</sup> His inner debate literally becomes a drama of the soul: not only do the conflicting voices inside him debate his case, but we also learn that he is a lost soul who is loved by no one. The second person is literally missing from this soliloquy: he is able only once to address a "thou," his conscience; then he moves on to "I," "myself," and the third person.<sup>35</sup> When Richard concludes that "There is no creature loves me," he acknowledges that his soul is no longer an *imago dei* because it is incapable of a loving self-address. Richard's drama of the soul accordingly does not end happily.

Despite this difference with regard to outcome between Shakespeare's Richard III and the speaker in Donne's *Holy Sonnet*, they are linked with regard to the communicative situation: in both, the speaker is doubled. While the speaker in Donne addresses a part in himself, in the case of Richard, self-division is presented not by self-address but by an internal dialog between different parts within himself. The fiction of a speaker who addresses himself when confronted with his judgment or death found its way into Shakespeare's drama as well as into Donne's poetry.

## 4 Comedy Ending

Donne's *Holy Sonnet* "Oh My Black Soule" – unlike the drama of Richard III or of Faustus, for that matter – does not end in despair but follows the tradition of medieval morality plays and their happy ending that is achieved through the protagonist's repentance and divine grace.<sup>36</sup> The speaker finds a way to save his soul and directs an imperative at it in the final couplet: "Or washe thee in Christs blood, which hath this might/ That beeing red, it dyes red Soules to whight." The concluding imperative has both dramatic and religious implications, and it is vital as the speaker asks his soul to do something and not to suffer and submit to its fate.

<sup>34</sup> Earlier he denied the ability to pity in another soliloquy: "[...] But I am in/ So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin./ Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye" (4.2.62–63).

<sup>35</sup> The use of pronouns is iconic of the events in the soliloquy: the address in the second person, especially "thou," is expressive of an emotional relationship, of a loving relationship, both in love poetry and in religious texts. See e.g. Freedman (2007) on the uses of *you* and *thou* in Shakespeare.

<sup>36</sup> For the underlying understanding of comedy, see above n13.

The image of washing in blood to become white is biblical – Revelation 7:14, “these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (*The Bible* 1998). Christ’s red blood “dyes red soules to white.” The red of Christ’s blood in combination with the redness of sin makes the soul white – it is cleansed in a quasi-alchemical process;<sup>37</sup> the image refers to the Passion of Christ, which turns out to be a major context that is being evoked in this *Holy Sonnet*.<sup>38</sup>

In the course of 14 lines, the speaker proceeds from the present moment to the past state of his soul as a thief and traitor to the future in the injunction to act; at the same time, the soul undergoes a process of recognition, cleansing, and catharsis with which the poem comes to its climax: death has to be turned into the dy(e)ing of the soul and can thus be overcome. Therefore, the pun on *dying* can be read as a playful way suggested by Donne (in the sense of *serio ludere*) of overcoming death,<sup>39</sup> and the transformation of death into dy(e)ing can be regarded as the central move of the poem: the final washing in Christ’s blood cleanses the soul and (re)turns the criminal (traitor and thief) into an innocent person. By means of the pun, the dy(e)ing of the soul, the speaker in Donne’s poem reinterprets death and shows how death can be overcome in spite of sin. The action to be taken by the soul accordingly ends the action (as plot) of the sonnet which presents the speaker (and the reader/audience) with a drama of salvation that ends happily.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

The morality play evoked in the poem eventually becomes a mystery play in that the soul undergoes the “might” of Christ’s death on the cross. At the same time, this creates a scene of meditation at the end of the poem: the speaker refers to the Passion of Christ and, through a *compositio loci* with Christ’s blood streaming,<sup>40</sup> imagines the soul to become present and “wash” itself. This ending can hence also be read as a performative act directed at the reader (or the audience) of the poem: they are either to meditate on the Passion themselves – “Or wash thee”

<sup>37</sup> See Shawcross on alchemical references in this poem (Donne 1967, 339).

<sup>38</sup> See Zirker (2015, 180–181) for a link between this *Holy Sonnet* and “At the round Earths imagined corners,” where the speaker also refers to the “pardon” effected by Christ’s blood.

<sup>39</sup> See also Donne’s *Holy Sonnet* “Death Be Not Proud” that ends on the line “And Death shalbe no more, Death thou shalt dy” (Donne 2005, 16).

<sup>40</sup> On the notion of *compositio loci* in the context of meditation, see Martz (1962).

is then uttered by the speaker who wishes to bring about change – or to partake in the Eucharist. The speaker's recognition – or *anagnorisis* – hence consists in integrating the drama of the soul into the larger drama of death and redemption. By distancing himself from his soul through the communicative situation of the soliloquy, the speaker recognizes what his soul has to do and that it should not submit to its fate but act. The dramatic references in this sonnet thus become a way towards this recognition and the speaker's salvation.

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