1

Self and Play: Definitions

In the first half of the seventeenth century, England produced an extraordinary array of self-conscious literary players, both fictional and real. At the turn of the century, Hamlet assumed his "antic disposition," and John Donne posed as faithful lover, then libertine, then Platonic idealist in riddling verse. George Herbert followed, composing puzzle poems in which he engaged both God and his readers in sacred games of wit. As political, intellectual, and religious disputes escalated toward civil war and a revolution of consciousness, men of letters continued to play. Despite his Puritan affiliations, Andrew Marvell had a playful streak that sparked him, even during the Interregnum, to write whimsical but enigmatic lyrics. Robert Burton called *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* his voluminous medical treatise, a "playing labour" written to stave off his own melancholy. Sir Thomas Browne, in defending the religion of a doctor, considered the universe his toy globe to "turne . . . round sometimes for [his] recreation." And Izaak Walton composed a fishing manual to be a "recreation of a recreation."[1]

Play, especially its relation to seriousness, fascinated men and women of the era. In "A Treatise on Playe" (1597), John Harington, the translator of Ariosto, attempts what twentieth-century cultural historians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians have labored to formulate: a definition of play. By describing it as "a spending of the tyme eyther in speeche or action, whose only end is delyght of the mynd and speryt," Harington includes devotion as a "kynde of recreation," indeed "absolutely the best." He justifies sacred play by the example of David, who played instruments and, although naked, danced before the Ark of the Covenant. When reproached for acting like a buffoon, King David replied, *"Ludam et fiam vilior"*—in the Douay translation of the Vulgate, "I will both play and make myself meaner than I have done: and I will be little in my

Copyrighted Material

own eyes" (2 Kings 6:22).[2] Playing freely in the Lord's loving presence becomes an important motif in much of the poetry and emblem literature of the period, and serious devotional writers frequently associate the Christian life with play.[3] Even the dissolute Thomas Carew, while deprecating his profane verse in comparison to George Sandys's holy poems, hopes to redeem his "unwasht Muse" and imitate King David's play:

> Though nor in tune, nor wing, she reach thy Larke,
> Her Lyrick feet may dance before the Arke.
> Who knowes, but that her wandring eyes that run,
> Now hunting Glow-wormes, may adore the Sun?[4]

Like many of his contemporaries, Carew sees that innocent play may lead to worship.

Naturally not everyone in the seventeenth century (nor today) could believe that play and seriousness are compatible. Puritan conduct books, manuals on sermon writing, and diatribes against dicing, church ales, and stage plays allow only those lawful pastimes that render humans more fit for work, and reject playfulness associated with devotion. Condemning especially "Prayers with strong lines," Daniel Featley mimics these lines to ridicule the man who comes "unto *God,* not *with the soales of his feet, but the feet of his soule,*" because "this is *playing,* not *Praying.*"[5] Even the master of strong lines, John Donne, occasionally doubts that his playful language is appropriate to serious devotion: in "The Litany," he prays for deliverance from "my excess / In seeking secrets, or poeticness" and from being "moved to seem religious / Only to vent wit."[6] Whether or not seventeenth-century writers and readers approved, they recognized much writing on serious issues, even religion, as play.

A puzzling question is why so many writers throughout the Renaissance represented their experience of a divided world in the spirit of play. Acute readers have studied this efflorescence of literary playfulness, which was not limited to England. Mikhail Bakhtin reads Rabelais's use of carnivalesque play as a literary regeneration of the communal grotesque body of the people, in opposition to both the passing medieval hierarchical self and the emerging individualized bourgeois self. Richard Lanham finds the motives for the playful eloquence of representative works from Chaucer to Shakespeare in the education that emphasized rhetoric and thus encouraged writers to assume any role that would persuade. This education, he argues, produced a species of man, *homo rhetoricus,* without a centrally rooted self, who found reality only in the role play of rhetoric. Taking his cue from Lanham, Richard Helgerson defines the serious selves projected by "self-crowned laureates," like Spenser, Jonson, and Milton, in contrast to amateurs like Donne and professionals like Shakespeare, who were detached role players on a world stage.

Copyrighted Material

Leah Sinanoglou Marcus is less concerned with play and self-definition than with play and history. She explains the importance of play to seventeenth-century English poets as sometimes a retreat to the innocence and humility of childhood to escape from political conflicts and social turmoil, and as other times an oblique engagement in those conflicts through allusions to the Stuart policies on merrymaking promulgated in *The Book of Sports*. The broadest of these studies, Frank J. Warnke's survey of seventeenth-century European literature, attributes the period's playfulness to the baroque style and suggests some relationship between play and the confusions of seventeenth-century life: "Possibly there is some connection between the spirit of the seventeenth century, with its incessant conflicts of ideologies, values, and modes of thought, and the characteristic works of art of that century, which consistently express an awareness of the contradictions of experience and resolve those contradictions in the hallowed sphere of play."[7] That connection is one goal of this study: to describe how play offered Hamlet, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Burton, and Browne a way to live within the contradictions and conflicts of their experience. They found in play a new stance for the self—not some universal body of the people, nor the nonself of *homo rhetoricus*, but a ludic self that allowed them to stand, without retreating, in the midst of difficult dilemmas.

To catch a glimpse of this new self founded in play and to follow its darting through an era of such profound change requires some preparation. Minimal working definitions of *self* and *play* establish my starting point for interpretation. A fictional example from the turn of the century, Hamlet, provides us with a paradigm of the self who finds in play a precarious stance amid maddening contradictions. Then a historical overview surveys the uses of play among real selves ill-equipped for revolutionary change—an overview that must expand and complicate the original working definitions of *self* and *play*. The first three chapters offer these definitions, illustration, overview, and redefinitions. After this preparation, the central chapters analyze distinct versions of the ludic self—from Donne's tense, flashy illusiveness to Browne's assured toying with the cosmos; from Herbert's wrestling with the angel of God to Burton's wrestling with the chaos of knowledge; from Marvell's recreating to Marvell's re-creating the self. My conclusion both backtracks and points ahead—to glance at the antecedent tradition of literary play in works from Rabelais to Cervantes, to preview a new concept of play in Izaak Walton's best seller, *The Compleat Angler*, and thus to locate the literary players of the midseventeenth century in a historical poise between folly and leisure.

I

Selves come into being in every era, and variable child-rearing practices, determined by and inculcating variable cultural codes, delimit the

Copyrighted Material

range of available structures for the self in a given era. The earliest events in the process of self-formation, however, seem universal, although timed and negotiated differently. So, when we take account of historically specific child-rearing practices, as we shall later, we can use the research of modern psychoanalysis into these early events to understand a version of self available in seventeenth-century England.

In the current debate over what, if anything, constitutes the self, theorists in various camps agree in locating the origin of subjectivity earlier than the Oedipal period, in the infant's first interactions with the world of objects and caregivers. In its primary narcissism, the infant seems merged with the source of nurture in an omnipotence that perceives no distinction between me and not-me. The inevitable and mysterious absences of the caregiver, however, shatter this illusion. Alone, the infant experiences being, not as a self, but as a flood of stimuli from within and without, as the pressure of impulses over which s/he has no control, and as a body whose movements s/he cannot coordinate. When the caregiver returns, more or less accurately perceives the infant's needs, and responds, then the infant finds in this care a kind of mirror of what s/he is. When mothers and fathers celebrate a spontaneous gesture as a wave or a grimace as a smile, then the infant sees in their response an image of what to be. When placed before an actual mirror (at between six and eighteen months), the infant appears enthralled, even ecstatic at the image of wholeness s/he perceives, so different from the inner experience of uncoordination.

As the caregivers physically hold the infant and arrange through nurture a holding environment, s/he experiences a cohesion of once random sensorimotor discharges. Captivated by the human face that offers an image of a self, the infant begins to identify with that image, composed of some mixture of the caregivers' responses to perceived need and projections from their own desires into an identity for the child. The symbiosis of this period breaks at around eighteen months with a thundering "NO!" as simultaneously the child begins to assert autonomy and to gain language. Entry into linguistic competence gives the child power in the struggle for autonomy from the caregivers' image and also subjects the child to the cultural codes that constitute and are constituted in language. The mastery of language completes the construction of the basic structure for a self—a framework that a life of linguistic and social interaction will continue to elaborate.

So much for fundamental agreement. What happens to the child seems clear, but theorists draw battle lines at what these events mean, particularly at two key points of interpretation: the status of the self, and the significance of the space opened up by separation. Jacques Lacan and his followers, in line with the opposition of current continental philosophy to the concept of a transcendent self, argue that the infant's first image of an "I" is an illusion or attribution. The mirror reflects a unity that does not match the infantile expe-

Copyrighted Material

rience of fragmentation, and the caregivers' image projects their own desire; thus the infant identifies with a desire that is "other." Although language frees the child from "captivation" by this image, the codes and laws of language require subjection to a greater "Other," and words are by their nature absence, a substitution for a presence of being to itself, lost forever with primary narcissism. For Lacan, the self is a "subject" position in language, a locus, not an entity, constituted in experiences of alienation; the space opened up by separation is an abyss.[8]

In general, theorists of object relations and theorists of narcissism (the following chapters will detail the findings of D. W. Winnicott, Margaret Mahler, and Heinz Kohut) perceive the same events, although their theories are based on observations of infants and on clinical data rather than on the debates of continental philosophy. The self they describe also originates in separation and is constructed in relation to primary objects. However, they do not assume that, because the self is constructed, it is a void or an illusion. The infant is not born with a self, only with needs, drives, and a genetic potential. When s/he looks in a mirror or gazes at a face, there is no entity yet to be alienated from. When s/he experiences the holding of nurture, identifies with caregivers' images, and internalizes cultural codes, a structure consolidates where only randomness existed before. So Lacanian phrases like the "fictional direction" of the ego, "the armour of alienating identity," or "the primary alienation of the *infans* from 'himself'" seem more like rhetoric than useful theoretical constructs.[9]

Depending on how the infant's earliest experiences are managed, s/he may, in fact, not be able to construct the framework for a viable self. If caregivers' absences are prolonged or traumatic, if caregivers *only* project their own psychic agenda and seldom perceive and respond to the child's spontaneous gestures, if cultural codes are inculcated in ways that confuse the child or warp potential, then s/he may form a self too compliant to external expectations to own internal desire, one too rigid or too weak to sustain conflict, or no self at all. Indeed, there are "false," divided, and wholly fragmented selves.[10] In the Renaissance and today they languish in institutions and wander the streets, and their real sufferings call into question the facile use in literary criticism of phrases like "the dispersion of . . . simultaneous selves" and "the void that constitutes identity" to characterize authors or readers.[11]

Most people, however, do survive the vicissitudes of infancy and childhood with a functional self; they feel a sense of identity, albeit cobbled together, between what they have been and may be, between impulse, thought, and action. The key word here is *functional*. Neither a transcendent ego nor a void, this self may experience tension, at times wrenching conflicts; it will be more or less vulnerable to dissolution; and certainly it will be subject to further construction.[12] Nevertheless, theories of object relations

Copyrighted Material

describe the self as a complex, ongoing inner synthesis characterized by a feeling of sameness and continuity.[13]

In regard to the second point of conflict, these theories do not interpret the experience of separation—between image and impulse, caregiver and infant, word and presence—as necessarily an abyss of alienation. D. W. Winnicott sees in these gaps a potential space for the earliest play, where infants and children may negotiate the boundaries between self and other. In this "play space," neither wholly in-here nor wholly out-there, the infant can connect the inner world of impulse and need with the external world that s/he has painfully discovered to be beyond omnipotent control. This play transforms part of the not-me world (a toy, a blanket, nurturing hands) in accord with some fantasy from the me-world (the caregiver's comforting presence, her breast, or her puzzling disappearance and return). Through play as simple as peek-a-boo, the child discovers that s/he is separate from the world of objects s/he manipulates, but that s/he is not alienated, because s/he can transform those objects; the self is neither merged with nor abandoned by the other.[14]

From this perspective, Freud's grandson's famous game (in which he repeated "Fort! Da!" as he reenacted the absence and return of his mother by throwing away and then retrieving a spool on a string) is more than a demonstration of Freud's theory of repetition compulsion or a "myth of origins" for Lacan's theory of the constitution of the subject in absence.[15] It is an example of play at mastery. The child transforms objects in accord with fantasy and thus locates the self in between what is inside and what is other. Winnicott further conjectures that such early play in the space opened by separation is the basis for human culture, the means whereby adults make themselves at home in a world no longer designed to gratify their desires.

As one of the elements of human culture, writing can become, like the earliest play, a self-constituting act. Against those who limit language to a system of differences serving the social system of exchange, Julia Kristeva has asserted that "the science of linguistics has no way of apprehending anything in language which belongs not with the social contract but with play, pleasure or desire." In poetic language, the play of primary process thinking erupts into the secondary process of linguistic structure, creating a dynamic interaction.[16] As the author sorts through these bits of fantasy from the unconscious, perceptions from consciousness, and pressures from the outside world—arranging and rearranging them in a dialogue with linguistic structures—s/he constructs a whole, and in the process may bring a confused or disjointed self into focus. So the entry into language is not simply the loss of presence, not always a deferral; it can be a means to give voice to and synthesize the competing forces that constitute identity. In the resulting text, the author projects a version of self, not necessarily identical with the internal structure, but not wholly unrelated either.

Copyrighted Material

II

'Play' is a no less vexed concept than 'self'. It is such a multidimensional phenomenon that no single discipline can exhaust its complexities. Suppose we seat a varied group of the learned behind a one-way mirror looking into a nursery school class of five-year-olds, some of whom are playing house while others roughhouse. Then let us ask the learned what they see. The ethologist observes the hubbub—squealing, wiggling, and jockeying for position and toys—and then describes its roots in animal evolution toward adaptation strategies more flexible than instinct. "This apparent chaos," adds the psychologist, "also fits into a larger pattern of human development: these preschoolers are moving beyond the sensorimotor play of toddlers into make-believe play; they won't play rule-bound games for two or three years yet." The psychoanalyst interrupts, "But that withdrawn boy in the corner, who is sucking a frayed blanket and rocking back and forth, has too fragile a sense of self to venture it in even the most elementary exploratory play, much less in make-believe."

The sociologist veers off in another direction, pointing out how the two games, roughhouse and house, illustrate the social construction of gender and prepare these children for adult roles. The anthropologist agrees, but questions the psychologist's assumption that there are universal, developmental stages of play; he contrasts these children to those of the Nyansongo of Kenya who almost never play make-believe. Although agreeing with the anthropologist and sociologist, the cultural historian reminds them of the influence that available toys exert on this kind of play; he compares the classroom's elaborate "home-living center" to the single rag doll in the home of a tot in nineteenth-century rural America. At this point, the communications theorist interjects, "Wait a minute. How much of this behavior is actually play? Most of the time these kids are negotiating who will play what in the game that only lasts an instant before new negotiations about the game erupt: 'You be the daddy.' 'No, I'm Batman.' 'You can't be Batman; I'm Batman.'"

While both children and colleagues argue, the philosopher and theologian listen patiently and, after a pause, leave their seats to join the children. When asked later to explain their odd behavior, they reply, in chorus, "I saw in this play the ground of my being." "The joy and innocence of amoral creation and destruction," continues the philosopher. "No, the joy and innocence of living a narrative life," counters the theologian. "But," they muse, "why did the children look at us funny and quit playing when we took their blocks and dolls?"

Albeit playful, this parable is not far from the truth about the state of research on play. Everyone sees something different. Several excellent surveys have tried to bring order to these varied perspectives, obviating the need to

Copyrighted Material

rehearse all these theories here.[17] What this project needs now is a working definition of play, to be expanded later by some of the theories oversimplified in our parable. But definitions, like theories, have proliferated. In literary study, two quite diverse conceptions have dominated: those of Johan Huizinga and Jacques Derrida.[18] These two theorists, a historian of culture and a philosopher of language, articulate two opposed concepts of play: play as voluntary, intentional human action, and play as impersonal, involuntary movement.

Huizinga defines play as "an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility." From this definition, he argues, "All poetry is born of play: the sacred play of worship, the festive play of courtship, the martial play of the contest, the disputatious play of braggadocio, mockery, and invective, the nimble play of wit and readiness." Other cultural institutions that Huizinga believes originated in play—religion, science, law, war, and politics—become less playful as they become more organized, but poetry, he asserts, is always play.[19] Derrida agrees that all culture is played but denies that individuals determine the play. Since he believes that there are no absolute centers—neither subjects like authors and readers, nor objects, like texts, that have stable significations—then all literature and interpretation are "free play." Authors and readers themselves result from the free play of various constituting factors, so the texts authors and literary critics produce come not from selves, but from the free play of language in previous texts.[20]

Both these theories rely on partial definitions that blur distinctions important for literary criticism. Derrida's concept of free play, as Mihai Spariosu has traced it, extends into the domain of language a concept of play employed by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Reacting against the rationalist tradition, these philosophers return to pre-Socratic thought, embracing Heraclitus's dictum, "Lifetime is a child at play, moving pieces in a game, the kingship belongs to the child." Like the philosopher in our playful parable, they see in the play of the child, and by analogy the play of the artist, an amoral creation and destruction that signifies the aimless to-and-fro movement of the cosmos. This conception of play offers little utility for analyzing play in literature for two reasons.[21]

First, it is based on a metaphor that won't work. To image the arbitrariness and aimlessness of becoming and passing, this line of philosophers, although not Derrida himself, compares life to a playing child. But to see child's play as the groundless ground of being is to mystify it. After all, when the philosopher in our parable tried to play this game, the children stopped theirs. Child's play is not arbitrary or aimless. Despite the apparent chaos in the nursery school class, the learned saw nascent selves negotiating their boundaries, roles, and power. Building and smashing block houses is not the

Copyrighted Material

amoral joy of aleatory creation and destruction. Both the building and smashing have meaning and follow patterns in the development of intellectual skills, emotions, gender roles, cultural values, and so forth.

Eugen Fink, a disciple of Heidegger, also sees play as a symbol of the world, but draws an important distinction. Although within its world human play has reasons and goals, the world totality itself, within which all means and ends arise, is without reason, goal, value, or plan. Cosmic power, he argues, is the play of becoming and passing, and its totality may shine through in the child's or the artist's sense of freedom, power, and irresponsibility. Still, unlike human play, world play has no intending subject.[22] So, although the spontaneity and ceaseless motion of child's play may help philosophers image a decentered universe without meaning, we cannot take this metaphor as a description of how play functions within the world of culture and use it to interpret other forms of human play like literature. Similarly, the play of the artist, so close to the child at play, may image for philosophers the capricious making and unmaking that moves the cosmos, but their image does not define art as a capricious making and unmaking. For Nietzsche and his successors, the artist creating and the child at play symbolize cosmic becoming and passing, but this metaphor is not an interpretive tool.

Second, even if we dispense with Heraclitus's problematical metaphor of child's play and focus on Derrida's more abstract concept of *free play,* the term still has little utility for analyzing play in literature. Derrida equates *play* with slippage or random movement—as in the sentence "There is too much *play* in this steering wheel." Since everything in his view is free play—language, texts, subjects, objects—Derrida rejects a theory of play that places an initiating subject at its center. If every act is the product, not of an intending self, but of random to-and-fro movement within and between systems with no center, then there are no distinctions to be made between playful and nonplayful acts. But if we return to our parable, we may remember the difference between the withdrawn boy in the corner, who sucks a blanket and rocks, and his romping classmates. In human terms, some movement is play and some is not; some children can play and some cannot. Derrida's concept of free play blurs such distinctions.

Furthermore, to explore, to pretend, and to compete, a child must have a self centered enough to ground any movement into the open space of play. There is no "free play" among children without some center. The same, I would argue, is true for literary critics. If we accede to Derrida's proclamation that the self is an absent center, a stance questionable on psychoanalytic grounds, we are left with universal free play, a concept that cannot help us make distinctions among the rich proliferation of playful acts in literature. We must either abandon criticism altogether or endlessly chart the slippages that destabilize meaning. Like the boy in our parable, we won't be able to

Copyrighted Material

play at all, or we will be able to play only one game, rocking back and forth.

Huizinga's definition of play (a rule-governed activity limited in time and space, set apart from what is necessary or useful) is more attentive to human play than Derrida's, but he tries to classify that which itself classifies. Play is so hard to define precisely because it is itself a defining activity: it communicates the definition of a situation to participants. Attempts to delimit play to a category of activities, so that a given action will always be play, are inadequate. Sunday TV viewers know that, when an NFL lineman breaks from the huddle, his mood is more likely to be deadly earnest than playful. Readers of eighteenth-century novels know that *Clarissa* is less playful than *Tristram Shandy.* Not a class of certain kinds of activities (not all football games are play; not all literature is play), play defines a given action in a certain way (punching another player may or may not be play; allusions to sexuality may or may not be playful). Play is a context, a frame, or a stance players adopt toward a source, almost any source—such as an object when toying with a pencil, or a person when teasing a friend, or a role when acting Macbeth, or an activity when playing war. The text produced by this context alludes to, purports to imitate, and transforms the source of the play.[23]

Gregory Bateson first noticed the importance of framing in play while watching otters in a zoo. The otters took their chasing, nipping, and scuffling—behaviors that might signal "This is a fight"—to mean "This is play." Observing this complex communication, Bateson realized that the otter who nips a playfellow gives a double message in a single action. The context message, "This is play, not a bite," frames the situation, redefining and transforming the fact of the bite, the physiological message, "This is a bite." Because of this doubleness of definition, play creates a logical paradox. For the otters, the paradox takes the form "This bite does not signify what a bite signifies." The play frame, Bateson reasoned, resembles the classic self-referential paradox formulated by Epimenides, the Cretan, who claimed, "All Cretans are liars." If the statement is true, then Epimenides, because he is a Cretan, must be lying, but then his statement must be false, and he may be telling the truth. This tangle reduces to the paradox: if Epimenides is telling the truth, then he is lying. Similarly, the otter's playful nip both is and is not a bite.

These self-references create logical paradoxes because the definition of the class of actions is itself one of the actions being defined. Although theoretically invalid, this confusion of logical types—of the defining frame with what is inside the frame—pervades human life and can produce great pleasure. This same paradox frames other forms of cultural play such as drama and ballet: the ballerina who dances *Swan Lake* both is and is not a swan.[24] Furthermore, because play conflates the defining frame with what is inside the frame, a single play action takes place simultaneously on two levels of reality: the player both participates in his action and stands apart framing the

Copyrighted Material

action, thereby gaining distance and perspective on himself. Although using different terms, Fulke Greville recognized this doubleness of the play stance; in his *Life of Sir Philip Sidney,* he describes "that hypocriticall figure *Ironia,* wherein men commonly (to keep above their workes) seeme to make toies of the utmost they can doe."[25] The seventeenth century understood the relation between play and perspective.

Following the lead of Bateson, Erving Goffman has classified the frames by which we define our experience. Several of these frames resemble play because they transform one kind of activity into another, which, although patterned on the first activity, is perceived by participants as something else. The frame of "make-believe," which applies to Bateson's otters and ballerinas, includes imitation, playfulness, fantasy, and drama. "Contests" include games and sports, in which clear limits of time and/or space and voluntarily accepted rules define the play frame so clearly that players need not continue to give the metamessage (a message about how to take a message) "This is play." As a result, these limits and rules create a microcosm, a secondary world, which takes on a separate "reality" so compelling that players sometimes forget their paradoxical position. They may feel that their actions are "real," not both real and not real simultaneously (hence the NFL lineman's earnestness when breaking from the huddle).[26]

When art gives form and limits to make-believe and fantasy (the time from the dimming of the lights to the final curtain, the space between the margins on the page), it may create an even more compelling "reality" than do games. Goffman's taxonomy helps clarify why, although literature may originate in play (in the play that generates culture as Winnicott and Huizinga would have it, or the daydreams of the author as Freud would have it), literature occupies its own class, the aesthetic domain. Like any other cultural category, literature may or may not be played.[27]

III

Two well known seventeenth-century lyrics can illustrate this distinction between playful and not-so-playful texts, and preview some moves of the ludic self. In 1652, after interrupting his promising poetic career to serve the revolutionary cause, John Milton was struck totally blind. As a record of anger and frustration, but ultimate submission to God's will, he composed "When I consider how my light is spent."[28] Although no one can be privy to the mind of a long dead poet, we may speculate that Milton played while writing this serious poem. As an Italian sonnet, its rigid meter and rhyme demand masterful skill with language. Yet within this form Milton manipulates its conventions to match his meaning, transcends the sonnet's brevity with allusions, and makes words serve double functions. He

Copyrighted Material

ends the thought of the octave in the middle of line 8 to enact the intervention of "patience to prevent" his almost blasphemous murmurings, which rumble through the first seven lines, from controlling the sonnet's first partition. He weaves into the texture of what appears to be spontaneous thought allusions to the parable of the talents and to the distinctions that arcane angelology draws between messenger angels, who "post o're Land and Ocean," and contemplative angels, "who only stand and waite" before God's radiance. And he ends the sonnet with a pun on *wait*, meaning both to attend idly and to serve actively—a quibble that encapsulates the speaker's hard-won realization that passive waiting is active service.

Whether or not this technical virtuosity resulted from Milton's play when he wrote the sonnet, the voice of the poem is not playful. It does not call attention to the use of literary conventions or invite the reader to pit his or her interpretive skills against the poet's cleverness. Rather, Milton uses literary structures and codes to create a miniature drama of a blind man on a spiritual pilgrimage to light, and through sonnet form, allusions, and puns he summons the reader to identify with the poetic voice and journey with him out of spiritual blindness toward submission before God's throne.

Like Milton, John Donne faced mid-life with anxiety, which he tried to allay by submission to God. Probably in 1623 after a serious illness, he recorded one such attempt at submission in "A Hymn to God the Father." As a hymn, this poem tested Donne's composing skills as the sonnet form did Milton's. Its stanzaic pattern, repetitive questions, and refrain, which puns on the speaker's name, suggest that Donne may also have played while composing. But the voice singing this hymn, unlike the well-defined voice of Milton's sonnet, is ambiguous and playful indeed.

Donne's catalogue of sins, his reiterated prayers for forgiveness, and his longing to bask in the radiance of the Son of God characterize him as a rueful penitent working out his salvation in fear and trembling. Yet, behind the penitent dances the irrepressible, slippery sinner, who seems almost gleeful at dredging up sin after sin to exhaust even God's patience. The refrain sounds like the boast of a playful child running from his father, to whom the hymn is explicitly addressed. Teasing "God the Father" to chase and catch him, the impish speaker taunts, "When thou has done [finished], thou hast not done [the man], / For I have more." Here the pun on Donne's name contrasts markedly to Milton's pun on *wait* in the sonnet on his blindness. Whereas Milton's climactic pun compresses the poem's dramatic tension into one word, thereby moving the reader to share the speaker's experience of frustration and submission, Donne's name pun characterizes the speaker, who both seeks and runs away from God, as a ludic self playing catch-me-if-you-can.

Likewise, the voice of the hymn plays hide-and-seek with the reader. At least in part, Donne's hymn is not a solemn musical offering to God, but a

Copyrighted Material

game for the reader to test his or her ability to get the joke. Will s/he recognize *done* as *Donne*, and maybe even *more* as *More*—a pun on the family name of Donne's deceased wife, whom he may have loved idolatrously? The refrain implies that God cannot have *done* (finished) and have *Donne* (the man) so long as Donne has *more* sins and his passion for Anne *More*.[29] Instead of increasing the reader's identification with the speaker, as does Milton's pun, Donne's wit both distances and attracts the reader, making him a playmate, even a competitor, challenging her not only to get the joke, but to find the hiding speaker. Is he a sincere penitent terrified that his sins abound more than grace, and that he will "perish on the shore" at his death? Or is he a tease whose insatiable needs demand repeated assurances of love, and who, while pleading to God for these assurances, always has an eye on the reader, whom he also wants to impress with his flashy wit? The self projecting the voice of this poem is an artful dodger who dares the reader to pin him down.

Although both Milton and Donne may have played while writing these poems, and readers may imaginatively share the poets' self-dramatization, the hymn self-consciously frames itself as play and calls for a playful response from its reader, whereas the sonnet does not.[30] These examples generate two related questions to help us identify literary play: (1) What kind of voice does the text project: the voice of a single self who communicates definable (if complex) ideas, emotions, or experiences to the reader, or the voice of an ambiguous, tricky self who plays with the reader? (2) What kind of response does the voice require from the reader: understanding of the communicated ideas and empathy with the emotions or experiences, or countermoves as in a game, solutions as in a puzzle, or a tense anticipation of the next play, a tension that precludes complete empathy?[31]

With these working definitions of *self* and *play*, and this preview of the ludic self, we can now explore the relation between play and contradictions that threaten the self. *Hamlet* appears at the turn of a century of contradictions, and its protagonist offers a paradigm for the other, later players to be studied here. All are emersed in worlds of destructive conflict and paradox, and all play to defend or integrate a self. As complex as *Hamlet* is, it is art, not life; its characters and world, although multifaceted and ambiguous, are circumscribed and formed, as life is not. So in the limited world of a drama, we can clarify the interrelation between play, self, and contradiction, as seen through contemporary eyes, before we turn to the morass of contradiction in seventeenth-century life and to the role of play in history. *Hamlet* dramatizes two families enmeshed in maddening dilemmas and one man's attempt to preserve his self in play.

Copyrighted Material