Abstract

We have not always been lonely. Loneliness may seem like a timeless and universal experience, but the words “loneliness” and “lonely” were new in late-sixteenth century English literature. In this dissertation, I argue that the invention of loneliness shaped what it meant to be a poet in Britain, from the Renaissance to the Romantic period. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, poets chose not to associate themselves with the new term, but by the nineteenth century, loneliness had become a central facet of poetic self-fashioning. When poets started to call themselves “lonely,” they were not merely drawing attention to their new-found solitariness, but also creating a new conceptual framework for the poetic imagination—and indeed, for what loneliness means today.

The standard account of literary loneliness has focused on the idealized figure of the melancholy male solitary and his growing tendency to symbolize a new kind of emotional, intellectual and aesthetic isolation. This account rests on the assumption that poets are most themselves when alone, and that aesthetic experience is most likely to occur in solitude. From Hamlet, to Milton’s Satan and Il Penseroso, to the graveyard poets, to male Romantic poets famous for their lonely wandering, solitariness has been taken as a sign of the inward turn necessary to be a poet.

Such narratives, however, have not taken account of loneliness’ origins in late sixteenth-century Renaissance romance. In its earliest instances, loneliness describes characters who are neither solitary, nor melancholy. These characters do not always speak and are not necessarily turned inward in their loneliness. From Shakespeare’s
Ophelia, to Milton’s Lady, to characters in Aphra Behn and Anne Finch’s poems, loneliness describes vulnerable, often speechless female characters whose bodies, as well as their imaginations, are under threat of attack because they are in spaces far away from the protections of society.

This gendered trope of romance loneliness is, I argue, the foundation on which the mythos of the lonely poet is built. Vulnerable lonely female bodies, first found in romance, form a model for later lonely poets. Loneliness emerges as a more social condition than it might have seemed, oriented toward the outside, social world. In this way, loneliness offers a model for poetic interiority that solitude could not. Early examples of loneliness inscribe a relationship between physical vulnerability and mental or imaginative openness and passivity. The idea that the imagination might be penetrated in the same way that a lonely female body can be is one that later poets are drawn to. At the same time, however, a deep anxiety lies at the heart of lonely poethood. Loneliness liberates, but only through constraint. To be a lonely poet is to be vulnerable, meaning that poets remain anxious about the position even as they embrace it. The muteness that attends early loneliness informs how difficult lonely poets find it to properly communicate their experiences, or sympathize with other lonely people. To be a lonely poet is to long for a connection with others that is not always possible to achieve.
For my parents,
John and Veronica
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Introduction

Loneliness, like aloneness, solitude, and solitariness, can describe a condition of physical isolation. Since one can be lonely when with other people, however, it can also denote an emotion or a state of mind. Of all these words, loneliness is the hardest to define. With a long, mournful “O” at its center, “lonely” is a word that resonates, but the exact quality of the longing it names is difficult to describe. “Who knows what true loneliness is—not the conventional word but the naked terror? To the lonely themselves it wears a mask,” Joseph Conrad explained. The word itself eschews company: it has no easy synonym. Today, loneliness is often defined in terms of an opposition to “solitude” and “solitariness.” Loneliness tends to represent physical conditions of isolation, where loneliness is more abstract. Loneliness also has more negative connotations than the other terms. Over the course of the twentieth century, loneliness came to describe certain forms of psychological pathology. Though there is no antonym for loneliness, Marianne Moore said “The cure for loneliness is solitude.” In the 1960s, the theologian Paul Tillich described the opposition between loneliness and solitude thus:

Our language has wisely sensed these two sides of man’s being alone. It has created the word “loneliness” to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word “solitude” to express the glory of being alone. Although, in daily life, we do not always distinguish these words, we should do so consistently and thus deepen our understanding of our human predicament.

Where solitude seems to be associated with an active choice to seek contentment in isolation, loneliness seems more passive, and implies a desire to counteract the condition or feeling of being alone. Much earlier, Wordsworth had longed after solitude to cure the loneliness of being parted from himself in The Prelude:

When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude... (IV.353-6 [1850])
Where solitude is often “benign”; a state in which a physical state of being alone results in a feeling of contentedness; loneliness more usually describes a lack or longing after company.

However, it has not always been thus. The words “loneliness” and “lonely” were completely new in late-sixteenth century English literature, just as “solitude” was still a rare word that not everyone understood. From a modern perspective, it is tempting to see the invention of loneliness as an effort to produce a more complex version of solitude, which might diagnose the advent of a more widespread feeling of solitariness in British culture. Especially since loneliness was a new concept, it’s possible to conjecture that the word was the abstracted form of a more concrete condition of being alone grew more common. If feeling lonely is not the same as being alone, loneliness seems to measure the relationship between feeling and being. At the root of the word, “lone,” lies the suggestion that it is impossible to imagine what the concept of loneliness might mean, without first imagining what it is like to be physically “alone.”

In the early modern period, however, loneliness was not yet the negative version of a more positive solitude. It was not yet a pathology, nor even, necessarily, a feeling. Our modern perspective of the difference between solitude and loneliness has skewed what the invention of loneliness stood for, and how it has been understood in the literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The invention of loneliness does not formulate the concept of feeling detached from other people even when amongst them, since “solitude” could describes this feeling in the Renaissance. The difference between loneliness and solitude in the early modern period is entirely different from those we might expect, and this is crucial for the central project of this dissertation;
that is, understanding how and why loneliness came to be allied with the mindset of the poet in eighteenth and nineteenth century culture.

“Solitude,” like our term “loneliness,” was frequently used to describe mental or emotional isolation that occurs within a crowd during the seventeenth century. In his essay “On friendship” (1612; rewritten 1625), for instance, Francis Bacon uses solitude, rather than loneliness, to explain the strange paradox of what it is to feel alone amidst a crowd, suggesting that the word “solitude” was closer to our word loneliness than it might today seem. Bacon also emphasizes that the word “solitude” was new in the period in which he was writing:

But little do men perceive what solitude is, and how far it extendeth. For a crowd is not company; and faces are but a gallery of pictures; and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love.

Modern ears might expect Bacon to use the word loneliness to describe this peculiar form of detachment amidst a crowd, but instead he uses “solitude.” In a multitude, Bacon suggests, people seem like mere representations of themselves. Like “pictures” in a gallery,” their appearance becomes a two-dimensional surfaces that cannot be broached. Echoing Corinthians 13.1, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal (KJV),” Bacon suggests that the voices of people also come across as noise rather than language that can be understood. The antidote to solitude, for Bacon, is a company that knows each other well enough to “love” each other.

Similarly, Michel de Montaigne also imagined that solitude could take place amidst a crowd, though he had less choice in the matter than Bacon, because there is not straightforward translation of “loneliness” in French. In “Of Solitude” (1595), which
Bacon most probably read, Montaigne argues that “true solitude” does not depend on one’s bodily location, but rather on one’s frame of mind:

It is not enough to withdraw from the mob, not enough to go to another place…we have to withdraw from such attributes of the mob as are within us. It is our own self we have to isolate and take back into possession…So we must bring her [the soul] back, haul her back into our self. That is true solitude. It can be enjoyed in towns and in king’s courts, but more conveniently apart. It is easier to be inwardly alone, Montaigne admits, when one is physically so, but inward solitude should be just as possible amidst the mob as outside of it. In each case, these writers are interested in cases in which mental solitude becomes split from physical solitude.

Even as late as the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson still prefers to use the term solitude where we might use the word loneliness. This is not only the case in his Dictionary, but also in his essays. He has Mr. Rambler describe his feeling of forlornness amidst a “multitude” as “solitude” rather than “loneliness”:

To a man who has survived all the companions of his youth, all who have participated his pleasures and his cares, have been engaged in the same events, and filled their minds with the same conceptions, this full-peopled world is a dismal solitude. He stands forlorn and silent, neglected or insulted, in the midst of multitudes, animated with hopes which he cannot share, and employed in business which he is no longer able to forward or retard (1750).

Mr. Rambler does not lack for company: the London he lives in is full of people with whom he might make conversation. But because the people who surround him do not share any past experiences with him, he feels unavoidably and irrevocably detached from them. There is little hope of finding a way out of this “dismal” feeling: he cannot solve this particular species of suffering by merely putting himself in the presence of people, because they only remind him of the longing he feels for his friends who have died. The “multitude” multiplies, rather than appeases, his suffering.
It’s crucial to note that male figures like Bacon, Montaigne and Johnson are reluctant to describe themselves as “lonely,” even as they depict “solitude.” This, I want to suggest, is because of loneliness’ gendered implications. Against the expectations that later writers have given us, loneliness does not often describe male solitaries in the early modern period. On the contrary, many of the earliest evocations of the terms “lonely” and “loneliness” describe female or feminine characters in isolated spaces, usually forests, far from civilized society they inhabit. It is therefore necessary to disaggregate loneliness from the figure of the melancholy male solitary. To understand the story of loneliness—especially as it pertains to the history of the lonely poet—it is necessary to do more than merely follow classic examples of masculine solitude through history.

Early loneliness is not just gendered feminine, but, in its most influential instances, it is also often sexualized. In these faraway places, female and feminized lonely characters are vulnerable: they are not often alone in their loneliness, but rather the object of male characters’ voyeurism. Sometimes, they are even under threat of rape in the woods. Not only are these female characters secretly watched by male spectators; they are also in view of the audience. They don’t have knowledge of the full picture of the scenes they inhabit—though their readers and audience members do—and this is another way in which they are not alone in their loneliness. This paradox of loneliness is particularly strong in dramatic renderings of it.

By paying attention to the overlooked female characters whom loneliness first described, I do not merely mean to replace masculine lonely figures with female ones; I also mean to question the model of poetic interiority that previous narratives of the rise of the lonely poet have relied on. The notion of poetic inwardness, and therefore of the
imagination, hinges a metaphor of penetration. From the early modern period into the eighteenth century, feminine lonely characters are conceived of in terms of their sexualized bodies. Several early depictions of loneliness suggest that there is a relationship between the feminine, vulnerable lonely body and the vulnerable lonely imagination. The interiority of lonely bodies becomes interchangeable with the interiority of lonely minds: their lone minds are encased by their lone bodies. This model of the lonely female imagination implies that the mind is a circumscribed interior, and its accessibility to outside attackers becomes obvious precisely because it is bounded off. Where there is a boundary, it is suddenly easier to imagine transgression. Because loneliness throws the relationship between ones embodied condition and imaginative vulnerability into question, it allows poets to think through different possible structures of interiority, providing them with new ways of understanding the relationship between their physical location and their mental condition.

Tracing this gendered paradigm of loneliness through literature, I offer a new history, not only of literary loneliness, but also of poetic interiority. Whereas early modern poets often depict solitary male melancholic figures with minds that are, like their bodies, separate, self-enclosed and self-involved, they first use the word “lonely” to describe female characters who are not alone, who are not inward, but outward-looking, open to sexual, social and sympathetic exchange. Physical and mental vulnerability—not solitariness—is the defining feature of Renaissance loneliness. Rather than being an inward-looking, closed off, melancholy egotist, the eighteenth-century masculine lonely poet is oriented toward the outside world. His fundamental struggle as a poet is with the vulnerability endemic to the identity he has chosen.
Loneliness is also reserved for constrained, wilderness spaces, located far away from the city, and this may also help to explain why Bacon and Johnson choose to describe the situations that take place amidst crowds in London as “solitude” rather than “loneliness.” One rare early sighting of the term “lonely” within the precincts of London, in a letter that Richard Steele wrote to Jonathan Swift in 1729, underlines this opposition between city solitude and lonely pastoral. Steele describes Ambrose Philips in a letter to Swift as “still a shepherd,” who “walks very lonely through this unthinking crowd in London.” In order to bring loneliness into London, Steele has to imagine Philips as personifying his pastoral poetry. He brings a piece of the countryside with him into the city, even as he walks through the crowd. Since the crowd in London is “unthinking,” we learn by an implied inversion that Philips is contemplative in his loneliness. Steele suggests that Philips seems not to have noticed that he’s walking in a very different landscape than before.

II. Chapter Summary

In the first chapter of *The Poetry of Loneliness*, I begin by looking at the earliest records of “loneliness” in English literature. Philip Sidney, the first writer to repeat the term in their work, typifies loneliness with a very specific romance trope: a character who is isolated in a forest space, without actually being alone. Even from the moment of its invention, loneliness already gestures towards an abstract version of what it is to be alone. But the concept is, nevertheless, dependent on tangible portrayals of the borders between different kinds of interiors and exteriors. Because Sidney often genders his lonely characters feminine, loneliness has different features from the more masculine melancholic mode. Sidney uses loneliness to conceptualize a relationship between lonely
spaces, minds, and female bodies. He associates the interiors of his lonely characters’ “huts” and “lodges” with the vulnerability of their bodies, and, in turn, depicts their minds as something that male characters can get access to. To be lonely in this period is to be a sexualized female in danger. Nevertheless, lonely spaces also allow the freedom for these characters to express their emotions and be free from the restraints of the court. Writers who follow Sidney’s Romance invocations of loneliness, such as Mary Sidney, William Basse, George Wither and Lady Mary Wroth, put the danger of loneliness and their characters’ desire for it in productive tension.

Shakespeare also genders loneliness feminine. Those familiar with the reception of *Hamlet* might reasonably assume that its emergence must be related to the Prince’s unusual proclivity for soliloquies and melancholy solitariness, since Hamlet is the English theatre’s most well-known solitary, famous for changing the status of being alone onstage. Lonely poets like Coleridge, Byron and Shelley all identified themselves with Hamlet at some point or another in their careers. Perhaps Coleridge put the argument for Hamlet’s loneliness most pithily, when he suggested, “I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so.” Meanwhile, Hazlitt advised, “It is we who are Hamlet,” Shelley called Hamlet a “tragic poet,” while Keats lamented, “Hamlet’s heart was full of such Misery as mine.” These poets suggest that Hamlet’s melancholy and solitary detachment is a sign not only of his introspection but also of his poetic vocation.

But it is the silent Ophelia whom Shakespeare associates with loneliness, not the soliloquizing Hamlet; and what is more, she is not alone. Rather, she is watched from behind an arras as she reads a book. Her loneliness, like that of the lonely females in the romance forest, takes place amongst other people. Because Ophelia’s loneliness frames
Hamlet’s “To be or not to be…” soliloquy, the characters become foils to each other in this scene. Because Ophelia is compared with “Devotion” in her loneliness, debates between Protestants and Catholics about the extent to which devotion and confession should be private also inform Shakespeare’s representation of her lonely silence. Her readerly silence represents a disavowal of the stage tradition whereby supposedly solitary characters confess their thoughts to the audience, as well as a break from the Catholic tradition of relying on an intercessor for self-examination. Silence sets the paradigm for lonely interiority, rather than Hamlet’s soliloquies. As the play proceeds, Hamlet undergoes a conversion that makes him more and more like Ophelia in her loneliness. One of Hamlet’s early speeches begins, “Now I am alone,” but by the end of the play, he can only say, “the rest is silence,” replicating Ophelia’s earlier reticence. The play culminates in Hamlet’s final refusal to confess himself—a renunciation of the soliloquy form.

Four out of Shakespeare’s five depictions of loneliness describe muted female characters: Ophelia, Hermione, Helena and Lavinia. Where Sidney and Wroth’s lonely characters often engage in lament in their loneliness, Shakespeare’s silent or incoherent characters insist on the impenetrability of their lonely minds, even as their counterparts’ drive toward penetrating their minds and bodies is constantly foregrounded. This tendency of Shakespeare’s lonely characters toward silence frequently encourages other characters to both sexualize them and attempt to penetrate their thoughts. Loneliness therefore asks us to dwell on the status of the relationship between loneliness and interiority.
Milton, a transitional Restoration figure, also positions several of his lonely female characters in a romance forest, and relates loneliness to muteness. He oscillates between two different models of the lonely mind; one dangerously open, the other dangerously closed. In the romance mode, he depicts the Lady in *Comus*, lost in the woods like a “lonely traveler,” who fears both the men that threaten her body and the “thousand fantasies” that threaten to broach her mind. She veers between silence and articulate speech. In the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, he tries hard to persuade his readers that loneliness can find a solution in “conversation.” He also uses loneliness to describe the tragic situation in which married minds *cannot* enter each other in the way that bodies can, suggesting that loneliness may describe a dangerously impenetrable situation. By paying close attention to his careful opposition between “loneliness” and “conversation” in the *Doctrine*, a new reading of Adam and Eve’s separation in *Paradise Lost* becomes possible. In “Il Penseroso,” he mitigates between these two extremes, showing how occupying a lonely space can make masculine thinkers more receptive. Milton pictures Il Penseroso in a “lonely tower” which opens his mind to conversation with the poetic tradition. By doing so, he prepares the ground for eighteenth-century poets to start to call themselves lonely. Milton’s own concerns about depicting himself as lonely, however, remain, and appear readable in his depiction of Satan: in this period, loneliness is a diabolical mode; something to be feared and avoided.

The fourth and fifth chapters consider how the romance trope endures in the eighteenth century, when poets start to inhabit the position of lonely female characters from early modern literature, in order to call themselves lonely. In line with its Renaissance roots, loneliness is a condition that poets both desire and fear in the
eighteenth century. In “Lonely poets in retreat,” I question why loneliness remained exiled in the wilderness in the early eighteenth century, by exploring the exception to the rule; two rare uses of the concept by Anne Finch and Alexander Pope in their poetry of retreat.

Seventeenth-century masculine poets famous for their poems about countryside retreat avoided associating themselves with loneliness because of its feminine associations. They prefer to associate themselves with “solitude,” in the countryside, rather than the vulnerability and emotionality in the wilderness that loneliness implies. Indeed, loneliness retains its romance resonances throughout the period: it is frequently associated with dangerous physical and mental vulnerability that occurs in the wilderness throughout this period. Loneliness’ romance influences meld with both Biblical and Classical descriptions of wilderness spaces to make loneliness a cliché to describe the danger associated with being far from society. Aphra Behn and John Dryden, two prolific users of the term loneliness in the late seventeenth century, use it to describe scenes of rape in the forest, suggesting the tenacity of the Romance trope.¹⁸

Where seventeenth century poets find loneliness distasteful, however, Anne Finch and Alexander Pope find the passivity it implies useful. They went from picturing feminized characters in lonely wildernesses, or the wildernesses themselves, to picturing poetic speakers as lonely instead. Finch and Pope made loneliness traverse a theoretical boundary, when they moved it out of the wilderness, into the more civilized space of the countryside (even if the wilderness is more present in their pictures of retreat than it was in the masculine genre of seventeenth-century retreat poetry). Nevertheless, Finch and Pope both imagine their lonely, notably feminine characters to be liberated by constraint.
They use images of a bordered wilderness location, paired with images of feminine vulnerability in such locations, to imagine how such borders can invite transgressions and produce an accessibility that wouldn’t otherwise be possible. In this way, Finch and Pope suggest that loneliness can benefit the imagination by converting a disadvantageous position of vulnerability into an advantageous situation of passivity.

In “Eloisa and Abelard,” Pope uses the romance trope of the socially exiled, religious female as his defining conceit, constructing a feminine imagination and embodiment that is imaginatively and sexually liberated by constraint. This has ramifications for how we imagine his own position of retreat in his grotto and in retreat poems such as “An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot” as gendered situations where he invites vulnerability. At the same time, he remains ambivalent about straightforwardly identifying himself as lonely because of the effeminacy it implies.

“Lonely Poets in Crisis” explores the moment that masculine poets suddenly started calling themselves lonely, arguing that the resurgence of feminized vulnerability and inarticulacy it entailed described a crisis that was occurring in poetic self-fashioning in the period. The longing for connection that loneliness describes may help to explain why poets including James Thomson, Thomas Gray, Thomas Warton, James Ralph, and later, Charlotte Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge all came to be particularly attracted to loneliness and lonely places as they dramatized their longing to connect with their readers. They are lonely poets in their experience as well as their voicing of poetic speakers, and they all innovate by taking loneliness out of closed spaces of retreat and into open spaces when they make their lonely characters wanderers.
The trope of romance loneliness remains strong throughout this poetry, which has more usually been historicized in terms of masculine precedents for melancholy solitariness. In poems that appeal to the concept of loneliness, poets seem torn between a desire for the emotional and contemplative freedom that loneliness implies, whilst at the same being concerned about the danger it implies. The vulnerable situation that Sidney’s lonely characters first find themselves in—in which their minds can be entered in a similar way that their bodies can—begins as a dangerous situation, but, over time, the mental passivity it also implies becomes a more and more appealing fantasy for poets. The more poets describe interiority as “lonely,” the more easy it is to see the advantages that this vulnerable condition has over the more enclosed condition of solitariness. Mid-eighteenth century male poets convert loneliness’ gendered vulnerability into a more productive state of openness or passivity. Inhabiting the role of a lonely poet gives these poets a temporary relief from solitariness, a situation in which minds are more closed off.

But the repressed figures of muted lonely females like Ophelia, Lavinia and Philomel also return to haunt the poetry of this period in less positive ways. Loneliness focuses vexed philosophical questions for lonely poets about what it means to be a voice speaking to an audience without that audience physically present. The link between loneliness vulnerability that constraint produces still continues, in that they each imagine their lonely poet figures as both muted and endangered. Via loneliness, each of these poets escapes the pressures of sociability that disrupt their capacity for poetic contemplation, without becoming entrapped by solitude, but also via loneliness, they all talk themselves around to storylines that involve the death of lonely poet figures. The gendered resonance of loneliness persists, creating a crisis for lonely poets.
Finally, Wordsworth is able to inhabit a position of loneliness with less anxiety about the vulnerability it implies. He is able to rescue loneliness for poets by reformulating lonely interiority, moving away from the metaphors of constraint and penetration that previous depictions of loneliness rely on. The lonely poetic mind, for Wordsworth, is more “as a cloud” than as a female body, although the mind in “solitude” retains these characteristics. Wordsworth makes this cloud-like loneliness—as opposed to enclosed and bordered solitude—a necessary condition for imaginative aesthetic experience. But at the same time that he insists on the openness of lonely poetic interiorities to perceptions of the outside world, the traces of poets’ vexed history with loneliness remain, because for Wordsworth, as for Ophelia, loneliness is a situation that is not easily described in linguistic terms. Conversation cannot solve loneliness for Wordsworth, though it could for Milton. Though critics have often understood Romantic loneliness to find an origin point in Hamlet’s solitariness, Wordsworth’s loneliness—like Byron’s, Percy Shelley’s and Keats’—shares much more in common with Ophelia’s loneliness than with Hamlet’s.

Studying loneliness makes gender central to the story of the Romantic imagination, usually conceived in masculine terms, and asks us to be more suspicious of the term “interiority” when describing poetic imaginations. Though it is usually viewed as a direct inheritance of German idealism, poetic loneliness is first shaped in the English forests of Renaissance romance. A tendency to conflate the notion of the solitary body with the lonely mind has obscured the way that loneliness actually works to break down, rather than build up, the boundaries of interiority in the Romantic period. Romantic lonely minds meld with their surroundings, producing a new model of poetic subjectivity,
one less tied to the binary of inside and outside. Romantic loneliness destabilizes the boundaries of selfhood that rely on a metaphor of inside and outside. Loneliness is a liquid state of self in which an aesthetic experience of melding, both with nature and with other people, becomes more possible. The invention of Romantic loneliness constituted a new model of the poetic imagination, and the study of loneliness suggests that this model finds unexpected origins in depictions of lonely vulnerable female characters in the Romance forest.
The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that loneliness began as a synonym for physical solitude, and only came to describe a feeling or mental condition in the Romantic period. The lexicographers state that the word “lonely” did not start to mean “Dejected because of want of company or society; sad at the thought that one is alone; having a feeling of solitariness” until the early nineteenth century, and they give examples from Wordsworth and Byron to document this transition. But Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* suggests that this history needs to be reconsidered. Sidney pictured loneliness as a feeling of solitariness that takes place amidst other people in the sixteenth century. His “lonely” characters are seldom alone. From the outset, he distinguishes loneliness from mere physical solitude, so that his loneliness describes forms of physical, mental and emotional vulnerability. The “feeling of solitariness” he describes does not always equate with one of dejection, as the dictionary suggests it should. Loneliness is never a straightforwardly melancholy experience in his writing.

Sidney’s first reference to “loneliness” in the 1593 *Arcadia* immediately gives a taste of his complex understanding of what the concept could accommodate. As Pyrocles searches far and wide for his lost lover Zelmane (who had previously been acting as his page, disguised as a male “Daiphantus”), the crowds of people that he comes across become what Sidney calls a “tedious lonelinesse” to him:

> Thence into the *Elean* prouince, to see whether at the Olympian games (there celebrated) he might in such concourse blesse his eyes with so desired an encounter: but that huge and sportfull assemblie grewe to him a tedious lonelinesse, esteeming no bodie founde, since *Daiphantus* was lost.¹⁹
The *OED* records this quotation as the earliest of its attestations for “loneliness,” but its lexicographers have elided the complex meaning of this quotation when they describe it with the definition “Want of society or company; the condition of being alone or solitary; solitariness, loneness.” Put simply, Pyrocles’ “want of society or company” does not arise from “a condition of being alone.” Instead, it is a more abstract condition of longing, that takes place amidst the company of the “assemblie.” Pyrocles does not want for company *per se*: like Samuel Johnson centuries later, he wants for a particular kind of company. The abiding sense is that the crowd cannot replace the feeling of *not* being alone that Pyrocles had when he was with Daiphantus. His loneliness describes a longing for connection that only one person could satisfy. He feels unable to find anybody that will fulfill this particular need for Daiphantus; only Daiphantus will do to solve his want. Pyrocles’ loneliness is also complicated by its temporal component: the verb “grewe” signals that his loneliness could be compared with a tedium that creeps up over a period of time.

But before Pyrocles’ loneliness starts to seem too much like a prototype for the alienation from the crowd more usually associated with nineteenth-century cities, it is crucial to note that Pyrocles’ crowd is located in the wilderness. His longing for Daiphantus becomes suddenly forceful when he arrives at the Elean province in the Greek *Arcadia*, a site famous for hosting the Olympic games. Crucially, the province was alien territory, where people were renowned for being barbarians. The Elean people are therefore more apt than others to incite a feeling of loneliness in Pyrocles. Finally, he calls the assembly *itself* a “loneliness,” reifying his disconnection from it.
Although Sidney’s use of the word “loneliness” to describe Pyrocles’ feeling of solitariness amidst a crowd seems almost impossibly modern, I wish to stress that Sidney never uses “loneliness” to describe a character amidst a crowd in the court or the city. Instead, he reserves it for places that are distant from civilized society. In this respect, Sidney’s Astrophel is useful to explore as a counterfactual example that better situates the nature of Pyrocles’ loneliness. Astrophel is constantly appealing to his separation from the court. In Sonnet 27, he goes so far as to describe the feeling of being “most alone among the greatest company.” But crucially, he doesn’t use the word loneliness to describe this feeling:

Because I often, in a dark abstracted mood,
Seem most alone among the greatest company,
With a dearth of words to say, or answers that are awry,
Those, who wish to make speech follow from speech,
Judge, and rumour flies abroad from their judgment,
That the foul poison of bubbling pride so lies
In my swelling breast that I only
Fawn on myself, and despise others:
Yet I do not think pride possesses my soul,
Which looks too often in its unflattering mirror:
But one worse fault, ambition, I confess to,
That makes me often overlook my best friends,
Unseen, unheard, while thought bends all its powers
To the highest place, that is to Stella’s grace.20

Here Sidney tests a version of Cicero’s claim, *minus solum, quam cum solus esset.*21

Where Cicero is never less alone than when alone, Astrophel is never more alone than when in company. “Alone” and silent amidst the crowd, Astrophel withdraws into his own contemplative world. Feeling alone amidst a crowd in this way is not something that poets had often described at this point in literary history. Astrophel registers some of the suspicion endemic to any pose of solitude in the early modern period when he explains that he understands people interpret his detachment as prideful. To make matters worse,
Astrophel styles himself in “dark abstracted guise,” a visual marker of his separation. Astrophel attracts negative attention to himself here for playing the part of a melancholy lover within the court, even though he defends himself by arguing that it is his longing for Stella that causes his detachment, rather than his pride. Even if the quality of Astrophel’s longing for Stella is similar to Pyrocles’ longing for Daiphantus, their loneliness is very different, since Astrophel is in the court. Sidney does not seem willing to also bring “loneliness” out of the countryside and into the court. Rather than associate loneliness with Astrophel—a figure who is sometimes thought to be an avatar of the poet himself—he keeps loneliness in the space of exile. Thus, although Astrophel might seem lonely by modern standards, he is not lonely according to Sidney’s standards. Only by following the record of where the terms “lonely” and “loneliness” actually appear in literature, seeking out their hiding places, can we be more aware of anachronisms like this.

The Arcadia is literary loneliness’ ur-text. If Sir Philip Sidney was not the inventor of loneliness, he was its author, since no writer before him had engaged with the concept in any sustained way. Although there are some records of “loneliness” before the Arcadia was printed, Sidney was the first to record the word more than once, and also the first writer to use both the words “lonely” and “loneliness” in the course of his career. In the 1590 version of the Arcadia (not published until the twentieth century), Sidney used the word “lonely” once and the abstraction “loneliness” three times; something that no previous writer had done.22 He also added a further seven citations of the word “lonely” in the New Arcadia (1593; the version that Sidney’s contemporaries would have known).
Sidney always locates loneliness in the forest. This is another crucial aspect of loneliness’ history that the dictionary covers over. The history of early modern ideas about the space of wilderness is crucial to the history of loneliness. Each of the most prolific users of the terms “lonely” and “loneliness” in the early modern period—Mary Sidney, William Basse, George Wither and Lady Mary Wroth—also locate loneliness in the forest.

II. Definitions

A comparison of Sidney’s depiction of loneliness with the citations from other early writers reveals that he not only repeated the concept more than any previous writer, but he also theorized the concept in a way that no previous writer had thought to. Before 1600, fewer than thirty three English texts listed on the database contain the word “lonely,” and fewer than five contain the word “loneliness.” Writers who used the word “lonely” before 1600 tended make it interchangeable with the adverb “only.” “Only” is a contraction of “onely,” which was (and still is) commonly used to intensify the sense of something’s unusual singularity. Sometimes, early modern writers preserve the word’s root in “alone,” using the word “alonely” as a synonym for our modern word “only.” The first two citations of “lonely” on EEBO both work like this. In the earliest record of the word on EEBO, for instance, Hieronymus Brunswchwig, a surgeon, is comparing the severity of different wounds when he argues that “alonely the wound of the thigh” is deadly (1525). Similarly, in a book describing the rudiments of grammar, John Colet describes that he has not made “new parts” in his grammar but “alonely” put them in a clear order. Both Robert Fabyan and Guy de Chauliac use the word “alonely” as part of “not only…but also” clause.
A few writers before Sidney did use the word “lonely” in such a way as to render their meaning slightly more ambiguous, though the most obvious gloss of these excerpts is still “only.” In *The Mirror of our Lady* (1530), for instance, Thomas Gascoigne uses “alonely” as a synonym for “only,” employing polyptoton in order to emphasize his point that God is alone in his omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience:

> For there is nothyng that may fylle the soulle but god alone. But for god ys one in whome is all therfore all scaterynges of the mynde may be oned in hym. And for he ys only more then the soule; therfore a lonely in hym the harte & soulle is rested on eche syde. Therfore be ware that ye lyue not rechelesly… 

Because of Gascoigne’s play on the word “alone” throughout this passage, he seems to intend a pun when he uses the word “lonely,” but it is also a synonym for “only.”

Similarly, in the fourth citation of the word “lonely” that EEBO records, John Lydgate (1531) could be using the word “lonely” to describe Christ’s singular suffering on the cross, or the suffering that comes of being alone in death—though the word’s most obvious meaning is once again a synonym for “only”:

> To fynde a man that shall vndertake
> This myghty quarell / of mercy and pyte
> To suffre deth lonely for mannes sake
> Uncompellyd frely and of volunte
> That is a lambe withouten spotte shall be
> And with his blode / shall wasshe vndefouled
> The gylt of man / with rust of synne y mouled.

When emphasizing that Christ died *only* for man’s, rather than his own sake, Lydgate may or may not also mean to suggest that Christ felt lonely during his death. But because most authors use the word as a synonym for “only,” it is less likely that he meant this word in the modern sense than it might appear if one was to encounter this text outside of its historical context.
Sidney also occasionally uses the word “lonely” as a synonym for “only” in the *Arcadia* (1593). Musidorus, for instance, sings a song to Pamela and uses the word “alonely” to gesture toward her singularity:

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Nay higher thoughtes (though thralld thoughtes) I call
My thoughtes then hers, who first your ryne did rente.
Then hers, to whom my thoughts a lonely thrall
Rysing from lowe, are to the highest bente;
Where hers, whom worth makes highest ouer all
Comming from her, cannot but downewarde fall.31
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This grammar is difficult to parse, but the sense is that Musidorus’ thoughts are only in thrall to Pamela, so that Sidney’s use of the word “alonely” here can be compared with that of his contemporaries.

**II. Loneliness and feminine vulnerability**

For the most part, however, Sidney uses the words “lonely” and “loneliness” to mean much more than a synonym for “only.” The majority of the characters, but not all, whom Sidney associates with loneliness are gendered female. By picturing lonely female characters as the objects of masculine sexual desire, the *Arcadia* inscribes a relationship between loneliness and feminine sexual vulnerability. Sidney imagines that loneliness not only describes a vulnerable state of body, but also a vulnerable state of mind, thus suggesting that he imagines the lonely mind in terms of a female body. Even some of the male characters that Sidney positions in the lonely spaces of the romance forest appeal to this theoretical link between loneliness and feminine vulnerability; not all of Sidney’s feminine lonely characters are female.

This is especially true when Pyrocles decides to impersonate a woman. Sidney’s next recorded reference to loneliness in the *Arcadia* (1590) describes Pyrocles dressed as
an Amazonian lady, “Zelmane” (or, in the Old Arcadia, “Cleophila”). Pyrocles has disguised himself as a woman in order to be less suspicious as he approaches Basilius’ pastoral lodge, where he has come to woo Basilius’ daughter, Philoclea, because, as he has learned from her portrait, she looks very much like his lost Zelmane (or Diaphantus). It seems odd that he calls himself Zelmane, even as he pursues her likeness in another woman, but this makes the relationship between his original loneliness in the Elean province and his loneliness here all the more apparent. As in the first example, Pyrocles (or Zelmane) is not quite alone in his loneliness, because Basilius is with him, giving him counsel:

Faire Lady (saide he) it is nothing strange, that such a solitary place as this should receiue solitary persons; but much do I maruaile, how such a beauty as yours is, should be suffered to be thus alone. I (that now knew it was my part to play) looking with a graue maiestie vpon him, as if I found in my selfe cause to be reverenced. They are neuer alone (saide I) that are accompanied with noble thoughts. But those thoughts (replied Basilius) cannot in this your lonelines neither warrant you from suspition in others, nor defend you from melancholy in your selfe. I then shewing a mislike that he pressed me so farre, I seeke no better warrant (saide I) then my owne conscience, nor no greater pleasures, then mine owne contentation. Yet vertue seekes to satisfie others, (saide Basilius.) Those that be good (saide I,) and they wil be satisfied as long as they see no euill. Yet will the best in this country, (said Basilius) suspect so excellent a beauty being so weakely garded.32

As Basilius counsels, to be a solitary female in a “solitary place” is categorically to be in danger.33 He understands the natural correspondence between solitary places and solitary persons—as though a place cannot be “solitary” without a person first being imagined in it—but he cannot imagine why Zelmane, to be a Lady in a lonely place is to not have enough of a “guard.”

Speaking as Zelmane, Pyrocles tries to make Basilius’ appellation of “loneliness” apply first and foremost to her “thoughts” and to “conscience.” In this role, Pyrocles is
defensively careful to stress that Zelmane’s noble thoughts keep her from being fully “alone”: in a set speech, he personifies “conscience” as her imagined companion and her warrant against the suspicion that she is inviting male attention by wandering into the forest alone. But the defense takes the tone of a cliché: Pyrocles’ description of his reaction to Basilius (“that now knew it was my part to play”) implies that the position he takes is a formality; something that a woman might be expected to say. Ironically, this parenthetical statement has the effect of proving Basilius’ point, since it suggests that the idea that conscience could be a protector of solitary females is disingenuous. Basilius is duly unconvinced by Zelmane’s reasoning. He refuses to allow that Zelmane’s conscience could protect her and instead he forcefully aligns her loneliness with the threat of a physical assault. Despite Pyrocles’ stress on mental fortitude, Basilius stresses that conscience is no guard against physical—and sexual—vulnerability. Sidney suggests a relationship between mental and physical vulnerability, even as he has Basilius emphasize that the penetrability of physical boundaries is more worrisome than the penetrability of mental ones.

A further irony of Basilius’ counsel is that he will turn out to be just the kind of aggressor he warns against when he himself falls in love with Zelmane (who is really Pyrocles). However, the idea that Zelmane’s loneliness invokes threat of rape is more than a joke at the expense of Basilius. This link between femininity and vulnerability is compounded when we remember that Zelmane is herself really a man who has come to this lonely place disguised, in order to prey on Philoclea. It is not Zelmane, but Basilius’ daughter, who is really in need of defense in this lonely place. Rape is the most exaggerated way to counteract loneliness.
Sidney once again relates loneliness to a threat of rape in a place distant from the protection that society affords as the saga of Pyrocles and Philoclea continues. His next use of the word “lonely” in the 1590 *Arcadia* emphasizes Philoclea’s vulnerability in the “lonely place” that Pyrocles (still dressed as Zelmane), has located her in. In this example, the relationship between physical and mental penetrability is even more emphatic. By now, Pyrocles is living in Basilius’ lodge with Philoclea. Philoclea is therefore in danger, though she doesn’t know it because she thinks Zelmane is another woman. In this situation, Sidney figures Philoclea’s mind in relation to the circumscribed interior of the lonely “lodge” she occupies in the forest:

> For after that Zelmane had a while liued in the lodge with her [Philoclea], and that her onely being a noble straunger had bred a kind of heedfull attention; her coming to that lonely place (where she had no body but her parents) a willingnes of conversation; her wit & behauior, a liking & silent admiration; at length the excellency of her natural gifts, joined with the extreme shews she made of most deuout honouring Philoclea, (carying thus in one person the only two bands of good will, louelines & louingnes) brought forth in her hart a yeelding to a most friendly affection; which when it had gotten so ful possession of the keies of her mind, that it would receaue no message from her senses, without that affection were the interpreter; ther streight grew an exceeding delight stil to be with her, with an vnmeasurable liking of al that Zelmane did; maters being so turned in her, that where at first, liking her manners did breed good-wil, now good-wil became the chiefe cause of liking her manners: so that within a while Zelmane was not prized for her demeanure, but the demeanure was prized because it was Zelmanes.  

By picturing Philoclea’s lonely mind as a lonely lodge, Sidney also subtly underscribes a metaphor for the vulnerability of Philoclea’s body. This “lonely place” is accessible through a door with a key. Pyrocles has not only entered the space, but has also gained “possession of the keies” to Philoclea’s mind. Sidney’s fantasy here is that the lonely mind can be penetrated in the same way that a body can be: Philoclea’s loneliness seems to allow Pyrocles to enter physically through the door of her mind. The pronoun “her” is
slippery here, but it is Philoclea that has come to the lonely place with her parents, so that the description applies to her, not Zelmane. The boundary of Philoclea’s mind is envisaged as like that of a lodge, enclosed, except for the area with a door. Sidney gives her mind a penetrable but also a manageable border, like an enclosed architectural space.

Sidney describes Philoclea as much more emotionally receptive in the lonely place than outside of it, and there is something threatening about this, too. Though, at first, it seems like inhabiting the lonely place has had a positive effect on Philoclea (her “most friendly affection,” we are told, is “well-prized” as a result of this experience), beneath the surface of the narrator’s seeming praise lies a subtle threat. The “willingness of conversation” that the lodge breeds would have signaled a sexual threat for early modern readers, who used the word “conversation” to describe both social and sexual intercourse. In this lonely place, the threat of Philoclea’s physical penetrability lies beneath her mental vulnerability, and becomes a structural metaphor to describe her mind.

Sidney also uses the word “loneliness” to describe a situation in which the mind is vulnerable in his final reference to the concept in the 1590 Arcadia. Cecropia, the villain of the piece, is discussing the best action for her son Amphialus to take as he engages in his own play for Philoclea. When he suggests that he does not mind the idea of Zelmane lodging with Philoclea, since he thinks he retains her affections in any case, Cecropia disagrees, advising that “company confirmes resolutions, & lonelines breeds a werines of ones thoughts, and so a sooner consenting to reasonable profers.” Like Basilius, Cecropia thinks Philoclea is in danger of being wooed by Zelmane because of her loneliness.
Sidney also uses the word “lonely” to tag his interest in the metaphorical relationship between mental vulnerability and bodily vulnerability in the *New Arcadia* (1593), when Dorus takes up the role of a poet, in order to sing a love song in praise of solitariness and the “lonely life.” “Contemplation,” he says, is “bownted with no limits” in the “sweet woods”; but even in this supposedly innocent song, the threat that male sexuality poses to the female characters in the lonely forest creeps in:

*Dorus* had long he thought kept silence from saying, somwhat which might tend to the glorie of her in whom all glory to his seeming was included, but nowe hee brake it, singing these verses called *Asclepiadikes.*

O sweet woods the delight of solitarines!  
O how much I do like your solitarines!  
Where manes mind hath afreed consideration  
Of goodnes to receiue louely direction.  
Where senses do behold th’order of heau’ly hoste,  
And wise thougkhts do behold what the creator is:  
Contemplation here holdeth his only seate:  
Bownted with no limitts, borne with a wing of hope  
Clymes euen vnto the starres, Nature is vnder it.  
Nought disturbs thy quiet, all to thy seruice yeelds,  
Each sight draws on a thought, thought mother of science,  
Sweet birds kindly do graunt harmony vnto thee,  
Faire trees shade is enough fortification,  
Nor danger to thy selfe if be not in thy selfe.

O sweete woods the delight of solitarines!  
O how much I do like your solitarines!  
Here nor treason is hidd, vailed in innocence,  
Nor enuiues snaky ey, finds any harbor here,  
Nor flatterers venomous insinuations,  
Nor comming humorists puddled opinions,  
Nor courteous ruin of proffered vsury,  
Nor time pratled away, cradle of ignorance,  
Nor causelesse duty, nor comber of arrogance,  
Nor trifling title of vanity dazleth vs,  
Nor golden manacles, stand for a paradise,  
Here wrongs name is vnheard: slander a monster is  
Keepe thy sprite from abuse, here no abuse doth haunte.  
What man grafts in a tree dissimulation?
O sweete woods the delight of solitarines!
O how well I do like your solitarines!
Yet deare soile, if a soule closed in a mansion
As sweete as violetts, faire as lilly is,
Stright as Cedar, a voice staines the Cannary birds,
Whose shade safely doth hold, danger auoideth her:
Such wisedome, that in her liues speculation:
Such goodnes that in her simplicitie triumphs:
Where enuies snaky ey, winketh or els dyeth,
Slander wants aprelext, flattery gone beyond:
Oh! if such a one haue bent, to a lonely life,
Her stepps gladd we receaue, gladd we receaue her eys.
And thinke not she doth hurt our solitarines,
For such company decks such solitarines.36

For a masculine figure like Dorus, the woods do not pose the same kind of danger as they did for Philoclea and Urania. “Faire trees shade is enough fortification” for him, he says; he need not to fear the forest. He tries to transfer that logic to the visitor to the woods, the “sweete” Zelmane. But the satire at the heart of his reassurances that the lady should be gladly received into the woods becomes suddenly apparent in the narration that immediately follows Dorus’ song. The shepherds that have just listened to Dorus’ song about the innocence of loneliness in fact spend the whole night awake, thinking about their desire for the newly arrived Lady:

The other Shepeheards were offring themselues to haue continued the sportes, but the night had so quietlie spent the most parte of herselfe among them that the king for that time licensed then. And so bringing Zelmane to her lodging, who would much rather haue done the same for Philoclea, of all sides they went to counterfett a sleepe in their bedd, for a trewe one there agonies could not aforde them. Yet there they Lay (so might they be moste solitarie for the foode of their thoughts) til it was neere noone the next day, after which Basilius was to continue his Appollo deuotions, and the other to meditate vpon their priuate desires.37

In this comic love triangle, the shepherds are in “agonies” for Zelmane, just as Pyrocles is in agonies for Philoclea.
Urania, another new character in the New Arcadia, also tries to treat the “lonely place” she occupies as a space for contemplation, but ends up under the gaze of some hidden male spectators. Before she arrives there, she is merely concerned with catching her pet sparrow: she has not sought out the place in order to think about her troubles. However, its loneliness takes hold of her, and inspires an upsurge of emotion. Sidney imagines that this emotional vulnerability reflects her physical vulnerability in the lonely space, since, unbeknownst to her, two shepherds, Klaius and Strephon, are watching her from behind a tree. They find her supposedly private display of emotion arousing. The force of their desire becomes most fully apparent in the final line of this excerpt:

With length laid downe she deckt the lonely place.
Proud grew the grasse that vnnder hir did growe, 
The trees spred out their armes to shade hir face, 
But she on elbow lean’d with sigh’s did show
No grasse, no trees, nor yet hir sparrow might
To long-perplexed minde breed long delight.
She troubled was (alas that it mought be!)
With tedious brawlings of her parents deare, 
Who would haue hir in will & worde agree
To wedd Antaxius their neighbour neare.

[…] In some such one she lik’d not his desire, 
Faine would be free, but dreadeth parents ire. 

[…] To yeeld she found hir noble heart did ake:
To striue she fear’d how it with vertue stoode.
This doubting clouds ore-casting heau’nyly braine, 
At length in rowes of Kisse-cheeke teares they raine.

 […] could shephookes this resist?
Klaius strait felt, & groned at the blowe, 
And cal’d, now wounded, purpose to his aide:
Strephon, fond boy, delighted did not knowe, 
That it was Loue that shin’d in shining maid:
But lickrous, Poison’d, faine to her would goe, 
If him new-learned manners had not stai’d. 
For then Vrania homeward did arise, 
Leauing in paine their wel-fed hungry eies.38
Nature, according to the tradition of the *locus amoenus*, is sympathetic to Urania’s plight, supporting her from beneath and carefully shading her from above. Sidney is invoking the conceit from classical poetry whereby nature seems to sympathise with people when they retire to remote places. In turn, Urania’s physical processes start to mirror the climate of the place: her “doubting brain” produces mental “clouds” that, in turn, produce tears which gently kiss her cheeks, like “rain.” But despite this seeming sympathy, the lonely location puts Urania in a vulnerable position.

Like Zelmane and Philoclea, Urania is not alone in her lonely place. It’s not only nature that sympathizes with Urania: so too do two hidden spectators—Klaius and Strephon—who read her heightened state of emotion as a form of sexual enticement. Her thoughts and feelings are depicted as laid open in loneliness. “Could sheephooks this resist?” Urania has effectively let her guard down, and it is precisely her emotionality that prompts the threat of Klaius and Strephon’s “hungry” desire.

**III. Loneliness and lament**

It’s not only sex, however, that brings people in lonely places together in Sidney’s *Arcadia*. Sidney sketches the affective shape of the lonely space with scenes of mourning, as well as scenes of sexual danger. Lonely places are not only places of physical danger; they are also places in which characters can find a companion to listen to their lament. Lonely places allow these characters to become open to passionate emotion and also to sympathetic exchange. They dissolves the restraint that the city upholds, so that many characters inhabiting the space (and genre) of lonely romance are more open about their emotions, and more receptive to others’ emotion than they might
be elsewhere. These scenes of emotionality all take place in isolated spaces. This openness, in turn, allows a permeability of sympathetic boundaries, allowing different people’s emotions to better meld together. Though the spaces are still theoretically confined, in that they are demarcated as separate from the court or the city, they seem open to the extent that they permit Sidney’s characters to feel that they have escaped the confinements of society.

When the word “lonely” appears in relation to someone who is grieving, it generally signals the fact that the grief-stricken character are is not going to be able to remain alone. But sometimes, the companion’s interest in their loneliness can be helpful, rather than aggressive. In the 1590 edition of the Arcadia, Parthenia the place that she inhabits a “lovely” place, but by the 1593 edition, the text has been corrected to read “lonely”:

she told him the trueth, with all circumstances; how being parted alone, meaning to die in some solitarie place, as she hapned to make her complaint, the Queene Helen of Corinth, (who likewise felt her part of miseries) being then walking also alone in that lonely place, hearde her and neuer lefte, till she had knowen the whole discourse. Which the noble Queene greatly pitying, she sent her to a Phisition of hers the most excellent man in the world, in hope he could helpe her.40

Where the “solitarie place” is somewhere Parthenia purposes to die, the “lonely place” is where she finds a fellow sufferer who, in this case, ends up coming to her aid.

Neither is the kind of sympathetic exchange that occurs in lonely places reserved for female characters alone. Shortly after Klaius and Strephon spy on Urania in her lonely place, Klaius is forced to flee to his own “lonely walke” in order to meditate on his longing for Urania. There, he finds Strephon:

\textit{Klaius} the wretch, who lately yelden was
To beare the bondes which Time nor wit could breake,
(With blushing soule at sight of iudgements glasse,
While guilty thoughts accus’d his Reason weake)
This morn alone to lonely walke did passe,
With in himselfe of hir deare self to speake,
Till Strephons planing voice him nearer drew,
Where by his words his self-like cause he knew.
For hearing him so oft with wordes of woe
Vrania name, whose force he knew so well,
He quickly knew what witchcraft gaue the blow
Which made his Strephon think himselfe in hell.
Which when he did in perfect image show,
To his owne witt, thought vpon thought did swell,
Breeding huge stormes with in his inward parte,
Which thus breath’d out with earthquake of his hart.41

The lonely walke is a place that Klaius wants to use as a kind of private stage for soliloquy. It is easier, Sidney implies, to speake “within” oneself when there are no other people around. But Strephon plays Queen Helen to Klaius’ Parthenia: he soon finds he has an audience. When Klaius recognizes that Strephon is feeling something very similar, he is able to reveal to himself the inward “stormes” of passion he has been holding within himself. In lonely spaces, characters can not only feel things they would not otherwise have the freedom to, but also talk about them openly.

Loneliness allows for occasions of lament, both in the Arcadia and in texts that follow in its traditions. Several other writers in the period, presumably influenced by Philip Sidney, also use the word “lonely” to describe places in which they can unleash repressed emotion, or where it is more possible to indulge in passionate grief or longing for an absent lover. Lonely places, then, are not only dangerous, they also liberate. And yet, the few writers who take up the concept of the loneliness in this way, all link loneliness to effeminacy, if not danger.

Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, to whom the Arcadia was dedicated, edited her brother’s Arcadia, which perhaps explains why she uses both the words “lonely” and
“loneliness” in her translation of Robert Garnier’s “The tragedie of Antonie” (1592).

Having been abandoned by Antonie, Cleopatra’s grief uses many of the same tropes as Urania’s, though it is more extreme:

Yet now at neede it aides her not at all
With all these beauties, so her sorrow stinges.
Darkned with woe her only study is
To weep, to sigh, to seek for lonelines.
Careles of all, hir haire disordred hangs:
Hir charming eies whence murthring looks did flie,
Now riuers grow’n, whose wellspring anguish is,
Do trickling wash the marble of hir face.\(^{42}\)

Part of the appeal of loneliness for Cleopatra is that it makes the idea of unrestrained lament possible. Cleopatra is not yet in space outside the city (she only “seeks” for loneliness, she has not yet achieved it) but Mary Sidney still describes her according to the romance paradigm. Like Urania, she weeps—but this time it’s not just rain, but rivers. The way that Cleopatra “seeks” for loneliness makes it a location; a situation far from others, where she might grieve without being watched or even comforted. Diomedes, who narrates this speech, goes on to describe how he sees this heightened emotional state as an opportunity for Cleopatra to use tears to charm Antony—to woo him by means of her emotion (as Urania unknowingly did to Kliaus and Strephon in the *Arcadia*). But Cleopatra will not agree to this, because her grief is much more extreme. “Careless” of her audience, she dies imagining that her children will be conducted to the “shady banks of hell, / By fields whereon the lonely Ghosts do treade.” Despite Cleopatra’s tragic register, though, Mary Sidney does not lose the opportunity to underscore the relationship between loneliness and female sexuality when she notes that Cleopatra has “charming eyes”: the tears that mark her pain also make her more beautiful to those watching. She
aestheticizes her by making her seem like a “marble” portrait bust; an object of spectatorship.

William Basse’s *Three Pastoral Elegies of Anander, Anetor and Muridella* (1602) makes some “loanly hills” the setting for his grief:

> Meane while, if thou feart not the fellowship
> Of lingring Loves infectious languishment,
> In these delicious meades I will o re-ship,
> The wearisome discourse of discontent:
> And in a shepheards humble out-side, clip
> My drouped Noblenesse, and live unkent:
> And unrespected on the loanly hilles,
> Till either Loue or Death conclude my illes.\(^43\)

As this speaker sees it, the most important thing about the lonely place he flees to is that he is unidentifiable there. Grief is a luxury that is to be indulged in far from others, lest it “infect” them. To live “unkent” is to live unknown; it is a way of avoiding wearying other people with talk of discontent; similarly, to be “unrespected” is to be un-looked at. Despite his seeming praise of loneliness, he gives constant clues that he really thinks it is a privation. Because he equates loneliness with languishing in a “drooped Noblenesse,” however, he also suggests that exile into the lonely hills is emasculating.

Jacobean court poet George Wither, one of the most prolific users of the terms “lonely” and “loneliness” in the early seventeenth century, illustrates this tension between loneliness as privation and loneliness as freedom in his poem *Epithalamia* (1613), where he specifically dwells on the question of what effect loneliness has on his role as a poet. Wither had offended Princess Elizabeth (King James’ daughter) with his *Satyrs*, and so, in beginning a new poem meant as an act of contrition, he seeks to humble himself by speaking an apology from a space of self-exile. He dons “sylvan weeds” and flees to Wales, or “Britain’s true Arcadia”:  

\[^{43}\text{Lines 31-38.}\]
Bright *Northerne* Star, and great *Mineraes* peere,
Sweet *Lady* of this *Day: Great Britans* deere.
Loe thy poore *Vassall*, that was erst so rude,
With his most *Rustick Satyrs* to intrude,
Once more like a poore *Siluan* now drawes neare;
And in thy sacred *Presence* dares appeare.
[…]
For lately greeu’d,
More then can be exprest, or well beleeu'd:
Minding for euer to abandon sport,
And liue exilde from places of resort;
Careles of all, I yeelding to security,
Thought to shut vp my *Muse* in darke obscuritie.
And in content, the better to repose,
A lonely *Groue* vpon a *Mountaine* chose.
East from *Caer Winn*, midway twixt *Arle* and *Dis*,
*True Springs*, where *Britans* true *Arcadia* is.
But ere I entred my entended course,
*Great Aeolus* began to offer force.
[…]
Thus by my *Muses* deare assistance, finding
The cause of this disturbance, with more minding
My Countries welfare, then my owne content:
And longing for to see this *Tales* euent.
My lonely life I suddainly forsooke,
And to the *Court* againe, my Iorney tooke.\(^44\)

Wither’s scene of a “lonely grove upon a mountain” is not simply a space of exile from the court, but also a space of exile from writing poetry *per se*. The “lonely mountain” is not a *locus amoenus*; rather, the winds that “Great Aeolus” offers seem too strong to be inspiring. He is the earliest poet I have found to describe himself in a “lonely” space, but he does so only to stress how destructive that loneliness is to his poetic output. “Careless of all,” he makes his exit from the court, but he paints that exit as tantamount to a kind of poetic death. On the mountain, he “shuts up” his Muse, making it lie silent, as if enclosed in a tomb.\(^45\) He underscores the opposition he has already made between the lonely mountain and the unlonely court, by using the extremely rare adjective “lonely” not only once, but twice. But finally, he quits both the lonely place and the conceit that he would
be trapped there, and returns to the court. If Wither is to remain a poet, it seems, he cannot remain in this lonely space.

Wither balances his overall message about his distaste for the court, however, with a sense that he is able to engage, while he is in the grove, in a productive exchange with the Muse. All of Wither’s posturing about the obstacle the lonely grove produces to his poetry also seems partly ironic in the wake of the realization that he is not truly in poetic exile there, because he is able to write a poem that imagines an audience looking at him there.⁴⁶

IV. Loneliness and liberation

Like Wither, Lady Mary Wroth, the niece of Philip and Mary Sidney, seems interested in weighing up the relative danger of the lonely space versus its benefits as a space of freedom from societal constraints. She dramatizes the female poet as someone who willingly isolates herself in a natural setting, and makes herself more open to poetic experience by doing so. But although her depictions of lonely women make those women less vulnerable than Sidney had imagined his characters to be in similar situations, the relationship between loneliness and their sexuality is still very much in the foreground.

Wroth is another writer who advertises her interest in loneliness by repeating it frequently. By this point, the word “loneliness”—though still recorded very rarely in literature—seems to have the force of a trope within this literary coterie. In The Countess of Mountgomerie’s Urania (1621), she appeals to the concept a total of nine times. Seven of those citations describe female characters. All of Wroth’s depictions of loneliness take place in the forest, and most relate to scenes of exaggerated grief. Wroth’s earliest
mention of loneliness describes the eponymous Urania, the namesake of the character whom Sidney put in the first recorded “lonely place.” Urania has come to the woods to make a complaint, but the scene soon turns into a sympathetic—and sexualized—encounter with a man who has come to the woods to do the same. As the book opens, Urania can be found watching her flock feed, as she mourns the discovery that she is not, as she had thought, the daughter of a shepherd, but rather a princess:

Unseene, unknowne, I here alone complaine
To Rocks, to Hills, to Meadowes, and to Springs,
Which can no helpe returne to ease my paine,
But back my sorrowes the sad Eccho brings.
Thus still encreasing are my woes to me,
Doubly resounded by that monenfull voice,
Which seemes to second me in miserie,
And answere giues like friend of mine owne choice.
Thus onely she doth my companion proue,
The others silently doe offer ease:
But those that grieue, a grieuing note doe loue;
Pleasures to dying eies bring but disease:
And such am I, who daily ending liue,
Wayling a state which can no comfort giue.

In this passion she went on, till she came to the foote of a great rocke, shee thinking of nothing lesse then ease, sought how she might ascend it; hoping there to passe away her time more peaceably with lonelinesse, though not to find least respit from her sorrow, which so deerely she did value, as by no meanes she would impart it to any.47

As in the case of Sidney’s Urania, the lonely place in which she resides is a locus amoenus and a space of contemplation. The way that Wroth describes Urania’s hyperbolic grieving, echoing back to her across the rocky landscape, seems to indict her for her excess, or even for affectation. Her decision to climb the rock in order to be even more lonely than she already is seems somewhat ridiculous to us today. Wryly, the narrator notes that her desire for loneliness results from a desire not to have any “respit”
from her sorrow; she values her sorrow too much to seek for a friend to whom to impart it.

But true to the precedent in Sidney, Urania’s loneliness does not last long before she finds that someone else is present in this lonely place. Having reached the top of the rock, Urania finds a cave—“not unlike the ancient (or descriptions of the ancient) Hermitages… covered and lined with Ivie”—and through a secret door, discovered by a chink of light, she first finds a sonnet lying on the table, and then, behind the door behind that, a man who has hidden himself from sight.\(^{48}\) Not far behind the sonnet, she finds its author, lying (conveniently) on a “bed of boughs.” Rather than being watched by two hidden spectators like Sidney’s Urania, then, Wroth’s Urania herself acts as a spectator. The man explains in his sonnet that he retreated to the cave in mourning for his lost love, Limena:

Here all alone in silence might I mourn:
But how can silence be where sorrowes flow?
Sigh’s with complaints haue poorer paines out-worne;
But broken hearts can only true griefe show.

Drops of my dearest bloud shall let Loue know
Such teares for her I shed, yet still do burne,
As no spring can quench least part of my woe,
Till this liue earth, againe to earth doe turne.

Hatefull all thought of comfort is to me,
Despised day, let me still night possesse;
Let me all torments feele in their excesse,
And but this light allow my sta
toe see

Which still doth wast, and wasting as this light,
Are my sad dayes vnto eternall night.

Alas Urania (sigh’d she)! How well doe these words, this place, and all agree with thy fortune!\(^{49}\)
This written lament seems somewhat disingenuous in that it appeals to silence as the mark of true grief even as it articulates that grief in terms of “excesse.” When Urania interrupts the poet’s supposed loneliness, she does not seem vulnerable, and embraces the opportunity for the open exchange of sympathetic encounter in this romance bower. Wroth cleverly reverses the situation we find in Sidney’s depiction of Pyrocles and Philoclea when she depicts Urania penetrating the constrained space of the man’s hermitage.

Several of Urania’s characters draw attention to the way that loneliness allows them freedom from the constraints of society. When Pamphilia is forsaken by Leandrus, the narrator describes that “twas loneliness she desired” despite her parents’ consolations, (III, 397). Urania, in turn, approaches the grieving Pamphilia in order to try to comfort her, despite her “seeming desires of loneliness” (III, 398). In the third book, Amphilanthus and Ollorandus come upon a Lady in the woods, and they know it is their duty to ask if she needs help. But they approach her cautiously, knowing that she may be in the woods because she is grieving:

\[
\text{till they met a Lady (as she seemd to be) in mourning attire, her faire eyes shewing more griefe, then her apparrell sadnesse, yet had they red cirkles about them, threatning reuenge for their sorrow; her traine was only one Page, who shewd as little mirth, as his Mistris did content they came one a little before the other, as if sorrow could haue most liberty in lonelines, and therefore although but two, would goe asunder.}^{50}
\]

Sometimes, too, the freedom that loneliness affords is sexual rather than emotional:

Belizia has “forsaken all” for the “Forrest Lord” she is in love with, and lives “a lonely life with him.”\(^{51}\)

And yet, Wroth does also suggest that loneliness can be a punishment.\(^{52}\) Bent on vengeance, the Queene (falsely) indict her husband, calling on him to either “revenge
her, or… permit her to retire to the most lonely and private life rather than there openly to sinke under shame and infamie.” Loneliness allows for open and unrestrained lament, and in this sense fleeing in to the forest is a kind of freedom, but most characters imagine a return to the city that makes inhabiting a lonely space seem like a deprivation.

Lady Mary Wroth, together with Philip Sidney, Mary Sidney, William Basse and George Wither, show us that early modern loneliness describes a much more complex state of being than a “Want of society or company; the condition of being alone or solitary; solitariness, loneness.” Loneliness in this period is inextricable from the space of the romance forest. Often gendered feminine, it is at once a situation of danger and escape, and this paradigm is one that Shakespeare’s description of loneliness follows, as we shall see in the next chapter.
Shakespeare’s loneliness

Like Sidney, Shakespeare also associated loneliness with sexualized, feminine characters whom are surrounded by other people, rather than alone. Despite Romantic writers’ frequent appeals to the loneliness of characters like Hamlet, Romeo and Richard II, Shakespeare did not associate loneliness with any of these figures.\(^5\) Shakespeare used the words “loneliness” and “lonely” a combined total of only five times in all of his plays, and four out of five of these five examples describe female characters.\(^5\) Unlike Sidney and Wroth however, Shakespeare figures these lonely women as silent during their lament, rather than demonstrative.

In The Winter’s Tale, Paulina describes Hermione’s silent statue as being kept “lonely, apart” before she unveils it in Act V, ready for observation by Leontes and the assembled group. As the statue, Hermione’s lonely, wordless communication in the face of male spectatorship is reminiscent of Philip Sidney’s Urania and Mary Sidney’s Cleopatra, whose face was also compared with a statue. The word “lonely” was so rare that this line was frequently misprinted as “lovely” and “loveliness” throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century.\(^5\) Similarly, Shakespeare’s reference to “loneliness” in All’s Well that Ends Well describes a quiet female character, and was frequently misprinted.\(^5\) The Countess says to Helena, “now I see the mystery of your loneliness” when she realizes that Helena has not been speaking to her because she is in love and knows that talking will reveal her state of mind. Even Coriolanus, Shakespeare’s only masculine “lonely” character, is silent in his loneliness, which causes social
Coriolanus says, “Though I go alone / Like to a lonely Dragon, that his Fenne Makes fear’d, / and talk’d of more then seene” (I.v.i.31; a1616). This is the only citation of his the OED records.

There is no more striking symbol of the influence of Sidney’s depictions of Shakespeare’s version of loneliness, however, than Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, who is raped in “a lonely part of the forest.” Chiron remembers how Tereus raped Philomel and cut her tongue out, as a way of explaining his plan to take revenge on Lavinia:

```
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head.
Hark Tamora, the empress of my soul,
Which never hopes more heaven than rests in thee,
This is the day of doom for Bassianus:
His Philomel must lose her tongue to-day,
Thy sons make pillage of her chastity
And wash their hands in Bassianus’ blood…(II.ii.38-45).
```

Homer and Ovid explain that before her metamorphosis into a bird, Philomel was raped by Tereus, and her tongue cut out. Not only is Lavinia’s tongue cut out; her hands cut off lest she wish to write down her attackers’ names. Mutilated and muted, she is inarticulate in both senses of the word.

Hermione, Helena, Lavinia and Philomel all share something in common with Shakespeare’s most complex lonely character and the subject of this chapter; Ophelia. It is with Shakespeare’s first recorded use of the word “loneliness,” in III.i of *Hamlet*, that I will be concerned with here. Like the women in Sidney’s romance forest, Ophelia is lonely without being alone. At the moment her loneliness is named, male spectators surround her. Although Ophelia is not in danger of sexual assault, all the men onstage, including even her father, overtly sexualize her. To favor Hamlet’s status as masculine
lone body, as previous accounts of loneliness in the play have done, is therefore to belie Shakespeare’s emphasis on loneliness as a feminine condition.60

Perhaps because Ophelia resides in court, and is not allowed the freedom a forest might give her, she does not speak in her loneliness.61 And yet, crucially, mention of Ophelia’s loneliness frames Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy. This means that these characters’ various attitudes towards self-revelation—silence and speech—are drawn into direct relief. The tendency to privilege Hamlet’s role as a speaker of soliloquies has obscured Ophelia’s position in the development of the soliloquy form. And perhaps her silence is part of the reason that her loneliness has so often been overlooked.

By keeping quiet in the background of Hamlet’s soliloquy, having just been called “lonely,” Ophelia asks her audience to consider the assumptions that frame their usual relationship to solitaries onstage, and throws the theatrical conventions surrounding soliloquies into flux. She shows those who speak their thoughts aloud, (either when supposedly alone, or when in the presence of a listening ear), that the relationship between loneliness and self-revelation is not straightforward. Whereas Hamlet uses his supposed solitariness as an opportunity to make confession of his thoughts to the audience, Ophelia counteracts this expectation. In doing so, she exposes the conceit of the soliloquy form: no character can be truly lonely when speaking aloud to an audience. Theatrical asides usually assumed a straightforward relationship between an actor’s supposed solitariness onstage and his revelation of thoughts to the audience by means of speech: one served as a premise for the other. But Ophelia dissociates the relationship between solitariness and speech and in this she sunders the privileged relationship
between the audience and supposedly solitary characters. When Shakespeare juxtaposes Ophelia’s reticence with Hamlet’s lone-speaking, he also makes more urgent the prompt to compare the varieties of their loneliness.

Shakespeare’s juxtaposition of Ophelia’s “devotion” with Hamlet’s solitary soliloquy brings Renaissance debates about how far devotion should be a solitary, silent activity to bear on the meaning of loneliness in the play. The Reformation had made the question of the relative merits of solitary vs. communal, and meditative vs. ritualized devotion an important one for both Catholics and Protestants. In essence, questions about how “lonely” devotion should be were highly charged in the period when *Hamlet* was first performed. Christians questioned which kinds of devotional aids they should use and how they should engage with them. They asked whether words addressed to God needed to be voiced or whether thoughts could reach God without being voiced. They also argued about how far confession should be a communal ritual or an individualized practice of self-examination, and whether an intercessor was necessary for the sacrament to be recognized by God.

By the end of the play, Hamlet himself comes to question the assumptions involved in speaking as a solitary onstage. He begins with a Vice-like attitude to his solitariness, using it as an opportunity to confess to the audience thoughts he has kept private from other characters onstage. Ophelia provides him with a new paradigm for loneliness in Act III. After Ophelia’s loneliness has been named, Hamlet changes his attitude towards the soliloquy form. His relationship to speaking when supposedly alone becomes increasingly vexed as he begins to disavow the efficacy of his confessions to the audience. Hamlet’s trust in theatrical convention in his early speech that begins “Now I
am alone,” starkly contrasts with his renunciation of the soliloquy form in the moments before his death when he simply says, “the rest is silence.” His final crisis of loneliness replicates Ophelia’s in Act III. Surrounded by others, he dies by marking his own illegibility.

II. Colouring “loneliness”

As the third act of the play opens, we learn that Polonius is constructing a tableau designed to test the causes of Hamlet’s “affliction.” Polonius’ plot is comparable to Hamlet’s plan to catch Claudius’ conscience by staging a play and watching his reaction: both Polonius and Hamlet believe that consciences can be both caught and represented with outward signs. And so, Polonius positions Ophelia in the hall where Hamlet often reads, hands her a book, and then creeps behind an arras with Claudius:

**POLONIUS:**

Ophelia, walk you here. (Gracious, so please you, We will bestow ourselves.) Read on this book, That show of such an exercise may colour Your loneliness. — We are oft to blame in this, 'Tis too much proved, that with devotion’s visage And pious action we do sugar o'er The devil himself.

**CLAUDIUS:**

Oh, 'tis too true!

[aside] How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!

(*Hamlet, III.i.44-50*)

To explore the radical indeterminacy of loneliness is to put oneself in the position of Shakespeare’s contemporary audience, for they would have had more difficulty understanding the word than we do. Of course, faced with constant neologisms on the Shakespearean stage, the audience must have been used to this kind of interpretive game,
and “loneliness” would have been somewhat recognizable because of its sonic relationship to “alone.” And yet, even the word “lone” was rare in the period, so that these syllables must still have been a strange sound to the unaccustomed ears of the crowds who first watched the play, giving them a reason to listen closely for clues of what the use of such an unfamiliar word might signify.62

Critics of Hamlet have not often remarked upon the novelty of the word “loneliness” in this scene, unless they have used that novelty as evidence that the Folio and first Quarto versions should be dismissed in favor of the second quarto’s version, “lowliness.” (Peter McCullough, for example, prefers lowliness, calling loneliness “unShakespearean”; I am more willing to believe that Shakespeare coined the word, than that the compositor of the second quarto invented it, since such a rare word is unlikely to have crept into both Q1 and Folio).63

Editors have also tended to overlook the novelty of Ophelia’s “loneliness,” understanding it to refer to her physical solitude.64 According to most readings, Ophelia’s “loneliness” is nothing more than an affectation she is forced to make for the sake of the trick. The majority of glosses instruct readers to follow Polonius’ encouragement to suspend their disbelief and focus their attention on her outward appearance. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions for both the words “loneliness” and “lonely” concur with this editorial perspective. The dictionary suggests that when Hamlet was written, loneliness referred to a desire for company that occurred only when one was physically alone.65 Its definition essentially splits loneliness’ genealogy into two stages, arguing that the word was a merely description of a bodily condition until the early nineteenth century, when it began to describe a “feeling” or the emotion of “dejection.” In his essay
“Loneliness and Poetry,” which I will return to in the final chapter of this dissertation, Christopher Ricks follows the OED to argue that loneliness “is in crucial respects a Romantic phenomenon.” 66 This reading would suggest that Shakespeare’s contemporary audience understood Ophelia’s loneliness merely as a description of her physicality and location in relation to others.

The observation that loneliness can’t straightforwardly describe Ophelia’s bodily solitude in Act III of Hamlet, because she is only supposedly alone, troubles, however, these critical perspectives that would seek to make loneliness an essentially Romantic condition. Shakespeare makes it difficult to align loneliness and physical solitariness, leaving us with the suggestion that loneliness could describe something more than physicality. Polonius knows that he will be hidden onstage behind his daughter even as he utters the word “loneliness”: he posits it in terms of performance. To argue that loneliness is a mere synonym for solitude is therefore to see her only as Polonius wants her to be seen by Hamlet. The presence of the audience, both onstage and offstage, troubles lonely statements in drama. There is also the possibility that Shakespeare means for Polonius’ description to describe Ophelia’s inward experience—that which “passeth show”—perhaps, even, in a more accurate way than Polonius knows.

My enquiry into Ophelia’s loneliness therefore intervenes in a broader critical debate regarding Shakespearean inwardness. It might seem naïve to propose an enquiry into Ophelia’s interiority, considering that several critics have already extensively debated the question of whether ascribing subjectivity to Shakespeare’s characters is feasible, and have used Hamlet as their main site of contestation. 67 Just as Ricks argues that the Romantics invented the idea that loneliness could describe an interior condition,
several scholars have argued that the Romantics also invented the idea of Hamlet’s individualized, isolated interiority.\textsuperscript{68} Deirdre Lynch, for instance, suggests that the Romantics co-opted Hamlet to serve their own ends, so that it was only in the “in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, [that] Hamlet…acquired inner regions of selfhood.”\textsuperscript{69} Jonathan Bate argues that “The Romantics’ reinvention of Hamlet as a paralyzed Romantic was their single most influential critical act.”\textsuperscript{70} Margreta de Grazia is perhaps the most well-known critic to argue that the notion of Hamlet’s “psychological depth and complexity” is an ex-post-facto interpellation.\textsuperscript{71} In response to this, Katherine Eisaman Maus has argued that we should not discount the idea of Hamlet’s inwardness altogether. The “theatrical” self is not, for Maus, straightforwardly equivalent with externality.\textsuperscript{72} Although Shakespeare suggests that “that within” Hamlet consistently “passeth show,” “that within” still exists.

What none of these debates about inwardness in \textit{Hamlet} take into account, however, is the question of how far Ophelia’s loneliness might describe “that within,” by comparing stage rituals with religious ones. Shakespeare suggests that loneliness may describe an interior condition when he relates it to “devotion,” a religious practice that had become increasingly inward in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He also specifically links Ophelia’s book to her loneliness. Like Hamlet, Ophelia is a reader. The book that she holds asks us to question whether her loneliness might signify her interior life. That one of the first utterances of “loneliness” describes someone reading suggests that the play is meditating on the consequences of reading becoming a more individualized activity in the period, in both secular and religious contexts.
By juxtaposing Ophelia’s silent and perhaps devotional reading with Hamlet’s spoken confession, Shakespeare puts Reformation theological debates about the conventions for confession into conversation with his own questions about how to employ the theatrical convention of the soliloquy. Though literary historians have recently begun to place renewed emphasis on the importance of religion in Shakespeare’s plays, the relationship between changing conventions of confession and the soliloquy form in the early modern period has not been adequately explored. Peter Brooks has argued, “What we are today—the entire conception of the self, its relation to interiority and to others—is largely tributary of the confessional requirement,” and the modern “conception of self” has similarly been seen as a tributary of Hamlet’s particular form of confession, the soliloquy. Ophelia complicates this by resisting the confessional requirement. Hamlet’s loneliness has been considered as more important than Ophelia’s, both by critics who follow in the Romantic tradition and those who purport to disavow it—but, even in her silence, Ophelia has much more to tell us.

III. Reading Ophelia

Polonius’ decision to give Ophelia a “book” has been seen to “colour” her loneliness by making her look like a picture of innocence. When Hamlet enters and sees Ophelia, he quixotically remarks, “Nymph, in thy orisons, be all my sins remembered.” Calling Ophelia a “nymph” suggests that she is sexually active, but nonetheless, Hamlet also seems to suggest that the book she reads a prayer book. This reading is reinforced by Polonius’ mention of the words “exercise” and “devotion” soon after he gives the book to Ophelia. “Devotion” herself was often represented in emblem books as a woman
reading. The Virgin Mary, an opposite figure to a nymph, was frequently depicted reading alone in the scene of the Annunciation. The picture of Mary with an open book, as Gertrud Schiller describes, was one of the “favourite themes of art” from the Middle Ages to the Counter-Reformation, so that Ophelia’s reading posture would not only have given her a Marian identity but also would have reminded audiences of Annunciation paintings.

Ophelia’s lack of speech during her loneliness has also contributed to this tendency to reduce her to two dimensions. Whether Ophelia wills her silence, or is forced into it by her father and Claudius, her reserve has encouraged readers to meditate on her lonely body as a two-dimensional surface or façade. Critics often couple their stress on the imagistic quality of Ophelia’s loneliness in this scene with assertions of her vacuity. “The play,” Margreta de Grazia argues, “allows Ophelia no mind of her own.” Eve Sanders argues that Ophelia’s resemblance to well-known images from the conduct book tradition also results in the erasure of Ophelia’s thoughts:

For Polonius and Hamlet, the sight of Ophelia with a book conjures the image of the female reader from out of the pages of The Instruction of a Christian Woman. She appears as a figure of the chaste woman who holds her tumultuous thoughts in check by the habitual reading of devotional texts. For them, she is an icon, not an agent. She is Devotion itself.”

Seeing Ophelia as part of the conduct book tradition makes her an image, or surface, to be seen, like her book’s cover, from a distance, rather than a text whose language can be read.

At the same time, however, it is worth following Sanders’ lead to take the conduct book tradition into account when trying to understand Ophelia’s loneliness. In The Instruction of a Christian Woman (c. 1529), Juan Luis Vives equated acts of silence and
withdrawal with the ideals of chastity and obedience, and the book was still in circulation when *Hamlet* was written. Vives advises husbands that a wife should “in company to hold her tongue demurely let few se[e] her and none at al here her.” Because conduct books like these frequently argue for the relation between silence, solitariness and female devotional reading, Shakespeare may have had this precedent in mind when he decided to make Ophelia silent in her loneliness. In another conduct book, *A Godly Form of Household Government* (1603), Robert Cleaver averred that “The dutie of a husband is, to deale with many men: and of the wives, to talke with fewe. The dutie of the husband is, to be entermedling: and of the wife, to bee solitarie and withdrawne.” Understanding female reading and silence to be aspects of feminine virtue, various authors aimed to make real-life women appear like silent images of Devotion, applying St Paul’s injunction that women should “keep silent in all churches” (1 Cor. 15.34) to spheres of life beyond the church.

This idealized image of Ophelia as “silent,” “solitarie” and innocent still exerts its influence even today. Generations of directors have paid homage (whether knowingly or not) to the tradition that sees Ophelia as Devotion by dressing her in white and handing her a book with a cross on it. Much of the ambiguity of the scene disappears in performance, since choices must be made. While some directors have asked Ophelia to read (or pretend to read) her prayer book devoutly, others have pictured her looking at the pages without seeming to know what she does. Many directors have instructed Ophelia to keep the book closed, as if it is a mere prop rather than something that she knows how to interact with. One director went so far as to have a vapid Ophelia hold the book she was
given upside-down, signaling her inability to read it; preserving a sense of her innocence in the sense of “unknowing” as well as “not guilty.”

At the other extreme to the interpretation that sees Ophelia’s loneliness as wholly innocent, some critics have also understood her to be complicit in Polonius’ plot, so that her devotional reading “exercise” becomes one of knowing deception. And yet, these critics still emphasize her two-dimensionality, arguing that Ophelia is holding a holy book only in order to seem innocent. Polonius’ references to “show” and to “colour,” in this framework, can be seen to emphasize Ophelia’s guilt. Though the word “colour” strictly refers to Ophelia’s “exercise” with her book, it could also refer to Ophelia’s person. He first juxtaposes mention of her loneliness with “devotion,” and then quickly inverts this image by referring to sugaring “o’er the devil himself.” This throws new light on the word “colour,” since it was often associated with dishonesty in the period, particularly false blushes or cosmetic trickery. “Colouring” can also refer to the practice of acting, together with the (often dishonest) embellishment of language with rhetorical or poetical elements. With these meanings of “colour” in mind, Ophelia’s “loneliness” can seem retroactively tainted by association, acquiring the sense that it is a cover or gloss for her brazen falsity; a form of persuasion in itself. Later in the scene, Hamlet echoes Polonius’ diction, when he says to Ophelia, “God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another”—words that are often understood to indicate that he understands that Ophelia is being consciously deceptive.

The diction that Claudius uses in the confessional aside that immediately follows Polonius’ reference to the sugaring o’er the devil himself further sexualizes the lonely Ophelia. Prompted by Polonius’ aphoristic meditation to examine his own conscience,
Claudius redoubles the association of “colour” and “devil” with his mention of “painted words.” Though Claudius is seemingly comparing his own cheek to a harlot’s, he also ends up tainting Ophelia by association:

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O, ’tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plastering art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word. (I.iii.49-53)
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All of Claudius’ imagery refers to the female face. Polonius’ reference to the “visage” of devotion ends up as a parallel to Claudius’ harlot’s cheek. Both the faces of the harlot and of Devotion, according to this logic, are “coloured”; both hide something ugly beneath. The plethora of words that refer to counterfeits and cosmetics in Act III might seem purposely chosen to inflect Polonius’ mention of the word “colour” to make her seem guilty.

Although these metaphors have made Ophelia seem culpable, it is only in the absence of any speech by her that the metaphors imputing her guilt come to be written onto her body. That is to say, it is only when Polonius, Claudius and Hamlet turn to examine their own consciences that they indict Ophelia. Critics of Act III.i of Hamlet have enacted a similar projection when they have argued that Ophelia’s loneliness either signifies her innocence or her guilt. To decide that Ophelia is either an icon of devout chastity or a shallow harlot—that she is guilty or innocent of complicity, knowing or unknowing, a vixen or an ingénue— is to elide the most interesting ambiguity that this scene offers for consideration; that is, the way that we are asked to question the relationship between what Claudius calls “th’ exterior [and] the inward” (II.ii.6) without being able to resolve the question. Act III.i makes possible multiple Ophelias. Setting
aside the question of Ophelia’s innocence or guilt allows us to see her not as an emblem to meditate on, or a painted face to be skeptical of, but as a figure that allows manifold and even opposite readings of what her loneliness might mean. Ophelia is not “all one” thing or the other; the paradox of her loneliness is she is not singular. In her loneliness, Ophelia makes the relationship between her outward appearance and “that within which passeth show” an enigma that invites interpretation.

IV. Ophelia Reading

Several possibilities for how Ophelia’s reading might connect to her devotion, and how that reading might confer a sense of her interior loneliness, might be pursued. Ophelia’s book, like her blush, need not necessarily be a false cover for a false physical loneliness, or a surface ornament for a surface form of loneliness. Rather, it could also be a sign of the detachment her thinking produces. Even if Ophelia is reading a prayer book in the traditional manner, the way the actor portrays this can have quite different effects. Shakespeare makes it possible for the actor playing Ophelia to read either aloud or silently, and each attitude could imply different degrees of introspection. Reading aloud, and especially praying aloud, was a common practice; Shakespeare might therefore have expected the boy playing Ophelia to recite “orisons,” even though he didn’t write any lines to represent them. The action of ritualistically reciting orisons could produce a sense that Ophelia is aurally and visually detached from her immediate surroundings, which “loneliness” could describe. However, this kind of recitation from a book would reduce the sense that Ophelia has “that within which passeth show,” since in this scenario she voices the text that runs through her head. Even if the boy playing Ophelia merely
mouthed the prayers, the audience would still have had a sign of how Ophelia was occupying her thoughts.

Because Ophelia has no lines to indicate what she is reading, however, she could also be reading silently; her eyes moving over the page even as her lips are still. Jeff Dolven and Sean Keilen explain that depictions of reading aloud are relatively rare in Shakespeare’s plays, though the majority of people were thought to read aloud in the period.88 Chartier explains that “by the fifteenth century silent reading was the norm” among literate sections of society.89 Ophelia would be from such a background. If Ophelia is a silent reader, her “loneliness” could describe the disjunction between what she is thinking and what she is communicating. Reading silently, she is more radically detached from the people around her than if she were to read aloud, not only because she cannot engage in the discourse around her onstage, but also because her offstage audience can’t understand her inner theatre by means of language. In this light, she occupies a mental theatre of her own, a situation which could enhance her sense of isolation. The detachment caused by silent reading, however, need not be a melancholy experience for Ophelia. It could mitigate her loneliness by distancing her from the distressing situation of which she is forced to be a part, allowing her a communion with her God that is not possible with those around her.90

Perhaps, too, Ophelia’s book is something other than a prayer book. Polonius is in such a rush to hide that he neither indicates what kind of book he gives Ophelia, nor what he intends her to do with it. Intent on finding an excuse for Ophelia to linger alone in the hall where Hamlet is often seen reading, he could have snatched one of Hamlet’s volumes. His mention of “devotion” in this context could even be an ironic gesture.
toward her lack of customary feminine piety. The argument that Ophelia’s book contains “orisons” is only an inference that has become lore; when Hamlet says “Nymph, in thy orisons, be all my sins remembered,” he could have misinterpreted what she is reading, or he could refer to separate prayers that Ophelia says at other times of day. His comment could also be sarcastic. The picture of Ophelia reading a secular text makes her seem more like Hamlet than she is usually thought to be, suggesting that her loneliness describes an inward experience to which we as audience are not entirely privy.

In the secular setting, too, reading was evolving from a public to a private, solitary, and silent activity, so that it is plausible that the invocation of “loneliness” is Shakespeare’s way of asking his audience to think through how the practice of solitary, silent reading was changing the activity. Though scholars have often seen Hamlet’s reading as a sign of his intellection, they have rarely understood Ophelia’s reading in these terms. Sharpe and Zwicker read Hamlet’s books as symbols of Hamlet’s interiority: “In Hamlet, meditation is epitomized by the actor with book in hand, the prop here a synecdoche of the intellectual life.” The same point has not often been applied to Ophelia.

Earlier editions of the play offer further evidence that Ophelia’s text could be a secular one. In the Folio version of Act III.i cited above, there is no preface to Polonius’ reference to Ophelia’s book. But in the first Quarto, Polonius (“Corambis” in Q1) draws attention to the fact that he sees Hamlet reading just before he hastily decides to add the book to his tableau. This suggests that he may intend Ophelia’s book to mimic the book that Hamlet is reading:
King: See where hee comes poring uppon a booke.

*Enter Hamlet*

Cor. Madame, will it please your grace
To leave us here?

Que. With all my heart. *exit*

Cor. And here Ofelia, reade you on this booke,
And walke aloofe, the King shal be vnseene.  (*Q1*, III.i, 111-116)

Though Corambis does not say “loneliness” in the first quarto, this version still colors later evocations of it. In the second Quarto, Hamlet has a stage direction to enter “reading” before Polonius speaks to Ophelia, making his direction more of an aside than it is in Folio. Hamlet’s vituperative attack on Ophelia later in the scene, “Get thee to a nunnery” (III.i.137), could in part be a reaction to this mimicry of his reading. He might not only be frustrated with her demonstrative sexuality, but also with the rebellion that her act of reading constitutes.\(^2\) By telling Ophelia to get herself to a nunnery, Hamlet could just as easily be chastising her for a lack of orisons as drawing attention to her supposed hypocrisy in reciting them. In a convent, there would only be books of devotion—and Hamlet might prefer Ophelia to read only such books.

Whether or not the book is a prayer book, different practices of devotion could reflect differently on Ophelia’s reading, and therefore also color the quality of her loneliness. It is possible to read Ophelia’s devotional stance in terms of both Catholic and Protestant devotional traditions. Although Ophelia’s lonely reading might seem overtly Protestant, Catholics had already practiced individual devotional exercises for centuries. Though household piety was not as common before the Reformation as after it, Ophelia could also be seen to be practicing the kind of devotional exercises contained within the Book of Hours, common among medieval English women. As early as the fourteenth century, the Catholic Geert Grote’s *devotio moderna* had encouraged Christians in the
Netherlands, Low Countries and Germany to examine their consciences, and this had spread to England by the time Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*. As John van Engen explains, “The very term *Modern Devotion*…seems inherently to suggest some rejection of the medieval past. Many readers have come to associate the Brothers and Sisters of the New Devotion with movements that in some way looked forward to the Renaissance or the Reformation…Broadly speaking, however, scholars are now in agreement that this religious movement was decidedly “late medieval” and “Catholic” in origin. Catholics had also practiced individual devotions in church, albeit in the presence of other people, for centuries. If medieval congregations had had access to the concept of loneliness, they may have used it to describe their experience of personal devotion amidst the crowd during mass. François Lebrun describes how medieval congregations occupied themselves with private prayer during mass, because they couldn’t understand (or could not hear) the Latin mass performed behind a screen. Ophelia’s situation in III.i is not unlike that of these churchgoers. Having said this, Catholic devotion had become particularly individualized in the century that *Hamlet* was written, so that Ophelia’s loneliness could also be read in terms of the growing sense of isolation in Catholic practices of prayer.

The Jesuits’ founder, Ignatius of Loyola, designed his *Spiritual Exercises* (1522-24) to be carried out over a period of 28 days; they were approved by the Pope in 1548. Many other Jesuit writers followed his lead. John Bossy explains, “the psychological approach had made enormous progress by the end of the sixteenth century, embodied as it was in the practice of the Jesuits.” The trade in devotional manuals flourished, and many promoted private self-examination. The most popular of these was Robert Persons’
ersons’ *Christian Directory* (1582), which, Alec Ryrie explains “was the most immediately successful work of practical piety of the entire period” (and later adapted by Edward Bunny to Protestant needs.) By the end of the sixteenth century, Catholics were also using emblem books as devotional aids. The Jesuit tradition plays an important role in the history of loneliness, even aside from its relevance to the citation of the word in *Hamlet*, since the English translation of one of their popular devotional manuals contains the very earliest attestation of “loneliness” that the *Early English Books Online* has on record. This is a citation not recorded in the OED. The Spaniard Gaspar de Loarte’s Italian text *Essercito della vita Christiana, The Exercise of a Christian*, was rendered into English by James Sancer (pseudonym of Stephen Brinkley) in 1579. Loarte recommends that his readers practice their exercises in an isolated place: in the opening to the book, he advises readers “thou must retire thyself from company and examine thy whole life.” Sancer renders Loarte’s Italian phrase from his exercise for Saturday, *non ti dimenticare in questo giorno d’accompagnare la solitudine della sconsolata madre*, into the English phrase: “And see thou faile not this day to beare the woful mother companie in her lonolines.” Like Shakespeare, Sancer associates “lonolines” with the Virgin Mary: while apart from actual company, the devotee can better sympathize with Mary’s lonely grief after the death of Jesus. In her likeness to Mary, Ophelia could be seen to sympathize with her. Perhaps she could even be holding a Jesuit devotional manual.

Just as it is possible to read Ophelia’s devotion as Catholic in its aspect, it is also possible to understand it within a Protestant framework. Reformation brought more stress on solitary, silent, inward devotion—and on reading books—than ever before; though the paradox is that these readers did not consider themselves alone during such solitary
reading, but rather, closer to God. Protestants privileged acts of individual, introspective contemplation above engagement in communal worship or verbalized rituals performed by a priest. Provoked by the imperative of *sola scriptura*, these readers withdrew from the space of the church in order engage in the kind of contemplation of individual conscience that occurs in the company of “scripture alone.” Roger Chartier argues that Protestants owned more books than Catholics.101 “Reading was the new keystone of the faith,” he says, establishing a close connection between religion and literacy.”102 As Alec Ryrie explains, Protestants were particularly interested in seeking solitude in order to perform their devotions: “Christians, not least medieval Christians, had long sought solitude to pray. But the practicalities of seeking solitude, and the reasons why—and extent to which—Protestants sought it, shaped their experience of prayer enough for us to pause on the subject.”103 Ryrie explains that Protestant devotional manuals were rare before 1600: “Although Protestant readers had plenty of books of prayers and even more printed sermons, before 1600 there was relatively little in the way of practical spiritual advice and exhortation.”104 One exception, Ryrie explains, was John Foxe’s *Actes and monuments*, or the *Book of Martyrs* (1563),105 but Protestants also often rewrote Catholic manuals. “Medieval devotional materials were much less problematic for Protestants than contemporary Catholic ones.”106 It would possible to imagine that Ophelia had retired to a solitary place in order to read one of these texts, and therefore to understand her loneliness in terms of the Protestant tradition, as a willed withdrawal from conversation that allows her to engage in silent self-examination aided by her text. Hamlet, as a student at Lutheran Wittenberg, would be ready to understand her devotion in these terms.
It’s also possible that Ophelia could be reading a Protestant emblem book to aid her devotion, such as those by Montenay, Harvey or Quarles. Polonius refers to the emblem of Devotion, which could easily put an audience in mind of this. Emblem books were often called *remembrances*; Ophelia’s line to Hamlet, “I have remembrances of yours that I have longed long to redeliver” could refer to the emblem book she is holding. Books of this kind were first printed in the early years of the Reformation as a Protestant genre, designed to provide a prompt to individualized introspection. The withdrawal from the senses and the physical realm into an internal world that they encouraged could constitute an interior form of “loneliness.” Huston Diehl argues, “rather than hearkening back to earlier beliefs, these emblem books question and challenge the inherited ideas of the Middle Ages.” These books sought to interiorize the practice of meditation and became exponentially popular in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

At the same time that Ophelia’s reading pose harks back to Catholic Annunciation iconography, her devotion, and therefore her loneliness, could also be understood in terms of the reaction against this iconography. Images of the Annunciation were a locus for demonstrations of Reformation iconoclasm. R. Hassel explains that images of Mary reading, ubiquitous in English churches, elicited highly charged reactions in the mid sixteenth-century. In 1563-4, Shakespeare’s father was himself ordered to cover up these controversial wall paintings in Stratford-upon-Avon’s Guild Chapel, since he was Chamberlain of the town. Perhaps Shakespeare’s tableau could also be a kind of cover-up.
The wonder of Shakespeare’s presentation of Ophelia is that it a director could just as plausibly choose to give Ophelia a Book of Hours, as Grote’s Devotio Moderna, as Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises, as a Protestant emblem book. Each of these traditions produce new forms of loneliness. A comparison of them focuses the extent to which solitary and communal, individual and collective, private and public, forms of worship had been pulling against each other for centuries. By encouraging such a variety of identifications, Shakespeare asks his audience to question their own relationship to loneliness by examining their own reference points for devotion. We cannot, in the end, know what Ophelia’s book is, so that it becomes a sign of her resistant illegibility.

Broad oppositions between Protestant and Catholic approaches to devotion don’t reveal the extent to which “loneliness” might have been a useful way for many Christians at the end of the sixteenth century to think through their own relationship to self-examination—especially since the very use of the terms “Catholic” and “Protestant,” while useful as a tool for interpretation, simplifies the nuances of Reformation religion. Peter Lake has described how misleading the opposition of these terms can be. Modernity has obscured the variety of different beliefs that Shakespeare’s contemporaries ascribed to in this time of religious flux and political unrest. Supposedly “Catholic” traditions persisted in supposedly “Protestant” churches; some “Catholics” were much more revolutionary than “Protestants.”

Ramie Targoff has challenged conventional distinctions “between the ritualized world of Catholicism and the more individualistic focus of Protestantism.” She argues, “what emerges in the aftermath of the Reformation is less a triumphant embrace of the individual’s private and invisible self than a concerted effort to shape the otherwise
uncontrollable and unreliable internal sphere through common acts of devotion.”

Even though Protestants have usually been seen to encourage private devotion, they were also interested in fostering a more communal experience of church service (i.e. one that everyone could understand) than Catholics had been. The introduction of the Book of Common Prayer forms an apt symbol of this paradox. “From its initial construction in 1549,” it “collapsed the distinctions between personal and liturgical worship by introducing a single paradigm for devotional worship.” In its “commonality,” this prayer book, authored by the Protestants who are supposed to value private devotion more strongly than Catholics, actually made devotion less personal. Thinking about the different interior experiences that personal prayer amongst others produces, as compared with ritualized prayer when alone, makes the use of a term like “loneliness” seem loaded. Especially since it complicates the relation between individual and communal devotion, Ophelia could well be holding a Book of Common Prayer.

V. Confession

From Polonius’ reference to “devotion” in Act III, we suddenly move to a scene of confession. Directly after Polonius names Ophelia’s loneliness, Claudius and Hamlet each confess their thoughts in quick succession. As we have seen, the Vice-like Claudius speaks an aside that shows obvious signs of the influence of medieval dramatic tradition because he refers to his “conscience,” and then Hamlet goes on to speak in a soliloquy. Claudius not only invokes the theatrical conventions of the morality play, but also gestures toward the religious ritual of confession when he refers to his conscience. He makes the audience his intercessor in order to confess sins that he does not expose to his
fellow characters. (Though Hamlet chases a confession of Claudius’ guilt throughout the play, he never hears anything as close to a confession as this). By sharing his thoughts like this, Claudius makes a companion or intercessor of the audience, reducing the sense that he is solitary onstage.

Ophelia’s loneliness, by contrast, cannot be spoken: her silence constitutes a tacit refusal, or at least an inability, to allow the audience access to what she is thinking. Claudius achieves a kind of communion with the audience as a result of his confession; almost as if one sacrament followed another (since confession is a necessary precursor to holy communion). But company cannot solve Ophelia’s loneliness. Even if she is only pretending to be lonely for Hamlet’s sake, the audience cannot be considered her companion. Because she doesn’t portray any obvious knowledge of her own theatricality with regard to the audience, she offers a picture of what it is like to be lonely in a world where confessions are not made out loud, and where there is no distinction between the kinds of communion possible with audience and other characters onstage. She neither exposes the audience by making them aware of their own presence, nor finds any comfort in their listening ears—and in this, she marks her difference from the other supposed solitaries in this scene.

Ophelia’s silence could be read as a sign that she is oppressed by (or at least obedient to) her male counterparts, but it can also be read as an act of defiance; a willed refusal of theatrical tradition. She absents herself from the tradition of verbally drawing attention to the disjunction between what she feels and what she says to other characters, and in this, enacts a tacit refusal to privilege her offstage audience above her onstage one. By withholding language, Ophelia makes herself difficult to read and frustrates any
assumption by the audience that they should have access to what she is thinking. Ophelia’s lack of a speech to the audience (“painted” or otherwise) marks her loneliness as different from that of Vice characters and those who are influenced by them.

Just as theatrical conventions of solitary speaking were in flux in the sixteenth century, so too were notions of confession. To use religious terminology, Ophelia disallows the offstage audience from acting as her intercessor and therefore makes herself comparable with Christians who preferred to confess inwardly rather than to a priest. Ophelia’s attitude to confession makes her a foil to Claudius, both in terms of theatrical and Christian convention. Though Claudius’ penitence here is not quite public, because he hides it from the characters onstage with him, the workings of his conscience are not private, because he uses the audience as intercessor. His attitude to confession therefore seems more medieval than Ophelia’s. Martin Luther, who advocated that private examination of conscience led to more heartfelt contrition, would have been skeptical of Claudius’ mode of confession.¹¹⁵

Since Claudius’ old-fashioned confession frames Ophelia’s silence, it might be tempting to see Ophelia’s attitude toward confession—and therefore her loneliness—as a straightforwardly Protestant opposite to Claudius’ more Catholic stance. But just as in the case of devotion, the distinction between individual and collective, interior and externalized confession doesn’t easily hold. Both Protestants and Catholics were poised between individual and collective modes of confession. It was the Catholic Church that introduced the confessional box, for instance.¹¹⁶ During the Counter-Reformation, Saint Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan and key figure at the Council of Trent, introduced the private confessional booth, which facilitated private confession by removing the
necessity to be face to face with one’s confessor.\textsuperscript{117} While Jesuits encouraged the “general confession,” a “carefully guided self-examination” that did not require a priest, its ritualized form made it a species of communal experience.\textsuperscript{118}

Medieval and Renaissance scholars see in changing practices of confession an indication of the advent of the privacy and a revolution in interiority, but they disagree about when this revolution happened. Some scholars claim that it occurred when the fourth Lateran Council of 1215 instituted the mandatory sacrament of private annual confession to a priest (who acted as intercessor to God as well as instrument of absolution) during the Easter season.\textsuperscript{119} This decree, for Peter Brooks, marks the moment when conscience became private. And yet, Mary Mansfield documents in great detail the evidence for why the supposed “penitential revolution” of the thirteenth century “did not produce genuine interior piety.”\textsuperscript{120} Put simply, “Christian penance cannot be perfectly private, because of the need to see sinners humiliated, neither can it be fully communal, because of the individual’s private relationship with God.”\textsuperscript{121}

If changing confessional practices are an indicator of interiority, then Ophelia’s “loneliness” is poised between interiority and outward appearance. Standing on the cusp between different traditions of confession and devotion, Ophelia demonstrates the extent to which each of these forms of religious practice produce a different degree of detachment and therefore a different sense of loneliness. Shakespeare’s juxtaposition of Claudius’ aside, Ophelia’s silence, and later, Hamlet’s soliloquy pits different practices of devotion and confession against each other to suggest that, depending on your attitude to confession, it is possible to feel lonelier when together with others than when apart from them.
Even by the time that Ophelia sings her mad songs freely, she foregrounds the detachment that comes of not being able to communicate in a way that people think they understand. Her songs, full of innuendo, foreground the radical ambiguity of language. Some critics have spoken of Ophelia’s songs as a kind of liberation, but they also limit her. Even in her supposed freedom, she remains trapped by her inability to communicate a sense that she is aware of her own thoughts. Like Cassandra, she is heard but not understood.

VI. Hamlet’s loneliness

By contrast to Ophelia, early in the play, Hamlet gives a sense that the language he is using can represent what he is thinking. He aligns himself more with Claudius and the soliloquy tradition straightforwardly inherited from the morality play. In his first soliloquy, “O that this too too solid flesh would melt,” (I.ii.127), like Claudius, he is aware of himself as a theatrical creature and able to use language to communicate what he is thinking:

Heaven and earth!
Must I remember? why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on: and yet, within a month
Let me not think on’t—Frailty, thy name is woman! (I.ii.144-8)

In this speech, Hamlet is able to use language as a path out of isolation. As he voices his anger, his speech seems to rescue him from the kind of uncommunicative condition in which Ophelia is trapped. And at the end of his speech, again, like Claudius, he self-consciously draws attention to the conceit that it is when he is alone that he can speak his thoughts freely: “but break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (I.ii.157). The
audience, in these soliloquies, is an intercessor to whom he has little difficulty unburdening his thoughts. But when Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo enter, he must stop his truth-telling tongue. He cautions himself to be quiet when he is in the company of other characters, drawing attention to his co-operation with the conventions of the soliloquy form inherited from the Vice tradition.

Because Polonius does not have the same access to Hamlet’s soliloquies that the audience does, however, he must contrive alternative means of garnering a confession. When Hamlet enters holding a book in Act II Scene II, Polonius sees this book as a way of reading “the poor wretch” who “comes reading” (II.ii.125). “What do you read, my lord?” (II.ii.189) he asks, hoping at the same time to gain some insight into what he thinks. But loneliness’ symbol is the silence of the mind as closed book. “Words, words, words” (II.ii.292), says Hamlet, communicating only that he means to avoid an answer. Elsewhere, Hamlet compares his memory with his commonplace book, and like Polonius, many critics have seen the book as a symbol of Hamlet’s subjectivity. But Hamlet does not participate in attempts to read his “affliction” by means of what he says and what he reads. As Polonius repeatedly and comically fails to understand Hamlet, he warns off those who seek to assume that minds are like texts that can be read.

And yet Hamlet is still participating in the soliloquy’s conventions at the end of Act II, when being suddenly alone offers a kind of relief not only from Polonius’ attempts to read him but also from the comparison of himself with the speaker of soliloquies in the

*Murder of Gonzago*:

Now I am alone.  
O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann’d,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do,
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? (II.ii.543-556)

Seemingly aware that someone is listening here, Hamlet privileges his offstage audience above his onstage listeners. Though he is purportedly being honest about his feelings, chastising himself for “saying nothing” about or to the King, dwelling on how he can speak more truthfully when “alone” than in front of the players, he also draws attention to the theatrical nature of his confession. Even as he distinguishes between his “painted” and unpainted selves, his rhetoric makes him a fluent orator. When speaking of his envy of the player’s capability to represent “passion” using a conceit, for instance, seemingly diminishing his own ability to do so, he works himself up into a passion using the conceit of two very well-timed rhetorical questions.

When speaking to other characters onstage, Hamlet is often aware that he is acting, but he is never so honest as he is in his early soliloquies. In the lines directly following Hamlet’s “Now I am alone” confession to the audience, Polonius makes clear his desire to make Hamlet “confess,” though the Prince continues to elude him:

CLAUDIUS
And can you by no drift of conference
Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?

ROSINCRANCE
He does confess he feels himself distracted.
But from what cause he will by no means speak.

GUILDENSTERNE
Nor do we find him forward to be sounded.
But with a crafty madness keeps aloof
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state. (III.i.1-9)

When Hamlet enters, however, he frustrates Polonius’ plan. In his “antic disposition,” he purposely avoids making a confession of himself and frustrates communication of “his true state” not only to Polonius but also to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He presents himself as a mind that keeps itself apart from others, even when he is speaking with them. Perhaps Hamlet objects to Rosencrantz’s Catholic attitude toward confession: the fact that the Danish word “Rosenkrands” means “rosary beads” is suggestive in this context.

Ophelia is party to this conversation between her father and Rosencrantz, as Polonius auditions them for the part he will next have her play.

Act III marks the point of a decisive turn in Hamlet’s relationship with the audience in his soliloquies, as he begins to find confessing his thoughts to them more and more difficult. The plot to “sound” Hamlet takes place in the hall, where both he and Ophelia read: this underscores the link between the motif of her loneliness and that of resisted confession. The book that Hamlet holds in Act III.i when he enters to be “sounded” once again, is, like Ophelia’s, a sign of his resistant illegibility; a symbol of how he frustrates others’ attempts to get a confession from him. Hamlet’s problem of isolation is not only inter- but intra-personal. This problem is emphasized in a character who attempts to speak his thoughts.

As soon as Ophelia’s loneliness is named, it becomes more difficult to separate Hamlet’s awareness of his offstage audience from his onstage one than it had been in his earlier soliloquies. His most famous soliloquy is less Vice-like—far less like Claudius’ mode of lone-speaking—than his previous speeches. Perhaps because Ophelia is present
in the background; perhaps because he somehow knows he is being watched by others;
perhaps because he is losing hold of the security of the morality plays’ ontology, his
speech here is far less straightforwardly confessional than his speech in his previous
soliloquies:

To be, or not to be – that is the question.
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, ’tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish’d. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life… (III.i. 56-69)

Language can no longer fully parse Hamlet’s thoughts; the rhythm of the speech is stilted
by self-interruption, hesitation and correction. Though his soliloquy is not
straightforwardly “quiet,” though it might be considered less “aloof” than other lines that
Hamlet teases characters on stage with, it is nevertheless by no means a “confession” in
the self-revelatory way that Polonius wants it to be. Plying between candid speech and
lonely reticence, Hamlet calls the very notion of his “true state” into question. Loneliness
marks the site of a new anxiety, whereby soliloquists find themselves unable to
communicate what they think simply by speaking aloud; either to characters onstage with
them, to the audience they previously relied upon as in intercessor—or to themselves. He
refuses to part “painted” from unpainted words in a meditation full of metaphorical
silences.
As his soliloquies progress to this final crisis of loneliness, Hamlet is less and less likely to “unpack his heart like a whore” (as he puts it at the end of his “Now I am alone” soliloquy). Yet this does not necessarily mean that he is hiding his inwardness. Rather it comes to seem impossible that language could access it. It is not that Hamlet is hiding “that within,” but that he cannot show what is within, even to himself. Hamlet’s Act III soliloquy underscores the idea that examination of oneself, even in loneliness, might be an activity that passes the limits of language. Because he cannot fully articulate his thoughts—even to himself—Hamlet reaches in this soliloquy beyond the kind of rhetorical performance that he and Claudius employ earlier in the play. He refuses to be read by means of his confession.

Performances of Hamlet, together with much of the criticism that addresses this speech, obscure the likelihood that Hamlet is not alone during his most famous act of lone-speaking. If Ophelia remains true to the text that we possess, mention of her loneliness not only frames Hamlet’s most famous speech. Her bodily presence also disrupts his physical solitariness during his soliloquy. When Claudius leaves the stage to hide behind the arras, Hamlet swiftly enters for his “to be or not to be” soliloquy—but the silent Ophelia remains. The cue for Ophelia to remain onstage is so subtle that it has often gone unnoticed or been willfully ignored, though the King and Polonius have a stage direction to “hide” behind an arras in Q2 and to “exit” in Folio, the player acting Ophelia has no stage direction to leave the stage in any of the texts.122

In his final moments, when Hamlet denies both his on- and off-stage audiences the speech they might expect from a dying man, he makes a testament of his solidarity with Ophelia. “The rest is silence”—in no line is Hamlet’s loneliness more apparent.
Whilst still surveilled, he intones only, “O O O O,” as if he might even be struggling to say “Ophelia.” In what Polonius calls Hamlet’s “days of quiet,” the Prince is more like Ophelia in Act III.i than ever.

VII. Ophelia’s lonely death

Ophelia dies without being able to communicate herself. She grows increasingly restive after Act III, and because the court cannot seem to contain her, she flees to the bank of a river, and drowns there. Her death is especially tragic in light of the way that she stands while Hamlet talks about the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

Ophelia is the one who dies alone in the end, not Hamlet. When Gertrude reports that the garlanded Ophelia has drowned under her willow tree, she underlines the links between her loneliness and that of the romance tradition:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream
There with fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them:
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. (IV.7,162-180)

When he pictures Ophelia dying under a willow, Shakespeare returns her loneliness to the scene of the romance past. Because she is a lonely woman alone in a wooded space, she is in danger. Though Shakespeare does not call Ophelia “lonely” at the moment of her death, her situation by the weeping brook bears a relation to scenes of loneliness in Sidney’s Arcadia and Wroth’s Urania. It also bears a relation to her earlier situation of loneliness in the third act of Hamlet, because it’s not clear whether she is actually
physically alone in this scene. How does Gertrude knows the details of her death? The question of how she knows what happened to Ophelia, but could not—or did not—help her, is one that has troubled many critics. Claudius instructs his men to “follow her close.” Her removal from the court has not guaranteed her privacy: somehow, Gertrude becomes a spectator, without feeling the need to explain how she came to be watching, or why, indeed, she could not help. It’s not clear whether Ophelia dies a solitary death or whether she was in fact being watched.

In all of these ways, Ophelia seems “lonely” in her final act, according to the definition of loneliness that Act III presents. But there is one crucial difference: in her death, Ophelia leaves the space of the court and enters into a scene of pastoral romance. The green world makes its entrance into the tragedy here, just as Ophelia makes her exit. Her grieving must take place outside its walls, like that of Urania, or Robert Garnier’s Cleopatra. The tree that Ophelia dies underneath is made heavy with symbolism. Her willow for weeping is hung with a catalogue of flowers—crow-flowers for ingratitude; nettles that sting; daisies for faithlessness and long purple, for lust and greed. Wild orchids that color the moment of Ophelia’s lonely death—a shock of mournful purple against green—make an apt symbol for the arrival of pastoral elegy into the drama. Shakespeare registers a further, almost wry, nod to this shift in the mention of some “shepherds,” hitherto unseen in the landscape of the play. Gertrude suggests that she is detached, even, from herself, in that “incapable of her own distress,” she appears ignorant of death’s approach. Seemingly punished for her transgression, Ophelia dies a muted death. Singing “snatches of old lauds” as she dies, Ophelia replicates the state of inarticulacy that she has previously been forced into. We can’t know who was watching
her as she feel into the brook, but the implied suspicion that there were spectators invokes the relationship between loneliness and danger that began in Sidney’s *Arcadia*. 
Milton’s loneliness

from them I go
This uncouth errand sole, and, one for all
Myself expose, with lonely steps to tread
Th’ unfounded deep, and through the void immense
To search with wand’ring quest a place foretold
Should be, and, by concurring signs, ere now
Created vast and round, a place of bliss
In the purlieus of Heav’n, and therein placed
A race of upstart Creatures, to supply
Perhaps our vacant room….
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, 826-835.\(^{124}\)

Satan stands next to Shakespeare’s Hamlet as the second “sole” protagonist who is famous for his contribution to Romantic loneliness.\(^{125}\) There is something diabolical, for Milton, about Satan’s Vice-like interest in talking in the first person. Although Shakespeare had not used the word “lonely” to describe Hamlet, however, Milton did imagine Satan in these terms. The passage above, where Milton describes Satan “wandering” with “lonely steps” (*PL. II*.828), is one of only two mentions of the word “lonely” in the whole of Milton’s epic poem. In his loneliness, Satan has been seen to look both backwards to Hamlet and forward to Wordsworth. Like Hamlet, he has been called a soliloquists who constantly stresses his aloneness.\(^{126}\) And like Wordsworth, Satan is a lonely wanderer. Milton uses much of the same diction that Wordsworth would later invoke to describe himself in his famous lyric, “I wandered lonely as a cloud”: Satan “wanders” to a place of “bliss” by way of a “vacant” room.\(^{127}\)

Although Satan has been seen both as the main model for Miltonic loneliness, and also the most influential figure in *Paradise Lost* for later lonely poets, however, studying
the way he actually uses the term “loneliness” troubles the narrative that has so easily placed him between Hamlet and Wordsworth. This chapter examines some other lonely characters in Milton’s work—such as the Lady in *Comus*, *Il Penseroso*, the implied couple in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, and Adam and Eve—in order to show that Milton’s loneliness builds on the gendered romance precedent for loneliness that Sidney and Shakespeare first inscribed.

Most often, Milton characterizes loneliness as a lack of communication—or what Milton calls “conversation”—between two people. Even when people are speaking to each other, Milton suggests, they are not always “conversing.” This term, conversation, forms a constant opposite to loneliness in Milton’s writings. Loneliness is not only a relational condition for Milton, but also one that betrays a deep anxiety about the inarticulacy that might frustrate communication between people. The way that Satan is able to discourse on his own loneliness is actually an anomaly when we compare him with other lonely characters in Milton, though he too shares a sense of vulnerability in his loneliness with the female characters. Satan is more like Ophelia and less like Hamlet in his loneliness than has usually been possible to observe.

The concept of loneliness is so familiar to us by now that critics have used it as a synonym for terms like “singularity” when speaking about Milton’s poems. But his choice of the word “lonely” appears to be deliberate. Whereas Shakespeare had only used the words “lonely” and “loneliness” a total of four times in his career, Milton used them a total of fourteen times in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* alone. Over the course of his life, he records the terms more times than any previous author had: in addition to the *Doctrine*, the word “lonely” (or its cognate “loneliness”) appears once in “Ode on the
morning of Christ’s Nativity,” twice in Comus, once in Il Penseroso, twice in Paradise Lost, eight times in Tetrachrodon. I draw attention to this frequency, not only in order to emphasize the importance of Milton’s writings to loneliness’ genealogy, but also to stress that he seems to have made a conscious decision to use the term “lonely,” over and above other terms like solitariness, solitude, or singularity. Although it is true that loneliness and solitude do sometimes overlap in Milton’s work, there is a philological, as well as a philosophical and political, import to tracing the differences between them.

I. Milton’s debts to Romance

In his loneliness, Satan describes himself as “exposed,” suggesting that he shares a sense of vulnerability with characters such as Philoclea, Urania and Ophelia. Milton suggests that he himself sympathizes with this form of lonely exposure, since he subtly compares his own poetic “solitude” to Satan’s loneliness. In Book VII of Paradise Lost, Milton hints that writing the poem is his own kind of “uncouth errand sole.” The verb “compassed” gives a forceful sense of the threatening shadow that Milton’s enemies cast, stressing his vulnerability. Like Philoclea, he is circumscribed in this solitude, and plagued by enemies rather than being alone:

Standing on earth, not rapt above the pole,
More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
To hoarse or mute, though fall’n on evil days,
On evil days though fall’n, and evil tongues;
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
Visit’st my slumbers nightly, or when morn
Purples the east: still govern thou my song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few. (PL. VII.23-31)
Because “solitude” shares a verb with the plural noun “dangers,” there seem to be multiple, personified solitudes here, making up a circle that physically surround the poet. Blindness gave Milton a visceral reason to meditate on what isolation means. In the wake of the Restoration, his political allegiances also meant he well understood the position of exile. Surrounded by political enemies, he presents himself as engaged in a lone quest, risking his safety to speak (like Satan) “one for all.” “Solitude sometimes is best society” (PL. IX.249) —but not in this form. There is an echo of Abdiel’s singularity in this scene: “the flaming seraph fearless, though alone / Encompassed round with foes” (PL 5.875-6), as Colin Burrow describes: “This single angel is frequently taken as a Miltonic alter-ego. One might with some confidence think of Abdiel as not simply a Miltonic alter-ego but an alter-ego of Milton after 1662, who conscientiously resists the legal and social pressures towards uniformity. He is a non-conformist angel.” But there is also an echo of Satan’s exposure in Book One.

“Compassed” is not a word with positive connotations in Paradise Lost. Satan compasses the earth just before his temptation of Eve. In Book Two, Sin not only sits “alone” and “pensive” before the birth of her offspring, but finds herself “vexed” round with their vicious attacks after they are born:

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of that rape begot
These yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry
Surround me, as thou saws’t, hourly conceived
And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
To me, for when they list into the womb
That bred them they return, and howl and gnaw
My bowels, their repast; then bursting forth
Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round,
That rest or intermission none I find. (PL. II.794-802)```

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Like Satan in his loneliness, Sin is in danger when she is alone, and like Milton in his solitude, she is “compassed around” by enemies, who also happen to be her offspring.\textsuperscript{132} The reference to Sin’s rape” highlights her circumscribed state of vulnerability when she is “alone.” Though she is a personification of evil rather than innocence, she is not so very unlike the female characters in the forests of Sidney’s \textit{Arcadia} and Shakespeare’s \textit{Titus Andronicus}. With Sin’s vulnerability in mind, we also can see how Satan and Milton’s exposed positions in their loneliness and solitude could also be informed by those vulnerable female characters in the forest. Indeed, Milton positions both Sin and Satan’s loneliness in wilderness spaces: he associates Satan’s loneliness with the “void” that exists between Hell and Eden. Later, Sin will attempt to find a way out the vexation she finds herself in, by building “a ridge of pendent rock / Over the vexed abyss” (\textit{PL. X}.313-314).

Milton’s earliest reference to loneliness also recalls Sidney’s gendered precedent for loneliness. In his earliest reference to loneliness, the Ode “On the morning of Christ’s nativity” (\textit{a}1629; published 1645), he uses the word “lonely” to describe a mountainous space populated by grieving “nympha” (the word Hamlet used to describe Ophelia).\textsuperscript{133} The poem centers around the early Christian legend that a deep groan was heard through all the isles of Greece when the shepherds at Bethlehem were told of the birth of Jesus, signaling that Pan was dead:

\begin{quote}
The lonely mountains o’er, 
And the resounding shore,  
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;  
From haunted spring, and dale  
Edged with poplar pale.  
The parting Genius is with sighing sent,  
With flow’r-inwoven tresses torn,  
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn. (181-188)\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}
Though the lonely mountains are isolated, they are not unpopulated: the nymphs are present, mourning for Pan in the classical style by tearing at their “flower-inwov’n tresses.” In this last detail, the nymphs are also reminiscent of Ophelia in the moments before her death. Mountains were synonymous with the wild in this period, places where people did not go; the “shore,” similarly, was not thought to be the place of leisure it is today, but rather, a site associated with danger. The ancients saw Pan, the “parting Genius,” as the presiding spirit of isolated places. But even if Pan is dead, the mention of him still gestures toward the sense of danger that occurs in places removed from the haunts of men.

*A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634) begins with another image of the danger produced by female loneliness in a remote space. When the Lady finds herself alone in the lonely woods, the threat of vulnerability that suffused Philip Sidney and Lady Mary Wroth’s mentions of loneliness in the romance forest becomes much more tangible. Milton’s is a much darker vision of feminine loneliness than theirs: there is no Sidneyan cross-dressing joke or Wrothian atmosphere of sympathetic exchange to lighten the atmosphere of danger in this scene. The Lady, cut off from her companions, describes how she ended up in the dark isolated “Grove” thus:

They left me then, when the gray-hooded Ev’n
Like a sad votarist in palmer’s weed
Rose from the hindmost wheels of Phoebus’ wain.
But where they are, and why they came not back,
Is now the labor of my thoughts; ’tis likeliest
They had engaged their wand’ring steps too far,
And envious darkness, ere they could return,
Had stole them from me, else O thievish Night
Why shouldst thou, but for some felonious end,
In thy dark lantern thus close up the stars,
That Nature hung in heav’n, and filled their Lamps
With everlasting oil, to give due light
To the misled and lonely traveler? (188-200)\textsuperscript{135}

By personifying the night itself as “thievish” and “fellonius,” the Lady signals her sense that she is under threat. She underlines her brothers’ mistake in leaving her so unprotected by calling their steps “wandering,” a word that Milton would later use to describe Satan’s movement. Like Satan and like the nymphs, the Lady fears the danger that comes of being far away from the protection of society.

Like Shakespeare’s Lavinia and Milton’s Sin, the Lady fears that she will be raped because she is alone. Her wandering brother is not so remiss that he is not aware of the danger that his sister is in. Anxious for her safety, he makes a direct reference to the link between loneliness and the threat of sexual assault:

\begin{quote}
You may as well spread out the unsunned heaps
Of miser’s treasure by an outlaw’s den
And tell me it is safe, as bid me hope
Danger will wink on opportunity,
And let a single helpless maiden pass
Uninjured in this wild surrounding waste.
Of night or loneliness it recks me not,
I fear the dread events that dog them both,
Lest some ill-greeting touch attempt the person
Of our unowned sister. (398-407)\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

Even as he explains that it is not “loneliness” in itself that he fears, so much as the fact that his sister is made vulnerable by it, the Lady’s brother reveals the gendered dimensions of loneliness. Lonely spaces may well be suited to masculine meditation, the brother explains, but a “single helpless maiden” (402) is not safe to engage in such contemplation. No one will rob a Hermit of his “few books, or his beades, or maple dish,/ Or doe his gray hairs any violence” (391-2). But a lone woman is in need of guardians, because, he explains, like Hera’s golden apples, she is tempting. The “ill-greeting touch”
is a nervously verbose euphemism for rape. This double invocation of loneliness in the space of so few lines is extremely rare in this period.

Just as Sidney depicted the lonely Philoclea’s mind as an interior, circumscribed space that was, like her body, vulnerable to incursion, Milton also suggests that there is a link between the Lady’s physical and mental vulnerability. This forest of loneliness is a space where the Lady’s imagination runs as wild as the “tangled wood” (181). She relates the bodily danger she is in to the images that aggressively “throng” her imagination, somewhat like the gnawing offspring that “vex” Sin round (PL. II. 801):

This is the place, as well as I may guess,  
Whence even now the tumult of loud Mirth  
Was rife, and perfect in my listening ear,  
Yet naught but single darkness do I find.  
What might this be? A thousand fantasies  
Begin to throng into my memory  
Of calling shapes and beck’ning shadows dire,  
And airy tongues, that syllable men’s names  
On sands, and shores, and desert wildernesses.  
These thoughts may startle well, but not astound  
The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended  
By a strong siding champion Conscience. (201-212)\textsuperscript{137}

The Lady’s imagination sustains a kind of assault, even as she tries to appease her fears with images of Christian comforts to solitude. The “single darkness” that surrounds the lady, like the darkness that encompassed Milton in Book VII, makes her more vulnerable to imaginative, as well as physical, attack.

It seems a commonplace here that barren, unpopulated places are also ones in which “shapes and shadows” tend to be conjured. In the dark, the “tufted Grove” becomes a kind of blankness, ready to be overlaid with images of all kinds of removed, desolate locations: “Sands, Shoars and Desert wildernesses.” In this play between presence and absence, fullness and vacancy, loneliness in \textit{Comus} becomes a prelude to
imagined—though threatening—companionship. The Lady’s imagination not only provides visual stimulants ("shapes" and "shadows"), but also aural distractions, amidst this sensory deprivation. The silence is overlaid by the imagined sound of what she longs for, the “tumult of loud mirth.” Pan haunts the world of this mask, just as he haunted the “lonely mountains” of the Nativity Ode. He was, after all, inclined to inhabit wild spaces, and thought to cause the people who also found themselves there to go mad with terror.

Perhaps to guard against this kind of panic, the Lady uses a logic like Sidney’s Zelmane, as she tries to remind herself that she is fortified against attack at the end of this flight of fancy. She quells some of her fears by appealing to “conscience” as her guardian. To be virtuous is not only to be “sided” by conscience but to have “Chastitie” as a guardian: perhaps she personifies these abstractions so she can more easily imagine them as physical companions. Moreover, the Lady’s very articulation of the story of her situation also seems to make her less lonely; as she appeals to listeners of some sort, whether they be imagined or real. But just as Philip Sidney has Basilius explain to Zelmane that conscience is not guardian enough when one finds oneself in a lonely forest, the Lady’s brother is not convinced that his sister’s virtue will protect her. By contrast to a male hermit, he says, a “single helplesse mayden” is not safe in the forest—and it’s here that he uses the word “lonelinesse” to underline his point. The vulnerability of the Lady’s imagination is of secondary importance to this physical danger.

Eventually, the Lady attracts the Pan-like figure of Comus, and at this point she becomes even more overtly sexualized than she had been when her brothers had been discussing the prospect of her safety. The ambiguous status of the Lady’s desire during her conversation with Comus—during which she mysteriously finds herself glued to her
chair with “gums of glutinous heat”—has been the subject of several critical analyses. The Lady’s line “I thought not to have unlocked my lips” is particularly evocative of the way in which the ability to speak can be understood in terms of feminine sexuality. Although the Lady’s conversation with Comus might seem to arouse her, however, as Katherine Eisaman Maus sees it, “what seems like capitulation turns out to be resistance.”

The crucial difference between Ophelia, and the Lady, is that though Milton allows her to speak her mind in the forest. Indeed, he makes her a skilled rhetorician. It’s by virtue of her ability to defend herself with speech that she remains a virgin. Milton presses the courtly model of loneliness into a different shape than the Sidney circle had, when he depicts the Lady proving her brother’s fears wrong by resisting Comus with her speech.

Having been captured, the Lady paradoxically seems far less vulnerable than she did when “lonely.” From one perspective, though her body is weak, her “freedom of mind” is untouchable. She protects her integrity thus:

Fain would I something say, yet to what end?
Thou hast nor ear, nor soul to apprehend
The sublime notion and high mystery
That must be uttered to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of Virginity. (783-7) 139

Milton empowers the Lady with a speech that befits his own point of view as a famous advocate for virginity during his university years. He had been disparagingly nicknamed “the Lady of Christ’s” by his peers, meaning that the Lady has often been read as an avatar for Milton himself. Impressed by the Lady’s rhetoric, Comus, too, understands that her words are not “fable.” When the brothers finally rush in with swords after this speech, their attempt at physical force seems ridiculous in the face of the performance the Lady
has given. In this denouement, Milton suggests that does not appeal to the Romance trope of loneliness without some irony. *Comus* was a demonstration of political and religious dissent, written in an attempt to reclaim the Mask form for Republican, Puritan ideals, after it had become associated with the debauchery of the royal court, and thus puts more stress on the power that the Lady’s chastity confers than others might have.

At the same time, however, some ambiguity remains as to how we are to understand the Lady’s speech because of her paralepsis. If we listen carefully, she actually utters her description of the sublimity of the doctrine of Virginity under the guise of a *refusal* to speak about it: “Fain would I say” (783). Her appeal to Virginity is a speech and also not a speech, and the fact that she becomes silent as soon as the brothers enter has been read as a sign of her submission. Milton makes the Lady much more articulate than Ophelia when speaking to Comus, but her sudden silence when her brothers re-enter throws her back into a state of inarticulacy.

The Lady goes back and forth between seeming vulnerable and not vulnerable; feminine and masculine; articulate and inarticulate. Like Shakespeare, Milton is interested in the question of whether language may or may not assuage loneliness—both writers share a concern as to whether communication between people is possible. Again and again throughout his work, Milton uses the words lonely and loneliness to tag moments when he is thinking through the metaphorical relationship between sexual communion and spoken communication.
II. “Il Penseroso” (1645)

Just as the Lady in *Comus* has been seen as an avatar of Milton, so too have critics seen *Il Penseroso*, Milton’s masculine personification of contemplation, as another figure for the poet. Because, like the Lady, he occupies a lonely space, the “high lonely tower,” their positions can be compared. *Il Penseroso*’s loneliness has most often been read as a masculine precedent for other lonely poets, but I am interested in exploring the feminine dimensions of his characterization. With *Comus* in mind, it becomes easier to see how Milton overlays the populated lonely space of the lonely tower with gendered metaphors of penetration.

Milton’s melancholy scholar occupies several removed spaces in the course of the poem; a green where he “walks unseen,” following the wandering moon; removed places, such as a hut “far from all resort of mirth,” until finally describing himself in the lonely tower where a midnight lamp burns in order that he can read. The lonely tower is supposed to be an opposite to the “Tow’red Cities” in Milton’s companion poem, “L’Allegro,” where he imagines Mirth—and “conversation”—residing amidst the city’s masques. But the multiple “towers” of the city end up seeming quite similar to *Il Penseroso*’s lonely tower:

*Penseroso*’s lonely tower:

Towered cities please us then,  
And the busy hum of men,  
Where throngs of knights and barons bold,  
In weeds of peace high triumphs hold,  
With store of ladies, whose bright eyes  
Rain influence, and judge the prize  
Of wit, or arms, while both contend  
To win her Grace, whom all commend.  
There let Hymen oft appear  
In saffron robe, with taper clear,  
And pomp, and feast, and revelry,  
With mask, and antique pageantry… (117-128)\(^{41}\)

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It turns out that the setting for an apostrophe to Melancholy is not very different from the setting Milton proposes for his address to Mirth. Both scenes appeal to an idea of pastoral romance: this is a “city” that sounds strangely green, with space for tourneys, masques and riverside encounters. In both settings, the authors of plays and poetry are present. In the lines that follow this quotation, Jonson and Shakespeare appear to speak through the actors that stage their plays, as Shakespeare, shepherd-like, warbles his “native wood-notes wilde.”

Like the lonely women of the Romance forest, too, Il Penseroso is not quite solitary in his lonely space. He does not seem dejected during his lucubrations: perhaps this is because, as he reads, a great procession of authors keeps him company. Milton figures the tower as a kind of theater of mind, and dramatically opens the curtains to us. He imagines Il Penseroso’s act of “lonely” reading as a dramatic interaction between the scholar and the authors of texts as that he reads, as their bodies are “called up” as if from the dead. In this way “Il Penseroso” makes the scene of loneliness companionable.

Sometime let gorgeous Tragedy
In sceptered pall come sweeping by
Presenting Thebes, or Pelops’ line
Or the tale of Troy divine.
Or what (though rare) of later age,
Ennobled hath the buskined stage. (97-102)\textsuperscript{142}

By contrast to Ophelia, the mind of Milton’s lonely reader, \textit{Il Penseroso}, is laid open to us. In these lines, the lonely tower suddenly opens to us like a stage, to become a spacious scene of imagined companionship between Il Penseroso and the authors of the books he reads. It only slowly becomes clear over the course of reading this passage that the scholar is himself reading; at first, the description seems more like a dramatic
encounter with figures. First, Tragedy personified enters the tower; next, Orpheus and Musaeus (whom Plato’s *Ion* describes as the inspiration to poets) come in; followed swiftly on by Spenser and Chaucer. The “bards” that populate the stage of the tower are endowed with bodies that “sweep” by and voices that “meet the ear.” This final line, “more is meant than meets the ear,” may seem odd, since this is supposed to be a scene of reading, but drama and poetry were less far apart in the seventeenth century, when reading aloud was the dominant mode. Penseroso’s reading is not silent and involves imagining a physical interaction between bodies, as if the author is actually there, speaking. Since the figures Milton refers to were once real people, rather than fictional characters, he blurs the line between real and imagined company for Il Penseroso. He also makes it easier to imagine this scene of reading as one of aural conversation when he pictures authors including Spenser and Chaucer, rather than their characters. It is easier to imagine conversing with non-fictional beings than fictional ones.

Milton pictures the architecture of Il Penseroso’s mind in terms of the lonely space he occupies. *Il Penseroso* is “compassed round” with the walls of the tower, but the tower neither affords complete solitude nor protection. His tow’r is reminiscent of Philoclea’s lonely lodge in that it is a circumscribed enclosed space, vulnerable to penetration because it has an opening, a “window,” through which the spirits of Plato, Virgil, Chaucer and Spenser are all able to fly. Indeed, throughout the poem, Milton uses architectural metaphors to describe the different ways in which the “immortal mind” is contained, and yet opened by its location in a lonely space. Il Penseroso triangulates the relationship between the tower, the “immortal mind” and the “flesh” that it houses:
Or let my lamp at midnight hour
Be seen in some high lonely tow’r,
Where I may oft outwatch the Bear,
With thrice-great Hermes, or unsphere
The spirit of Plato to unfold
What worlds, or what vast regions hold
The immortal mind that hath forsook
Her mansion in this fleshly nook… (85-92)\textsuperscript{143}

The tower temporarily houses the scholar’s body, just as the body houses the immortal mind in its “fleshly nook.”\textsuperscript{144} The words “unsphere” and “unfold” ask readers to imagine expansion, before the perspective shrinks back down to the image of the enclosed “nook.” When Milton asks his readers to meditate on the difference between the vastness of the sky, the immortal mind’s usual abode, and the bounded holding spaces of the “lonely” tower and the body, he gives the lonely mind a much greater capacity than Sidney or Lady Mary Wroth had, while still thinking of the lonely space in terms of confinement and penetrability.

There is one sense, however, in which Il Penseroso’s masculinity assures him a freedom that not all lonely characters receive. His scene of reading offers a solution to the detachment that loneliness produces, which didn’t seem so possible in Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}. His occupation of the lonely tower is a prelude to intellectual and imaginative freedom. He uses his confinement as an aid to contemplation, and the conversation he has does not expose so much as enrich him. Being in a lonely tower makes him more receptive to understanding the philosophy and poetry that he reads there. Il Penseroso has all the advantages of loneliness—companionship, accessibility—without any of the danger.
III. The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce

Milton’s loneliness is not always such a productive condition, however. In The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Milton makes an unprecedented move to make the abstract noun “loneliness” unequivocally and repeatedly describe an incapacitating mental condition. When he moves loneliness out of poetry and into prose—out of the sphere of the pastoral romance and into the domestic sphere of law, he makes the word describe a more obviously complex and more obviously negative mental condition than he previously had done. The extremity of Milton’s rhetoric and descriptions of what bad marriages can be like suggests that he is anxious that divorce may not be the solution to loneliness that he is pitting it as. But at the same time, he also still holds out “conversation”—both spiritual and sexual—as an antidote to loneliness. In this term “conversation,” sexual and spoken intercourse collide. Paying attention to this opposition between loneliness and conversation also reveals the way in which even this vision of mental loneliness still relies on a concept of a body with an interior and exterior in order to function.

“Loneliness” erupts into and through The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce (1643), demanding our attention through sheer force of repetition. Though Milton makes a break with the romance tradition when he makes loneliness describe this domestic situation, many of the features of romance loneliness subtly remain. Once again, loneliness in this text describes a situation that takes place when with other people, rather than when apart from them. The Doctrine uses “loneliness” to describe the feeling that results from a lack of “apt and cheerful conversation” with one’s partner, as it rails against the law that supported divorce only in the case of a non-conssummated marriage.
Milton, as is well-known, takes an unusual stance when he argues that God had ordained marriage as a sacrament to counteract loneliness of mind as well as of body.

His first invocation of “loneliness” stresses that the communion of a couple’s “temper, thoughts and constitutions” is much more important than the communion of their bodies. Loneliness is something that (as Milton continually repeats) needs a “remedy”: that remedy is the “conversation” that a suitable marriage partner provides:

For although God in the first ordaining of marriage, taught us to what end he did it, in words expressly implying the apt and cheerfull conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evill of solitary life, not mentioning the purpose of generation till afterwards, as being but a secondary end in dignity, though not in necessitie; yet now, if any two be but once handed in the Church, and have tasted in any sort of the nuptiall bed, let them finde themselves never so mistak’n in their dispositions through any error, concealment, or misadventure, that through their different tempers, thoughts, and constitutions, they can neither be to one another a remedy against lonelines, nor live in any union or contentment all their dayes, yet they shall, so they be but found suitably weapon’d to the least possibilitie of sensuall enjoyment, be made, spight of antipathy, to fadge together, and combine as they may to their unspeakable weariomnes & despair of all sociable delight, in the ordinance which God establisht to that very end.147

Milton draws his notion of “God’s first ordaining of marriage” from Genesis’s second book. This is a subtle exegesis indeed: he uses Genesis here as evidence that God supports divorce, though Genesis, of course, never explicitly mentions the idea of separation, but only communion. Man was at first a solitary creature; but God, realizing his mistake, made Eve as a remedy against that loneliness. For Milton, it logically follows that a man who finds himself with a wife who makes him “despair of sociable delight,” is returned to a worse state of loneliness than the one in which he began. Being married to an unsuitable partner produces a much greater “loneliness” than an inability to consummate the marriage. His rhetoric is forcefully blunt; to “fadge” something together is to clumsily force two things together that don’t easily combine.
Being alone before marriage is one kind of loneliness, Milton suggests, but feeling lonely within marriage—or, as he puts it at one point, being a “sad spirit wedded to loneliness” (the fourth attestation of the term in the text)—is much worse. In a “single life,” Milton says, “the absence and remoteness of a helper might inure [a man] to expect his own comforts out of himselfe, or to seek with hope,” but in an unsuitable marriage, “the continuall sight of his deluded thoughts without cure, must needs be to him, especially if his complexion incline him to melancholy, a daily trouble and paine of losse in some degree like that which Reprobates feel.”\footnote{148}

IV. Meet Conversation

Milton’s interest in using the word “loneliness” to describe the opposite of a feeling that results from a lack of apt conversation is particularly apparent in his translations of the Bible in the Doctrine and Discipline. He goes so far as to use the term to translate the Hebrew word in Genesis 2.18 *badad*, where previous translators had always used the word “alone.”\footnote{149} The most common translation of Genesis 2.18 reads, “it is not good for man to be alone, I will make an helpmeet for him.” But Milton instead interpolates “loneliness”:

Nevertheless, it shall be here sought by due wayes to be made appeare, that those words of God in the institution, promising a meet help against loneliness […] were not spoken in vaine; for if the knot of marriage may in no case be dissolv’d but for adultery, all the burd’ns and services of the Law are not so intolerable.\footnote{150}

Milton insists that Genesis 2.18 should be translated with the word “loneliness” several times in the Doctrine. In Tetrachordon, too, Milton translates Genesis 2.18 as “Loneliness is the first thing which God’s eye named, not good,” adding that “God provided against man’s loneliness” when he made Eve for Adam.\footnote{151}
Marriage prevents loneliness by providing conversation, but divorce also prevents loneliness by making sure that men are not yoked to wives who do not make satisfactory helpmeets:

*It is not good, saith he, that man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him.* From which words so plain, lesse cannot be concluded, nor is by any learned Interpreter, then that in Gods intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of mariage; for we find here no expression so necessarily implying carnall knowldg, as this prevention of lonelinesse to the mind and spirit of man.

Several times, Milton stresses God’s desire for the “prevention of lonelinesse,” so that not only marriage (in the first place), but also, divorce (in the second place), can be sanctioned.

The irony of Milton’s attempt to dispel the Canon Law’s stress on sexual union, however, is that he continually returns to bodily metaphors to describe his image of an ideal union of minds. Although, on the surface of the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton is at pains to deny the importance of sexual union, his language continually betrays that he has not severed ties with the corporal in his imagination of what “conversation” between marriage partners might mean. Milton’s concept of loneliness in this text—and, by extension, the notion of interior selfhood it implies—is not so disembodied as it might at first seem. The word that Milton chooses to make an opposite to loneliness, “conversation,” was a term that encompassed both sexual and spiritual union in the period. From the Latin *conversārī*, (lit. to turn oneself about, to pass one’s life in, to dwell, abide, live somewhere, or keep company with), it can be compared with the way we use the word “intercourse” today. Even the ideal unity of “souls” is figured as an “incorporation”:
The fit union of their souls be such as may even incorporate them to love and amity.\textsuperscript{153} Milton’s ideal marriage is a fantasy of mental rather than physical interpenetration—but he figures this interpenetration of minds and soul as if those minds were bodies, with surfaces that can fit together.

The counterfactual of the ideal union is also figured in corporal terms, as in the following passage, where Milton rhetorically displays a vituperative force that even he is only rarely capable of:

but that can never be where no correspondence is of the minde; nay instead of being one flesh, they will be rather two carkasses chain’d unnaturally together; or as it may happ’n, a living soule bound to a dead corps, a punishment too like that inflicted by the tyrant Mezentius; so little worthy to be receav’d as that remedy of lonelines which God meant us. Since wee know it is not the joyning of another body will remove lonelines, but the uniting of another compliable mind…\textsuperscript{154}

If two people’s “minds” can’t penetrate one another, Milton says, then their bodies can’t properly become “one flesh” either. He imagines such an unfit union in terms of the ancient punishment of chaining a living soul, trapped in a body, to a rotting corpse. (And if Milton’s own unfit union is part of the reason that he feels so strongly about this topic, it would seem that he is the living soul in the analogy, and his wife Mary is the corpse.)

Although Milton seems to figure loneliness as a more sexualized, physical phenomenon in the \textit{Mask} than in the \textit{Doctrine}, where it appears to describe a more interior phenomenon, both texts, in essence, figure loneliness in terms of sex. Whereas the threat of physical penetration hangs over the Lady’s loneliness in \textit{Comus}, the lack of interpenetration, not only between bodies, but also between minds, is the source of anxiety in the \textit{Doctrine}. In essence, Milton desires a wife’s mind to be accessible in the same way that her body is. If only another person’s imagination could be enterable—if
only marriage could be like a lonely night in the woods—Milton would be more easily able to control the defects of his loneliness. Loneliness finds a remedy in the idea that souls can be unified, like bodies. Even though Milton would seem to have to give up on the metaphor of idea of sexual communion to describe the remedy for loneliness in order for his argument to be most persuasive, he cannot let go of the metaphor of the body when describing his vision of the ideal union.

V. Ideal Conversation

The dark version of what failed conversation looks like in the fallen world of the *Doctrine and Discipline* contrasts sharply with Raphael’s vision of conversation between heavenly spirits, but even when Milton imagines Raphael describing what conversation between Angels is like, he still relies on the metaphor of sexual intercourse as the ideal form of communication—and the ideal solution to loneliness. Spirits do not merely unite their compliable minds “by looks onely”; they are also able to mix Souls:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Love not the Heav’nly spirits, and how their Love} \\
\text{Express they, by looks only, or do they mix} \\
\text{Irradiance, virtual or immediate touch?} \\
\text{To whom the Angel with a smile that glowed} \\
\text{Celestial rosy red, love’s proper hue,} \\
\text{Answered. “Let it suffice thee that thou know’st} \\
\text{Us happy, and without love no happiness.} \\
\text{Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy’st} \\
\text{(And pure thou wert created) we enjoy} \\
\text{In eminence, and obstacle find none} \\
\text{Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars:} \\
\text{Easier then air with air, if Spirits embrace,} \\
\text{Total they mix, union of pure with pure} \\
\text{Desiring; nor restrained conveyance need} \\
\text{As flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul. (PL. VIII.615-629)\textsuperscript{155}}
\end{align*}
\]
Milton spelled “only” “onely” in the original version, to emphasize the angels’ union.

Though Milton’s point here is that there is no physical obstacle when Angels converse, the language he uses to describe this pure union relies on his listeners imagining what those obstacles are.

The highest kind of angelic “conversation,” Milton explains in the *Mask*, occurs between angels and chaste maidens, and this is what leads to immortality:

So dear to Heav’n is saintly chastity,
That when a soul is found sincerely so,
A thousand liveried angels lacky her,
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,
And in clear dream and solemn vision
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,
Till oft converse with Heav’nly habitants
Begin to cast a beam on th’ outward shape,
The unpolluted temple of the mind,
And turns it by degrees to the souls essence,
Till all be made immortal… (Comus, 453-463)156

This vision is not a metaphor, but rather gestures toward Milton’s deeply held theological belief that a mode of conversation approaching heavenly conversation might be possible, even in a fallen world. A solution to loneliness could be possible if one is able to marry the right partner.157 This emphasis on “conversation” means that he imagines a way out of loneliness that didn’t seem possible in Shakespeare’s picture of loneliness.

Like Donne in “The Extasie” (1633), Milton in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* privileges the union of souls above the union of bodies, though physical union remains the metaphorical basis for how he imagines the union of souls. In a poem that Donne calls a “dialogue of one”—a kind of soliloquy—he envisions the “interinanimation” of souls that is able to counteract, or “control” the “defects” of
loneliness. Setting this scene in a *locus amoenus*, he first uses the image of grafting violets to describe this melding of souls:

A single violet transplant,
The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poore, and scant,)
Redoubles still, and multiplies.
When love, with one another so
Interinanimates two soules,
That abler soule, which thence doth flow,
Defects of lonelinesse controules.

Signalling a lack, or a “defect,” loneliness is the opposite to physical, mental and affective communion with a lover in Donne’s poem. He envisions the soul as capable of communion with another soul—as if, like the violet, its edges could touch and be grafted onto another soul. By bringing two “soules” together, love addresses the lonely soul’s defects to make it stronger. Violets, the plants that Ophelia wishes had not withered when her father died, are for constancy and devotion, and in this image that devotion is redoubled. Here, penetration is not a unidirectional threat, but rather figured as a reciprocal process (an “interinanimation”). He adds a further gloss on this point:

Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke.

Though he separates the body from the soul, Donne doesn’t exclude the body’s importance to love and to controlling loneliness.

VI. Adam’s loneliness

In *Paradise Lost*, Adam also wants to believe in the notion that a partner can provide a neat solution to the problem of loneliness. Like Milton in the *Doctrine*, Adam longs for a partner who will be both the “prevention” and the “remedy” to his loneliness.
He cannot be “happy” or “content” without a lover: “In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?” he asks. And he is able to ask God to make him the helpmeet that he requires directly. God at first protests. “What think’st thou then of mee, and this my State … who am alone / From all Eternitie?”, he asks. In response, Adam describes his longing for a partner in terms of a lack of “conversation”:

To attain
The highth and depth of thy eternal ways
All human thoughts come short, supreme of things;
Thou in thy self art perfect, and in thee
Is no deficience found; not so is man,
But in degree, the cause of his desire
By conversation with his like to help,
Or solace his defects. (PL. VIII.412-419)

Because God is “perfet”—all one; a unified whole—Adam argues, he has no defects and therefore requires no “conversation.” “Defects of loneliness” was the phrase that Donne had used, and like Donne, Adam seems to be imagining this conversation in terms of sexual desire here.

During the Reformation, Francis Bacon imagined prayer as a kind of conversation that attempts to rectify such a separation from God. Bacon argues in his essay “On Friendship” (1625), in a passage that prefaces the excerpt that I considered in my introduction, that the only permissible kind of solitude is one in which hermits seek a higher “conversation” with God, pitting this conversation against “aversation”:

Whatsoever is delighted in solitude, is either a wild beast or a god. For it is most true, that a natural and secret hatred, and aversion towards society, in any man, hath somewhat of the savage beast; but it is most untrue, that it should have any character at all, of the divine nature; except it proceed, not out of a pleasure in solitude, but out of a love and desire to sequester a man’s self, for a higher conversation: such as is found to have been falsely and feignedly in some of the heathen; as Epimenides the Candian, Numa the Roman, Empedocles the Sicilian,
and Apollonius of Tyana; and truly and really, in divers of the ancient hermits and holy fathers of the church.¹⁶³

In his 1670 collection of sermons, Thomas Horton also recommended prayer to his readers according to a very similar logic to Bacon:

The sweetness of Prayer is, that therein we speak to God; and the sweetness of Reading is that therein, we have God speaking to us: and revealing his mind unto us, we have here a satisfaction of us in a double sense; a comforting of us in Distresses, a companion for us in solitariness and loneliness and what not? If there be so much contentment in other Authors, how much more is there in the book of God, which is the chief Book of all. It is the want of Experience and Tryal of such performances as these are which makes any to be ignorant of the Delight and sweetness which is in them. Those which have tasted of honey, they know the sweetness of honey; And so those which have tasted of Gods word, they know the Excellency, and Comfortableness which is in it, and will desire it again, and again.¹⁶⁴

Following the early history of the word “loneliness” also leads to John Wells’ 1668 text, *The practical Sabbatarian, or, Sabbath-holiness crowned with superlative happiness*, which recommends prayer as a kind of conversation that provides its own remedy to loneliness:

The heart can work in prayer when there is no company to excite it, and oftentimes God is most effectually present, when man is wholly absent; therefore if we must spend a Sabbath alone, let part of it be taken up in fervent prayer and supplication. In this case of solitariness, let us be filled with holy meditations: This holy duty of a Sabbath, is advanced not obstructed by loneliness and retirement, nay, it cannot well be performed in company: the noise of any associates hush away these pleasing contemplations which light upon the mind, or are started by the excitation of the good spirit. In thy solitary Sabbaths, let thy head work in meditation, as well as thy heart in prayer and supplication.¹⁶⁵

If mortals are able to achieve conversation with God through prayer, Adam is able to achieve a kind of conversation with God and the Angels still. Adam doesn’t merely read scripture, but instead speaks directly to God, and God responds to his questions and requests.¹⁶⁶
And yet, even this is not enough for Adam; for mortals, he explains, to be “single” is to be “imperfect,” and he feels the lack of his “unity”:

No need that thou
Shouldst propagate, already infinite,
And through all numbers absolute, though one;
But man by number is to manifest
His single imperfection, and beget
Like of his like, his image multiplied,
In unity defective, which requires
Collateral love, and dearest amity.
Thou in thy secrecy although alone,
Best with thy self accompanied, seek’st not
Social communication, yet so pleased,
Canst raise thy Creature to what highth thou wilt
Of Union or Communion, deifi’d;
I by conversing cannot these erect
From prone, nor in their way complacence find. (PL. VIII.419-433).167

God was able, as we saw in Book V, to create his “only Son” alone. But Adam cannot do the same, and protests that being “One” as a unified, Godlike being is different from being a “single” mortal.

VII. Adam and Eve’s “solitary way”

In the end, of course, God capitulates, and creates Eve in Adam’s image, “He for God only, she for God in him.” Despite the initial mishap, in which Eve at first seems more interested in her own reflection than in Adam, she does go some way toward answering his prayer, because she agrees with him on what ideal “conversation” should look like:

My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst
Unargu’d I obey; so God ordains,
God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more
Is womans happiest knowledge and her praise.
With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and thir change, all please alike. (*PL. IV.635-640*)

Milton makes Eve seem somewhat over-eager to deny her own agency when speaking about “conversation,” in that she seems to speak from a masculine perspective, inviting the wifely submission that Milton idealizes in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. However, she is at least granted enough agency to be able to be characterized as a fit interlocutor for Adam, unlike the chaste Lady, who remained silent in the presence of her brothers.

Eve also seems like a fit helpmeet, according to the terms of the *Doctrine and Discipline*, to the extent that she is interested in both kinds of “conversation.” Hand in hand with Adam, she walks to a “tuft of shade” to eat, and Milton makes this hand-holding a sign of their capacity for physical “imbraces” of all kinds:

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So hand in hand they passd, the lovliest pair
That ever since in loves imbraces met,
Adam the goodliest man of men since borne
His Sons, the fairest of her Daughters Eve. (*PL. IV.321-4*)
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But there is a lurking threat, however, in the echo between this image and the one in the final lines of the poem, “hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way” (*PL. XII.648-9*). Eve does not always enjoy holding hands so much, and she will soon incite a separation that leads to both of their falls. Speaking of Eve’s thoughts on conversation, J.H Prynne explains “this is both Eve’s hymn at twilight to God’s sweetly ordered creation, innocent nature, and also by like token her deep pleasure at the spousal company of Adam; all is melodious and fragrant” (*PL. IV.170*), only to add the rather devastating rejoinder that “Satan’s ambush of Eve’s over-secure
independence was concealed, we learn, beneath these very same sweet flowers” (*PL*. IV.171).

Nevertheless, Eve uses the term “conversation” once again, to describe her reasons for wanting to separate from Adam in order to perform her labors. We’ve heard something like this before, from Zelmane and the Lady in *Comus*, which might alert us to the danger involved:

*These paths and bowers doubt not but our joint hands
Will keep from wilderness with ease, as wide
As we need walk, till younger hands ere long
Assist us: but if much converse perhaps
Thee satiate, to short absence I could yield.
For solitude sometimes is best society,
And short retirement urges sweet return. (*PL*. IX.244-250)*

Eve uses the word “solitude,” rather than “loneliness” here, perhaps because she wants to stress how physical isolation will give her a break from the “conversation” that Adam desires she participate in. But after the Fall, it’s not solitude, but being “lonely” that Eve seems to fear. Michael consoles Eve that she will not be “lonely” when she leaves Eden, which is the second invocation of the word in the whole poem (there is no “loneliness” in *Paradise Lost*):

*Lament not Eve: but patiently resign
What justly thou hast lost; nor set thy heart,
Thus over fond, on that which is not thine;
Thy going is not lonely, with thee goes
Thy Husband, him to follow thou art bound;
Where he abides, think there thy native soile. (*PL*. XI.286-292)*

Michael reminds Eve that although she thought it fit to leave Adam once, she should not leave him again.

*Although Michael suggests that partnership will cure loneliness even after the Fall, however, his consolation falls rather flat. As the poem ends, Eve stresses her*
commitment to Adam, calling him her “contentment sole,” and so it is, that they once again go “hand in hand,” “their solitary way:”

They, looking back, all th’ eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate
With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms:
Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide;
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way. (PL. XII.641-9)\textsuperscript{173}

Here Adam and Eve might seem to many readers to be truly together in their solitariness. Because the phrase “hand in hand” recalls a happier moment, it’s possible to imagine that the couple will continue to have meet conversation outside of Eden. This reading invokes the optimism behind the rhetoric of disgust in the \textit{Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce}, because it suggests the communion of souls is still possible, even in a fallen world, if one finds the right partner. In this reading, Adam and Eve’s way would be “solitary” because it’s a way they go together, unified, as one.

Less optimistically, Milton’s image of Adam and Eve taking “their solitary way” through Eden could be read as a sign that they remain tied to each other physically, without true conversation being possible. Holding hands is not the conversation of angels. In the fallen world, Adam and Eve are more comparable with the couple in Milton’s \textit{Doctrine of Discipline} than they were before the Fall. This image of Adam and Eve’s handholding is a physical symbol, perhaps, of what loneliness could mean for modern minds. Even though Milton continually tries to ward off the specter of irremediable mental loneliness by figuring it in terms of physical union, his depictions of loneliness have the deep anxiety at their center, that meet “conversation” might not be possible.
By the nineteenth century, Milton’s premonition becomes central to representations of loneliness. It is fitting, then, that Wordsworth takes this precise image of Adam and Eve walking out of Eden in order to represent his own poetic singularity at the beginning of *The Prelude*:

The earth is all before me—with a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way. (I.15-19 [1805])

The world is all before the young poet in the first book of the poem on the growth of his mind, but he depicts himself going his “solitary way” alone, with only a lonely “wandering cloud” as his companion.
Lonely Poets in Retreat

After Milton’s complex description of loneliness as an abstract state of mind, one might assume that the term might have gained in popularity in the late-seventeenth century. Since Milton moves loneliness out of the genre of romance and into the domestic, legal realm in *the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, one might also assume that loneliness might start to be depicted in cities more often. But this was not, in fact, the case. Loneliness remained relatively rare in the seventeenth century. Instead of using the concept to describe a mental condition, most writers who used the terms “lonely” or “loneliness” during the Restoration used it to describe dangerous locations situated far from society. In this sense, loneliness was associated with a series of clichés that referred to a defined set of locations in the wilderness. Word-searches on *Early English Books Online* reveal repeated references to lonely groves, lonely shades, lonely deserts, lonely rocks, lonely shores, lonely cells, lonely huts, lonely houses, lonely caves and lonely grottos in seventeenth-century plays and poetry. Sermon-writers also used it to describe confined spaces in the wilderness, like hell, the grave, or deserts like the one in which Jesus was tempted by the devil. Relegating loneliness to the space outside of the city, seventeenth-century poets kept “loneliness,” like the adjective “lonely,” at a safe distance, both from the realm of court poetry, and from themselves.

Loneliness in the late-seventeenth century is not only in exile from the court and court poetry, but also from the space of masculine poetic retreat. None of the seventeenth-century poets famous for their poems about solitary retirement in the
countryside call themselves lonely. Neither Jonson, nor Vaughn, nor Marvell, nor Denham, nor Charles Cotton, nor William Habingdon—who all wrote poems about country retreats—invoke the concept of loneliness. They desire of “solitude”—Marvell even calls that solitude “delicious” in his poem “The Garden”—but none desire loneliness. Tracing the various examples of lonely places on EEBO suggests that these poets abide by a gendered division between solitude and loneliness. Not all spaces outside the city are alike: where countryside spaces were more fitting for masculine retreat, loneliness retains its feminine associations, and dwells in less cultivated wilderness spaces. The places of countryside retreat that poets like Marvell, Denham, Jonson and Vaughn occupy are the more landscaped, or garden-like spaces. But the spaces of loneliness—forests, woods, groves and deserts—are defined by the absence of civilization. The realm of solitude is one of rational contemplation and masculine order, but the realm of loneliness is a wilderness where disorder and emotions rule.

Because seventeenth-century poets and dramatists continues to associate loneliness, not only with feminine characters, but also with feminised spaces, the gendered force of romance loneliness remains tangible. Lonely wildernesses themselves, not just the characters occupying them, can be read according to the gendered paradigm for loneliness that Philip Sidney and Lady Mary Wroth first imagined, because they are repeatedly figured as far-off, enclosed spaces that invite penetration. Lonely places like groves, caves, huts, grottos are spaces in which characters are vulnerable, passive and emotional. These circumscribed spaces are bounded by defined edges, and yet their accessibility is constantly stressed. In many cases, the word “lonely” describes bordered spaces only in order that those borders can be transgressed.
This motif of the lonely bordered space that invites transgression recurs throughout the poetry and drama of the two most prolific users of the terms “lonely” and “loneliness” in the Restoration, Aphra Behn and John Dryden. This gendered trope also appears in the poetry of two eighteenth-century poets who are famous for their visions of poetic retreat: Anne Finch and Alexander Pope. In the first half of this chapter, I explore this relationship between loneliness, wilderness and gender in the work of seventeenth-century lexicographers, dramatists, and poets. In the second half of the chapter, I mark the shift that occurs when poets first start to associate themselves and their own mental conditions with loneliness. Aphra Behn is no Urania: she pictures her characters, rather than herself, in lonely forests. But Anne Finch positions herself in a lonely place. When Anne Finch, together with Alexander Pope start to admit loneliness into their own spaces of poetic retreat, allowing it to traverse the boundary between wilderness and countryside. Like sixteenth and seventeenth-century writers, Finch and Pope imagine enclosed lonely spaces in terms of penetration, although they inhabit a more flexible relationship to the gendered paradigms of Renaissance loneliness than previous writers had done.

I. Lonely Spaces

We can’t know why male poets writing in the seventeenth century eschewed loneliness, but there is evidence that the force of its gendered link to social exclusion and vulnerability was widespread in seventeenth-century culture. Early lexicographers had noticed a trend for the association between loneliness and wilderness long before word-searches on digital databases were possible. In the mid- to late-seventeenth century, the
words “lonely” and “loneliness” appear in several dictionaries, most of which give the sense that loneliness was associated with places far away from civilized society. As was the case in Sidney, Wroth, Shakespeare and Milton’s loneliness, the people in lonely places are not necessarily single; often, the space itself is singular, because it is far away from other dwellings. Lonely spaces are dangerous precisely because the people who inhabit them are not necessarily solitary. In this framework, a lonely house seems more lonely when people are approaching it, than when a solitary person lives there alone, because it is at that moment that the inhabitant fully realizes his or her distance from the protection that society affords. A deserted place is vacant or empty, not only of other people, but of the society that would make it a safe place to inhabit.

Dictionaries in the seventeenth century were written with the express purpose of listing only unusual words that were especially difficult to understand, so the fact that they often contain the words “lonely” and “loneliness” suggests that the words were not well-understood. Edward Philips’ The new world of words (1658) uses “loneliness” to gloss both the words “desolation” and “solitude”:

Desolation, (lat.) a lonesinesse or lying waste.
Solitude, (lat.) lonesynesse, privatennesse.

Loneliness, for Philips, is a space of desert solitude; a wasteland; a “privateness” (or privation.) John Ray, the compiler of a glossary of English words not generally used (1674) also suggests that the word “lonely” had gained currency to describe places “far from neighbours.” He uses the rare word lonely to gloss its even rarer cognates, “deafely” and “ellinge”:

Deafely: Lonely, solitary, far from neighbours.
Ellinge: Solitary, lonely, melancholy, far from neighbours: q. elongatus. Suss. a Gallico Esloigner. Ellende in the Ancient Saxon signifies procul, farre off, farre from.\textsuperscript{182}

Loneliness, for Ray, is an embodied condition that occurs only in spaces that are far from “neighbours.” It is difficult to divide the lonely place from the bodies that might inhabit it: an “ellinge” house is not only far from its neighbouring houses, but also from the people who dwell within them. The word lonely functions as a synonym both for the concepts of “far off” and for “singular.”\textsuperscript{183} Although Ray sees “melancholy” as a synonym for “ellinge” rather than “lonely” in itself, he does suggest that places far from neighbours were often associated with a mood.\textsuperscript{184}

The overwhelming affective association of seventeenth-century loneliness is with dark moods and gloomy climates. Biblical and classical precedents for the danger associated with wilderness spaces join with motifs from romance to culminate in the cliché that is the “lonely” place in seventeenth century literature. In The English Parnassus (1657), a proto-thesaurus Josua (sic.) Poole seems particularly interested in this overlap between religious and romance loneliness. Drawing from a long list of texts by Chaucer, Sidney, Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton, amongst many others, Poole notices that the word “lonely” is most often used as an adjective to describe the following nouns: “anchorite or hermite,” “cave,” “den,” “palmer,” “pelican,” “quiet,” “vault,” “wildernesse.” Poole’s study of common motifs of English literature leads him to argue for a conceptual link between gloomy, melancholy, silent, dangerous places and certain practices of religious devotion:

\textit{Anchorite. v. Hermite.} Sullen, zealous, pious, devout, retired, devotious, religious, recluse, abstemious, \textit{lonely}, melancholy, bookish, studious, sad, pensive, withered, aged, sequestred. […]
As Poole’s list indicates, the clichés attendant on lonely wilderness spaces do not only come from romance, but also from the rituals of Christian monasticism. Anchorites, hermits and palmers are “devout,” “pious,” “pensive,” “sad,” “melancholy” lonely creatures, who, by force of association in these entries, inhabit “quiet,” “rocky,” “uncouth,” “unfrequented,” reclusive spaces. Poole has not given a sense of the sexual danger that attends on such places in romance in his glosses, but he has given a sense of their oppressive enclosure: caves, dens and vaults are, to him, uniformly “dark,” “dreadful,” “nasty” places, and wildernesses are “devious” and “desart.”

The most famous dictionary from the period, Elisha Coles’ *English Dictionary*, mentions loneliness much more briefly than others. He simply defines the word “solitude” with the single word “loneliness,” as if the terms were interchangeable.
“Solitude,” too, was still a rare word, and was often included in these lists, and is comparable with loneliness in that it often described a wasteland or a desert space.

Much later, Samuel Johnson also used the phrase “lonely place” to describe “solitude” in his Dictionary (1755):

Sólitude. n.s. [solitude, French; solitudo, Latin.]
1. Lonely life; state of being alone.
   It had been hard to have put more truth and untruth together, in few words, than in that speech; whosoever is delighted with solitude, is either a wild beast or a god. Bacon.
   What call’st thou solitude? Is not the earth
   With various living creatures, and the air,
   Replenish’d, and all these at thy command
   To come, and play before thee? Milton’s Paradise Lost.
   Such only can enjoy the country who are capable of thinking when they are there: then they are prepared for solitude, and in that solitude is prepared for them. Dryden.
2. A lonely place; a desert.

The passage that Johnson chooses from Milton suggests that he did not believe that a lonely place need be devoid of people.

II. The dangerous spaces of Restoration loneliness

John Dryden takes great satiric pleasure in drawing together the religious and romance traditions of loneliness to depict female devotees, nuns and anchorites in sexual danger because of the places they inhabit. Dryden used the term “lonely” prolifically—over thirty times in the course of his career—involving almost all of the lonely places that I mentioned above. Lonely shades, lonely abodes, lonely nights, lonely wandering travelers, a lonely plain, lonely sands, lonely copses, lonely cell, a lonely contemplative life, a lonely grove, lonely privacy, a lonely cottage, a lonely lawn, a lonely Vale and a lonely Cave can all be found in his works. But his most interesting meditations on
loneliness appear in his depictions of vulnerable female characters in attitudes of devotion. In the *The conquest of Grenada* (1672), Hamet recommends that his brother Zulema attempt to rape a woman while she prays in a “lonely Gallery”:

\[\begin{align*}
\textit{Zulema.} \\
& \text{She said she would my folly yet conceal,} \\
& \text{But vow’d my next attempt she would reveal.} \\
\textit{Hamet.} \\
& 'Tis dark; and, in this lonely Gallery, \\
& (Remote from noyse, and shunning every eye) \\
& \text{One hour each Evening she in private mourns,} \\
& \text{And prays, and to the Cercle then returnes.} \\
& \text{Now, if you dare, attempt her passing by.---} \\
\textit{Zulema.} \\
& \text{These lighted tapers show the time is nigh.} \\
& \text{Perhaps my Courtship will not be in vain.} \\
& \text{At least few women will of force complain.}^{189}
\end{align*}\]

What Zulema proposes is hardly a “courtship” of this lonely woman; rather, it is a preconceived rape, timed to coincide with a ritual of devotion. The tone is awkwardly posied between aggression and comedy. Her attacker posits that this attitude of devotion makes her more vulnerable: there’s an echo of Ophelia’s position here, whether or not Dryden realizes it. There’s also an echo of the nunnery that Hamlet wishes Ophelia to go to in Act III.i of *Hamlet* in *The assignation, or, Love in a nunnery* (1673). Ophelia was not necessarily deserving of Hamlet’s criticism of her sexuality, but the aptly-named Lucretia in Dryden’s play is guilty of a sexual transgression. The abbess Sophronia chides Lucretia, her would-be recruit, for her sins:

\[\begin{align*}
\textit{Soph.} \\
& \text{By this, then, it appears you all are guilty;} \\
& \text{Only your ignorance of each others crimes} \\
& \text{Caus’d first that tumult, and this discovery.} \\
& \text{Good Heavens, that I should live to see this day!} \\
& \text{Methinks these Holy Walls, the Cells, the Cloysters,} \\
& \text{Should all have strook a secret horror on you:} \\
& \text{And when, with unchast thoughts,}
\end{align*}\]
You trod these lonely walks, you should have look’d
The venerable Ghost of our first Foundress
Should with spread arms have met you in her Shroud,
And frighted you from Sin.

Luc.
Alass, you need not aggravate our crimes,
We know them to be great beyond excuse,
And have no hope, but only from your mercy.190

Dryden enjoys imagining nuns who have given in to sexual desire in this anti-Catholic satire. Despite the seeming sanctity of the “cloysters” and “lonely walks,” sex has entered into the nunnery. Once again, the seeming enclosure of the lonely walks in the abbey is mentioned only in order that the penetration of that boundary can be stressed. The currency of the cliché of the lonely places as a place of sexual danger is apparent in the way that Dryden parodies it in these lines.

Alongside Dryden, Aphra Behn was the other most prolific user of the terms “lonely” and “loneliness” during the Restoration, and she also repeatedly employs the terms to imply the threat of male sexual aggression for female characters in lonely places. As *Early English Books Online* shows, most of Behn’s references to the concept describe spaces. Many of the lonely spaces she depicts all recall clichéd tropes from the romance forest: she refers to a “loanly cottage,” “lonely recesses,” “lonely bowrs,” “lonely groves,” a “lonely Walk,” and a virgin who sits under a “Willow by the lonely spring.

Like Dryden, Behn links loneliness to scenes of actual or imagined penetration. But her picture of how the characters in these spaces relate to these surroundings is more complex than Dryden’s, for she suggests the moods of these spaces can inflect the character’s moods and thoughts. Behn’s characters are prone to mingling with their environment, so that the boundaries of their beings seem more permeable as soon as they enter these
lonely spaces. In turn, the attributes of lonely landscapes are also sometimes characterized by, their lonely characters’ thoughts and emotions.

One of Behn’s greatest skills is her ability to make scenes both comic and tragic at once, so that it’s not always clear when we should laugh and when we should fear loneliness in her plays and poems, and she continually skirts between comedy and tragedy in her depictions of loneliness. In The feign’d curtizans, or, A nights intrigue a comedy (1679), Behn uses the word “lonely” to frame a bed trick. Galliard, who has what he calls a “damn’d hankering” for another Lucretia-figure, Laura Lucretia, decides to sneak into her bedroom. In this mindset, on his way to the bedroom, Galliard thinks to use the word “lonely”:

Galliard
[1] will be as secret as a Confessor---
As lonely shades, or everlasting Night---come lead the way.---

By comparing himself to a silent confessor, Galliard suggests that lonely shades are also compelled to be silent witnesses to his sin, cloaking him in confidentiality. But because most confessors are priests, the comedy is dark, too. The way that Galliard imagines himself dissolving into invisibility in the lonely shades confers an eerie sense of menace. The way that Galliard blends with the shades is almost gothic in tone.

A lonely space is also the setting for sexual “hankering” in Behn’s long poem “A Voyage to the Isle of Love” (1684). In this romance, based on the Abbé Paul Tallemant’s Voyage de l’isle Amour, Lisander describes his pursuit of Aminta to his friend Lycidus. The first time he mentions the word “lonely,” he simply situates himself in a shady place of grief, because he is unable to find Aminta. In this posture of grief, Lisander is a
comparable to Wroth’s Urania, because the landscape becomes a *locus amoenus*, fitted to his feelings:

I parted thus, but knew not what to do;  
Nor where I went; nor did I care to know;  
With folded Arms, with weeping Eyes declin’d,  
I search the unknown shade, I cou’d not find,  
And mixt my constant Sighs with flying Wind.  
By slow unsteady steps the Paths I trace,  
Which undesign’d conduct me to a place  
Fit for a Soul distrest; obscur’d with shade,  
Lonely and fit for Love and Sorrow made;  
The Murmuring Boughs themselves together twist,  
And ’twou’d allow to Grief her self some rest,  
Inviron’d ’tis with lofty Mountains round,  
From whence the Eccho’s, Sighs, and Crys rebound...

Lisander’s folded arms match the way that the trees’ arms “twist,” and echoes of his sighs rebound around the mountains. The lonely circumscribed “inviron’d” space seems to protect him while he emotes. And yet, lonely spaces are not always protected in this poem. Elsewhere in the poem, Lisander describes the paradox whereby each time he tries to retreat from his desire into a lonely grove, the violence of his “Love” seems more urgent:

Then to cool Shades I ragingly retire,  
To ease my hopeless panting Heart,  
Yet thereto every thing begets desire.  
Each flowry Bed, and every loanly Grove,  
Inspires new wishes, new impatient Love.

Lisander supposedly desires to ease the force of his “panting” lust, but each time he arrives at a new “loanly Grove,” it fails to quell his “raging;” in fact, its sexual associations only serve to strengthen his desire. In these lines, the diction she uses to describe Lisander’s lust is both exaggeratedly ridiculous and ominously threatening.
This threat of violence is not just a threat. At the end of the poem Behn gives us the tragic version of the same story that she tells to much more comic effect in “The Disappointment.” Lisander’s desire finally causes a tragedy when he is able to leave his “lonely solitude” and meet with Aminta. Lisander, as “impatient lover” ends up impotent at the crucial moment, but nonetheless, Aminta does not survive the encounter, dying mysteriously right afterwards.\(^{195}\)

In Behn’s roman-à-clef, *Love letters between a nobleman and his sister* (1684) the word “lonely” again sets the scene for male sexual aggression, as well as a perverted form of the *locus amoenus*. The eponymous nobleman fantasizes about forcing himself on Silvia in almost every clichéd lonely place possible:

> In silent Groves and grotto’s, dark Alcoves, and lonely recesses, all its formalities are laid aside; ’twas then, and there, methought my *Silvia* yielded! with a faint struggle and a soft resistance; I heard her broken sighs, her tender whispering Voice that trembling cry’d---Oh can you be so cruel.---Have you the heart---Will you undo a Maid because she loves you? Oh will you ruine me because you may? --My unkind, then sigh’t and yielded, and made me happier than a Triumphing God!\(^{196}\)

Later, in a letter to Silvia, he invokes another list of clichéd lonely places in order to describe the space where he “contemplates” his love for her:

> Say fond Love whither wilt thou lead me? thou hast brought me from the noysey hurry’s of the Town, to charming solitude; from Crowded Cabals, where mighty things are resolving to loanly Groves, to thy own abodes, where thou dwell’st, gay and pleas’d, amongst the Rural Swains in shady homely Cottages; thou hast brought me to a Grove of flowers, to the brink of Purling Streams, where thou hast laid me down to contemplate on *Silvia*! \(^{197}\)

But in the “lonely Grove,” where love apparently dwells, the nobleman does not merely contemplate his love for Silvia, but also ends up persuading himself to “ravish” her:

> … the Winds a round me blow soft, and mixing with the wanton Boughs, continually play and Kiss; while those like a coy Maid in Love resist and comply by turns; they like a ravisht vigorous Lover, rush on with a transported violence;
rudely imbracing its Spring-drest Mistress, ruffling her Native order; while the pretty Birds on the dancing Branches incessantly make Love: upbraiding duller man with his defective want of fire: man the Lord of all! he to be stinted in the most valuable joy of Life! is it not Pity? Here’s no troublesome Honour, amongst the pretty inhabitants of the Woods and Streams...

This excursion is an extreme and twisted form of pathetic fallacy. The nobleman imagines that nature itself chides him for not “rudely imbracing” Silvia. He imputes machismo to the birds, whom, he imagines, are upbraiding his lack of ardor. He even pictures the wind in the trees in terms of the trees being ravished. He talks himself around to the idea that Nature is imploring him to forget his “troublesome honour” and instead indulge his sexual “fire.”

III. Anne Finch

Some of Anne Finch’s most well-known poems position her in lonely places like the one that the nobleman retires to, and indeed, her space of retreat was, in reality, a forest in Kent. She doesn’t appeal so straightforwardly to the romance tradition as Behn, in that she never positions herself in sexual danger, though she does repeatedly draw attention to her metaphorical mental vulnerability in lonely spaces, and seems torn between a desire and a fear of what might happen there. The vulnerable situation that early loneliness describes—in which minds can be entered in a similar way that bodies and circumscribed lonely spaces can—seems an appealing fantasy for Finch in her “Petition for an Absolute Retreat” (1713). As is the case of Behn’s lonely places, the picture of imaginative accessibility Finch gives us in this poem relies on a notion that her mind is a circumscribed and yet vulnerable spaces, both like a feminine body and the enclosed (but accessible) lonely space she locates herself in.
The boundaries of retreat that Finch describes produce the possibility of transgression. Ardelia, Finch’s speaker, holds up Crassus’ retirement in a “lonely wond’rous Cave” (210) as a model for how loneliness might help her to achieve a state of mind amenable to poesis. Finch revels in her loneliness, explaining how it allows her a kind of imaginative freedom she does not usually have. The vulnerability of previous lonely female characters has been replaced by a more positive form of accessibility, which makes her speaker open to “poetic survey” and “extensive joy.” Ardelia’s retreat is not an enclosed or enclosing space, but rather allows her “transports,” both emotional and intellectual, which lead to new perspectives and poetic visions. Like Il Penseroso’s lonely tower, Ardelia’s lonely space allows her mind to “roam”:

Whilst my Transports I employ  
On that more extensive Joy,  
When all Heaven shall be survey’d  
From those Windings and that Shade.  

The first image we have of the forest, the “high” trees, give a sense of the space’s capacity and accessibility: it is not entirely circumscribed, though it is “lost.” Ardelia’s transports take her to the top of those high trees. This “lonely” space is not one of Oblivion, like the state she describes in “The Spleen.” Rather, it liberates her from the sense that her mind is closed in or unable to produce poetry.

The space of retreat, Ardelia argues, allows her to achieve better “contemplations of the mind” (163):

Let me still, in my Retreat,  
From all roving Thoughts be freed...
The lonely space here is supposedly one of freedom from roving thoughts, in favor of more sustained contemplation. “Thus from Croups, and Noise remov’d, / Let each Moment be improv’d,” (110) Ardelia says elsewhere.

Despite Finch’s attempts to present loneliness as a mode of liberation that allows her to engage in a masculine genre of retreat poetry, however, her mention of loneliness also consistently draws attention to the way that the lonely space constrains, rather than liberates her, even as it makes her imagination more accessible to imaginative “transports.” At the same time that Finch claims that loneliness improves her thoughts, the metaphors she uses to suspiciously like constraint. From another perspective, being freed from roving thoughts is tantamount to having those thoughts controlled or repressed.

Though she is never actually under threat of rape, Ardelia’s position recalls that of various early modern and Restoration lonely female characters, because she is not safe from the intrusion of others while she occupies this “lonely” space. Her repeated requests for privacy betray a sense that she is not as solitary as she would like to be. Ardelia enjoys the companionship of her husband, “Arminda,” but despite his protective presence, the threat of invasion continually asserts itself:

Give me O indulgent Fate!
Give me yet, before I Dye,
A sweet, but absolute Retreat,
’Mongst Paths so lost, and Trees so high,
That the World may ne’er invade,
Through such Windings and such Shade,
My unshaken Liberty.
Let no Intruders thither come… (1-8)

“Invading” “intruders” give a sense that the space Ardelia occupies is penetrable, even if it is “lost.” Although Ardelia ostensibly portrays herself taking consolation from retreat,
she also subtly fears that her retreat will not be as “absolute” as she would like it to be. Ardelia figures much of her praise of what the countryside can offer in terms of how it might *replicate*, rather than improve upon, the pleasures that the city guarantees. She finds herself in a defensive position in the forest, where she must guard herself against “intrusions” of the outside world. Even Ardelia’s mention of the word “liberty” is qualified by an adjective, “shaken,” that encourages readers to imagine the opposite.

The paradoxical pull between a desire for loneliness and a fear of it run throughout the “Petition.” In the course of the poem, the “sad Ardelia” compares herself to a “lonely stubborn oak” (126), a symbol of a blasted England. Though “stubborn” seems on the surface like a defiant adjective, this is a deeply ambivalent position for Ardelia. The political context in which Finch herself invented this phrase suggests further reasons why she might be more undecided than she is willing to openly admit about whether lonely retreat is truly a positive condition. Finch herself had been exiled into the countryside after she and her husband, Heneage Finch, refused to swear an oath of allegiance to William and Mary after James II was deposed in the 1688 revolution. Heneage Finch was arrested for Jacobitism in April 1690. Though he was eventually found innocent at trial, the Finches were effectively exiled from court after this incident, and were forced to take up residence in the countryside estate of their nephew, the Earl of Winchelsea. Finch, in the guise of Ardelia, hints at her initial despair when she depicts her exile as a kind of enveloping “darkness”:

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Blasted by a Storm of Fate,
Felt, thro’ all the British State;
Fall’n, neglected, lost, forgot,
Dark Oblivion all her Lot… (140-144)
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Ardelia explains that she originally understood exile as a place where she was “lost” in a “dark oblivion” rather like Milton when he is “compassed round” with “solitude” in his apostrophe to Urania in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*. She piles up four adjectives, “Fall’n, neglected, lost, forgot,” which figure the countryside as a kind of prison where she has been left, unnoticed. Finch is calling Ardelia lonely, while she herself was really in exile, which perhaps goes some way toward explaining why her space of retreat pulls back toward wilderness.

Finch’s space of lonely retreat is somewhere between a wilderness and a garden. To be a female poet advocating for the feminine condition of loneliness in the usually masculine space of retreat puts Finch in new territory for eighteenth-century poetic self-fashioning. Finch gestures toward this dichotomy when she self-consciously draws attention to her feminine transgression or intrusion into the masculine genre of seventeenth-century retreat poetry by having Ardelia explain her wishes for a retreat in terms of an escape from domestic duties:

> Courteous Fate! afford me there
> A Table spread without my Care (22-3).

By contrast, Ben Jonson in “To Penshurst” takes his freedom from domestic duties for granted, when his speaker describes himself enjoying the feast that a waiter provides for him. Similarly, where masculine poets in retreat are usually alone, Ardelia is accompanied in her lonely space. Marvell’s speaker in “The Garden” enjoys comparing himself to Adam before Eve arrived, able to “wander solitary…without a mate.” He explains:

> Two paradises ’twere in one
> To live in Paradise alone.203
But by contrast, Finch presents her “solitary” retreat as one in which she is accompanied by her husband. Finch has Ardelia picture herself as a female Adam longing for an Eve, when she asks that “A Partner suited to my Mind, / Solitary, pleas’d and kind” (109-110) is there in the countryside with her.

V. Alexander Pope

Pope, like Finch, imagines loneliness as a productively accessible condition, but as in Finch’s poetry, that notion of accessibility relies on a notion of a circumscribed boundary around lonely spaces, bodies and minds. Pope consistently associates loneliness, not only with female characters, but with circumscribed, feminized spaces in the wilderness that allow the imagination to be opened to its surroundings. Though he never used the word “lonely” to directly describe his own poetic vocation, Pope inhabits the psyches of lonely female characters, to both comic and tragic effect, and at times he does so so convincingly as to suggest that he was using these characters to think through his own position as a poet on the outskirts of society. Like Milton and Finch, Pope was also a religious exile, and that position had an effect on his poetics of loneliness.

Sometimes, Pope merely gestures toward the trope of loneliness for superficial comic effect. In The Rape of the Lock, Pope inhabits the voice of Belinda, mock-heroically speaking of her desire to fly off to a “lone isle.” To some extent, it could be possible to read Belinda’s desire to escape the city in terms of her vulnerability: she is, after all, made vulnerable by the “rape” of a lock of her hair. But her inability to imagine the countryside as anything other than an opposition to the city means that her desire for loneliness ends up being little more than a joke. She bemoans the loss of her lock of hair,
and sighs:

Oh had I rather unadmir’d remain’d
In some lone isle, or distant northern land;
Where none learn ombre, none e’er taste bohea! (Canto IV. 153-6)\textsuperscript{204}

Belinda can only imagine exile in terms of a lack of card games to play, or tea to drink. Like the Cave of Spleen in *The Dunciad*, Belinda’s imagined space of exile is populated with reminders of the city; “Unnumber’d throngs on ev’ry side are seen / Of bodies chang’d to various forms by Spleen”–teapots, pipkins, jars, bottles and goose pies (IV. 47-48; 49-52).\textsuperscript{205} The pull of the city persists in Pope’s depiction of the “lone isle.” But although his depiction of Belinda is silly, the dichotomy she summons up between the city and the “lone isle” is not so far away from the way Pope imagines his own position as poet in his early poem, “Ode on Solitude” (published 1717, written c.1700):

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me dye;
Steal from the world, and not a stone…\textsuperscript{206}

Here Pope pictures retreat from the city as a poetic death. Even in a poem purportedly in praise of retreat, he figures withdrawal to a space where he is “unseen” as tantamount to erasure.

In other poems, however, Pope was fond of picturing himself in retreat in the countryside, following the classical ideals espoused by Horace and Juvenal. Unlike Finch, he never depicted his own spaces of retreat as “lonely,” but is a trace of Romance loneliness in these scenes, as well as an echo of Anne Finch’s concern about intruders, when Pope gestures toward his vulnerability in his grotto. Pope makes the grotto space emblematic of both his body and his mental capabilities. The “Epistle… to Dr Arbuthnot” (1734),\textsuperscript{207} modeled on Horace’s satire, begins with a dramatic description of how difficult
he finds it to keep intruders away from him in his supposedly lonely place. “Shut, shut the door, good John!” he begs, asking,

What walls can guard me, or what shade can hide?
They pierce my thickets, thro’ my Grot they glide;
By land, by water, they renew the charge;
They stop the chariot, and they board the barge. (7-10)208

Although this mock-heroic danger is not seriously threatening, Pope nevertheless recalls (whether knowingly or not) the sexualized position of the lonely females in Sidney’s *Arcadia* when he depicts himself in thickets that people can “pierce,” and a grotto that people can “glide” through. He presents his inability to escape others (perhaps partly conceived of in order to magnify his own importance) in a hyperbolic fashion, so that Twickenham becomes a *twitnam*:

Is there a Parson, much bemus’d in beer,
A maudlin Poetess, a rhyming Peer,
A Clerk, foredoom’d his father’s soul to cross,
Who pens a Stanza, when he should *engross*?
Is there, who, lock’d from ink and paper, scrawls
With desp’rate charcoal round his darken’d walls?
All fly to Twit’nam, and in humble strain
Apply to me, to keep them mad or vain. (15-22)209

In his Grotto, Pope *cannot* enclose himself as hermits of old could; he suggests that he longs for the “darken’d walls” of the prison cell to protect himself, if not to contain those who accost him. He implies that there are no spaces of enclosure left in the world. And yet, this fantasy of approach, where bodies continually surround him, seems more productive to his poetry than he wishes to admit. A cell where the door is locked would be a place devoid of “ink and paper,” the tools by which a poet can share his work with others.

Pope’s references to loneliness often invoke the architectural space of the grotto. In
his Pastoral verse, “Sapho to Phaon” (sic) a translation of Ovid’s Heroides VI, Pope inhabits Sapho’s feminine perspective as she laments the loss of her lover, Phaeon, whom she used to meet with in the Grotto:

But when with Day the sweet Delusions fly,  
And all things wake to Life and Joy, but I,  
As if once more forsaken, I complain,  
And close my Eyes to dream of you again.  
Then frantick rise, and like some Fury rove  
Thro’ lonely Plains, and thro’ the silent Grove,  
As if the silent Grove, and lonely Plains,  
That knew my Pleasures, cou’d relieve my Pains.  
I view the Grotto, once the Scene of Love,  
The Rocks around, the hanging Roofs above,  
That charm’d me more, with Native Moss o’ergrown,  
Than Phyrgian marble, or the Parian Stone.  
I find the Shades that veil’d our Joys before;  
But, Phaon gone, those Shades delight no more.²¹⁰

Sapho’s speech here alludes to many of the conventional tropes of both classical and Restoration loneliness: there is not only a lonely plain and a silent grove here, but also a rocky grotto and a bower of love. Most importantly, the grotto offers a space for lament and contemplation. It is no coincidence that Sapho is a female character, since her roaming through the lonely plains is reminiscent of earlier scenes from romance.

Pope’s interest in the grotto as a space for imaginative contemplation extends beyond a trope in his poetry. He went so far as to build himself a grotto in the grounds of his home with a “subterraneous way” that allowed him to avoid crossing the public road. But this grotto was more easily accessible than might be imagined. The “grotto” is less of a lodge and more of a colonnade, where Pope frequently invited guests. As Samuel Lewis’ 1785 map of the grotto shows (Appendix I), even the “cave” Pope had built inside the grotto had both an entrance and an exit. He also had mirrors set into the walls in order to reflect the light from the adjoining river, bringing a constant reminder of the outside
world into the space. Pope described the effects of his invention in a letter to his friend Edward Blount in 1725:

I have put the last hand to my works…happily finishing the subterraneous Way and Grotto: I then found a spring of the clearest water, which falls in a perpetual Rill, that echoes thru’ the Cavern day and night. …When you shut the Doors of this Grotto, it becomes on the instant, from a luminous Room, a Camera Obscura, on the walls of which all the objects of the River, Hills, Woods, and Boats, are forming a moving Picture…And when you have a mind to light it up, it affords you a very different Scene: it is finished with Shells interspersed with Pieces of Looking-glass in angular Forms…at which when a Lamp…is hung in the Middle, a thousand pointed Rays glitter and are reflected over the place.  

The space reflects the outside world and in turn, opens his imagination, when he has “the mind to light it up.” The epistles he sent from that space reinforce the sense of its accessibility. If the grotto’s walls and the way that they channel light are a metaphor for Pope’s mind, then enclosure allows for a more complex awareness of moments where the outside world comes in.

Pope also positions his character Eloisa in a grotto with “lone walls,” and those walls push her toward flights of fancy that would not be possible without constraint. In “Eloisa to Abelard” (1717), Pope’s most obvious transaction with the Romance and religious traditions of loneliness, Pope uses the trope of the socially exiled, sexualized female as the defining conceit of the poem. Eloisa’s cell is more circumscribed than Pope’s grotto, but its loneliness holds promise at the same time as a sense of despair:

In these lone walls (their days eternal bound)
These moss-grown domes with spiry turrets crown’d…(141-2)  

Eloisa’s lament is based on the twelfth century story about Heloise, who fell in love with her teacher Abelard, only to watch him be castrated by her family, while she was sent to a convent and he to a monastery. Pope encountered the story in John Hughes’ 1713 translation of their letters. Letters, Pope’s Eloisa argues, were “first taught for some
wretch’s aid, / Some banish’d lover, or some captive maid,” and she imagines that her letters will help her to “Speed the soft intercourse from soul to soul.” Just as Donne imagines that “a dialogue of one” controls the “defects of loneliness” in his “The Extasie,” Eloisa imagines that her soul could engage in a kind of imaginative intercourse with Abelard’s soul.

Early in the poem, Eloisa’s grotto is more apt to remind us of the “darken’d walls” of the desperate scribbler in the “Epistle to Arbuthnot” than Pope’s more open grotto:

Relentless walls! whose darksome round contains
Repentant sighs, and voluntary pains:
Ye rugged rocks! which holy knees have worn;
Ye grots and caverns shagg’d with horrid thorn! (17-20)

By the end of the poem, however, Eloisa’s grotto has come to seem less enclosed. In Eloisa, Pope constructs a feminine imagination and embodiment that is imaginatively and sexually liberated by constraint. Directly after the mention of the “lone walls,” we immediately witness Eloisa imagines the “rays” of Abelard’s male gaze entering into the prison:

Thy eyes diffus’d a reconciling ray,
And gleams of glory brighten’d all the day. (145-6)

Pope sexualizes Eloisa’s mind when he imagines her imagining Abelard entering into the lonely space. It is in this circumscribed and yet not quite enclosed space of the lone walls that Pope imagines Eloisa’s “erring…loose soul” can meet Abelard’s:

Far other dreams my erring soul employ,
Far other raptures, of unholy joy:
When at the close of each sad, sorrowing day,
Fancy restores what vengeance snatch’d away,
Then conscience sleeps, and leaving nature free,
All my loose soul unbounded springs to thee. (223-8)
Eloisa finds her soul “unbounded,” as if her soul could cross a boundary and enter into the “void,” or interior, of the body.

Pope’s picture of Eloisa and Abelard’s ideal love closely resembles Milton’s in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, since mental conversation is imagined in physical terms:

Oh happy state! when souls each other draw,  
When love is liberty, and nature, law:  
All then is full, possessing, and possess’d,  
No craving void left aching in the breast:  
Ev’n thought meets thought, ere from the lips it part,  
And each warm wish springs mutual from the heart.  
This sure is bliss (if bliss on earth there be)  
And once the lot of Abelard and me. (91-98)²¹⁹

From the very beginning of the poem, Eloisa rails against the assumption that she should read her imprisonment in terms of the “pensive,” masculine tradition of inward-looking melancholy. Her thoughts, like Anne Finch’s, constantly “rove…beyond” the space that she is constrained within. Abelard’s “lone-forgotten heat,” too, seems to enter into the cell where she resides:

In these deep solitudes and awful cells,  
Where heav’nly-pensive contemplation dwells,  
And ever-musing melancholy reigns;  
What means this tumult in a vestal’s veins?  
Why rove my thoughts beyond this last retreat?  
Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat?  
Yet, yet I love!—From Abelard it came,  
And Eloisa yet must kiss the name. (1-8)²²⁰

Pope continually figures Eloisa’s cell as restricted, but somehow accessible, is not surprising that he uses the word “lone” to describe the walls of the prison in which Eloisa is constrained.
Pope persuasively inhabits Eloisa’s role, and imagines writing epistles that could lead not only to imagined conversation between bodies, but minds. And yet, the poem ends in Eloisa imagining her own death, since she cannot hold onto her imaginative recreations of Abelard. In the poem’s despairing final line, “He best can paint ’em, who shall feel ’em most,” Pope asks us to compare Eloisa’s lone position with his own. There is more than a hint of pathos in the idea that Pope could “paint” Eloisa feelingly, not because he was trapped inside a prison, but because he was trapped inside a body that was far less able to “meet” others than he desired.

Anne Finch and Alexander Pope are interested in what inhabiting spaces of retreat can do for consciousness; but more than that, they are interested in using these enclosed and yet accessible spaces of retreat as models for the poetic imagination. Finch and Pope usually imagine their lonely characters as female, and they depict them in relation to bounded, constrained, feminized wilderness spaces. When he inhabits the subject position of lonely female characters such as Sapho, Belinda and Eloisa, Pope explores what that structure might do for his imagination. Nevertheless, he does not entirely embrace loneliness as part of his poetic identity. Building from the paradox that romance loneliness first instantiated, where inhabiting lonely spaces produces both freedom and danger—both lament and refusals of language—Finch and Pope seem torn between a desire for and fear of what loneliness might produce. This tension between desire and fear, which is only a minor theme in early eighteenth century poetry, is at the heart of the poetry of James Thomson, Thomas Gray, Charlotte Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose poetry I explore in the next chapter.
Lonely Poets in Crisis

In or about the 1730s, the figure of the poet changed. Loneliness suddenly became a more central feature of poetic self-fashioning. Male poets such as James Thomson, Thomas Gray, Thomas Warton and James Ralph began to use loneliness to describe their speakers in the wilderness, rather than to describe female characters there, as previous writers had done. Even as they made this shift, however, many of the gendered aspects of Renaissance loneliness subtly remain in their poetry. These speakers imagine themselves inhabiting wildernesses and that loneliness allows them to enter into an unusual mode of imaginative receptivity there. Though they are not under threat of rape from the spectators that secretly watch them, they frequently appeal to such spectators, both within the poem and outside of it. Even as loneliness allows this benefit of openness, however, its gendered resonances also bring with it an anxiety about the vulnerability it confers. Loneliness registers their deep-felt concern about what their withdrawal into the wilderness or position as writers mean: when they call themselves lonely, speakers are often concerned as to whether or not they can properly communicate with their audiences. The question of whether conversation can cure loneliness continues to trouble eighteenth century poets, just as it had troubled Milton. Paradoxically, lonely poets both seem to fear the appearance of weakness that comes along with the vulnerability of loneliness, and the sense that they are not vulnerable enough to be understood (or penetrated by) their audiences. The fear seems to be that the integrity of their loneliness may remain too strong.
The sudden shift toward loneliness in mid-century poetic self-fashioning has been well documented, but previous commentators who have used the word “loneliness” to describe it have not tended to pay attention to the historical specificity of the term. Loneliness has been considered a synonym for melancholy and solitariness, rather than a gendered condition of vulnerability. In *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth Century England*, for instance, John Sitter argues for the centrality of a “politics of melancholy” to the poetry of the period, suggesting that poets began to fashion themselves as “solitary writers writing for solitary readers” on a much wider scale than ever before during this decade. His work is a crucial foundation for this project, though we understand the term “loneliness” differently.223

There are feminine, as well as masculine, precedents for the turn toward loneliness in mid-eighteenth century poetry, and these precedents make melancholy seem a less crucial facet of loneliness than has previously been suggested. Sidney’s Philoclea, Wroth’s Urania, Shakespeare’s Ophelia and Milton’s Lady—together with Philomel, the nightingale—are important prototypes for Thomson and Gray, whether or not they were consciously appealing to them. Masculine poets had often associated themselves with melancholy before the eighteenth century, but they had not associated themselves with loneliness, suggesting that loneliness allowed them a hermeneutical structure not available to melancholy. This contention stands in opposition to previous narratives of the rise of the lonely poet, which have usually focused on the masculine precedents for this mid-century interest in solitariness and melancholy as a mode of self-fashioning. Eric Parisot, for instance, argues that “Shakespeare [along with *Il Penseroso*]…provides useful source material for the graveyard poets, particularly, of course, in *Hamlet*.”224 In
The Gloomy Egoist, Eleanor Sickels argues that Milton’s apostrophe to Melancholy in *Il Penseroso* was the single most influential poetic act for eighteenth-century poetry. Sickels catalogues numerous examples of what she terms the “Penseroso type” as evidence of her claim that *Il Penseroso* became a prototype for the poet in this period.

Paying attention to the feminized origins of loneliness exposes the paradox at the center of this turn toward loneliness in mid-century poetry. Even as Thomson, Gray and the Wartons repeatedly use the term “lonely” to represent moments of productive passivity and openness to imaginative experience, the danger and muteness that dogged earlier representations of loneliness remains. Loneliness often describes moments of stilted or obstructed self-expression in the mid 1700s. The paradox of being a lonely poet is that one simultaneously must inhabit a position of silence and speech. Standing simultaneously within society and on its outskirts; acting as a silent observer while also presuming to compose poetry—the position of a lonely poet is fraught with unease. Thomas Gray, Charlotte Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge often represent their speakers and other proximate figures as lonely poets in the presence of other people, but this is a position fraught with anxiety. Philomela, Lavinia, and Ophelia are not allowed to live through their loneliness, and neither are lonely poets in the eighteenth century. Gray and Smith both make a point of killing off their proxy figures for lonely poets. This undercurrent of violence is representative of the crisis of loneliness in the late eighteenth century, as poets question what it means to fashion oneself as a solitary who attempts to speak to an audience while simultaneously keeping a distance from it.
I. James Thomson

In his poem *Winter* (1726), the first installment of his longer poem *The Seasons*, James Thomson defies tradition by repeatedly using the word “lonely” to describe his masculine speaker’s poetic disposition and the workings of his imagination. And yet, he complicates this embrace of loneliness as part of his poetic vocation by also associating it with silence. In a scene that is reminiscent of *Il Penseroso’s* companionate lonely tower, Thomson positions the speaker of *Winter* in a remote hut, where the “lonely power” of “Silence” guards the door. For Thomson, a conversation watched over by “lonely silence” enlivens one’s imaginative capabilities:

Now, all amid the rigours of the year,
In the wild depth of Winter, while without
The ceaseless winds blow ice, be my retreat,
Between the groaning forest and the shore,
Beat by the boundless multitude of waves,
A rural, sheltered, solitary, scene;
Where ruddy fire and beaming tapers join
To cheer the gloom. There studious let me sit,
And hold high converse with the mighty dead;
Sages of ancient time, as gods rever’d,
As gods beneficent, who blest mankind
With arts, and arms, and humaniz’d a world.
Rous’d at th’ inspiring thought, I throw aside
The long-liv’d volume, and deep-musing, hail
The sacred shades that slowly rising pass
Before my wondering eyes. […]
First of your kind! Society divine!
Still visit thus my nights, for you reserv’d,
And mount my soaring soul to thoughts like yours.
Silence, thou lonely power! the door be thine;
See on the hallow’d hour that none intrude
Save a Lycidas the friend…(*Winter*, 413-428; 461-466)²²⁶

Just as in Penseroso’s “lonely tow’r,” reading produces a kind of imagined society for Thomson. A whole host of Greek and Roman characters, together with the “Great Homer” (453), Virgil and Milton, “the British muse” (455), are all present. Pope, he
explains, sometimes join him in his retreat. The authors seem to appear, embodied, in the room with him. The enclosed architectural space seems suddenly like a theater of mind, as if the parameters of his imagination have expanded to the edges of the room. He pictures the poetic imagination in terms of a room with a door that can be opened and closed by voicing language. By encouraging his readers to imagine “lonely silence,” keeping guard of the door to his solitary retreat, however, Thomson also encourages us to think about how his lonely silence is keeping guard of his mind, suggesting a kind of constraint. This constraint is, nevertheless, productive of poesis. A few lines down from his description of lonely silence, Thomson describes how inhabiting this lonely space allows his speaker’s imagination to “open” itself still wider. This is some of the most effusive praise of the effects of loneliness yet:

Thus in some deep retirement would I pass
The winter-glooms with friends of various turns,
Or blithe or solemn, as the theme inspired:
With them would search if this unbounded frame
Of nature rose from unproductive night
Or sprung eternal from the _Eternal Cause_;
Its springs, its laws, its progress and its end.
Hence larger prospects of the beauteous whole
Would gradual open on our opening minds,
And each diffusive harmony unite
In full perfection to the astonished eye… (Winter, 473-484)\(^{227}\)

Thomson cannot seem figure the imagination without shaping it in terms of a bounded space. The prospect seems to enter a window into the mind, whose frame grows wider as the retirement becomes more successful. The “eye” he refers to here is both literal and figurative, in that it produces an opening of the mind, as well as the “prospect.”\(^{228}\)
Later, in *Spring* (the second book of the poem), Thomson’s speaker similarly describes how his “lonely heart,” “liberal Eye” and “generous,” “open” mind allows creativity to enter:

```
But come, ye generous Breasts, in whose wide thought,
Of all his Works, Creative Bounty, most,
Divinely burns; and on your open Front
And liberal Eye, sits, from his dark Retreat
Inviting modest want. Nor only fair,
And easy of Approach: your active Search
Leaves no cold wintry Corner unexplor’d;
Like silent-working *Heaven*, surprising oft
The lonely heart with unexpected Good. 229
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Unlike Jonson or Marvell or Pope, who remain constrained in more civilized spaces of retreat in their solitude, Thomson mostly prefers to depict his speaker wandering through wild spaces more evocative of romance. But despite all of the lonely heart’s “active” wandering, creative bounty enters from the outside in. “Creative Bounty” himself seems to be in darkness, until he sees the “lonely heart,” whom he is able to direct his creative rays on and into. The “open” mind and “liberal Eye” both receive Bounty’s rays and cause them to be recognized. Perhaps Thomson’s speaker is more able to enjoy his passivity because he has more agency in his loneliness than earlier figures had, but behind the picture of the lonely poet who actively seeks out creativity is a notion of vulnerability rooted in the architecture of a body, that can open or close itself to the outside.

The silence that accompanies loneliness can also produce a detachment that allows for poetry. In one scene in *Spring*, it at first seems that Thomson’s speaker is using the word “lonely” to describe a situation in which his imagination is dulled and closed off
amongst company. Neither nature nor reading, it seems, can open up this lonely, unobservant mind “inflam’d with love”:

All Nature fades extinct; and She alone
Heard, felt, and seen, possesses every Thought,
Fills every Sense, and pants in every Vein.
Books are but formal Dulness, tedious Friends;
And sad amid the Social Band he sits
Lonely and inattentive.  

Preoccupied, the speaker seems uninterested in occupying his imagination. But in the lines that follow, he suddenly forges a path from the social band, through “glimmering shades, and sympathetic gloom…With sighs unceasing,” toward his desk. There, a “lonely taper” burns, just as it did in Il Penseroso’s tower. Although the youth’s loneliness seemed to make him incommunicative at first, it soon becomes the occasion for poetic rapture. Writing not only substitutes for eros, but becomes a scene of eros in itself:

…but forth He walks,
Beneath the trembling Languish of her Beams,
With soften’d Soul, and wooes the Bird of Eve
To mingle Woes with his: or, while the World,
And all the Sons of Care lie hush’d in sleep,
Associates with the Mid-night Shadows drear;
And, sighing to the lonely Taper, pours
His sweetly-tortur’d Heart into the page,
Meant for the moving Messenger of Love;
But ah how faint, how meaningless, and poor
To what his Passion swells! which bursts the Bounds
Of every Eloquence…  

The “bird of eve,” the nightingale, not only accompanies this wanderer in his rapturous journey toward writing a poem, but “mingles” its woes with him, as if the bird’s song literally breaks down the boundary of his self in order to enter into his hut and himself. Like Philoclea in the Arcadia, Thomson’s speaker doesn’t remain alone in his lonely hut.
It is under this influence of Philomel, by the light of a “lonely Taper” like Il Penseroso’s, that Thomson imagines his speaker is able to convert his woes into poetry. Even if some of his feeling is lost to “sighs,” some of his what his heart feels finds its way onto the page in front of him.

II. The lonely Philomel

Again and again in mid-century poetry, the nightingale’s song accompanies “lonely” figures, or is itself called lonely. While the precedent that lonely female characters from early modern literature, such as Ophelia or Milton’s Lady, are only quietly present in mid-eighteenth century poetry, Philomel haunts scenes of loneliness much more emphatically. Because the nightingale’s music is so complex, it has been a symbol for the poet’s song since Aristophanes, Callimachus and Virgil. And yet, as we have already seen in Titus Andronicus, Philomel is not only a proxy for the poet, but also a symbol of physical vulnerability and muted speech. To sing like a lonely nightingale is to be between states of communication and non-communication. The melancholy notes of the nightingale’s song are a poor replacement for a tongue that would be able to tell her tale. The nightingale’s song is moving in the affective overtones that the minor key produces, but such a song cannot describe feelings or narratives in detail. Though Thomson depicts the nightingale as allowing for imaginative interchange by breaking down the boundaries of self, this particular birdsong might also be read as a sign of a resistance to conversation.

There were seventeenth-century precedents for Philomel’s relationship with loneliness. We have already seen how John Oldham and John Dryden both used the rare
word “lonely” as an adjective to describe Philomel. Milton also seemed to foresee a hint of how the crisis of loneliness would play out for lonely poets in the mid-eighteenth century when he invoked Philomel in “Il Penseroso.” The tension that the nightingale summons in this poem between “mute silence” silence and song, becomes more visible when viewed in light of the poetry that comes afterwards:

But first, and chiefest, with thee bring
Him that yon soars on golden wing,
Guiding the fiery-wheeled throne,
The Cherub Contemplation;
And the mute Silence hist along,
’Less Philomel will deign a song,
In her sweetest, saddest plight,
Smoothing the rugged brow of Night,
While Cynthia checks her dragon yoke,
Gently o’er th’ accustomed oak.
Sweet bird that shunn’st the noise of folly,
Most musical, most melancholy! (51-62)233

Philomel’s song leads Il Penseroso to enter into a mode of observation not ordinarily possible. But the sweet song is also the “saddest.” Most readers would not think to recall the rape and violence that Philomela was made to endure in her lonely wood at this moment, but Philomel’s mutilated—and muted—body is standing in the background of this melancholy song. And because the “melancholy” sounds can only convey their meaning “musically,” it’s possible to hear the song as a species of “mute” language, as well as a melody.

Anne Finch also imagined Philomel as her speaker Ardelia’s companion in “A Nocturnal Reverie”:

In such a Night, when every louder Wind
Is to its distant Cavern safe confin’d;
And only gentle Zephyr fans his Wings,
And lonely *Philomel*, still waking, sings;
Or from some Tree, fam’d for the *Owl’s* delight,
She, hollowing clear, directs the Wand’rer right
In such a *Night*, when passing Clouds give place,
Or thinly vail the Heav’n’s mysterious Face;
When in some River, overhung with Green,
The waving Moon and trembling Leaves are seen…(1-10).

Perhaps Finch means for us to dwell on her reference to the violence implicit in her reference to Philomela, though she does not overtly draw our attention to the undertones of violence implicit there. The poem ends with a meditation on the impossibility of describing the mind’s musings, so that the figure of the muted Philomela, who used to speak higher “syllables,” haunts this poem:

> But silent Musings urge the Mind to seek
> Something, too high for Syllables to speak;
> Till the free Soul, to a compos’dness charm’d,
> Finding the Elements of Rage disarm’d,
> O’er all below a solemn Quiet grown,
> Joys in th’ inferiour World and thinks it like her Own:
> In such a *Night* let Me abroad remain,
> Till Morning breaks, and All’s confus’d again;
> Our Cares, our Toils, our Clamours are renew’d,
> Or Pleasures, seldom reach’d, again pursu’d.  (41-50)

Ardelia describes how she sometimes experiences “elements of rage” that try to assert themselves. In the night-side of life, she is able to “compose” herself, in order to rise above those feelings and maintain a “solemn Quiet.” In the daytime, cares, toils and clamours surround her, but night-side of life allows repose. But although she seems so keen to praise the composure she achieves during the night-time, a sense of her *inability* to speak during her reveries remains. Her “silent musings” are “too high for syllables.” Charmed “compos’dness” is not necessarily the best mode for a poet to inhabit; from another angle, it could also be called muteness.

At the same time, however, wandering in the company of the nightingales’ song
improves Ardelia’s powers of poesis. Like Ophelia, Ardelia wanders by the willows that
overhang the river. But her song, guided by Philomel’s, is more articulate than the
“snatches of old lauds” she sang. Ardelia seems to benefit from her association with
Philomela’s vulnerability. As her ears open to hear the nightingale’s song, her eyes seem
to open wider, too. The “Reverie,” is a characterized by rapt observation in which Ardelia
is able to notice and describe much more than might usually be possible.

Poets in the mid-century continually call attention to this relationship between
loneliness, the nightingale, and imaginative vulnerability. In his poem “Night” (1728),
for instance, James Ralph imagines how the nightingale’s song competes with the “silent
influence” of the night. Even as he gives a sense of the “strain” of understanding the
nightingale, he associates Night’s “lonely limits” with the conditions under which it is
possible to engage in more “solemn thought” than usual:

Lo! sable night ascends the dusky air,
And spreads her deep’ning shadows all around;
Her silent influence stills the noisy world,
And wakes the studious soul to solemn thought.
Wrapp’d in thy shades, companion of thy gloom,
O goddess waft me in thy cloudy wain
To all the lonely limits of thy rule;
While mortals dream the happy hours away,
And slight the awful pleasures of thy reign…
Then night arises big with vernal joys,
And veils the welkin with a grateful shade:
………………………………………………
While wakeful Philomela pensive sings
Her soul-enchanting strains, and lonely chears
The darksom shadows with melodious lays.236

When Ralph relates his own poetic mode to that of the wakeful nightingale who sings
“melodious lays” in the darkness, he also subtly invokes the link we first saw in Sidney
between loneliness and sexual vulnerability. The night itself “arises big,” pregnant with
“vernal joys,” which, in turn, prepares for the speaker’s meeting with a virgin “inflam’d with love.” As “cloudy,” shadowy night descends, the speaker, too, starts to seem more passive and open to the outside world: he allows himself to be wafted like a cloud, and the “strains” of the nightingale’s song seem to enter, as it were, into his soul. The “darksom shadows” become a metaphor for the poet’s own thoughts, which the nightingale’s “melodious lays” enter into.

Poets are flexible about whether they depict the nightingale’s song as a proxy for their own active poesis, or whether the song more passively instills them with inspiration, but when mentions of Philomel and loneliness converge, they are usually imagining Philomel’s influence as making them more open to the outside world. In “The Pleasures of Melancholy” (1745; published 1748), Thomas Warton imagines his speaker in a vulnerable position, where lonesomeness in the “woods” provides the setting for poetic passivity:

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O tell how rapturous the joy, to melt
To Melody’s assuasive voice; to bend
Th’ uncertain step along the midnight mead,
And pour your sorrows to the pitying moon,
By many a slow trill from the bird of woe
Oft interrupted; in embow’ring woods
By darksom brook to muse, and there forget
The solemn dulness of the tedious world,
While Fancy grasps the visionary fair:
[. . .]
Or let me sit
Far in sequester’d iles of the deep dome,
There lonesome listen to the sacred sounds,
Which, as they lengthen thro’ the Gothic vaults,
In hollow murmurs reach my ravish’d ear. 237
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The nightingale’s song “interrupts” him and leads to “ravishment” by sound; both of these words registers the metaphorical relationship between the rape of female bodies and
an experience of being passively inspired. Warton pictures the nightingale’s song broaching his interior by way of his ear, and he “melts” in response. His actions come to seem more liquid and fluid, as he “bends” and “pours” his sorrows out. Here, the action of listening is what leads to being “grasped” by Fancy. It is when “sequestered” that he is most likely to be “ravished” by the sound.

Later on, in his poem “Solitude, at an Inn” (1769), Warton depicts himself as unable to enter into this mode of poetic passivity, and seems to be wishing for the kind of ravishment he describes in his “Pleasures of Melancholy”:

Here thou com’st in sullen mood,
Not with thy fantastic brood
Of magic shapes and visions airy
Beckon’d from the land of Fairy:
’Mid the melancholy void
Not a pensive charm enjoy’d!
No poetic being here
Strikes with airy sounds mine ear;
No converse here to fancy cold
With many a fleeting form I hold,
Here all inelegant and rude
Thy presence is, sweet Solitude.238

Warton’s speaker can’t have the kind of aesthetic experience he desires. “Solitude” can be “Best and true society,” he argues, but it also can be devoid of “poetic being.” Where “loneliness” allowed him a state of poetic “ravishment,” in “solitude” he only feels himself to be in a bounded, impenetrable “void.” Part of the problem here seems to be that he is at an inn, rather than in the wilderness, which is closer to the “land of Fairy” and therefore closer to Fancy.
III. Thomas Gray

Thomas Gray also imagines loneliness to provide him with an imaginative access not ordinarily possible, but wonders about the valence of his song from such a lonely position. Gray continually fashions himself as a lone wanderer who is able to observe society by standing on the edges of it. By repeatedly representing the death of his lonely speakers, he evokes the precedent that Philomel and Ophelia set for loneliness, as much as he evokes *Il Penseroso*. Gray’s speakers are, like these characters, not alone in their loneliness. Whenever he presents a speaker as solitary, hidden spectators are not far behind. Gray also remembers the romance past when he associates the position of the lonely poet with effeminacy, muteness and danger.

In his wildly popular “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) (first titled “Stanzas Wrote in a Country Church-Yard” in a pirated version, and then published as “An Elegy Wrote in a Country Church Yard,” before finally receiving its current title), Gray presents his speaker as a poet desperately trying to mediate between public and private worlds. The poem begins with the speaker standing far from the madding crowd:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower  
The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such, as wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.
Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep. (1-16)²³⁹

Though his location is remote and unpopulated, it is not, however, uncivilized. Within the space of the graveyard, Gray is reminded, and reminds his audience, of human history. The buried bodies that accompany him in their “cells,” together with the beetle and the solitary (and yet molested) “owl,” make the graveyard seem like a kind of monastery. The paradox of being a lonely poet is that one imagines an audience even as one draws attention to one’s detachment. Despite his seeming isolation, he cannot remain “mute,” unlike the “inglorious Miltons” he laments.

Gray’s speaker is, as has often been argued, a classic Penzero-so-type, not least because the poem opens with him listening to the sounds of the “curfew” tolling the knell of passing day, while contemplating the “tower” that stands nearby. This recalls Milton’s “Il Penseroso,” where the speaker stands on a piece of elevated ground that allows him to survey the landscape as he listens to the curfew bell:

Oft on a Plat of rising ground,
I hear the far-off curfew sound,
Over some wide-watered shore,
Swinging slow with sullen roar…(73-76)²⁴⁰

The difference between Penzero-so and Gray’s speaker, however, is that Gray’s speaker’s relationship to his audience is more strained. He does not picture himself engaging in any apostrophes to goddesses. There is no personified Muse of melancholy or tragedy to keep Gray’s speaker company. Only at the end of the poem do we learn that there were other living inhabitants of the landscape where Gray’s speaker has been wandering, without interacting with him.
At the end of the poem, Gray’s speaker is strangely compelled to imagine what his own funeral might look like. Suddenly aware, in death, that a “kindred spirit”—led by “lonely contemplation”—might have noticed his presence in the landscape, he explains that he was not alone in his loneliness. Before he can even imagine a situation in which anyone would think to enquire about him, the poet has to metaphorically kill himself. It’s at first hard to know whether the poet is addressing himself or his audience in the following lines. But as the stanzas progress, it becomes more likely that he is apostrophizing himself, since he imagines the scene that might occur after his death:

For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
“Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

“Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Mutt’ring his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz’d with care, or cross’d in hopeless love.

“One morn I missed him on the customed hill,
Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

The next with dirges due in sad array
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou can’st read) the lay,
Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.” (93-116)²⁴¹

Lonely contemplation is the prelude to a kind of conversation here, as the speaker imagines the speech the swain who has seen him might be able to describe him to someone else. But he is also aware that from the outside, he seems separated from his
satisfactorily, and is unable to be understood. Like the mourning lonely women in the romance forest, or Ophelia when she is singing her mad songs, he pictures himself as an effeminate, “wan” creature, “craz’d with care.” Before the speaker imagines his own disappearance, he imagines that he was last seen—like Ophelia before her death—muttering wayward fancies beneath a tree. On the edge of the “wood,” like a character who has fled to the romance forest in order to be able to mourn with more abandon, the speaker remains separate from others, and his words are inaudible, muttering sounds. The speaker imagines that the swain is categorizing him as a specifically literary figure.

Although the swain is the figure who is ostensibly led by lonely contemplation, the speaker, too, abides by the conventions of loneliness. And in fact, in an earlier version of the poem, Gray designed the poet himself, rather than the swain, to be led “by lonely contemplation.” The original conclusion of the poem has no “hoary-headed swain”: only a dialogue that the speaker has with himself:

The thoughtless World to majesty may bow
Exalt the brave, & idolize Success
But more to Innocence their Safety owe
Than Power & Genius e’er conspired to bless

And thou, who mindful of the unhonour’d Dead
Dost in these Notes thy artless Tale relate
By Night & lonely contemplation led
To linger in the gloomy Walks of Fate

Hark how the sacred Calm, that broods around
Bids ev’ry fierce tumultous Passion ease
In still small Accents whisp’ring from the Ground
A grateful Earnest of eternal Peace

No more with Reason & thyself at strife;
Give anxious Cares & endless Wishes room
But thro’ the cool sequester’d Vale of Life
Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.242
In this alternative ending, Gray also links loneliness to inarticulacy by stressing that his doom has a “silent tenour.”

The poet’s epitaph re-inscribes the paradox of loneliness in the “Elegy.” The speaker explores his longing after a “kindred spirit” or “friend” to communicate with, at the same time as suggesting the impossibility of such a connection:

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frown’d not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy mark’d him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heav’n did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Mis’ry all he had, a tear,
He gain’d from Heav’n (‘twas all he wish’d) a friend. (117-124)

This final reassurance that the poet has gained a friend from heaven is little consolation since it is a fantasy of conversation rather than one that truly connects the speakers. Finally, the speaker sees himself as like the mute inglorious Miltons, “to Fortune and to Fame unknown,” and worse still, dead and incapable of forming any other alliance. The fantasy here is that lonely death finally allows the conversation of friendship and a truer interpenetration, but it is a grim form of conversation that first requires his death.

Gray seems to find it hard to imagine how a poem about a solitary figure cannot end in detachment and death. In his “Ode on the Distant Prospect of Eton College,” the speaker’s separation from the children he can see in the distance becomes more defined as the distance between their innocence and his despair becomes more and more apparent. Even more strikingly, in “The Bard. A Pindaric Ode” (1757), Gray imagines the suicide of a hoary poet who stands in a lonely place “on a rock” above a torrent
surrounded by “desert cave[s].” Dogged by “Sorrow's faded form, and Solitude behind,”

the Bard throws himself from the rock and into the torrent:

   Enough for me: with joy I see
   The different doom our fates assign.
   Be thine despair and sceptered care;
   To triumph, and to die, are mine.”
   He spoke, and headlong from the mountain’s height
   Deep in the roaring tide he plunged to endless night. (139-144)

Another Ophelia, the Bard must die.

   Gray was already well-known for his “lonely anguish” in the eighteenth century,

but at the turn of the century, Wordsworth made it even more famous by offering Gray’s

“Sonnet on the Death of Richard West” (1775) as an example of poetic diction that had

become too “curiously elaborate.” In his preface to Lyrical Ballads (1798), Wordsworth

argues that the only part of the sonnet “of any value,” were the following lines in italics

(his emphasis):

   In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,
   And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire:
   The birds in vain their amorous descant join,
   Or cheerful fields resume their green attire:
   These ears, alas! for other notes repine,
   A different object do these eyes require.
   My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;
   And in my breast the imperfect joys expire.
   Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer,
   And new-born pleasure brings to happier men:
   The fields to all their wonted tribute bear;
   To warm their little loves the birds complain.
   I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
   And weep the more because I weep in vain.

Though Wordsworth dislikes the majority of the diction in this poem, he appreciates

Gray’s statement that he is alone in his “lonely anguish,” judging this sentiment to be less

falsely elaborate than the rest. The paradox at the heart of Gray’s elegy is that it a public
poem written in order to communicate a very personal grief, and in this situation, he seems torn between the poles of silence and speech.

Even as he seems to be making an effort to communicate with his audience by describing his mourning, Gray also claims that such communication is impossible, by stressing his disconnection from everything around him. His eyes and ears, like those of Pyrocles in the Arcadia when he is searching for Daiphantus, are searching for a face and a voice he cannot find in the pastoral setting he finds himself in. The sun may rise and the birds may sing, but not for him. The ultimate audience he imagines for his poem is Richard West himself, but Richard West cannot hear. This is a loneliness that cannot be solved by conversation. And this makes sense, when one realizes that Gray’s lonely anguish for Richard West was likely mingled with an erotic longing that could never be fulfilled under the strictures of his society. For Gray, being lonely is not such a sensuously ravishing experience as it is for the Wartons: his speakers are more often closed off to the outside world than open to it.

IV. The lonely poet as parody

Like Thomas Gray, Charlotte Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge overlay their representations of loneliness with an anxiety about their marginal position as poets, and whether they can communicate from their remote positions in society. They suggest their concern about the gendered vulnerability that loneliness confers upon them by creating parodic lonely poet figures, in order to then do violence to them. The hermits that haunt these anxious poems are proxies for the poets themselves.
There are several lone figures in Charlotte Smith’s long poem *Beachy Head* (1807): the “lone shepherd,” the man who lives in the “lone farm” and another who lives in the hut nearby, the “lonely man” who haunts the cliffs, the “forest hermit” who dwells in a “lonely cave,” and finally, the “lone hermit” who dwells in a cave by the sea. Each of these figures could be read as an avatar of the lonely poet who narrates the poem. The speaker (whom it is possible to identify with Smith herself, since she was another woman poet stranded by her husband) opens the poem describing her position on the “projecting head-land” of the cliff, watching the dawn rise. As she presents herself to her audience, she nods to the *Il Penseroso* tradition:

Contemplation here,  
High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,  
And bid recording Memory unfold  
Her scroll voluminous…\(^{246}\)

Standing on the southern edge of England with France in the distance, the speaker, Bard-like, first feels compelled to offer a history of land and battles that have been fought over it. But she is glad to change from the epic mode to one of observation of “simple scenes of peace and industry” around her. She uses her observation of the lone farms and huts as a segue into a reflection on her own “solitudes”:

I once was happy, when while yet a child,  
I learn’d to love these upland solitudes,  
And, when elastic as the mountain air,  
To my light spirit, care was yet unknown  
And evil unforeseen: Early it came,  
And childhood scarcely passed, I was condemned,  
A guiltless exile, silently to sigh,  
While Memory, with faithful pencil, drew  
The contrast…\(^{247}\)

In this section of the poem, her viewpoint is very like that of Gray in his Eton College Ode, (or, later, Wordsworth’s in “Tintern Abbey”). But for Smith’s speaker, the tragedy
of adulthood is the loss of powers of articulate speech. As an adult, her “silent” sighs are a fundamental part of her exile.

The lonely speaker finds a compatriot, if not a companion, in the “tiller of the soil” she has observed wandering on the cliffs, though no conversation with him is possible since he is also condemned to a form of sighing silence. This “lonely man” is also reminiscent of Gray, and has many of the attributes of a graveyard poet. He spends his night amidst ruins, wanders around in the “evening” listening to sounds, and garners suspicion from those who watch him from afar:

Among the ruins, often he would muse--
His rustic meal soon ended, he was wont
To wander forth, listening the evening sounds
Of rushing milldam, or the distant team,
Or night-jar, chasing fern-flies: the tir’d hind
Pass’d him at nightfall, wondering he should sit
On the hill top so late: they from the coast
Who sought bye paths with their clandestine load,
Saw with suspicious doubt, the lonely man
Cross on their way: but village maidens thought
His senses injur’d; and with pity say
That he, poor youth! must have been cross’d in love--
For often, stretch’d upon the mountain turf
With folded arms, and eyes intently fix’d
Where ancient elms and firs obscured a grange,
Some little space within the vale below,
They heard him, as complaining of his fate,
And to the murmuring wind, of cold neglect
And baffled hope he told.-- The peasant girls
These plaintive sounds remember, and even now
Among them may be heard the stranger’s songs.

While the speaker of the “Elegy” wanders alone, “muttering wayward fancies,” the “lonely man” emits “plaintive sounds.” His attempts at communications do not seem easily understandable, but they are “songs.” Certainly, the sound must be memorable, because the village maidens hear the sounds and mimic them. The maidens imagine
reasons for his strange detachment and decide that he must have been “cross’d in love.”

This phrase suggests that Charlotte Smith may even have had an allusion to Thomas Gray in mind, since his speaker imagines that other people will think him “craz’d with care, or cross’d in hopeless love” in his “Elegy.”

Like the village maidens, the speaker of the poem also sympathizes with the lonely man, but she is not content to repeat simply his plaintive sounds as they do. Instead, she uses the opportunity to imagine what she would say if she were a lone shepherd. And yet, her speech is uncertain, poised between an effort to communicate and an effort to obfuscate her sympathy:

Were I a Shepherd on the hill
And ever as the mists withdrew
Could see the willows of the rill
Shading the footway to the mill
Where once I walk’d with you

And as away Night’s shadows sail,
And sounds of birds and brooks arise,
Believe, that from the woody vale
I hear your voice upon the gale
In soothing melodies; […]

I think, I could endure my lot
And linger on a few short years,
And then, by all but you forgot,
Sleep, where the turf that clothes the spot
May claim some pitying tears.

For ’tis not easy to forget
One, who thro’ life has lov’d you still,
And you, however late, might yet
With sighs to Memory giv’n, regret
The Shepherd of the Hill. 249

The conditional tense the speaker uses betrays an anxiety about what it means to speak as a lonely character. She slowly confesses her secret, that she has not forgotten her lost
love, the shepherd on the hill. This makes conversation, and a cure to loneliness, seem momentarily possible; and yet, the ultimate message of these stanzas, like the voice which blends with the winds, is obscure. The sudden apostrophe to a mysterious “you,” describing a person who once walked with the speaker at Beachy Head, excludes the audience who might have thought that the poem was addressed to them. Those readers who don’t have the requisite experience, the speaker suggests, won’t be able properly to understand this communication.

Neither will the speaker let the village maidens have the last word in the debate about how to interpret the circumstances of the lonely man’s mysterious life. She has a more fanciful interpretation, imagining that the lonely man leads a double life as a character from romance. This fantasy registers a deep nostalgia for romance. In his forest retreat—a “lonely cave”—the hermit composes love poetry, where not even the sadness of the nightingale’s song can reach him:

Yet otherwhile it seem’d as if young Hope
Her flattering pencil gave to Fancy’s hand,
And in his wanderings, rear’d to sooth his soul
Ideal bowers of pleasure--Then, of Solitude
And of his hermit life, still more enamour’d,
His home was in the forest; and wild fruits
And bread sustain’d him. […]
Lost among the deepening gloom.--
But near one ancient tree, whose wreathed roots
Form’d a rude couch, love-songs and scatter’d rhymes,
Unfinish’d sentences, or half erased,
And rhapsodies like this, were sometimes found--

Let us to woodland wilds repair
While yet the glittering night-dews seem
To wait the freshly-breathing air,
Precursive of the morning beam,
That rising with advancing day,
Scatters the silver drops away.
And I’ll contrive a sylvan room
  Against the time of summer heat,
Where leaves, inwoven in Nature’s loom,
  Shall canopy our green retreat;
And gales that “close the eye of day”
Shall linger, e’er they die away.

And when a sear and sallow hue
  From early frost the bower receives,
I’ll dress the sand rock cave for you,
  And strew the floor with heath and leaves,
That you, against the autumnal air
May find securer shelter there.

The Nightingale will then have ceas’d
  To sing her moonlight serenade;
But the gay bird with blushing breast,
  And Woodlarks still will haunt the shade,
And by the borders of the spring
Reed-wrens will yet be carolling.

The forest hermit’s lonely cave
  None but such soothing sounds shall reach,
Or hardly heard, the distant wave
  Slow breaking on the stony beach;
Or winds, that now sigh soft and low,
Now make wild music as they blow.\textsuperscript{250}

By writing the hermit’s poem within her poem, Smith effectively inhabits the role of a romance poet. Her nostalgia for a bygone age of poetry comes through in the way she edits out the violence that romance writers such as Sidney associated with the lonely forest. Only at the end of the dream does the speaker make clear how “unreal” this ideal lonely place has been:

Ye phantoms of unreal delight,
Visions of fond delirium born!
Rise not on my deluded sight,
Then leave me drooping and forlorn
To know, such bliss can never be,
Unless loved like me….\textsuperscript{251}
“Drooping” like Gray’s “wan” speaker in the “Elegy,” the lonely poet delivers her ambiguous message, destroying the fantasy that it’s possible to inhabit the happy world of the lonely “sylvan room” she has been dreaming about.

Finally, the speaker leads us from this utopian imaginary of what an ideal space for a lonely poet could be like, to the opposite extreme. The poem ends with the stor of another “lone hermit,” another proxy for the lonely poet whom Smith makes seem more realistic. From the idyllic sylvan room in the realm of romance, we are transported to a much lonelier cave, or “flint surrounded home” at the base of the cliffs:

Just beneath the rock
Where Beachy overpeers the channel wave,
Within a cavern mined by wintry tides
Dwelt one, who long disgusted with the world
And all its ways, appear’d to suffer life
Rather than live; [...] the fog,
Hovering no more above the beetling cliffs
Betray’d not then the little careless sheep
On the brink grazing, while their headlong fall
Near the lone Hermit’s flint-surrounded home,
Claim’d unavailing pity; for his heart
Was feelingly alive to all that breath’d;
And outraged as he was, in sanguine youth,
By human crimes, he still acutely felt
For human misery. 252

Like the lonely man at the beginning of the poem, the hermit suffered in his youth, and his existence on the brink of society allows him to better observe “human misery.”

Because of these characteristics, it’s possible to read him as a figure for the lonely poet, stranded between a need for isolation and a deep feeling for the human society from which he has separated himself. In his flinty home, he is all the more alive to the suffering that surrounds him. He is not only outraged at the death of sheep that fall from
the cliff, but for the “human crimes” and “misery” that he knows exists in the civilization he has fled from.

Rather than spend his time making mere plaintive sounds, like the lonely man Smith describes early in the poem, this hermit does something useful. He rescues drowning sailors, finally dying in the attempt to save another. This seems to hold out some optimistic hope for what the role of the poet could be, shepherding souls as well as sheep. But Smith, like Gray, finally cannot sustain this optimism: she kills this tragic proxy for the lonely poet, and the epitaph for him becomes a way of ending her poem:

At day-break, anxious for the lonely man,
His cave the mountain shepherds visited,
Tho’ sand and banks of weeds had choak’d their way--
He was not in it; but his drowned cor’se
By the waves wafted, near his former home
Receiv’d the rites of burial. Those who read
Chisel’d within the rock, these mournful lines,
Memorials of his sufferings, did not grieve,
That dying in the cause of charity
His spirit, from its earthly bondage freed,
Had to some better region fled for ever.253

The poem itself, we finally learn, is supposedly inscribed in the rock at the scene of his death, just as Gray imagined his epitaph for himself inscribed in rock at the end of his poem. Since the “lonely man” cannot speak for himself, the lonely narrator speaks for him. But the moral that the speaker finally draws seems too brief to be persuasive; it doesn’t quite seem that being freed from earthly bondage makes up for the lonely hermit’s sufferings. Rather, the violence of Smith’s negation of his life—and even of the occasion to grieve—sits uneasily. By depicting the lonely hermit’s death, Smith performs a kind of violence against the figure of loneliness, which is perhaps symptomatic of her anxiety about her own position as a wanderer on the rocks.
Like Smith’s lonely hermit, Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner in the *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) has experienced a trauma at sea, and wanders around, homeless, trying to find a listener who might be able to understand him well enough to unburden him of the trauma he experienced when “alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea.” 254 Having shot the albatross and endured the solitude of being alone on a ship stuck in ice, surrounded by corpses, he returns to tell his tale. Describing his time at sea, the Ancient Mariner reports, in his repetitious melancholic strain, “So lonely ‘twas, that God himself / Scarce seeméd there to be.” 255 But the poem suggests that this is a poem that is never finished, since the Mariner feels compelled to repeat himself, *ad infinitum*. He explains this repetition as a kind of supernatural curse. In essence, the mariner’s rime is a kind of epitaph, like Gray’s or Smith’s—an effort to tell his story in such a way that he finds a “friend” and creates an end to his suffering—but unfortunately for the Mariner, his epitaph offers no finality.

The Ancient Mariner, condemned to repeat the narration of his previous loneliness aboard the ship, might be viewed as an avatar for the lonely poet, troubled by their inability to properly converse with their audience from the remote space they occupy. At first, the Mariner’s rime seems to appeal to his listeners, but each retelling ends in a further separation:

> Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
> With a woful agony,
> Which forced me to begin my tale;
> And then it left me free.

> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns:
> And till my ghastly tale is told,
> This heart within me burns.
I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.256

This loneliness is not the inward-looking experience it might seem because it is oriented toward a social scene of communication. The Mariner longs for companionship; he tells us how sweet it is to walk with the wedding guests from the church, but instead he is compelled by a supernatural force to wander alone in order to find new listeners to the story he is doomed to repeat. His final stanza repeats the first, giving the sense that the tale must, like the Mariner’s, go on and on, without ever being fully understood.

Similarly, Keats’ lonely, loitering knight-at-arms in “La Belle Dame Sans Mercy” must similarly repeat his tale again and again, in a repeated speech that finally leaves his experience opaque. Like Gray in the “Elegy,” Keats makes his wanderer seem effete in his wandering:

Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
   Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
   And no birds sing.

Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
   So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel’s granary is full,
   And the harvest’s done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
   With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
   Fast withereth too.257

Keats describes the knight’s brow and cheeks by comparing them to the color of flowers, which has the effect of feminizing the knight. Like Ophelia, he weaves garlands for his lost love. The tale that the ailing knight-at-arms tells about his strange encounter with a
wild woman, however, has not yielded a scene of poetic production; instead he lives in a
landscape where no birds (not even the bird that Keats is famous for depicting, the
nightingale) sing. He is unable to articulate the nature of his detachment, and in this,
forms another parody of the lonely poet in crisis.

This position of not being able to fully describe, or even understand oneself in
loneliness is one that Byron also understood. In a journal that she kept while travelling
with Percy Shelley and Byron, Mary Shelley depicted Byron’s muted and “ineffable”
reaction to *Hamlet*. She depicts Byron—like Ophelia—as a reader, whom others find
difficult to read:

Here, in the wide space, under those lofty trees, we were no longer constrained to
walk singly, and Shelley placed himself beside Lord Byron, who led the way
through the trees: “You seem very ineffable this evening,” said he.
“I have been reading,” he replied, “*Hamlet.*”
“No wonder, then, you are melancholy.”
“No,” said Lord Byron, “‘tis not so much melancholy, but I feel
perplexed, confused, and inextricably self-involved…”

In this scene Byron is an articulate self that is nonetheless momentarily incapable of self-
knowledge after his experience of reading *Hamlet*. At a loss to describe the nature of the
self-involvement that results of reading the book, Byron can only say that his loneliness
is of a more “perplexing” and “confusing” bent than the word “melancholy” could
describe. By giving us a list like this, Byron suggests that he cannot fins the right words
to describe himself. Though Byron doesn’t call himself lonely, the word might easily
describe him here, since in his loneliness he finds no consolation in company. He
recognizes that the difficulty in explaining himself to others is akin to the difficulty of
understanding himself.
Percy Shelley’s desire to join with Byron is blocked by Byron’s reading of the play, which not only makes it difficult for others to read what’s on his mind, but also makes it difficult for him to understand his own mood. Though his friend tries to convert the poet’s lonely wandering into a companionate stroll, Byron remains detached. Shelley’s Polonius-like mode of reading is implicitly criticized. As he tries to make Byron more “effable,” he attempts to straightforwardly align his solitariness with dejection, but Byron refuses that description, reaching after a way to describe his state of mind, he finally compares his inability to put what he feels into words with an “inextricable” self-involvement. Although Romantic attitudes to loneliness—and indeed, to *Hamlet*—have been called egoistic, Byron’s “self-involvement” ultimately razes his sense of self. The *OED* uses an attestation from Lord Byron to describe how “loneliness” came to describe an emotion of dejection, Byron was actually careful to divide the experience of melancholy from that of reading *Hamlet*. Byron understood Ophelia’s loneliness better than even he knew, and calls on a tradition that eighteenth century poets began when they associated self-involvement with ineffability.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the imaginative accessibility that loneliness had earlier provided seems more and more troubled. Where, early in the century, poets associated loneliness with a positive “ravishment,” by the end of the century, poets start to seem troubled that such interpenetration between the poet, the outside world, and other people, may not be possible. Silence and the strange muteness of the nightingale’s song attends on loneliness throughout the century, but by the end of it, lonely poets have started to present themselves as less and less likely to be able to properly communicate with their audience. Many of them are pictured as not being able to survive the encounter.
Loneliness had reached a kind of crisis point, which perhaps reflected the position of poetry, an increasingly marginalized genre in a society that had started to value the silent, private reading of journals, newspapers and novels above the communal act of reading plays or reciting poetry out loud together.
Wordsworth’s Loneliness

Wordsworth, by contrast to the lonely poets that precede him, no longer figures loneliness as an obstacle to poetic making. Instead, he makes it a condition that he seeks out in order to engage in aesthetic experience. In *The Prelude*, loneliness no longer signals an effeminate condition; Wordsworth makes it a characteristic of the Philosophic, rather than the weeping mind. Everyone knows that Wordsworth “wandered lonely,” but the precise quality of that loneliness has not been well understood. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Wordsworth was the first author to use loneliness to describe a kind of “dejection” that comes from an abstract “sense of solitariness,” rather than a longing for company that arises out of the actual condition of solitariness. The OED’s chronology implies Wordsworth’s loneliness is an affective mode, which is based on an experience of physical solitude itself. In turn, when critics have glossed Wordsworth’s lonely wandering, many have described it as equivalent with a dejected emotion that arises out of a proclivity for solitariness. The relationship between solitariness and melancholy that we saw in discussions of Hamlet’s character in Chapter Two reach a kind of climax in discussions of Wordsworth’s loneliness.

Christopher Ricks, whom I referred to briefly in my introduction, argues that the Romantics first developed the emotional register of loneliness:

Loneliness is in crucial respects a Romantic phenomenon. In Dr. Johnson’s day, and in his dictionary, *loneliness* is “solitude; want of company; disposition to avoid company” and *lonely* is “solitary, addicted to solitude.” These are not wide of the modern mark, but they are importantly not quite it, either. What the *Oxford English Dictionary* brings home is [that] the strong emotional coloring of the
words, and no less markedly of their cousin “lonesome,” is a later development—it is a Romantic development.

...With Romanticism came new opportunities, new opportunities for self-scrutiny and self-worth but also for self-deception and self-pity. “Lonely” had much to offer, much that is true and much that is not; feeling, and human illusions of feeling.260

The problem with this narrative, as will have by now become clear, is that the chronology from the *Oxford English Dictionary* that it relies on is not correct. Loneliness, as I have shown, already had complex affective connotations in the period in which Samuel Johnson was writing. When he argues that loneliness was first “emotional” in his poetry, Ricks not only neglects this fact; he also mischaracterizes the Romantics’ contribution to loneliness.

Wordsworth is careful to distinguish loneliness from solitude. In his poetry, solitude is more often equivalent to dejection than loneliness is. For this lonely poet, “wandering lonely” does not necessarily equate with dejection; it can also be an experience of joy, and is in fact an experience he often courts precisely for that reason. Loneliness, rather than solitude, becomes the necessary condition for imaginative aesthetic experience in Wordsworth’s poetry. Just as we should be wary of reading his loneliness in terms of the Renaissance linkage between solitariness and melancholy, so too should we be wary of reading Wordsworth’s loneliness in terms of the affective connotations of sadness and dejection it has acquired today.

Even if Ricks’ characterization of Romantic loneliness is misleading because the evidence he relies on is not sound, his argument is nonetheless useful to examine, since it exposes widely held assumptions about Romantic loneliness. For Ricks, the emotionality of loneliness implies a tendency toward “self-scrutiny.” This stress the relationship between loneliness, dejection and self-scrutiny recalls the discussions of Hamlet’s
melancholy I referred to in Chapter Two. Following in the tradition of Keats’ attack on Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime,” Ricks subtly criticizes Wordsworth for his loneliness, suggesting that it is an egotistical mode. Ricks is critical of Romantic poets, not only for their tendency toward “self-deception and self-pity” but also for their interest in, as Ricks puts it, “self-worth.”

But Wordsworth is much more like Ophelia in her loneliness than like Hamlet in his solitariness. When there is a sense of dejection attached to Wordsworth’s loneliness, it comes not from the “self-pity” that comes of “self-scrutiny,” but rather from his awareness of the obstacles to such self-scrutiny. Reading his poetry in light of loneliness’ literary genealogy highlights how often he relates loneliness to moments of silence and inarticulacy. Though loneliness makes aesthetic experience more possible for Wordsworth, it also highlights his inability to successfully relate those experiences to other people. The traces of Thomas Gray, Charlotte Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s concerns over the inarticulacy that loneliness describes have not disappeared in this vision of loneliness, even if Wordsworth is able to sublimate those anxieties as he makes loneliness central to his poetic self-fashioning.

I. The lonely moor

Wordsworth’s stress on the relationship between loneliness and an inability to communicate oneself is nowhere stronger than in “Resolution and Independence” (composed 1802; first published in 1807), a poem about his encounter with an intransigent leech gatherer on a “lonely moor.” Like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, the man is doomed to repeat himself. Wordsworth also repeats the word “lonely” several
times in the poem, drawing attention to it. The poem opens with the speaker describing himself (in a manner reminiscent of Milton’s Lady) as a “traveller then upon the moor,” experiencing a mood swing from “the might / Of joy,” to a low dejection, in which he fears the “solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty” that might come to him. In this mood, he stumbles upon a pool in a “lonely place,” with the leech-gatherer standing by. At first, it seems as if the man has been sent as a kind of blessing from heaven, to awaken him out of his feelings of solitude and change his mood. A long description of the old man ensues, and finally, the speaker greets him, in preparation for a conversation. But his awkwardly verbose greeting is the first sign that this project of sympathy will fail, and as the exchange continues, it becomes clearer that the old man will remain reticent:

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,
A leading from above, a something given,
Yet it befell that, in this lonely place,
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven
I saw a Man before me unawares:
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.

[…]

Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face,
Upon a long grey staff of shaven wood:
And, still as I drew near with gentle pace,
Upon the margin of that moorish flood
Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call,
And moveth all together, if it move at all.

At length, himself unsettling, he the Pond
Stirred with his Staff, and fixedly did look
Upon the muddy water, which he conned,
As if he had been reading in a book:
And now a stranger’s privilege I took;
And, drawing to his side, to him did say,
“This morning gives us promise of a glorious day.”
A gentle answer did the old Man make,
In courteous speech which forth he slowly drew:
And him with further words I thus bespake,
“What occupation do you there pursue?
This is a lonesome place for one like you.”
Ere he replied, a flash of mild surprise
Broke from the sable orbs of his yet-vivid eyes.

His words came feebly, from a feeble chest,
But each in solemn order followed each,
With something of a lofty utterance drest—
Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach
Of ordinary men; a stately speech;
Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use,
Religious men, who give to God and man their dues.

He told, that to these waters he had come
To gather leeches, being old and poor:
Employment hazardous and wearisome!
And he had many hardships to endure:
From pond to pond he roamed, from moor to moor;
Housing, with God’s good help, by choice or chance;
And in this way he gained an honest maintenance. (50-56; 78-112)

Not only is the speaker’s first comment rather unwieldy, but his first question is also presumptuous. This presumption that he knows something about the man already (one “like you”) causes the man’s “flash” of surprise, although he may be equally surprised that someone like Wordsworth wishes to speak with him. But his next question is similarly awkward: “how is it you live, and what is it you do?” It’s almost as if the speaker of the poem expects the leech-gatherer to speak his mind in a soliloquy.

But the leech-gatherer is no Prince Hamlet, nor was he meant to be. And neither is he an attendant lord. Instead, he plays the part of a character whose thoughts interest his audience, but who is unable, or unwilling, to express himself in a speech. At first, the leech-gatherer is silent. Like Ophelia, the leech-gatherer is hard to read during his loneliness, and like Ophelia, he is also a reader. Wordsworth says the leech-gatherer
looked, “Upon the muddy water…/ As if he had been reading in a book” (87-88). From one perspective, these lines could simply indicate that the man knows how to read the mud for signs of leeches, in a way that others don’t. But the lines could also indicate that he is thinking about something that we can’t know.

In her loneliness, Ophelia’s book is a symbol of her illegibility. The same could be said of the leech gatherer’s reading. In both cases, there is a possibility that the character understands something we do not, but this possible understanding remains unreadable. We cannot, in the end, know what this characters is thinking, or even, whether he is thinking at all. It is impossible to broach his surface, just as it is impossible to see through to the depths of the muddy pool, or inside of Ophelia’s book. When Wordsworth set this scene of loneliness by a pool of “muddy water”, he may or may not have been thinking of the “brooke” or “glassy streame” in which Ophelia is finally pulled, as Shakespeare puts it, “from her melodious lay, / To muddy death.” Perhaps here Wordsworth is sublimating some of the violence that poets like Gray and Smith inflict on lonely poet figures.

Eventually, “What occupation do you there pursue?” the leech-gatherer explains himself, but he can’t give an explanation that the speaker can understand. The speaker seems distracted, and can’t seem to hear or make sense of what the man is saying:

The old Man still stood talking by my side;  
But now his voice to me was like a stream  
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;  
And the whole body of the Man did seem  
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;  
Or like a man from some far region sent,  
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment. (113-119)
The more the leech-gatherer speaks, the more difficult it is to understand him. His words, too, become a kind of surface, or muddy stream, so that his speech glides past the speaker without him being able to understand it. Instead of listening to his words, the speaker is fascinated by his dream-like appearance.

At this point in the poem, the speaker realizes that he has become so distracted that he must ask the leech-gatherer to repeat himself. He recreates some of the drama of this for his audience by presenting the leech-gatherer’s narrative as if it is occurring in real time. While the speaker is telling us about how the leech-gatherer’s voice became like a stream, we, as audience, also miss out on what the leech-gatherer is saying. Cursing his inattention, the narrator repeats his original question. The leech gatherer must repeat himself, both for the speaker’s and for our sake. But once again, the speaker’s ideas about the leech-gatherer separate him from temporal experience, and the encounter becomes dream-like:

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills
And hope that is unwilling to be fed;
Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills:
And mighty Poets in their misery dead.
—Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,
My question eagerly did I renew,
‘How is it that you live, and what is it you do?’

[...]

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,
The old Man’s shape, and speech—all troubled me:
In my mind’s eye I seemed to see him pace
About the weary moors continually,
Wandering about alone and silently.
While I these thoughts within myself pursued,
He, having made a pause, the same discourse renewed.

And soon with this he other matter blended,
Cheerfully uttered, with demeanour kind,
But stately in the main; and when he ended,
I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.
‘God,’ said I, ‘be my help and stay secure;
I’ll think of the leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!’ (120-126; 134-147)

The leech-gatherer who speaks has a silent avatar that wanders around the lonely moor “continually.” His speech “blends” together again, like a stream, and is ultimately ineffectual, as the speaker decides to look through his “mind’s eye” rather than his actual line of vision.

It was Hamlet who first coined the phrase “mind’s eye” when speaking to Horatio of his visions of his father, so that when the speaker draws attention to his tendency to remain, as he puts it, “within” himself, he plays Hamlet to the leech-gatherer’s Ophelia. While “within himself,” he appreciates that there is no chance of knowing what might lie “within” the leech-gatherer. Indeed, he has learned nothing from talking to the man that he could not have learned by merely looking at him. And though the speaker is preoccupied with the distinction between the mind’s eye and what he actually can see, the leech-gatherer himself is unconcerned. The speaker seems to hope that he will be able to lose consciousness of the project of sympathy that he is attempting to engage in long enough to enable a more powerful form of connection. But instead, he can only imagine the man perpetually wandering on the moor.

This projected wandering acts as a physical symbol of the communicative disconnection between the pair. The “lonely moor” which the leech gatherer wanders around seems symbolic, not only of his inability to make himself readable to another, but also of the speaker’s communicative failure. When we remember that Wordsworth was famous himself for wandering lonely, it’s not hard to see how the leech-gatherer could
function as another parody of the lonely poet. Just as Coleridge imagined the Ancient Mariner as doomed to wander about repeating himself, unable to find a listener who can disburden him of his need to retell his story over and over again, Wordsworth imagines the leech-gatherer wandering silently, without end.

Despite these communicative difficulties, though, the encounter with the leech-gatherer on the lonely moor is not devoid of all hope, for it provides the speaker with an “admonishment.” In order to better understand this admonishment, it’s useful to compare “Resolution and Independence” with a scene from The Prelude in which Wordsworth encounters another old man, the blind beggar. “Lost” in the “moving pageant” of a crowd, Wordsworth stumbles upon him:

And once, far travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indications, lost
Amid the moving pageant, ’twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the man, and who he was.
My mind did a this spectacle turn round
As with the might of waters; and it seemed
To me that in this label was a type,
Or emblem of the utmost that we know
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixed face and sightless eyes, I looked,
As if admonished from another world.267

(VII, 608-623 [1805]; my emphasis)

Both encounters produce a loss of the sense of the progression of time: as Wordsworth gazes at the blind beggar, he is “smitten.”268 In the 1850 version, Wordsworth changes the word “looked” (622) to “gazed” (VII.648). And he compares the action of his mind, in both “Resolution and Independence” and The Prelude, to the action of “waters.”269
Contemplating the placard that the beggar holds, Wordsworth comes to understand, with a sudden force, that all that he can know about the blind beggar is that he cannot know him. The words on the placard, he realizes, symbolize the “utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and of the universe.” We never learn what the placard says, but in the context of this realization, it would be irrelevant, because language, he argues, cannot tell our stories properly. The pronoun, “we,” implies that readers are also implicated in this experience. We cannot presume to know the beggar by means of his “story” and, as a result, we can neither presume to describe ourselves, or even understand ourselves, by means of language. Wordsworth seems to take a similar lesson from his encounter with the leech-gatherer, whose spoken words are like the words on the placard the blind beggar bears.

Gazing on the beggar as he gazed on the leech-gatherer, the speaker does not engage in conversation with the man he describes. And yet, as in the case of the leech-gatherer, the gaze perhaps allows more understanding than language could. In the knowledge that we are like each other in that we cannot fully know each other, Wordsworth’s lonely gaze seems less self-centered, or less egotistical, than it might at first appear. Looking at the blind man, he acknowledges his own blindness; that is, his own inability to see beyond the “shapes” of people and how they affect him, together with how incapable he is of describing what he knows of himself beyond the “story” of “whence he came.”

In both of the encounters with the blind beggar and the leech gatherer, Wordsworth retreats from a model of self that relies on a metaphor of inwardness.
It is not necessarily the case that these men are hiding themselves, in the manner of a vice character, but rather that their language is not apt to describe their suffering. Neither does Wordsworth presume to read these old men’s faces as symbolic of the character or mind that lies beneath it. In this, he escapes a model of sympathy that requires him to “enter as it were” into another’s body in order to imagine another’s feelings.

II. Loneliness and clouds

Once it becomes possible that the leech-gatherer, like the blind beggar, might not have an “interior” to breach, Wordsworth’s comparison of him to a cloud might come to seem more understandable. Clouds, unlike human bodies, have no insides or outsides, suggesting that “interiority” is not the best symbol for lonely poets. Wordsworth creates a new model of poetic interiority through the repeated connection he makes between being cloud-like and being lonely. He gets rid of the metaphor of penetration that the gendered model of the mind as an “interior” relies upon. By moving the lonely mind out of its enclosure in the interior of a solitary body, and toward the model of the lonely cloud—a new model of lonely selfhood—the idea of the poet as a singular, unified figure starts to disintegrate.

Wordsworth’s loneliness is fundamentally different from solitude, because it doesn’t rely on the notion that a lone body encapsulates a lone imagination. Wordsworth frees loneliness from a metaphor that relies on an embodied or enclosed architectural model of self. Rather than imagining an “inward” mind interacting with “outward” nature, Wordsworth characterizes mental loneliness as a state of fluidity, where the concepts of inside and outside are less important. As a state of mind, Wordsworth’s
loneliness does not rely on a state of body. When he is “as a cloud,” in a state of mental fluidity, aesthetic experience becomes more possible—but linguistic communication is blocked.

This opposition between solitude as dejection and loneliness is also at issue in “Resolution and Independence.” In the beginning of the poem, he associates “joy” with floating on “high.” By contrast, he associates solitude with “sinking low,” “dejection,” “pain of heart, distress, and poverty”:

> But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might  
> Of joy in minds that can no further go,  
> As high as we have mounted in delight  
> In our dejection do we sink as low,  
> To me that morning did it happen so;  
> And fears and fancies thick upon me came;  
> Dim sadness-and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.  

The “fears and fancies” here are figured as a mob that surrounds the speaker, coming “thick” upon him. The image here is of a mind circumscribed by thoughts on all sides. Like Anne Finch at the end of “A Nocturnal Reverie,” who speaks of morning as a time when “All's confus'd again; / Our Cares, our Toils, our Clamours are renew'd, Or Pleasures, seldom reach'd, again pursu'd,” this speaker associates this morning not only with a dim sadness but a feeling that that sadness is “too high for syllables to speak.”

Loneliness, by contrast, characterizes a more liquid form of self. As the speaker moves from a state of dejection and melancholy to a state where “remembrances” have gone from him “wholly,” the sun makes water rise into the atmosphere, creating a “mist” increases his ability to perceive the landscape that he sees through it. The heavy rain
means that the streams are full, so that a pleasant noise of water fills the air. His
perception is enhanced in this liquid landscape:

The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;  
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.  
All things that love the sun are out of doors;  
The sky rejoices in the morning’s birth;  
The grass is bright with rain-drops;—on the moors,  
The hare is running races in her mirth;  
And with her feet she from the plashy earth  
Raises a mist, that, glittering in the sun,  
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.

I was a traveller then upon the moor;  
I saw the Hare that raced about with joy;  
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;  
Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:  
The pleasant season did my heart employ:  
My old remembrances went from me wholly;  
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy!

In the opening stanzas of the poem, the speaker travels with little thought of his “old
remembrances,” enabling him to perceive the hare that “races” in front of him, and hear
(or not hear) the noise of waters, without the oppression of “dim sadness” or “blind
thoughts” intervening (even as the magpie “chatters.”) Though he does not use the word
“lonely” in this section of the poem, the speaker indeed wanders “lonely as a cloud,” able
to gaze on the landscape that surrounds him. The word “Resolution” in the title of the
poem most obviously refers to the speaker’s firm intention to “think of the leech gatherer
on the lonely moor,” but it might also refer to the action of becoming liquid, as when
Hamlet desires his flesh to “resolve itself into a dew” (Act 1.2).

This link between loneliness and irresolute borders continues throughout
Wordsworth’s poetry. On top of Snowden, the climax of Book VI of The Prelude
Wordsworth once again depicts his mind as watery—this time as a “vapour.” Losing the boundaries of himself, he compares himself to a lonely traveler, lost in a cloud:

Imagination--here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say--
“T’I recognise thy glory:” in such strength
Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode…(Book VI, 593-603)

Just as Wordsworth associated lonely moor with the inability of language to communicate the leech-gatherer’s feeling, he draws attention to the incapacity of language to describe the imagination when he associates being lost in an “unfathered vapour” with the “incompetence of speech.” Paul Fry reads the cloud’s enwrapping as a metaphor for death, but it is just as possible to see this enwrapping as a kind of protection in that it makes the boundaries of self less obvious and therefore removes the sense that his mind is penetrable or vulnerable. Wordsworth makes this state of imaginative, lonely, cloud-like passivity one in which the “soul” is not “conscious.” Here “loneliness” describes a momentary liberation from consciousness. Being a “lonely traveler” describes an experience of the breakdown of the borders of self, rather than an experience of isolation. In the moment of loneliness, the poet doesn’t have mastery over himself or his experience. Rather, he has forgotten himself; he can only reconstitute his borders in retrospect. And only in retrospect, when Wordsworth narrates his experience from the position of solitude, can the imagination’s power be recognized as a “flash.”
Wordsworth often equates this feeling of being wrapped in a vapour with an imaginative mode in *The Prelude*. In Cambridge, he desires to find a watery “primeval grove” (III. 430) where he might “wander,” and, like the pelican he imagines there, engage in “lonely thought.” Because he had left the “Presences of Nature” behind, he feels the lack of places fit for “ruminating creatures” to inhabit when he gets to a town. But though he desires loneliness, he is instead stuck in solitude, where he must defend his eyes and ears from vexing chatter and trivial impresses, as if his mind is stuck inside the confines of his body:

A habitation sober and demure
For ruminating creatures; a domain
For quiet things to wander in; a haunt
In which the heron should delight to feed
By the shy rivers, and the pelican
Upon the cypress spire in lonely thought
Might sit and sun himself.—Alas! Alas!
In vain for such solemnity I looked;
Mine eyes were crossed by butterflies, ears vexed
By chattering popinjays; the inner heart
Seemed trivial, and the impresses without
Of a too gaudy region.                           (III, 435-446 [1805])

The “butterflies” and “popinjays” are wishful metaphors, in that they naturalize the image of students who flit and distract him in a far less pleasing manner than actual butterflies and popinjays would. In place of the natural sounds that Wordsworth desires, he is “vexed” by ineffectual “chattering.” Wordsworth wishes not only to be in the countryside but without a sense of himself as a circumscribed entity that must defend itself from assault from without, which he cannot seem to find in the town,

The solitude Wordsworth feels in Cambridge is akin to that he feels as a child, after he has stolen a boat and taken it out onto the lake in *The Prelude*. During this
traumatic episode, his mind, “in solitude,” turns in on itself, as he becomes unable to recognize outward scenes:

O’er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams. (Book I, 393-400)

Having seen the “spectacle” on the lake, Wordsworth does not only not remember “familiar shapes,” but can’t seem to take in new ones either. He must still have been surrounded by “trees” and “green fields,” but the images are no longer available to him, so focused has his brain become on the “dim and undetermined” workings of his memory. In this solitude, he imagines his mind to be a circumscribed space, forms moving “through” it both by night and day, as if it were an enclosed container, with an entrance and an exit.

This distinction between loneliness as a cloud-like and solitude as a more contained experience is also apparent in Wordsworth’s short lyric on daffodils. This is the earliest version, first published in Poems in Two Volumes (1807):

I wandered lonely as a Cloud
That floats on high o’er Vales and Hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd
A host of dancing Daffodills;
Along the Lake, beneath the trees,
Ten thousand dancing in the breeze.

The waves beside them danced, but they Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:—
A Poet could not but be gay;
In such a laughing company
I gaz’d—and gaz’d—but little thought
What wealth the shew to me had brought:

178
For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the Daffodils. 276

By contrast to the lonely experience of wandering, floating, gazing and “little thought”
that characterizes loneliness, the “bliss of solitude,” together with the “vacant” or
“pensive” mood from which it arises, are each bounded, bordered, delimited experiences.
In “solitude,” Wordsworth’s mind is located within the tangible, circumscribed limits of a
solitary body. When he opposes the “inward eye” to its implied opposite, he sets up an
opposition between inwardness and the outside of the body. Wordsworth perhaps recalls
Hamlet’s “mind’s eye” again, which suggests a comparison to the Prince here too (1.2).
When speaking of Hamlet, Claudius marks the difference between “the exterior” and the
“inward man” (2.1). In solitude, the poet’s mind inhabits a circumscribed space, with the
“eye” as its entryway and exit. It was in fact Mary Wordsworth, rather than William, who
composed the lines “They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude,” but
she intuited a pattern that persists elsewhere in his poetry. We have seen “flashes” in
close proximity to lonely gazing before, both in “Resolution and Independence,” and in
The Prelude. 277

Because Wordsworth highlights the opposition between loneliness and solitude by
placing them at opposite ends of the poem, this poem has been read as a narrative of a
conversion experience from melancholy wandering to “bliss.” 278 Kenneth Eisold reads the
memorial reconstruction that occurs during the “bliss of solitude” as preferable to the
“lonely” gazing that precedes it. 279 According to this reading, “wealth” of the show lies in
the notion that the mind is a storehouse to be used for future consolation. But loneliness is not necessarily the melancholy version of solitude that needs to be converted into “bliss.”

Clouds are not known for their loneliness. Though, for many readers, the simile “lonely as a cloud” simply conjures an image of a singular speaker who wanders alone like a lone cloud, the simile in fact requires readers to imagine something quite unusual. Many kinds of clouds cannot easily be construed as self-contained entities: it is not always clear when a single “cloud” becomes the plural, “clouds.” They are mutable and roll into each other; it is often difficult to say where one cloud begins and another ends. Even when a cloud can be called singular, because it seems, from a distance, to have clearly defined edges, it is rare to see only one such cloud in the sky. In general, singularity (for which loneliness can be a synonym) is neither a typifying characteristic, nor a common attribute, of clouds. Like daffodils, they are most likely to be found in crowds. If clouds are not by nature singular, the simile “lonely as a cloud” could suggest that Wordsworth’s loneliness is cloud-like in other ways. According to this framework, Wordsworth’s theoretical distinction between loneliness and solitude doesn’t rely so much on the difference between singularity and plurality, as Marjorie Levinson has suggested as on the difference between being aware and unaware of one’s consciousness.280

The experience of “wandering lonely,” as well as gazing on daffodils, occurs in a far less enclosed setting than the “bliss of solitude.” As opposed to the bounded room in which the couch lies, lonely wandering takes place out in an open space, with more indefinite contours. Though the picture of a “cloud,” “vales” and “hills” frames the
portrait of the daffodils, they are merely similes that describe facets of the speaker’s lonely wandering; they do not necessarily describe the space he actually occupies. Indeed, we are given very little detail about this setting; it has no definitive edges. Wandering, too, is a far less deliberative or bounded experience than lying on a couch. To “wander” is to move vaguely without purpose; to drift; to be unconcerned about time. In Wordsworth’s poem on Tintern Abbey, the river “wanders,” suggesting that it is an action Wordsworth associated with liquidity. (He might also have remembered that Milton associates wandering with loneliness in *Paradise Lost*; since Milton used the term to describe Satan’s erring “lonely steps” (*PL*, II. 828).

It makes more sense to align vacancy and pensiveness with solitude, than with loneliness. Certainly, there is enjoyment involved in the solitude: “bliss” can mean “perfect joy,” and the heart exuberantly “dances” during it. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the speaker values the recollected experience of the daffodils more highly than the original experience of gazing on them, or that he wishes to eliminate, cure or replace loneliness with the “bliss of solitude.” The problem with the bliss of solitude is that it replaces the possibility of new perception. When the “inward eye” is occupied, it seems to shut down the “outward eye,” and with it, receptivity to one’s surroundings. If the “inward eye” had been active during lonely wandering, the original experience of the daffodils would presumably not have occurred in the same way. We have already seen how Wordsworth represents his speaker’s mind in terms of containment inside a body, underscoring the boundary between the inside and the outside of his mind by making reference to his “inward eye.” The eye provides a window on the world, as if the mind’s limits were bounded by the head that encases it. The eye, in effect, functions like the door
or window of a study. And indeed, the speaker on the couch in the bliss of solitude not only asks to imagine that the action of his mind is constrained by the outline of his skull; he also asks us to imagine that his body is enclosed by the walls of a room. During the “bliss of solitude,” the speaker is also immobilized on the “couch,” and therefore presumably held within the limits of four walls, with movement and new sights unlikely. In solitude, his heart also “fills” with pleasure, as if it is another kind of container. All of these images serve to align solitude with being in a confined space.

The “bliss of solitude” is bounded by the limits of space, as well as by the limits of time, since the past is firmly differentiated from the present during the experience. The inward eye sees the daffodils in a “flash,” which suggests that time on the couch is compartmentalized and understood in terms of sequential units. The “flash” is transitory; it allows no room for prolonged gazing and suggests a delimited chronology. Moreover, the difference between the speaker’s past and present self are more palpable during solitude. To be aware of one’s “mood” is to be cognizant of one’s situation in a temporal continuum, since a mood is usually defined by Wordsworth as a temporary state. To say that one is in a “pensive mood,” is also to be cognizant of one’s psychological weather; as the OED puts it, to be pensive is to be “sorrowfully thoughtful.” To be in any “mood” is not merely to be engaged in deep thought, but also to be aware that one is engaged in it.

Loneliness, by contrast to solitude, is a non-deliberative condition of “little thought,” which is productive of the mental state necessary for poetic “gazing.” Wordsworth’s assertion that he “little thought” what wealth to him the show had brought is usually taken to mean that it would have been better had he realized what “wealth” he
was accumulating *while* he was accumulating it. The use of the word “but” seeming to signal the speaker’s self-reproof for not thinking. One might assume, from reading Wordsworth’s description of the relationship between a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and the “recollection in tranquility” in the “Preface” to the third edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, that “thought” is required to convert the experience of the daffodils into a meaningful poetic experience.  

However this reference to “little thought” need not signal regret. A phase of “little thought” may equally suggest a pleasurable escape from attention or comprehension, a momentary, though indefinite, liberation from the bounds of solitude and consciousness more generally. It might signal a flight from memory, and with it, an escape from the bounds of selfhood. The indefinite period of gazing with “little thought” is productive to the extent that it allows a space for contemplation. Knowing nothing of present, past or future, the lonely gazer dwells in the moment without awareness of that dwelling. Loneliness enhances unmediated perception of the daffodils.

By contrast to the more compartmentalized “flashes” that the inward eye sees, the discovery of the daffodils, “all at once,” is an experience that takes place outside of sequential time. The phrase “I gazed—and gazed—” implies that knowledge of time was suspended during the observation. The verb is repeated even though the experience is described in the past tense, implying that there was an extended period of gazing where time was not experienced as compartmentalized, rather than suggesting that there were two discrete actions of gazing. The typography of the 1805 edition emphasizes this, since the em-dashes that surround the words “gaz’d—and gaz’d—both symbolize the prolongation of time and extend the time it takes to read the poem. Just like the cloud, the
words denoting gazing “float” in space. During his gazing, the speaker makes no attempt to move deliberatively forward, either in space or in thought.

The cloud’s movement is also indefinite. To “float” is to inhabit a space without the intention to move in a specific direction. “Floating,” for this reason, often signifies an absence of concern about time, and the encounter with the daffodils that follows the lonely wandering seems to take place outside of marked time. To float is also to be between water and air, and Wordsworth thematises liminality, especially in his revised 1815 version of the poem. Here the daffodils don’t merely dance “along the lake,” but can be found on the “margin” of the bay. A “margin” is a liminal space, a boundary that is made less definite by the way that the waves constantly move it back and forth. Similarly, the daffodils are now compared with stars, so it becomes hard to tell them apart from one another, as, water and air become “continuous”:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought…
Though, on the surface of the poem, the lonely wanderer praises the “bliss” of solitude, his loneliness at the same time allows an escape from the boundedness of isolation, which is more apparent during solitude than otherwise. Inhabiting a mode of “little thought” allows the lonely wanderer to be free from the knowledge of the difference between “inward” and outward which means that it could also be seen to allow a momentary release from what might just as well be called the *crisis*, as the bliss, of solitude. Loneliness makes perception more possible. The problem for Wordsworth, as a lonely poet, is that he cannot actively decide to be “lonely,” and even when he has achieved loneliness, solitude inevitably returns. In order to be able to narrate the workings of the imagination, he must have returned to the confines of a mind bounded by the outline of a solitary body.

Wordsworth associates vacancy and pensiveness with solitude, to the extent that they too are bounded by the limits of time and space. Vacancy might at first seem similar to loneliness, because to be vacant is to be detached or unoccupied, which seems like it might be an attribute of loneliness. But the concept of vacancy also requires the notion that thoughts are somehow contained by the mind, since in order for something to be “vacant,” or empty, it must be defined in terms of a bounded space. Wordsworth’s vacancy is also temporally inscribed: if the speaker has an awareness of the emptiness of his mind, he must also be looking backward to a time when it was not so empty. Similarly, one cannot be lonely “like a cloud” when “pensive” because it is the opposite to a state of “little thought.” Solitude, pensiveness and vacancy are all states that prohibit lonely “gazing.”
Wordsworth also suggests that the pensiveness that occurs on the couch is much closer to a state of “dejection” than loneliness. The passage from pensiveness to the bliss of solitude, unlike the passage of loneliness to solitude, is more obviously a description of a conversion from something like dejection to something like happiness. When “pensive,” the speaker marks himself as much more mentally isolated than when he depicts himself as wandering lonely. Though the flashes of the “bliss of solitude” are pleasurable, looking on the “inward eye” does not necessarily improve, so much as transform, the original experience of lonely gazing.

Since Wordsworth frequently stresses his proclivity for solitude on hillsides and mountaintops, his lonely wandering has been read as part of a desire to be far from others, and his loneliness has been understood in terms of his solitariness. Moreover, because he allies the condition of being a “lonely traveler” with a state in which he is most able to engage his imagination, he has also been seen to use his bodily solitariness as a metaphor to describe his imaginative isolation. Literary historians have also suggested that Wordsworth’s penchant for representing himself as lonely changed the concept’s meaning.

Wordsworth’s loneliness is neither a straightforward synonym for physical solitude, nor is it always equivalent with dejection. Instead, Wordsworth wants to suggest that being lonely is less about being solitary or dejected than about inhabiting a state of consciousness in which he is able to escape himself and forget that he has emotions altogether. He is careful to distinguish loneliness from solitude, and he makes loneliness, rather than solitude, a necessary condition for imaginative aesthetic experience.
III. Loneliness and crowds

For Wordsworth, it’s almost *impossible* to feel “lonely” in crowds. John Plotz argues that Wordsworth gives us the quintessential picture of modern loneliness amidst a crowd, but he is actually very careful to avoid calling himself lonely in such situations. Unlike Plotz, Wordsworth does not see loneliness as equivalent with “alienation.” Instead, loneliness is something that Wordsworth craves when amidst other people, because it paradoxically allows him to feel less alienated from them. Wordsworth is not often lonely when amidst multitudes; instead he is in what he would call “solitude.” The heuristic I am taking to read his description of the crowd at Bartholomew Fair in *The Prelude* comes from his lyric “I wandered lonely.” In fact, this text shares a striking number of words and images with the description of the “crowd” of daffodils. It is useful to compare the poems in order to better understand this relationship between loneliness and solitude:

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What a hell
For eyes and ears, what anarchy and din
Barbarian and infernal — ’tis a dream
Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound.
Below, the open space, through every nook
Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive
With heads; the midway region and above,
Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,
Dumb proclamations of the prodigies;
And chattering monkeys dangling from their poles,
And children whirling in their roundabouts;
With those that stretch the neck and strain the eyes,
And crack the voice in rivalry, the crowd
Inviting; with buffoons against buffoons
Grimacing, writhing, screaming… (VII, 659-674 [1805])
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These people “twinkle,” rather like the stars on the “milky way” to which Wordsworth compares the daffodils in the 1815 version of the daffodils lyric. He also sees the group
of people metonymically, as a group of “heads,” just as he had seen the daffodils. But despite these similarities, Wordsworth cannot “gaze” on this crowd of people as he could gaze on the daffodils, because he is once again distracted by “chattering.” He emphasizes how the behavior of this crowd makes lonely gazing—that is, perception than occurs with “little thought”—impossible. In the 1850 revision, there are “thousands upon thousands” (VII.724) of people in the city, just as there are “ten thousand” daffodils at a glance.

The comparison between these poems also asks us to compare how Wordsworth’s loneliness alters his relationship to people, as well as nature. The encounter with the crowd of daffodils in “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” which ostensibly describes an experience that takes place in isolation, could be read as an allegory for an encounter with a crowd of people. Wordsworth repeatedly anthropomorphizes the flowers: the daffodils are not only a “crowd,” but “company.” They “dance” and are filled with “glee”; in the 1815 version of the poem, they are also “tossing their heads.” But unlike the crowd of daffodils, the crowd at Bartholomew Fair repeatedly assaults him with images and sounds. These lines emphasize that the speaker is aware of his body as a circumscribed entity in this situation, since the openings, the “eyes” and “ears,” are attacked, and breached, by what lies outside them. The mind, which processes the “shock” of that which confronts it, is located within the circumscribed space of the head. In this situation of solitude amid the crowd, the speaker’s mind is vulnerable, mimicking his bodily vulnerability at the Fair. He encourages readers to imagine his mind as surrounded and bordered by other minds, which inhabit the bodies that similarly threaten him. Desperate to escape the “press and danger of the crowd,” he mimetically makes the syntax more and more oppressive. Compound adjectives and nouns, together with the surfeit of present
participles; “chattering,” “whirling,” “inviting,” “grimacing,” “writhing,” “screaming,”
seem to throng around him. This proliferation of verbs, together with the sheer length of
the long enjambed sentence that describes the scene, provides a sense of the speaker’s
mental disorder. The setting, in which “tents and booths, as if the whole were one vast
mill, / Are vomiting, receiving on all sides, Men, Women, three-years’ / Children, Babes
in arms” (719-21) recalls a Spenserian nightmare. The crowd takes on the form of the
Error, vomiting “deformed monsters” of children from her “filthy maw” (I.i.22). The
procession of people and the noise make his experience of time sequential: the chattering,
the crack of the voice, the screaming, the hurdy-gurdy, in turn, all prevent loneliness. The
different elements of Bartholomew Fair are too distracting for any one of them to be
properly perceived.

Just as Milton had called on the Muse Urania to carry his body from the sky to
the ground in Paradise Lost directly after he had described himself as being
“compassed round by solitude,” Wordsworth calls on the Muse to “waft” his entire
person “on her wings” up into the sky. He is instantly raised above the chaos.
Wordsworth’s vantage point, high above the crowd, might seem to make him “lonely as a
cloud,” but because he seems firmly aware of his body in this scene, his experience is
more enclosed, and therefore more like solitude (if not “bliss”). He does not say that he
views Bartholomew Fair “as” from above; instead, he depicts his whole body as being
carried upwards from it:

From those sights
Take one, an annual festival, the fair,
Holden where martyrs suffered in past time,
And named of St. Bartholomew, there, see
A work that’s finished to our hands, that lays,
If any spectacle on earth can do,
The whole creative powers of man asleep.
For once the Muse’s help will we implore,
And she shall lodge us, wafted on her wings,
Above the press and danger of the crowd—
Upon some showman’s platform. (VII.649-659 [1805])

Once he has conjured such a fantastical itinerary, it would be easy to leave his body behind, but in this state of solitude, he is unwilling entirely to discard it. The showman could be both a participant of the fair and a reference to the kind of poet who appeals to the Muse. The restraints of solitude—that is, the spatial and temporal delimitation of perception—are very much present while Wordsworth stands lodged on the “showman’s platform.”

Wordsworth’s additions to this passage 1850 Prelude emphasize the way in which the “what” and “wither” distract him from properly engaging with people when he is amidst multitudes:

How oft, amid those overflowing streets,
Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said
Unto myself, “The face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery!”
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
Until the shapes before my eyes became
A second-sight procession, such as glides
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams… (VII, 626-634 [1850])

Looking and not ceasing to look recalls the poet’s “gazing,” but the impetus to keep looking is spurred on by “oppressive” thoughts. The description summons an image of a mind pressed upon by impressions bombarding him. Because Wordsworth mentions the “faces” of the people that go by, rather than their persons, their faces seem to say more than the text they might speak. In any case, he stops being able to see the faces themselves. Yet the more he looks on the faces before him, the more they lose definition.
The mind interferes with perception, so that the image becomes “a second-sight procession.” Wordsworth equates loneliness with a pre-linguistic state. In solitude, or moments where poetic perception is less possible, language intervenes. For Wordsworth, it is in moments of tension between solitude and loneliness, that aesthetic experience—poetry—becomes suddenly possible. Wordsworth’s loneliness allows for aesthetic experience, not because it allows space for introspection, but because it allows space for a break from it, and a release from the very metaphor of interiority.

Though critics have often understood Wordsworth’s loneliness to find a point of origin in Hamlet’s solitariness, his condition shares more in common with Ophelia, because he depicts loneliness as a silent, passive condition in which his imagination is vulnerable. Like Thomas Gray, Charlotte Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth repeatedly links loneliness to inarticulacy and obstructed communication, betraying an anxiety that he cannot always communicate—or, as Milton might put it, “converse”—as well as he would like to. Because Wordsworth uses the words lonely and loneliness to mark moments when he either desires to know or to be known by another, his loneliness is not egotistical, but rather, fundamentally social in orientation—even when his social desires are frustrated.

IV. Romantic loneliness: “To mingle with the universe”

Wordsworth’s new model for the lonely mind was influential. Byron and Shelley were both interested in the idea that the lonely poet is a liquid being (who nonetheless finds that liquidity impossible to properly describe). In one of the most famous passages
of Byron’s epic poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, he relates loneliness to an experience of “mingling” with the universe:

> There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
> There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
> There is society where none intrudes,  
> By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:  
> I love not Man the less, but Nature more,  
> From these our interviews, in which I steal  
> From all I may be, or have been before,  
> To mingle with the Universe, and feel  
> What I can ne’er express, yet cannot all conceal.²⁹⁰

This exchange unfolds, not via language per se, but via feeling: he “feels” what he “can ne’er express.” Though there no people, Childe Harold feels a sociability with nature. Despite his feeling that language is inadequate to describe his experience, Childe Harold associates loneliness with the feeling that he might commingle with the universe. In the pathless woods, on the lonely shore, he loses himself enough to find communion with Nature, which he nonetheless figures in terms of human sociability.” There is a society where none intrudes;” he says, using the word “interviews,” usually used for people, to describe his conversation with nature.

Freed from the vulnerability that comes of inhabiting a model of the imagination that relies on the difference between “inward” and outward selves, Romantic poets repeatedly use the “gazing” that occurs within loneliness to describe aesthetic experiences. Keats imagines a similar mingling with the universe in his “Ode to a Nightingale”:

> O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
>     Cool’d a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
> Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
>     Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
> O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
>     Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
    And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
    And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
    What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
    Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
    Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. 291

Freed from the vulnerability that comes of inhabiting a model of the imagination that relies on the difference between “inward” and outward selves, Romantic poets repeatedly use the “gazing” that occurs within loneliness to describe aesthetic experiences.

In “Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude,” Shelley describes a youth who, “led forth” by his imagination, ventures through foreign lands in order to “contemplate the universe.” 292 Shelley repeatedly foregrounds loneliness as an attribute of Alastor’s imaginative drive: he stays awake during “lone and silent hours”; he visits the grave of a Poet who “lived…died” and “sung in solitude”; he seeks strange truths in “many a wide waste and tangled wilderness”; he lingers “long / in lonesome vales,” and retreats to a “loneliest dell” in Cashmire. 293 When he arrives in Ethiopia, he has an experience amidst the ruins very reminiscent of Wordsworth’s in “I wandered lonely as a cloud.” He uses much of the same diction in order to describe the poetic inspiration that “flashes” on his “vacant mind” as he “gazes” at the ruins:

    He lingered, poring on memorials
    Of the world’s youth, through the long burning day
    Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
    Filled the mysterious hall with floating shades
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time. 294

Alastor does not “suspend” his task and in turn, time is suspended while he gazes. The repetition of that word serves to strengthen the sense of his absorption. Loneliness in “Alastor” is the prelude to inspiration, though Shelley retains the sense that the mind is a kind of container that can be “vacant” or full of meaning.

In “Mont Blanc,” Shelley similarly describes how gazing on the mountain can counteract the mind’s vacancy:

In the lone glare of day, the snows descend
Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them:-Winds contend
Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
Over the snow. The secret strength of things
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind’s imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy? 295

For this speaker, solitude and silence need not mean emptiness, but instead act as a prelude to poetic plenitude. Implicitly, Shelley compares the poet’s imaginings with the powerful flashes of lightning whose force seems magnified by the emptiness of the snowy waste. The paradox of this poem is that though the lightning on the lone mountain is supposedly voiceless and though supposedly, no-one is there to witness the snow falling, the speaker of the poem is in fact giving both voice. Silence and solitude allow Shelley’s speaker to be inhabited by the mountain in order to produce a poem about it.
Caspar David Friedrich’s 1818 painting *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (see Appendix II) has been used to depict Hamlet as often as it has been used to illustrate the work of Wordsworth and even depict the poet himself. From Laurence and Olivier’s film of *Hamlet*, to a recent 2008 stage production, directors have used the painting as inspiration for the backdrop for Hamlet’s soliloquies. The stock image of the solitary, black-clad figure, whose outline stands in stark contrast to the vague mists that surround him at the top of a mountain, is a classic emblem for the figure of the Romantic lonely poet. But a comparison of Wordsworth’s loneliness with that of Hamlet has been misleading. Paying close attention to the way in which Wordsworth describes states of loneliness asks us to alter our gaze when looking at Friedrich’s painting. When looking for an appropriate visual representation of the Romantic lonely poets’ imagination, instead of becoming fascinated on the outline of the lonely poet’s silhouette, we should instead look to the mists that surround him. Wordsworth was able to rescue loneliness for lonely poets when he used it to describe a cloud-like state in which the imagination can be freed from the constraints of the metaphor of “interiority.”
APPENDIX I: Plan of Pope’s grotto as measured by Samuel Lewis in 1785
APPENDIX II: Caspar David Friedrich’s Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818)
INTRODUCTION


5 In recent article in the popular magazine, Psychology Today, Hara Estroff Marano suggests that this opposition between solitude and loneliness still remains current: Solitude is the state of being alone without being lonely. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself. Solitude is desirable, a state of being alone where you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company. ….Loneliness is harsh, punishment, a deficiency state, a state of discontent marked by a sense of estrangement, an awareness of excess aloneness…. Solitude is something you choose. Loneliness is imposed on you by others…. Solitude is something one chooses, loneliness is something you don’t. Hara Estroff Marano, “What is solitude?” Psychology Today, (July 1, 2003). http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200308/what-is-solitude.


7 The Early English Books Online database suggests that fifty-five had authors recorded the word “solitude” before 1600. Only three authors had recorded the word “loneliness” by that point.

I have used a digital online database of texts in order to trace where and when the terms “lonely” and “loneliness” actually appear in English literature, from their first records onwards. *Early English Books Online*, together with *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, the two most comprehensive databases of the literature of these periods currently available, make it possible to chart a detailed genealogy of where loneliness appears across a wide range of canonical and non-canonical texts.

Mr. Steele to Dr. Swift, October 8, 1729. Quoted in Vol. 1 of *Letters, written by Jonathan Swift, D.D. Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin, and several of his friends. From the year 1703 to 1740*, ed. John Hawkesworth (London: T. Davies, in Russel-Street, Covent-Garden, 1767), 39.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Table Talk”, in *Coleridge’s Writings on Shakespeare*, (New York: Capricorn, 1959), 140.


“Hamlet’s heart was full of such Misery as mine is when he said to Ophelia ‘Go to a Nunnery, go, go!’ Indeed I should like to give up the matter at once—I should like to die. I am sickened at the brute world which you are smiling with.” John Keats, quoted in Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History, from the Restoration to the Present* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 103.

It was possible for me to read through every record of where the terms lonely and loneliness appear between 1600 and 1700, but the *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* database reveals too many examples than can easily be read between 1700-1750. Between 1700 and 1750, ECCO lists 2648 records for “lonely” and 96 records for “loneliness.” Nevertheless, it is still possible to observe trends. I paid attention to the authors who repeat the term most often in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. Aphra Behn, John Dryden, together with Anne Finch, who is notable for being the first poet to depict loneliness within a space of poetic retreat.
CHAPTER ONE: LONELY ROMANCE


22 As EEBO has it, the English translator of *The exercise of a Christian life*, an Italian text by Gaspar de Loarte, is the first author to record “loneliness”; Philip Sidney is the second. I consider this passage from *The exercise of a Christian life* in more detail in chapter two.

23 *Early English Books Online*, the most comprehensive database of early modern texts currently available, makes more of loneliness’ history available to us than ever before. Though this database is not exhaustive, and though we have lost many of the more ephemeral printed materials that would have been available to readers in 1600, the collection gives a sense of literature’s trends.

24 EEBO records that Martin Luther, Robert King, John Bourchier Berners, William Whittingham, Miles Coverdale, Matteo Bandello, Conrad Heresbach, Andreas Hyperius, Urbanus Rhegius, John Calvin, John Foxe, Brian Melbandeke, George Whetstone all used the word “lonely” as a synonym for “only.”

25 “There is but lytell dyfference bytwene these woundes and yᵉ woundes in yᵉ armes but a lonely the wounde of the thyghe is of ten deedly.” Hieronymus Brunschwig, “Of the wounde in the thyghe,” *The noble experyence of the vertuous handy warke of surgeri, practysyd [and] compyled by the moost experte mayster Iherome of Bruynswyke* (London: Petrus Treueris, 1525), Ca. liiij.

26 “In which lytel warke if ony newe thynges be of me / it is a lonely yᵉ I haue put these partes in a more clere ordre / & haue made them a lytel more easy to yong wyttes / tha~me thynketh they were before.” John Colet, “A lytell proheme to the boke,” in *Rudimenta grammatices et docendi methodus non tam scholae Gypsuichianae per reuerendissimum* (London: Petrus Treueris, 1525).

27 “But it was nat longe after that the other of that affynyte, herynge of the enprysonement of theyr felowes / assembled theym of newe, and lyke woode men ranne vnto the prysons / & nat a lonely deluyed theyr felowes, but also many other whych laye there for great causes & crymes / & some suche as were condemnpd to deth for theyr transgressyons.
whan notice of this great outrage and ryot came vnto ȳe kyng / anone he sent thyder…”.
Robert Fabyan, *Fabyan’s chronycle newly prynted, wyth the cronycle, actes, and dedes done in the tyme of the reygne of the moste excellent prynce kynge Henry the vii. father vnto our most dread souerayne lord kynge Henry the viii.* (London: Wylylym Rastell, 1533).

28 “Nowe it is well knowen to all after that I holde my peace, that the auncyentes haue well loued shortnes of speche, and pryncypally for that cause. Nat a lonely Hyppocrate, but also all the o|ther auncyentes.” Guy De Chauliac, *The questyonary of cyrurgynes with the formulary of lytell Guydo in cyrurgie, with the spectacles of cyrurgynes newly added, with the fourth boke of the Terapentyke [sic], or methode curatyfe of Claude Galyen prynce of physyciens, with a synguler treaty of the cure of vleres* (London: Robert Wyer for Henry Dabbe and Rycharde Banckes, 1542). [No page numbers; *Early English Books Online* document image 111.]

29 Thomas Gascoigne, *Here after folowith the boke callyd the myrroure of Oure Lady very necessary for all relygyous persones* (London: Richarde Fawkes, 1530), xxxi.

30 John Lydgate, *Lyf of our Lady, or, This boke is compyled by Dan Iohn Lydgate monke of Burye, at the excitacion [and] styrynge of the noble and victorious prynce, Kynge Henry the fiftieth, [n] the honour glorie [and] reuerence of the byrthe of our moste blessed Lady, maybe, wyfe, [and] mother of our lorde Iesu Christe, chapitred as foloweth by this table* London, Fletestrete: Robert Redman, 1531), Ca. xiii.

31 Sidney, *Arcadia.* (1593), 179.


33 The phrase “solitary place” is much more common in early modern literature than “lonely place.” There are 82 examples of the phrase “solitary place” on *EEBO* before it is cited in the *Arcadia*.


36 Sidney, *Arcadia* (1593), 120.

37 Sidney, *Arcadia* (1593), 120.

38 Sidney, *Arcadia* (1593), 45.
In his translation of Virgil’s tenth Eclogue, W. L. Gent sketches a similar locus amoenus. He uses the word “lonely” to translate Virgil’s word solus twice:

The very shrubbs, and Laurels for him wept:
And (as hee lay under his lonely Rock,)
The Pene-tree Melus, and frozen stones
Of chill Eyus, him with teares bemones.
And all the Rocks, about him flocking were;
He chooses to live and lament in a lonely cave:


I now will goe, and to my selfe reherse Those songs, which erst, I, in Calcidick verse, On the Sicilian Shepheards Pipe, did frame: Much rather chusing, mongst the beasts untame, Henceforth to suffer in this lonely Cave, And there, my love, in barke of Trees ingrave, That as they growe, (my Love) thou als’ mayst growe

(Gent, Virgil’s Eclogues, 179).

Sidney, Arcadia (1593), 15.

Sidney, Arcadia (1593), 49.


George Wither, Epithalamia: or Nuptiall poems vpon the most blessed and happie mariage betweene the high and mightie Prince Frederick the fifth (London : Imprinted [by F. Kingston] for Edward Marchant, 1612). [No page numbers; Early English Books Online document images 4-6].

Wither associates loneliness with a dark grave in his Abuses Stript (1613), when he asks a singular “reader” to imagine the “lonely darknesse” of his night-time bed as a lonely grave which he is trapped inside. Both are spaces of enclosure that nonetheless make it more likely that terrifying images will penetrate into the imagination; inside the grave, “monstrous visages” appear to the imagination. He imagines that the imagination runs wild in dark loneliness, in which the mind makes a hell of the blank darkness it contemplates: Milton imagines something similar happens to the Lady in Comus. George

When George Wither and Lady Mary Wroth depict poet-like figures vying with the question of whether the disadvantages of loneliness might outweigh the benefits it confers, they foreshadow the tension of loneliness at the heart of eighteenth century poetry.


Wroth, *Urania*, 3.

Wroth, *Urania*, 325.


Similarly, Dolorindus writes a poem to Amphilanthus to explain that he would prefer to be punished all at once and sit “lonely” with that punishment:

```plaintext
Fully torment me now, and what is best
Together take, and mem’ry with the rest,
Leaue not that to me, since but for my ill,
Which punish may, and millions of hearts kill.
Then may I lonely sit downe with my losse
Without vexation, for my losses crosse. (Wroth, *Urania*, 111).
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Wroth, *Urania*, 43.

**CHAPTER TWO: SHAKESPEARE’S LONELINESS**


“Loneliness” is in *Hamlet* and *All’s Well that Ends Well*, “lonely” in *The Winter’s Tale*, *Coriolanus* and *Titus Andronicus*. 
“Lonely, apart:] The old copy—lovely. STEEVENS. lovely, i. charity, with more than ordinary regard and ten-, derness. The Oxford editor reads: Lonely, apart: As if it could be apart without being alone. WARBURTON. I am yet inclined to lonely, which in the old angular writing cannot be distinguished from lovely. To say, that I keep it alone, separate from the veil, is a pleonasm which scarcely any nicety declines. JOHNSON. The same error is found in many other places in the first folio. In King Richard III we find this very error: "Advantaging their love with interest “Often times double." Here we have hue instead of lone, the old spelling of loan. MALONE.” The plays and poems of William Shakespeare: with the corrections and illustrations of various commentators [James Boswell, Edmond Malone, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Edward Capell, George Steevens, Richard Farmer, Nicholas Rowe], ed. anon., (London: C. Baldwin, 1821), 421.

“Now I see the mystery of your loneliness:] The old copy reads—loveliness. STEEVENS. The mystery of her loveliness is beyond my comprehension : the old Countess is saying nothing ironical, nothing taunting, or in reproach, that this word should find a place here ; which it could not, unless sarcastically employed, and with some spleen. I dare warrant the poet meant his old lady should say no more than this : “I now find the mystery of your creeping into corners, and weeping, and pining in secret." For this reason I have amended the text, loneliness. The Steward, in the foregoing scene, where he gives the Countess intelligence of Helena's behaviour, says — "Alone she was, and did communicate to herself, her own words to her own ears." THEOBALD. The late Mr. Hall had corrected this, I believe, rightly,—your lowliness. TYRWHITT. I think Theobald’s correction as plausible. To choose solitude is a mark of love. STEEVENS.” The plays and poems of William Shakespeare: with the corrections and illustrations of various commentators [James Boswell, Edmond Malone, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Edward Capell, George Steevens, Richard Farmer, Nicholas Rowe], ed. anon., (London: C. Baldwin, 1821), 347.


There are only 4 attestations of “lone” from before 1625 recorded in the OED; the dictionary suggests that usage became suddenly popular around 1740.

Peter McCullough, “Christmas at Elsinore,” *Essays in Criticism* 58, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 324. McCullough makes his argument that “lowliness” should replace “loneliness” in service of his reading that Polonius intends to compare Ophelia to Mary. He imagines that Shakespeare means to invoke thoughts of *The Magnificat*, the verse that Mary sang upon telling her cousin Elizabeth of the Annunciation, in his audience, since it includes the word “lowliness” (“My soul doth magnify the Lord, /And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour. / For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden”). His point about Ophelia’s Marian resemblance is persuasive, without making his textual emendation necessary.


“Loneliness”: “Want of society or company; the condition of being alone or solitary; solitariness, loneness” (*OED*, 1a). Compare “lonely”: “Of persons, etc., their actions, condition, etc.: Having no companionship or society; unaccompanied, solitary, lone.” (*OED*, 1a) It is not until the nineteenth century, the dictionary argues, that “loneliness” comes to mean “The feeling of being alone; the sense of solitude; dejection arising from want of companionship or society” (3); and “lonely,” “Dejected because of want of company or society; sad at the thought that one is alone; having a feeling of solitariness” (my emphasis).

Ricks argues that Wordsworth and Byron who first gave the word its “strong emotional coloring.” See chapter six for a more detailed engagement with this claim. Christopher Ricks, “Loneliness and Poetry,” *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 268.

Katherine Eisaman Maus gives a detailed overview of this debate about whether Hamlet has “an authentic personal interior.” She cites the arguments of Francis Barker, Catherine Belsey, Jean Howard, Jonathan Goldberg, Patricia Fumerton, Kay Stockholder,

68 This is not to say that the tendency to give Hamlet a psychology has disappeared from criticism entirely. Indeed, this often happens when critics use the word “lonely.” Jerome Rinkus, for instance, argues that “we can identify with Hamlet’s loneliness because, in the words of David Bevington, ‘Every human being is unique and believes that others can never fully understand or appreciate him.’” Jerome J. Rinkus, “Hamlet and Don Quixote,” *Perspectives on Hamlet: Collected Papers of the Bucknell-Ssquehanna Colloquium on Hamlet, April 27 and 28, 1973*, eds. William G. Holzberger and Peter B. Waldeck (Cranbury, N. J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1975). More recently, Sarah Beckwith evoked the relationship between loneliness and interiority when she described Shakespeare’s frequent depiction of characters who express “the terrible, world-and-soul-destroying split between a self that “passeth show” and a face and body that can only betray a mind too lonely and inaccessible to be expressed.” Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2011), 1.

69 Lynch continues: “in a related development, he also acquired a youth. He began, that is to exist not only within the expanse of time delimited in the play but also in a happier epoch, before the death of his father.” Lynch argues that Hamlet became a round character in the 1770s and 80s, nourished, as she puts it, “by a psychological subtext that is nowhere stated in print” and encouraged by the “homage” of some of the first character critics, like Maurice Morgann, Henry Mackenzie, William Richardson and Thomas Robertson. Deirdre Lynch, *The Economy of Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 134-137.


72 It is not that “theatrical externals conceal an inaccessible inwardness,” Maus argues, but that inwardness is always theatrical, even when unveiled. Maus, *Inwardness*, 29.


75 “The image of a solitary woman with a book in her hand was conventionally interpreted as representing an attitude of prayer and devoutness” so that the scene presents

Also: “The book, we presume, is a religious text since he describes her as “devotion’s visage. This perception is confirmed by Hamlet’s greeting: “Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered.” Eve Sanders, *Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57.

76 As surprising as it may seem, “there are few depictions of men at prayer with books in hand, [though] the book is ubiquitous in the portrait of the humanist intellect…Contemporary portraiture and paintings of the spiritual life tended to focus on reading as female piety; given the ubiquity of the word and low levels of female literacy, it is puzzling that these images were so selectively gendered…” Sharpe and Zwicker, *Reading, society and politics in early modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16.

77 “Polonius and Claudius…set the stage with a prop which visually and verbally suggests the iconography of the Annunciation. […] In most representations of the Annunciation, the Virgin sits holding an open book of devotion to represent her piety and her devotion to God. Alternatively she kneels or stands near it.” R. Chris Hassel, Jr., “Painted Women: Annunciation Motifs in *Hamlet*,” *Comparative Drama* 32, No. 1, Drama and the English Reformation (Spring 1998): 47. Renaissance depictions of Mary receiving the news that she had been chosen as Jesus’ mother often picture her reading in an enclosed *hortus conclusus*, which symbolized her virginity.


80 Sanders argues that she holds her thoughts, as well as her speech, “in check.” Sanders, 57.

81 Sharpe and Zwicker, *Reading, society and politics*, 169.

82 Laura Caretti described how Ophelia first wore black, rather than the customary white, in Stanislavski’s Moscow 1912 production, though even then her costume evoked that of a nun in her lecture, “Ophelia’s Passions in Performance,” Thursday Sept. 6, 2012, at *Synapsis, European School for Comparative Studies*, Pontignano, Italy.

83 “Spanning and his Ophelia were at the height of their reconciliation when he looked down and saw the books she had pretended to read was upside-down.” Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 522.
Modern directors, too, have often depicted Ophelia wearing a cosmetic blush in this scene, like that of a harlot who, at the bidding of her solicitor, waits for her lover alone in the hall. Ingmar Bergman, for instance, made his Ophelia seem artificial when he had his Gertrude smother Ophelia in her rouge and lipstick before the scene began, transferring agency from the speaking Polonius onto the silent Gertrude that is in charge of him. This rather brash projection of irony onto the verb “colour” registers in an extreme way something that is more subtle in the text. See Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet*, 460.

Polonius associates “colour” with acting elsewhere in the play, saying of the player; “look where he has not turned his colour” (*Hamlet*, II.ii).

R. Chris Hassel implicates Ophelia in Polonius’ guilt: “That Ophelia’s “pious actin” is false against the Virgin’s true partly explains why Polonius then refers to sugaring “O’er the devil himself” in their hypocritical iconography.” R. Chris Hassel, Jr., “Painted Women: Annunciation Motifs in *Hamlet,*” *Comparative Drama* 32, No. 1, Drama and the English Reformation (Spring 1998): 47.

Peter Lake argues that “objectively, viewed in terms of the likely effects of her actions, she has gone over to the dark side, and the savagery of her treatment at Hamlet’s hands registers that fact.” Peter Lake, “*Hamlet* with the (confessional and succession) politics left in” (not yet published), 17.

Shakespeare frequently criticizes painted, or coloured faces, seeing them as an index of falsity. In sonnet 127, for instance, he refers to “Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face.”

“It is something of a commonplace among historians of this polyglot practice that in the sixteenth-century, reading was a more communal business, more likely to be done out loud and with others… And yet, whatever route we take through Shakespeare’s career-long meditation on books and their uses, we encounter the idea that reading is somehow a private activity.” Jeff Dolven and Sean Keilen, “Shakespeare’s Reading,” *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, eds. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.


Chartier also notes “The spirituality of mendicant orders, the *devotio moderna* and Protestantism, all of which presuppose a direct relation between the individual and God, relied heavily on silent reading.” *A History of Private Life*, 125.

Sharpe and Zwicker, *Reading, society and politics*, 17.

Peter Heylyn, like Hamlet, also attacks nuns on the grounds of their false chastity in another very early record of the word “loneliness.” He argues that the word “nun” comes
from the Egyptian word for “loneliness” only to ironically undercut his etymology with stories of their sexual exploits:

They are called in Latin Moniales, … because of their solitary life: & amongst vs, Niînes, from the Egyptian word Nonna: (for Egypt in former times, was not meanly pestered with them) which signifieth also lonelinesse; a word in some of the barbarous Latines very frequent. Scholastica the sister of Saint Benedict, was the first that collected them into companies, and prescribed them orders. They are shaued as Monkes are, and vow perpetual virginity, which how well they performe, let Clemanges be judge; who telleth vs, that puellam velare idem est ac publicè cam ad scort ndum exponere: And one Robinson, which for a time liued in the English Nunnery at Lisbon, writeth; that hee by chance found a hole in the wall of a Nunnery Garden, covered with plaister, in which were many bones of young children, whom their unnaturall dammes had murdered, and throwne in there.


99 Gaspar de Loarte, Essercitio de la vita Christiana, 1557, Cap. VII.


103 Ryrie, Being Protestant in Reformation Britain, 154.

104 Ryrie, Being Protestant in Reformation Britain, 284.

105 Ryrie, Being Protestant in Reformation Britain, 283.

106 Ryrie, Being Protestant in Reformation Britain, 287.

107 “Emblems, as defined by Protestant writers like Montenay, Willet, Jenner, Harvey and Quarles, reenact for the reader the ideal Protestant experience of the physical world… By reminding the reader of what they cannot see, the emblematic image points away from itself… Although the image is seen by the eye, it stimulates men to “withdraw” from the senses, to substitute spiritual for physical sight. In this way, Protestant emblem books reform the inherited images of medieval Catholicism, internalizing and personalizing them.” Diehl, “Graven Images,” 66.

108 This would mean that Polonius could have a double purpose in giving her the book: it could be both a prop to occupy her while she waits and a means of starting a conversation about what she needs to return to him. Steven Ratcliffe, by contrast, reads “remembrances” as “props, letters, flowers, pictures.” Steven Ratcliffe, Reading the Unseen: (Offstage) Hamlet (Denver: Counterpath Press 2010), 82


110 Seven hundred emblem books had been published by 1616, only eighty-five years after the first emblem. Diehl, “Graven Images,” 49.


113 Targoff, Common Prayer, 5.

114 Targoff, Common Prayer, 4.

115 Brooks, Troubling Confessions, 100.

Because entrance into the confessional was only at first compulsory for women, scholars assume that this was in part a defense against sexualized interactions between priests and women confessors. Bossy, “Social History of Confession,” 30.


Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (London, 1964), 7ff, 34, 96-102, 158 ff, 208. John Bossy agrees with Poschmann’s analysis: “The actual practice of pre-reformation confession did in fact continue to incorporate the social dimension which had been abandoned by the dominant scholastic tradition.” Bossy, “Social History of Confession,” 24. However, François Lebrun cautions against this perspective: “Individual confession, required at least once a year, was the most reluctantly accepted of all the compulsory practices of the faith.” Lebrun, A *History of Private Life*, 78.


Mary Mansfield, *The humiliation of sinners*, ix.

Such is the apparent desire to make Hamlet a solitary that some directors carefully hide Ophelia onstage, presuming her to be in a different part of the castle or hall than the one Hamlet is in when he speaks to the audience; others have made her leave the stage only to reappear when he has finished talking. Some have used a spotlight on Hamlet to suggest that the soliloquy takes place out of clock time, and that Ophelia cannot hear him; others have made her appear to be so engrossed in her book that she does not notice Hamlet has arrived. A few directors have removed the problem altogether, by moving the soliloquy to a later scene, after the encounter with Ophelia takes place. In both Zeffirelli’s and Olivier’s films, for instance, Hamlet speaks the soliloquy after the “nunnery scene.”


CHAPTER THREE: MILTON’S LONELINESS


“The reception history of *Paradise Lost* tells us that it’s a poem about individualism. The Romantic tradition has put Satan’s lonely charisma at its center. That is I would submit a mistake, but an understandable mistake.” Colin Burrow, “Milton’s Singularity,”
125 Harold Bloom suggests that both Satan and Hamlet are soliloquists. “It does not matter that Satan is an obsessed theist and Hamlet is not…Two angelic intellects inhabit a common abyss: the post-Enlightenment ever-augmenting inner self, of which Hamlet is a precursor, intervening between Luther and Calvin, and later Descartes and Spinoza.” Harold Bloom, “Milton’s Hamlet,” The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 99.

127 The rarity of the word means that it is possible that Wordsworth was remembering these particular lines as he depicted his own “lonely…wandering” and the “bliss” of solitude it would later lead to in his own “vacant room.” Whether or not the reference was a conscious one, there are a startling number of echoes between the two passages. In this light, the “vacancy” that Wordsworth experiences in his study, associated here with the emptiness of hell before the souls of any “creatures” have arrived there, might start to seem ironic.


130 Leon Grek suggested that I consider this passage in a workshop in the Princeton English Department, April 1, 2014.


132 In the first Prolusion, Milton presents himself as if he is “alone,” when he is in fact speaking aloud to an assembly. Colin Burrow argues “He was fond of presenting himself as alone, but he needed either to have or imagine adversaries in order to contrast with his own singular being.” Colin Burrow, “Milton’s Singularity,” 7:02-7:09.

133 The poem represents not only how the death of Pan makes way for the coming of Christ, but also Milton’s attempt to cast off the more youthful mode of lonely romance in order to make the transition to a more mature epic. He registers an association between pastoral and immaturity when he calls the shepherds “silly”:

The Shepherds on the Lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sate simply chatting in a rustick row;
Full little thought they than,
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly com to live with them below;
Perhaps their loves, or els their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busie keep.

(Milton, The Complete Poetry, 85-92)


I am indebted to Andrew Milller for the suggestion to consider these lines more closely, in a workshop of an early draft of this piece in the Princeton English Department, April 1, 2014. Milton, *The Complete Poetry*, 90.


144 There are two ways to understand the relationship between the “mansion” and the mind. The “immortal mind” could be “held” by the walls of Il Penseroso’s body, having forsaken the vast regions of the sky in order to be embodied within him. According to this gloss, Penseroso is thinking about how the immortal mind is lodged in the mere “nook” of the body, which can hardly compare with the usual abode that it has forsaken, the much larger “mansion” (which serves as an equivalent to the “Vast Regions”). At the same time, however, Il Penseroso could also be describing how Plato’s portion of the immortal mind could have forsaken its usual “mansion” in the sky to instead find itself in the “fleshly nook” of the tower. According to this reading, “the immortal mind” is usually contained within the body, but the tower allows him a kind of escape from those limits. His distance from other people grants him a liberty to read and “unfold” his mind that wouldn’t be possible in other spaces. Because, in the tower, Penseroso is able to “unsphear” Plato, as if he can also somehow “unsphear” himself from the tow’r, to inhabit the “vast regions” of the stars. Plato had said in the *Phaedo* that the body is a tomb which philosophy can free one from. When Plato’s spirit appears to show Il Penseroso what “vast Regions” the mind can fill when it is itself “unspheared” from the body, it seems that Il Penseroso’s mind is perhaps able to travel outside of the lonely space.

145 Jacques Ferrand offers similar advice in his physicians’ guide to lovesickness.
Solitariness, he argues, should not be considered a cure for love melancholy, “And the reason is that these kind of people, in their Lonelinesse, thinke of nothing else but their Loves, having their hearts filled with longing desires, their mouths breathing forth nought but sighs and complaints, and their eyes, for the most part, ore-flowing with teares… Ferrand, Jacques. *Erotomania, or, A treatise discoursing of the essence, causes, symptomes, prognosticks and cure of love or erotic melancholy* written by James Ferrand, Dr. of physicke. Treatise discoursing of the essence, causes, symptomes, prognosticks and cure of love or erotic melancholy. Treatise discoursing of the essence, causes, symptomes, prognosticks and cure of love or erotic melancholy. (Oxford: Printed for Edward Forrest, 1645), 326. “But on the contrary side,” he continues, “Company, and Frequency of conversation, and commerce with people, diverts the mind of a doating Lover and cheares him up, and makes him see his Errour.” Ferrand, *Erotomania*, 327.


147 John Milton, *The doctrine and discipline of divorce restor’d to the good of both sexes from the bondage of canon law and other mistakes to Christian freedom, guided by the rule of charity: wherein also many places of Scripture have recover’d their long-lost meaning: seasonable to be now thought on in the reformation intended*, (London: Printed by T. P. and M. S., 1643), 2.


149 Henry Cuff had also used the very rare word loneliness in 1607 to paraphrase these verses of Genesis: “That God would not from euerlasting create the world, to shew the independency of his existence in regard of the creatures: as also, to giue vs vnderstand, that not for any hope of benefit, which should proceed to him from the creatures, he vndertooke this worke: but rather (as it is the property of goodnesse to communicate it selfe) out of the ouerflowing fountaine of his indefectiue goodnesse, to deriue some commodity vnto vs his creatures: for hee that could so long be witthout vs, might without any inconueniency vnto himselfe, for euer haue continued in that state of lonelinesse.” Henry Cuff, *The differences of the ages of mans life together with the originall causes, progresse, and end thereof*, (London: Arnold Hatfield for Martin Clearke, 1607), 37.


154 Milton, *The doctrine and discipline of divorce* (1643), 35.

Gerard Croese also sees loneliness as a prelude to marriage and “mutual love” in his description of George Fox’s marriage: “Fox having thence return'd in England, and till then, by reason of troublesome Incumbrances, been oblig’d to lead a single life, having now got some liberty, and ease, grew weary of the loneliness of a Solitary bed, tho otherways free, and pleasant in it self; and in this mind, he addrest himself to Margaret the Widdow of L. Fell, his old Friend, with whom he had lodg’d; and afterward, by the advice of both their Friends, he marry’d her, neither to supply the beggary of the one, nor gratify the lust of the other, (and therefore they were less anxious for dowry) but from mutual love.” The general history of the Quakers containing the lives, tenents, sufferings, tryals, speeches and letters of the most eminent Quakers, both men and women: from the first rise of that sect down to this present time, (London: Printed for John Dunton, 1696), 67.

For a detailed history of the textual crux of the verb “interinanimate,” see Ramie Targoff, Common Prayer, 192.


The status of God’s loneliness was under debate amongst exegetes in the period. Peter Heylyn sums up the debate thus:

Lactantius I am sure was of this opinion [ie. that the world was made in 6 days]; and thereby answereth the objection which Hortensius made, touching the loneliness and solitude of Almighty God, before the making of the World. Tanquam nos qui unum esse dicimus, desertum ac solitarium esse dicamus. Habet enim Ministros quos vocamus nuncios. How far this satisfyeth the objection we have shewn before; but certainly it doth sufficiently declare his judgment, that the Angels were created before the World. The old Hermit Cassianus is more plain and positive; and he a Latin writer too, of approved antiquity, Ante conditionem hujus visibilis Creaturae, spiritales coelestesque virtutes Deum fecisse, &c. nemo fidelium est qui dubitat.

Peter Heylyn, Theologia veterum, or, The summe of Christian theologie, positive, polemical, and philological, contained in the Apostles creed, or reducible to it according to the tendries of the antients both Greeks and Latines: in three books (London, Printed by E. Cotes for Henry Seile, 1654), 68.


Samuel Slater also recommended prayer as a remedy against loneliness:

“Secret Prayer is a special way for the making of your retirement *comfortable and pleasant to you*. Solitariness is looked upon as having Melancholly for its usual Companion; and a Life of loneliness and retirement is reckon’d a very disconsolate Life. The Prophet made this a part of his bitter complaint, *Psal. 102. 7. That he was as a sparrow alone upon the house top. And Solomon saith, Eccles. 4. 10. Wo be to him that is alone. Hence one said, He that loves to be alone, is either a Beast, or a God. But Secret-Prayer is an excellent way to sweeten solitariness, and take off the uncomfortableness of it. If thou dost but in thine uprightness apply thy self heartily to this work, when thou art without any Company, thou shalt not be without matter of rejoyning; but with *Hagar* in the Wilderness, find a *Spring opened to thee*. That was a great saying of one, *Nunquam minus solus quam cum maxime solus*: I am never less alone, than when I am most alone. He did never find less want of Company, than when he had none; then a Man enjoys his God and himself; and he that hath indeed that enjoyment, needs no body. *John 16. 32. Our Saviour spake thus to his Disciples, The hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone, and yet I am not alone, because the father is with me.* Not alone when alone. I shall be altogether without you, but not without my Father, who doth more, infinitely more than fill up those vacancies; as at noon-day we do not want the Stars, though they be all obscur'd and disappear, because we have the glorious Light and Beams of the Sun, who doth abundantly supply their absence. *A discourse of closet (or secret) prayer from Matt. VI 6 first preached and now published at the request of those that heard it* (London: Printed for Jonathan Robinson and Tho. Cockerill, 1691), 39-41.


CHAPTER FOUR: LONELY POETS IN RETREAT

175 One possible reason for this is that *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* was neither widely available nor widely read during the Reformation.

176 Between 1600 and 1650, there are 74 records on EEBO containing the word “lonely” and its variant spellings and 23 records containing the word “loneliness.” Between 1650 and 1700, the number does not increase very substantially: there are 229 records of “lonely” and 32 records of “loneliness” on EEBO.

177 The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s second and third definitions of “lonely” registers some of this emphasis on place: Definition 2 is “poet. Of things: Isolated, standing apart;” definition 3, “Of localities: Unfrequented by men; desolate.”


179 Perhaps this is why several lexicographers understand the word “unison,” or a musical harmony, as a synonym for loneliness. Thomas Blount defines “unison” thus:

*Unison* (Fr. *unisson*) an one; an oneliness, or loneliness, a single or singleness. Whereas most people today would consider “unison” and “loneliness” opposites, Blount sees them as synonyms. Thomas Blount, *Glossographia, or, A dictionary interpreting all such hard words of whatsoever language now used in our refined English tongue with etymologies, definitions and historical observations on the same: also the terms of divinity, law, physick, mathematicks and other arts and sciences explicated*, (London: Thomas Newcombe for George Sawbridge, 1661). [No page numbers; EEBO document image 340).

Guy Miege similarly defines “unison” in a similar way:

*Unisson*, for *unité*, unity, singleness, loneliness, or being alone.

Guy Miege, *A dictionary of barbarous French, or, A collection, by way of alphabet, of obsolete, provincial, mis-spelt, and made words in French taken out of Cotgrave’s dictionary with some additions: a work much desired, and now performed, for the satisfaction of such as read Old French* (London: J.C. for Thomas Basset, 1679). No page numbers; EEBO document image 127.

John Oldham also equates loneliness with “privacy,” by which he seems to mean a space “far from neighbours” in his poem “THE DREAM. Written, March 10. 1677.”

I dreamt, and strait this visionary Scene
Did with Delight my Fancy entertain.
I saw, methought, a lonely Privacy,
Remote alike from man’s, and Heavens Eye,
Girt with the covert of a shady Grove,
Dark as my thoughts, and secret as my Love:

John Oldham, Poems, and translations by the author of the Satyrs upon the Jesuits, (London: Jos. Hindmarsh, 1683), 122-123.

John Ray, A collection of English words not generally used, with their significations and original in two alphabetical catalogues, the one of such as are proper to the northern, the other to the southern counties: with catalogues of English birds and fishes: and an account of the preparing and refining such metals and minerals as are gotten in England (London: H. Bruges for Tho. Barrell, 1674), 14.

Samuel Morland comically links loneliness with dangerous places when he describes the speaking trumpet he has invented in order to try carry the voice over longer distances. He explains how his invention might help people during burglaries:

In case a number of Thieves and Robbers attaque a House that is lonely, and far from Neighbours, by such an Instrument as this, may all the Dwellers round about, within the compass of a Mile or more, be immediately informed, upon whose House such an attaque is made, the number of Thieves or Robbers, how armed and equipped… No particular whereof can be performed by either Drum, Trumpet, Bell, or any other Engin or Instument, hitherto in use.

Samuel Morland, Tuba stentoro-phonica an instrument of excellent use as well at sea as at land invented in the year 1670 (London : W. Godbid for M. Pitt, 1671), 14.

It might be more accurate to call this a stimmung. Hans Gumbrecht explains that the German concept stimmung is more capacious than the English word “mood”: “To gain an awareness of the different significations and shades of meaning that stimmung conjures up, it is useful to look at various clusters of words that translate the term in other languages. English offers “mood” and “climate.” “Mood” stands for an inner feeling so private it cannot be precisely circumscribed. “Climate,” on the other hand, refers to something objective that surrounds people and exercises a physical influence. Only in German does the word connect with Stimme and stimmen. The first means “voice,” and the second “to tune an instrument”; by extension, stimmen also means “to be correct.” As the tuning of an instrument suggests, specific moods and atmospheres are experienced on a continuum, like musical scales. They present themselves to us as nuances that challenge our power of discernment and description, as well as the potential of language to capture them.” Hans Gumbrecht, Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a hidden Potential of Literature, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 3-4.
Josua Poole, *The English Parnassus, or, A helpe to English poesie containing a collection of all rhyming monosyllables, the choicest epithets, and phrases: with some general forms upon all occasions, subjects, and theams, alphabetically digested* (London: Printed for Tho. Johnson, 1657), 49; 69; 81; 150; 153; 215; 223.

John Oldham understands the space of the lonely “desert” in Biblical terms in his persona-poem, “David’s lamentation for the Death of Saul and Jonathan” (1683). As David is cursing Mount Gilboa in Israel, he makes a distinction between cultivated land and the savage land of the “lonely wast”:

No Flocks of Off’rings on thy Hills be known,  
Which may by Sacrifice our Guilt and thine attone  
No Sheep, nor any of the gentler kind hereafter stay  
On thee, but Bears, and Wolves, and Beasts of prey,  
Or men more savage, wild, and fierce than they;  
A Desart may’st thou prove, and lonely wast,  
Like that, our sinful, stubborn Fathers past,  
Where they the Penance trod for all, they there transgress’d…


EEBO records almost three times as many examples of “solitude” as “loneliness” from 1650-1700, but solitude was, as Edward Phillips puts it, a “hard word.”


John Dryden, *Almanzor and Almahide: or, the conquest of Granada by the Spaniards. A tragedy,* (London: printed for Jacob Tonson in the Strand, 1735), 150.

John Dryden, *The assignation, or, Love in a nunnery as it is acted, at the Theatre-Royal,* (London: Printed by T.N. for Henry Herringman, 1673), 58.

Aphra Behn, *The feign’d curtizans, or, A nights intrigue a comedy: as it is acted at the Dukes Theatre* (London : Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1679), 59.

Aphra Behn, *Poems upon several occasions with a voyage to the island of love: also The lover in fashion, being an account from Lydicus to Lysander of his voyage from the island of love / by Mrs. A. Behn; to which is added a miscellany of new poems and songs, by several hands,* (London: Printed for Francis Saunders, 1697), 80.

Aphra Behn, *Poems upon several occasions with a voyage to the island of love: also The lover in fashion, being an account from Lydicus to Lysander of his voyage from the*
island of love / by Mrs. A. Behn; to which is added a miscellany of new poems and songs, 
by several hands, (London: Printed for Francis Saunders, 1697), 30.

194 Thomas D’Urfey is much less capable of balancing these tragic and comic modes. In 
his poem The progress of honesty, he describes a very similar scene to Aphra Behn, with 
lover who retires to some lonely “cool shades,” but does so less persuasively:

In the dark Center of a lonely Grove,
For Melancholly fram’d and Love,
A Rock there stands that props th’ adjacent hill
Craggy and mossy made by unknown skill,
Of wondrous height and magnitude,
Impenetrable Stone and rude;…
I much delighted with the cool Recess
Of this miraculous place,
Laid my self down to rest and meditate
Upon the Worlds and my uncertain state….

D’Urfey lists well-worn clichés, by contrast to the much more paradoxical situation of 

195 “Where premature orgasm temporarily castrates Lisander, sexual pleasure kills 
Aminta.” S. J. Wiseman, qtd in the Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn, eds. Janet 
Todd and Derek Hughes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 212.

196 Aphra Behn, Love letters between a nobleman and his sister (London: Randal Taylor, 
1684), 18.

197 Behn, Love letters, 99.

198 Behn, Love letters, 100.

199 Anne (Kingsmill) Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, Miscellany Poems, on Several 

200 Finch, Miscellany poems, 49

201 Melancholy disables Finch’s creative powers:

I feel my verse decay, and my cramped numbers fail.
Through thy black jaundice I all objects see,
As dark and terrible as thee. (Finch, Miscellany poems, 92).

202 Paula Backscheider distinguishes the tradition of female retreat poetry as a separate 
class from male retreat poetry “The greatest contrasts between men’s and women’s 
retreat poems is that women’s are neither solitary, melancholy, nor especially steeped in 
sensibility” Paula Backscheider, Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry:


207 Pope, “An Epistle from Mr. Pope to Dr. Arbuthnot, Poems, ed. Butt (1963), 597.

208 Pope, “An Epistle from Mr. Pope to Dr. Arbuthnot, Poems, ed. Butt (1963), 597.


215 Gabrielle Starr notes that Pope is perhaps recalling “Donne’s description of letters as a kind of extasie, and a departure and secession and suspension of the soul, which doth then communicate it self to two bodies,” and also notes its relationship “to the dialogue of one” in “The Extasie.” Qtd in. Gabrielle Starr, Lyric Generations, pp. 67-68.


CHAPTER FIVE: LONELY POETS IN CRISIS

221 At this point in loneliness’ history, it is no longer possible to engage with all of the various records of loneliness that *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* records, because they are too numerous. I have therefore narrowed my focus to well-known poems, famous for including lonely figures, although my selection principle still involves tracing where the word “lonely” actually appears.

222 Eric Parisot explains that “graveyard poetry” is “a relatively modern term used by critics with some hesitancy” and “refers at its narrowest, to “Parnell’s “Night-Piece on Death” (1721), Robert Blair’s “The Grave” (1743), Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1742-45) and Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Eric Parisot, *Graveyard Poetry: Religion, Aesthetics and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetic Condition*, (Surrey: Ashgate 2013), ii.


228 Thomson frequently makes loneliness symbolic of a mind that is open to both observation and to imaginative experience in *The Seasons*. Finch had wished to be “lost” in pathless woods; Thomson wishes to be “lost in lonely Musing,” where “images of things” “wander” in and out of his mind, as if his mind itself is a kind of architectural space. Just as bodies can go in and out of spaces of retreat, poetic images can enter into the open eye and mind, and these images are more likely to enter a “lonely” mind:

> Or catch thy self the Landskip, gliding swift  
> Athwart Imagination’s vivid Eye:  
> Or by the vocal Woods and Waters lull’d,  
> And lost in lonely Musing, in a Dream,  
> Confus’d, of careless Solitude, where mix  
> Ten thousand wandering Images of Things…  
> That waken, not disturb the tranquil Mind. (*Spring*).

In this passage, lonely Musing and careless “Solitude” are more like synonyms than is usual: solitude often signals a more enclosed space and self than loneliness does. But if loneliness is usually associated with danger, here it is more tranquil. The “wandering images” that enter his dream are benevolent rather than threatening; certainly, this is a
very different picture of the lonely Imagination than we found in Milton’s *Mask*, where airy fantasies ominously thronged the Lady’s imagination. In his reassurance to his reader that “wandering images” need not “disturb” the mind, Thomson marks the conversion of loneliness he is enacting. Refiguring vulnerability as a pleasing kind of imaginative passivity, Thomson pictures the situation of “thousand” images trying to enter his mind as stimulating rather than dangerous.

229 Thomson, *The seasons*, (1730), 45.

230 Thomson, *The seasons*, (1730), 49.


232 Frank Doggett, “Romanticism’s Singing Bird,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* Rice University, XIV (4): 568.


244 Gray, *Selected Poems*, 35.


Smith, Beachy Head, 20.

Smith, Beachy Head, 35-6.

Smith, Beachy Head, 37-3.

Smith, Beachy Head, 40; 43-4.

Smith, Beachy Head, 46.

Smith, Beachy Head, 47-8.

Smith, Beachy Head, 51.


Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1800), Longman Anthology of British Literature, 595.


Conversation thought to have been recorded by Mary Shelley. “Byron and Shelley on the Character of Hamlet,” in The Romantics on Shakespeare (London: Penguin, 1992), 342.

“Though gay companions o'er the bowl / Dispel awhile the sense of ill : /Though pleasure fires the maddening soul, The heart, the heart is lonely still!” “One Struggle More” (1811).
CHAPTER SIX: WORDSWORTH'S LONELINESSS


The hermit’s question to the Ancient Mariner, “What manner of man art thou?” is rather like Wordsworth’s question to the leech gatherer.


In The Prelude, Wordsworth recalls a period of depression in which he felt himself to be on a “lonely road,” in order to describe how his sister Dorothy helped him out of it.

In this loneliness, a feeling of companionship remains. Though the speaker of the poem might seem like a solitary walking alone on a lonely road, he is in fact accompanied by Dorothy his sister, just as is the case in “Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey.” Like Ophelia, she is seen but not always heard. William Wordsworth, The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 408.


The scene also looks forward to a moment in Book VIII, when Wordsworth recalls being abruptly surprised by a shepherd through the mist:

severest solitude
Seemed more commanding oft when he was there.
Seeking the raven’s nest and suddenly
Surprized with vapours, or on rainy days
When I have angled up the lonely brooks,
Mine eyes have glanced upon him, few steps off,
In size a giant, stalking through the fog.  (VIII. 395-401 [1805]).


268 The beggar’s blindness allows Wordsworth to prolong his lonely looking and there is a kind of guilt in this gaze. Wordsworth also emphasizes the lack of reciprocity between himself and the beggar when he draws attention to the beggar’s blindness. Unlike other faces in the “moving pageant,” the beggar’s eyes are “sightless” and cannot look back at him: the poet’s gaze therefore remains unacknowledged.

269 Although the leech-gatherer is not blind, the beggar is like him in many ways. Both are “propped” in some way. Wordsworth encounters him when “far-travelled,” just as his speaker encounters the leech gatherer when a “traveller.”

270 In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith had described sympathy as the imaginative action of entering into another’s body in order to try to imagine his pain:

> By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.


271 Like the daffodils, the leech gatherer is positioned “on the margin” of a body of water. This vision of the man comes on “abruptly,” just as the vision of the daffodils appeared “all at once.”


275 Wordsworth also relates being lonely being amongst vaporous clouds in Book I of *The Prelude*:

> In November days,
> When vapours rolling down the valleys made
> A lonely scene more lonesome, among woods,
At noon, and 'mid the calm of summer nights,
When by the margin of the trembling lake,
Beneath the gloomy hills I homeward went
In solitude, such intercourse was mine—
'Twas mine among the fields both day and night,
And by the waters all the summer long (1.443-451 [1805]).


277 Shelley seems to have picked up on this trope, since in *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*, he describes the wandering poet experiencing a similar flash during his gazing, just before he arrives at a lonely dell:

He lingered, poring on memorials
Of the world’s youth: through the long burning day
Gazed on those speechless shapes; nor, when the moon
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time. (121-128)


278 Ricks sees loneliness as “sad,” and uses “I wandered lonely” in order to distinguish the dejection of loneliness from “solitude”:

Even in subsequent moods that are not gay, the memory of the daffodils, like and yet unlike the revisited memory of the poem for us, will offer still some mitigation of loneliness, some pleasure that distinguishes sad loneliness from that state which may or may not be sad, solitude.

(Ricks, “Loneliness and Poetry,” 271.)

Ricks suggests that the speaker, like the reader of the poem, experiences a constant cycle of loneliness and relief from it, seeing the “mood” in the second half of the poem as equivalent to the one with which the poem began, as if vacancy and pensiveness are equivalent with wandering lonely. The experience of the daffodils and the memory of them, according to Ricks, are designed to be parallel states, each able to mitigate loneliness.

279 Kenneth Eisold suggests that Wordsworth is looking for a cure to his persistent loneliness, and finds it in memory. He argues that loneliness is a similar condition to the speaker’s “vacant” and “pensive” detached state on the couch:
…what is far more important than the experience itself is its therapeutic power. For often, he says, when he is alone as he was before when he came upon the crowd—vacant or pensive, absorbed, detached—he re-experiences their gaiety. Kenneth Eisold, Loneliness and Communion: A Study of Wordsworth’s Thought and Experience Vol. 13 of Romantic Reassessment. Ed. Dr. James Hogg. (Salzburg, Austria: University of Salzburg Press, 1973), 142.

280 Marjorie Levinson has persuasively argued that it is possible to read “cloud as crowd, not its opposite,” so that Wordsworth’s “singularity” can be read as a “way of being numerous.” (Marjorie Levinson, “Of Being Numerous,” Studies in Romanticism 49:4, Winter 2010: 634). Levinson argues that Wordsworth’s “being” in the poem, like a cloud, “has the form of a circular series, evaporation and condensation.” Cloud-like being, she contends, produces a situation in which “singular and plural being, figure and ground, matter and motion, humanness and all that is not human, subject and object… become positions within a self-organizing continuum rather than qualitatively fixed values.” (648) As Levinson sees it, it is possible to see Wordsworth’s loneliness in terms of an escape from self, and even from “matter,” even as it can form an opposite to happiness at other moments. Essentially however, this argument makes loneliness and solitude comparable and even equivalent conditions. Vacancy and pensiveness, in this reading, also become part of the same “mesh” as loneliness. “In the Ethics, “Joy” is nothing but the awareness of becoming joined to another body harmonious with one’s own… On Spinoza’s account, Wordsworth's syntax makes perfect sense; happy is the opposite of lonely.” Levinson, 646.

281 “All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.” William Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads With Pastoral and Other Poems, in Two Volumes, 3rd edition (Printed for T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1802).


283 John Plotz sees the Prelude as the original evocation of “the lonely crowd,” a situation in which people feel more distant from each other the closer together they are. [“Like ‘the lonely crowd,’ that phrase oxymoronically stresses the ways in which our new exposure to one another in a collectivity is linked, inextricably and depressingly, with our alienation from one another. …It has been a common lament ever since Wordsworth’s The Prelude (ca. 1805).” John Plotz, “The Return of the Blob, or How Sociology Decided to Stop Worrying and Love the Crowd,” Crowds, ed. Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 206.


Milton explains that he needs Urania’s help to bring his body back to Earth, as, at the beginning of Book VI, he begins to write the portion of his poem that takes place on “solid ground.” But even when he was soaring in the heavens, Milton did not leave his body behind:

Up led by thee  
Into the Heaven of Heavens I have presumed,  
An earthly guest, and drawn empyreal air,  
Thy tempering. With like safety guided down,  
Return me to my native element  
Lest,

……………………………………………  
on the Aleian field I fall,  
Erroneous there to wander and forlorn.  
(PL. VII, 12-17; 19-20; Milton, *The Complete Poetry*, 476-477)

He opposes the action of “soaring” with the action of “wandering” forlorn, which he fears. But Wordsworth prefers to wander, because it allows him the opportunity to become cloud-like.

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\[
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289 See, for instance, Martin Greenberg’s *The Hamlet Vocation of Coleridge and Wordsworth* (Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press, 1986).


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