SEXUALITY AND THE CONTOURS OF THE SELF IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH VERSE

by

GINA FILO

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2020

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Gina Filo

Title: Sexuality and the Contours of the Self in Early Modern English Verse

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

Ben Saunders	Advisor
Lara Bovilsky	Core Member
Brent Dawson	Core Member
Leah Middlebrook	Institutional Representative

and

Kate Mondloch	Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded June 2020

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Gina Filo

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

May 2020

Title: Sexuality and the Contours of the Self in Early Modern English Verse

"Sexuality and the Self" argues against conventional views of early modern subjects as anxious about possible breakdowns of self effected by sexual encounters, showing instead how sex's potential to radically alter the self was often actively sought out. Early moderns understood body and self as mutually implicated, literally fluid, and highly unstable. This self is always in flux and at risk of collapse; its claim to identity categories like its gender or humanity is also contingent in this model. This instability has led many scholars to claim that sex—a paradigmatically boundary-blurring activity—was inherently anxious in the period. In this construction, writers try to reassert difference after moments of sexual blurring in their texts, anxiously recuperating the individual and categorical integrity sex threatens. However, I argue that this account of early modern sexual formations elides the clear pleasure many texts take in articulating breakdowns of selves, of gendered forms, and of human bodies in sex. By reading Shakespeare, Donne, Herrick, Marvell, Crashaw, and Traherne, I show how poets exploit the language of erotic self-shattering to imagine unbounded forms of self and self-other relations, rejecting hierarchical divisions of gender and species to imagine diffuse forms of sex, self, and sociality. These poets, I argue, constitute an important yet overlooked body of early modern sexual thought. The dissertation demonstrates how writers leverage the language of

eroticism to negotiate relationships with other, different, beings. It explores how poetic representations of sex transform relationships of self and other; male and female; human, plant, and animal; and human and God. It also shows how critical beliefs about erotic normativity lead us to overlook or reject the apparent strangeness of many of the period's canonical texts. And, finally, it recaptures some of the delight, the playfulness, and the pleasure these texts take—and offer—in reimagining sexuality and the self.

This dissertation includes previously published material.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Gina Filo

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene

University of Evansville, Evansville, Indiana

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, 2020, University of Oregon

Bachelor of Arts, 2014, University of Evansville

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Early modern English literature

Gender and sexuality

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Assistant Professor of English, Southeastern Louisiana State University, Fall 2020-

Graduate Employee, University of Oregon, Fall 2014-Spring 2020

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

College of Arts and Sciences Dissertation Research Fellow, "Sexuality and the Contours of the Self in Early Modern English Verse," University of Oregon, 2019-20

Award for Equity and Inclusion in Composition, University of Oregon, 2017

Summa cum Laude, University of Evansville, 2014

PUBLICATIONS:

"Fulke Greville's 'Sweet Boy': Homoerotic Desire in *Caelica*," *Sidney Journal* 37, nos. 1-2 (2019): 133-49.

"Gender, Genre, and Donne's 'The Flea,'" *Modern Philology* 117, no. 2 (2019): 214-32.

"'A scarce seen thing she glides': Blackness and Miscegenation in Eldred Revett's *Poems*," *ELH* 86, no. 1 (2019): 55-76.

"'Spermatique issue of ripe menstrous boils': Gender Play in Donne's Secular Lyric," *Philological Quarterly* 95, no. 1 (2016): 1-23.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a dissertation is a process of incurring debts that can never be fully comprehended, let alone acknowledged or repaid. Despite the always-incomplete nature of the attempt, however, I would like here to offer brief thanks to a handful of people whose assistance was particularly instrumental in this work. First, to my advisor, Ben Saunders, whose support, encouragement, and generous engagement with the writing and ideas herein presented have meant more than I can express; this project would truly not have been possible without him. I have also benefitted immeasurably from the generosity of the other members of my committee, Lara Bovilsky, Brent Dawson, and Leah Middlebrook, whose tireless provision of time and feedback have invaluably strengthened the project. I would also like to thank the larger body of faculty and graduate students of the English Department at the University of Oregon, from whom I have learned immensely as a scholar, a writer, and a teacher. My appreciation particularly goes out to Carmel Ohman, Celeste Reeb, and Abigail Johnson, who have been not only invaluable sounding boards, but also true friends in this process. And finally, I would like to thank my family, Mary, Sara, and Greg Filo; I have tried their patience and sanity more times than I can count in the process of writing this project, and yet their support and faith has been unequivocal.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION: SEX AND SELFHOOD IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

In *Upon Appleton House*, Andrew Marvell's speaker rehearses a masochistic sexual encounter with the vegetal world he explores through the text's ninety-seven stanzas:

> Bind me ye woodbines in your twines,
> Curl me about ye gadding vines,
> And oh so close your circles lace,
> That I may never leave this place:
> But, lest your fetters prove too weak,
> Ere I your silken bondage break,
> Do you, *O* brambles, chain me too,
> And courteous briars nail me though. (609-16)

Subsequently imploring his botanical captors to "tie [his] chain" (617) by day and "stake [him] down" (624) at night, the speaker pleads for not only the relatively gentle "silken bondage" offered by "woodbines and gadding vines," but also more violent "chain[s]" of "brambles" and "briars" to "nail [him] through": the speaker, that is, begs to be rendered a helpless captive, unable to resist penetration from aggressive briars and brambles (however "courteous" they may be in fulfilling his desire to be so violated). The speaker's desires are not sated by a single experience; rather, he hopes that he will "never leave this place," permanently bound and nailed through by the obligingly forceful plants he encounters at Nun-Appleton. At this point in the narrative, "hedge[d]" (641) with "heavy sedge" (642) and bedecked with "oak leaves" (585), "caterpillars" (586), and "ivy" (589) that "licks, and clasps, and curls" about his body (590), the speaker seems to

want less a discrete, bounded sexual experience with the forest plants than to dissolve wholly, pleasurably, into the natural world surrounding him.

This brief sketch of the encounter between *Appleton*'s narrator and the plant world—in which the speaker not only seeks out erotic pleasures offered by the conjunction of human and botanical, but eagerly cedes the integrity of his human body and subjectivity in so doing—will, I hope, illustrate my larger concerns in "Sexuality and the Contours of the Self in Early Modern English Verse," in which I explore the relationship between sex and selfhood in lyric poetry of the English Renaissance. The only-provisionally discrete character of the Renaissance self and its merely contingent claims on its gender and humanity have prompted critics to suggest that early moderns were generally anxious about the destabilization of boundaries around the self entailed by nearly all sexual behaviors. However, in "Sexuality and the Self," I locate a significant poetic counterdiscourse that embraced, rather than rejected, self- and categorical annihilation brought about by erotic encounters. The poets in my study—William Shakespeare, John Donne, Robert Herrick and Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw, and Thomas Traherne—deploy the language of eroticism to cross, confound, and ultimately erase not only the borders of bodies and selves, but also boundaries between male and female; human, plant, and animal; and human and divine. In this poetry, I argue, breakdowns of the self and its concomitant identity categories are represented as not only inevitable but also pleasurable and even desirable. My project embraces the weird, inventive qualities of these poems (qualities often overlooked or pathologized by modern scholarship), showing how they reimagine and rearticulate sexual relationships outside of the binary, anxiety-causing paradigms frequently ascribed to early modern sexual feeling.

The poets I read articulate and celebrate diffuse, non-anxious forms of sex, self, sociality, and gender that operate outside of conventional power hierarchies—and, far from being anxious, they welcome this destabilization of self, taking imaginative, intellectual, and indeed erotic pleasure in both language and conceit.

Early moderns understood body and self as mutually implicated, literally fluid, and highly unstable. Perhaps the most important factor affecting the individual's physical condition and her psychological disposition was her humoral complexion, that is, the relative proportions of the four humors (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm) within her body. Such a self was contingent and processual, as the proportions of these liquids were continually in flux. Each humor was associated with a temperature and either moisture or dryness; these qualities combined to precondition the individual to a particular disposition. An overabundance of hot, moist blood produced a sanguine personality; an excess of hot, dry yellow bile led to choler; black bile, dry and cold, induced melancholy; and cold, moist phlegm resulted in a lethargic or phlegmatic temperament. While every individual had a different humoral equilibrium or set point, physicians, surgeons, and humoral theorists generally agreed that humoral imbalances were deeply hazardous to one's physical and mental health. Early moderns thus attempted to regulate their bodies to achieve a balance among the four liquids; this would, theoretically, produce a healthy body, a relatively moderate disposition, and a more stable sense of self. DIY-interventions and medical treatments sought to set or reset the humoral equilibrium, generally through regulating the body's intake or output—purging humoral excess through bloodletting, emetics, and enemas, for example, or

following diets thought to foster one disposition over another—in order to bring the humors into proper proportions. Quoting Nancy Siraisi, Patricia Simons describes how "[c]onsiderable agency was granted to individuals to maintain their own health, chiefly by managing the six so-called non-naturals, 'air, exercise and rest, sleep and waking, food and drink, repletion and extraction, and the accidents of the soul, or passions and emotions.'"[1] Simons goes on to note how "coitus was added to the non-naturals in the early twelfth century" and thereafter "remained an important factor in one's health."[2] Michael Schoenfeldt underlines the self-stabilizing and regulatory imperatives of early modern wellness practices when he similarly notices how, "[p]roperly managed, diet and excretion ameliorate the inherent instability of mortal existence," thus becoming a central responsibility of the individual, and, that failing, the physician.[3] Self-help and medical intervention, however, could only go so far, as individuals were predisposed to particular humoral configurations based on factors beyond their control, such as their age, geographic location, and gender. Furthermore, as I shall discuss in more detail below, the porousness of the self and its susceptibility to external forces does not stop at the non-naturals Siraisi describes, but extends to its interactions with other people as well: Laura Levine puts it well, if somewhat dramatically, when she says that "this is a self which can always be altered not by its own playful shaping intelligence, but by malevolent forces outside its control."[4] Despite the perhaps always-futile nature of the attempt, then, it was

[1] Simons, *Sex of Men*, 126; Siraisi, *Medicine,* 101.

[2] Simons, *Sex of Men,* 126. See also Shepard, *Manhood*, 47-69.

[3] Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves*, 81.

[4] Levine, "Women's Clothing," 123.

incumbent upon the subject to take steps to maintain her physical health and psychological integrity through careful regulation of humoral balance, what Thomas King usefully calls the "ethical practice of managing one's corporeality."[5]

While the ideal temperament was one of moderation, it was well-recognized that this was exceptionally difficult to achieve.[6] However, the other complexions were ranked according to their desirability; in general, hotter temperaments were preferable to cooler ones, even as they too had pitfalls against which the watchful subject had to guard.[7] In both of the dominant medical traditions of the period, the amalgamated Hippocratic/Galenic and the Aristotelian, men were believed naturally hotter and drier than women, who were associated with surpluses of cool and moist humors.[8] The temperaments correlated with these humors were gendered in ways that reflect the social structure more broadly; passive temperaments, particularly the phlegmatic, fit with contemporary beliefs about women's proper comportment, whereas sanguine and choleric dispositions were suited to men's public lives.[9] Men were also likelier than

[5] King, *Gendering,* 62.

[6] Shepard, *Manhood*, 59.

[7] Ibid. 61.

[8] For a useful overview of Hippocratic, Galenic, and Aristotelian medical traditions as they were inherited by the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, see Cadden, *Sex Difference*, 15-39. Cadden points out that a significant difference between the Aristotelian and Hippocratic traditions lies in the fact that, while both relied on systems of polarities (hot/cold, moist/dry), "[t]he Hippocratic system of polarities…is not hierarchical" (17) whereas "Aristotle, more than the authors of the Hippocratic texts, tended consistently to read values in the poles" (23); Galen represents a roughly moderate position: "[i]n contrast to Aristotle, Galen did not emphasize the differences between the sexes: his use of polarities did not suggest radical contrariety. But following Aristotle, though to a lesser extent, he used evaluative language in discussing sex difference" (33).

[9] Cold, dry melancholic dispositions occupy a peculiar place in this tradition, at times valorized as the thinking man's complexion and at other times castigated as effeminate and effeminizing, particularly as embodied in the figure of the melancholy lover: per Lawrence Babb, "[a]ccording to Galenic tradition,

women to achieve the elusive ideal moderate temperament. As Alexandra Shepard suggests,

> In contrast to women, men were characterized as the beneficiaries of bodily perfection, capable of achieving a balanced and temperate constitution. This…was the bodily basis of the link between masculinity and reason which in turn provided the justification for men's claim to social and political precedence.[10]

While women were physiologically and thus temperamentally disadvantaged in this scheme, the self's liquidity and contingency could sometimes work to their advantage; exceptional women (particularly those whose humoral equilibrium inclined toward the warmer end of the feminine range) could strive to attain hotter and more perfect complexions. In fact, according to some authors working in the Galenic paradigm influentially dubbed the "one-sex model" by Thomas Laqueur, women's genitals were understood to be inverted versions of men's, the testicles corresponding to the ovaries, the penis to the vagina (or clitoris), and so on.[11] As such, "[g]iven the right conditions (usually based on vigorous exercise or heat), this latent member [i.e., the penis] could, in theory, spring from within the woman's body."[12] While reports of this phenomenon were

---

melancholy is a most ignominious and miserable condition of mind; according to the Aristotelian tradition, it is a most enviable and admirable condition of mind" (qtd. Daniel, *Melancholy Assemblage*, 23).

[10] Shepard, *Manhood*, 58.

[11] See Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 63-118. Part of Laqueur's argument for the ideological construction of the body lies in the ways in which male body parts were imprecisely mapped onto female, e.g., that both the vagina and clitoris could be likened to the penis. For important critiques of Laqueur, see Park and Nye, "Destiny," Adelman, "Defect," and Simons, *Sex of Men,* 141-57.

[12] Gilbert, *Hermaphrodites*, 150. For examples of case histories of women spontaneously transforming into men, see 144-49.

few, reports nevertheless there are. The fundamental idea behind this spontaneous gender change was simply that nature tends toward perfection; as women were less perfect than men, it was understandable for a woman—or, at least, her body—to strive to inculcate male attributes and virtues. (Predictably, this rarely worked out well for woman who rejected gender norms in the real world, as opposed to the realm of theory.) As the "beneficiaries of bodily perfection" (to borrow Shepard's phrase) on the other hand, men were expected and indeed exhorted to guard against lapsing into feminine temperaments, which were not only inferior, but also anterior. Young male and female children were treated in similar ways; largely consigned to the care of women, they wore identical clothing until the age of seven, when boys were "breeched" and began to be regarded as sexed beings.[13] In this way, even the most basic gestures toward maleness were regarded as an emergence from a prior femininity (and, indeed, as a manifestation of nature's aforementioned tendency toward perfection). As boys aged into youths and finally men, the maintenance of masculinity, defined as it was (and remains) largely in opposition to femininity, required constant vigilance: as Ruth Gilbert argues,

> There was a profound anxiety in early modern culture about the potentially permeable borders between men and women. As powerful women were perceived as being dangerous because they might usurp the social authority of men, so men were always at risk of slipping or falling into the feminine.[14]

[13] See Orgel, "Nobody's Perfect," 14.

[14] Gilbert, *Hermaphrodites*, 30.

Failure to uphold the ideals of masculinity, of reason, balance, "discretion, control, and containment" meant that the early modern man would regress to what was considered to be an anterior form of subjectivity: in a word, he would be rendered effeminate.[15] And while there seem to be no stories of men physically transforming into women in period medical texts (in contrast to these works' fascination with case studies of women turning into men), it seems nevertheless reasonable to suggest that the Galenic medical model's insistence on the plasticity of gender could not have been felt in only one direction; that is, there was a latent theoretical possibility of male genitalia spontaneously inverting and consigning the subject to physical as well as social femininity.[16] Keeping in mind Simons's salutary caution that "[t]he early modern body was not comprised of a labile, virtual economy of limitless possibilities," it is nevertheless the case that maintaining one's health thus meant more than the preservation of the individual body and the continuity of the self; it was also vital for maintaining one's gender and one's human status more generally.[17]

The fundamental volatility of the early modern self-concept created an environment that placed heavy demands on subjects to maintain a stable self for both

[15] Shepard, *Manhood*, 28-30.

[16] Per Valerie Traub, "[i]f…the Galenic paradigm which dominated sixteenth- and seventeenth-century medicine understood men to originate as female, then the fear of a reverse teleology—of being turned back into a woman—may have been a common masculine fantasy" (*Desire*, 51). While it seems unlikely to me that this fantasy was widespread and altogether conscious (as Traub suggests with the qualifier "may"), I would argue that the logic of Galenic medicine entails its availability as a cultural fantasy.

[17] Simons, *Sex of Men*, 155. Simons further argues that "most men were not…anxious on a daily basis about the untrustworthy, unstable nature of their own body and its potential to shift sex" (26), a contention with which I largely agree. My argument is not that men were in a permanent sense of dread about the fungibility of their gender, but rather that this concern lay in the background of early modern understandings of the self, which may or may not have affected the daily life of the individual.

their own physical and psychological well-being and (as I shall come to shortly) the stability of the larger social system in which they found themselves embedded. In this model, the onus of maintaining one's physical, mental, and emotional health fell on the individual even more than it does today; this control was primarily effected through the regulation of the individual body and its apertures.[18] Such concern with controlling the body's permeability has implications for individual identity; as Gail Kern Paster argues,

> For the humoral body *all* boundaries were threatened because they were—as a matter of physical definition and functional health—porous and permeable. What they may have threatened most of all was the psychic economy of the humoral subject in an age newly preoccupied with corporeal self-discipline.[19]

Bodily regulation was a marker of a stable subject, one often coded or explicitly identified as masculine in its discipline, self-sovereignty, and self-control; as Paster notes, one definition of masculinity was a laudable state of corporeal and psychological control, over and against "leaky," emotional femininity. Early modern medical discourse, as Paster describes,

> [I]nscribes women as leaky vessels by isolating one element ofthe female body's material expressiveness—its production of fluids—as excessive, hence either disturbing or shameful. It also characteristically links this

[18] Or, at least, fell on the individual differently than it does today in the twenty-first century neoliberal U.S. American context, wherein individuals are treated as free actors whose health statuses are their responsibility alone, a bad-faith construction that lacks reference to the broader social, economic, and political frameworks that also play significant roles in determining health.

[19] Paster, *Body Embarrassed,* 13-14 (emphasis in original).

> liquid expressiveness to excessive verbal fluency. In both formations, the issue is women's bodily self-control, or, more precisely, the representation of a particular kind of uncontrol as a function of gender.[20]

Correlatively, for a male-bodied individual to fail to maintain his corporeal, emotional, or discursive boundaries was to potentially cede his masculinity. Loss of containment, the failure to sustain proper and defined boundaries around the self, could effectively lead the individual into anterior forms of subjectivity—for early moderns, this meant lapsing from the masculine into the feminine, or from the human to the non-human. In such a model, masculine identity is particularly precarious, always at risk of "lapsing" into femininity, but the individual's claim on other seemingly stable components of identity, such as human, rather than bestial, nature, was fraught as well.[21]

While the individual was largely responsible for maintaining their own selfhood, the humoral self's instability was exacerbated by its fundamentally interpersonal dimension. As Nancy Selleck reminds us,

> Sixteenth-century speakers lacked a vocabulary for abstract, subjective autonomous selfhood…Renaissance usage insisted on those social and physical dimensions of the person, pointing not to an isolated and interiorized individual, but to a physically and interpersonally embedded person.[22]

---

[20] Ibid. 25. See also Shepard, *Manhood*, 21-46; Shepard notes that manhood was not de facto granted to all male-bodied persons in the Renaissance, but was rather a state that had to be attained through factors both without and, at least theoretically, within the individual's power (such as age and class for the former, and skills of physical and emotional self-control for the latter).

[21] See Orgel, "Nobody's Perfect," 14; Shepard, *Manhood*, 27-38; Thomas, "Bestiality," 152.

[22] Selleck, *Interpersonal Idiom*, 3.

Kevin Curran similarly defines early modern selfhood as an "ecology," as "a product of interpersonal exchange or as a gathering of material forces."[23] Identity and selfhood were not perceived as autonomous and discrete, but rather coalesced via relation to and distinctions from an other or others. Whereas in today's neoliberal and post-Cartesian context some may imagine an atomized, essential self independent of its social context (despite the ultimate impossibility and indeed irresponsibility of that self-conception), in the sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries the self was understood to exist only within a larger constellation of interpersonal relationships. This interpersonal quality of selfhood posed yet another challenge for the subject: if the self's internal fluidity and susceptibility to external forces were not difficult enough, it was further affected by and indeed inextricable from other, equally unstable selves.

A significant tension emerges, however, when this general understanding of the self as an unstable, fluid process that gains meaning only in relation to selves arising from other, equally unstable and fluid processes is embedded within a rigidly hierarchical social structure that relies on the illusion of firm, unchanging distinctions among its constituent groups. While Tillyard's famous "world picture" has been problematized by new historicist critics who suggest that he takes official rhetoric as transparently indicative of popular beliefs,[24] his description of the early modern inheritance of a

[23] Curran, *Legal Ecologies*, 3.

[24] See Egan, "Shakespeare and Eco-Criticism" for a useful parsing of critiques of Tillyard; for Egan, Tillyard faces the somewhat unfair charge that he "promulgat[ed] a naïve view of ideological cohesiveness that gave too little space to reasoned dissent from the dominant beliefs of the period" (np). Egan interestingly tries to recuperate some of the cosmological world picture by drawing out its suggestive parallels with the late twentieth-century Gaia hypothesis. Roland Knowles articulates a more forceful critique when he says that "[Tillyard's] assemblage of conventional orthodoxies completely disregards the concrete particularity of sixteenth-century political, social, economic, and intellectual history" (introduction to *Henry VI*, 42).

medieval system that understood both the human world and the cosmos as "an ordered universe arranged in a fixed system of hierarchies" continues, I think, to be a largely convincing model of an important Renaissance understanding of world and cosmological order.[25] That is, even as we can and should question the extent to which Tillyard's immutable hierarchy constituted a hegemonic belief, it is difficult to seriously deny that the Tudor and Stuart culture was one in which analogically figured systems of political and personal relationships were framed in rhetoric of hierarchy and difference that, however contested in practice, must have had significant implications for interpersonal interactions. Such an epistemological and social system can be justified only if there are meaningful distinctions separating categories of being. As such, it coexists awkwardly with the humoral understanding of the self wherein the individual is perpetually in flux and can be said to inhabit a particular category only provisionally. If the individual is fungible and inchoate, defined interpersonally, and subject to humoral flux, distinctions of degree—of rank, of gender, even of species—are perpetually under threat, even as that threat may not have consciously registered in the day-to-day life of most early moderns.

If the self, and thus the social categories to which the self belongs, are inherently problematic in the early modern worldview, they are rendered even more vulnerable in erotic encounters; sex, largely understood as beyond the bounds of rational control in the postlapsarian world, entails the physical and psychological entanglement of differently-positioned individuals, rendering boundaries of self and other indistinct if not

[25] Tillyard, *World Picture*, 5.

indistinguishable.[26] In Valerie Traub's useful formulation, "the *erotic* body metaphorically figures precisely the permeability that is constitutive of the early modern subject, its apertures palpably embodying social relations as linguistic and bodily intercourse."[27] Sexual encounters transform the body into an array of surfaces and depths, each of which can serve as an interface, a site of merging, between the self and other. Beyond physical conjunction, however, sex also involves a psychological entanglement of the self with the out-of-self. In his influential *Erotism,* Georges Bataille suggests that eroticism entails a "partial dissolution of the person"—erotic encounters, that is, temporarily undo the self.[28] Not only does eroticism have the power to dismantle the individual, however; it also represents a "plethoric disorder" that shakes "an ordered, parsimonious and shuttered reality," one that "cannot be given free rein without barriers being torn down."[29] Leo Bersani takes this notion a step further, suggesting that "sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart."[30] For Bersani, "sexuality would not be originally an exchange of intensities between individuals, but

---

[26] Here and throughout "sex" is not restricted to the teleological penetration-and-ejaculation model, which privileges heteronormative configurations and male orgasm; agreeing with Valerie Traub that "sex is an experience of the body (and hence fleeting) and…individual sexual acts are likewise local and ephemeral" (*Thinking Sex*, 4), I do not presume to delimit ahead of time what counts as "sex" or "erotic," nor to privilege one mode of desire or object over others in my analysis.

[27] Traub, *Desire*, 15 (emphasis in original).

[28] Bataille, *Erotism*, 17. I am generally reluctant to cite Bataille, given the heteronormative and often overtly misogynistic tenor of his work; however, his account of the boundary-destroying nature of eroticism is not only foundational to much work in sexuality studies but also, I think, often apt and useful, so I employ it here advisedly.

[29] Ibid. 104; 106.

[30] Bersani, "Grave," 222.

rather a condition of broken negotiations with the world, a condition in which others merely set off the self-shattering mechanisms of masochistic *jouissance.*"[31] While I am less convinced of sex's fundamental asociality than Bersani, what is most important here is the notion of self-shattering that sex brings about.[32] As Bataille and Bersani suggest, this is not simply a function of the release of orgasm (although it is at times that), but rather the breakdown of bodily and ego barriers.[33]

The dangers of sex's capacities for self-shattering are exacerbated in the Renaissance by the precarity of the humoral body and self; by the perceived debilitating effects of male orgasm, the emission of seed incurring a "little death" that vitiates a man's overall life force; and by the loss of rational control in the face of desire. As this list adumbrates, these dangers are particularly pronounced for male subjects, as, within the logic of the period, sex (particularly with women) is an effeminizing act both for its irrationality—one of the defining markers of femininity in this period (and beyond)—and

---

[31] Bersani, *Body*, 38.

[32] Bersani's perspective is an early example of what comes to be called the antisocial thesis in queer theory, a discourse that makes the leap from (primarily Lacanian) psychoanalytic accounts of the incoherence of both sexuality and selfhood to the claim that queerness is fundamentally antithetical to normative (or any) forms of social relationality. We see this in Bersani's argument that one of the more valuable things about Freud is his subversion of

> [V]iews of pleasure as inherently social by [his suggestion] that even the most sublimated forms of pleasure are ontologically grounded in a *jouissance* at once solipsistic and masochistic, a *jouissance* which isolates the human subject in a socially and epistemologically 'useless,' but infinitely seductive, repetition. (*Body,* 90)

Bersani is often cited as one of the foundational figures in queer antisociality, the argument that queerness is inherently antithetical to any social or political relationship (a position staked most influentially and provocatively by Lee Edelman in *No Future*). While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to engage extensively with questions of queer sociality, the following discussion will demonstrate my alignment with the queer utopianism associated with figures like José Esteban Muñoz and Mari Ruti, both of whom discuss the *enabling* creative, political, and community-building possibilities brought about by sexual self-shattering. See e.g. Ruti, "Always a Future," 117-22; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; and the 2006 *PMLA* roundtable discussion "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory."

[33] Hence Bersani's suggestion that the paramount sexual activity is passive anal sex, constituting the "grave in which the masculine ideal…of proud subjectivity is buried" ("Grave," 222).

for the proximity to a differently-positioned body (or bodies) it entails. As Stephen Orgel puts it, "Women are dangerous to men because sexual passion for women renders men effeminate: this is an age in which sexuality itself is misogynistic, as the love of women threatens the integrity of the perilously achieved male identity."[34] While Orgel's account may inaccurately suggest that the dangers of sex are limited to the heteroerotic, it helpfully points to the potential for effeminacy and self-dispersal attached to sexual desire, particularly that of men for women: desire and sex between men and women threw into question physical and psychological boundaries that were simultaneously so fundamental to the social structure as to be immutable and, as I have shown, highly problematic in their relative and fluid qualities. Almost all sex acts (even, I think, many forms of autoeroticism) blurred and blur such physical and psychological boundaries and, as such, pose a danger to the humoral subject of the early modern period, laying bare the self as the malleable and permeable entity that it is. Sex is effeminizing in this period not simply because heteroerotic sex brings one in close physical proximity to women, but rather because the loss of physical and emotional control makes men more like women, driven by passions rather than reason. If, as Mark Breitenberg suggests, normative masculinity is a "potential site of disorder and misrule, a 'state' in and of itself whose competing elements must display proper obedience and subjection to the internal authorities of reason and self-control," sex both makes it very difficult to maintain and emphasizes its contingency and constuctedness.[35] In brief, then, the fluid nature of the

[34] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 26.

[35] Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity*, 18. Breitenberg's account of masculinity as inherently anxious has been rightly problematized by critics such as Simons (see *Sex of Men,* 73-74); however, his assessment of masculinity as a site requiring maintenance and control is, I think, largely accurate.

humoral self; the imperative to stabilize and sustain that self; the social structure relying on that elusive stability; and the self-shattering, irrationality, and "ontological confusion" of sex, made erotic encounters highly problematic for early modern subjects.[36]

Given this potential for sex to exacerbate impulses toward identity- and categorical collapse already implicit in early modern understandings of the self, it is perhaps unsurprising that there exists a significant critical literature dedicated to gendered and sexual anxiety in early modern England. Most frequently, this anxiety crystallizes around the breakdown of stable masculine identity, with critics such as Breitenberg going so far as to argue that masculinity is (then and now) an inherently anxious subject position:

> Masculine subjectivity constructed and sustained by a patriarchal culture…inevitably engenders varying degrees of anxiety in its male members. In early modern England, despite a broad and powerful discourse that assumed a natural, divinely ordained basis for authority based on gender and status, signs of anxiety among those whose privilege might have seemed inviolable are widespread.[37]

Breitenberg's further claim that "[a]nxiety and masculinity: the terms must be wed" is extreme in its overt naturalization (and odd sexualization) of the relationship between anxiety and masculine identity, but the logic underpinning this alliance is common in early modern criticism.[38] In one of their discussions of changing Renaissance

---

[36] "ontological confusion," Raber, *Animal Bodies*, 76.

[37] Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity*. 1.

[38] Ibid. 2.

understandings of hermaphrodites, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park too suggest that the early modern period was suffused by "a general climate of acute male anxiety" in part stemming from concerns about both "sodomy and other sexual crimes, and the proper relationship and boundaries between men and women."[39] Examining that darling of new historicist-inflected gender criticism, the English boy actor, Laura Levine similarly argues that he "becomes the embodiment of all that is frightening about the self" because his presence implies that there "is no such thing as an essential gender," leading to an "unmanageable anxiety that there is no such thing as a masculine self."[40] Conversely, Roger Freitas argues that gender-ambivalent boys and castrati mitigated male sexual anxiety because such figures were "socially and physically subordinate, but…male, and so less threatening to another man's masculinity" than women, erotic affiliation with whom "provoked real anxiety" among early modern men.[41] Freitas's and Levine's assessments of the effect of boys on early modern men are diametrically opposed, but their claim that men were anxious about potential loss of masculinity through erotic encounters remains tellingly consistent. More generally, Traub locates an anxious impulse in sex for both men and women, arguing that a constituent component of early modern sexual ideology was a "politicized 'sexuality' simultaneously physical and psychological, often bawdy, and constituted as much by anxiety as by desire."[42] While

[39] Daston and Park, "Sexual Ambiguity," 129. Daston and Park are writing primarily about France here; while the French and English understandings of sex in this time cannot be collapsed into one another (France having, for example, a far higher number of sodomy prosecutions than England), the medical texts upon which Daston and Park base many of their arguments were standard in both countries.

[40] Levine, "Women's Clothing," 130; 131; 135.

[41] Freitas, "Erotics of Emasculation," 212-13; 205.

[42] Traub, *Desire*, 2. See also *Sodometries*, where Jonathan Goldberg suggests that "[w]omen become the site for the production of male anxiety" (157).

desire was potentially problematic for both men and women in this formulation, Traub goes on to suggest that heterosexual intercourse erodes a specifically male subject position: "[o]rgasm within the body of a woman calls attention to—makes palpable—the myth of the unity and self-identity of the masculine subject."[43] More recently, Diane Purkiss has suggested that "[e]arly modern masculinity is often acutely anxious about the extent to which female sexuality might actually destroy the male who falls prey to it."[44] These writers, then, are largely in line with Orgel's claim, quoted above, that "the love of women threatens the integrity of the perilously achieved male identity," suggesting that every heteroerotic relationship was fraught with anxiety about the collapse of male subjectivity. In sum, as Phyllis Rackin suggests, the period sees extreme "associations between heteroerotic passion and the loss of gender identity."[45]

While heteroeroticism is often represented as a particularly thorny modality of desire, exacerbating the potential for male identity collapse through proximity to women, homoeroticism too is frequently seen as anxiety-ridden. While it is well established that homosocial and often homoerotic ties were normative and even valorized in the period, they were shadowed by the ever-present yet arbitrarily-defined specter of disorderly sodomy, which transformed its practitioners from respected citizens to abjected degenerates. As Alan Bray has influentially shown,

---

[43] Traub, *Desire*, 27.

[44] Purkiss, *Civil War*, 94-95. See also Rackin, "Foreign Country": "[d]esire for a woman…incurs the risk of feminization" in Renaissance England (70).

[45] Rackin, "Foreign Country," 71.

> As a social form the personal service of early Tudor England was in decay by the end of the sixteenth century but as a cultural form it was not; here the language of "friendship," as a set of assumptions and expectations, was still very much alive. There was now a disparity between the two in precisely those elements that protected the intimacy it involved from a charge of sodomy.[46]

The apparent security of male-male relationships was problematic, that is, by the late sixteenth century, largely because of what Mario DiGangi shows as the hermeneutic difficulties attendant upon attempts to separate the lawful homoerotic and disorderly sodomitic: "[b]ecause the political significance of male relations…depended upon the contingencies of interpretation, the definitional boundaries of 'orderly' and 'disorderly' homoeroticism were open to negotiation, manipulation, and contestation."[47] Beyond its perilous proximity to sodomy, like all forms of desire homoeroticism had the further potential to provoke the irrationality and humoral imbalances that problematize the self more generally, and, as such, is often seen as manifesting the anxiety attendant upon heterotic desire in contemporary criticism as well.[48]

---

[46] Bray, "Male Friendship," 13.

[47] DiGangi, *Homoerotics*, x. See also Bray, *Homosexuality*, especially 33-80; Bredbeck, *Sodomy* 10. While I am here aligning sodomy and homoeroticism, I do not mean thereby to suggest that sodomy was restricted to same-sex sex acts; as has been well established, it had a far broader significance in early modern theological and popular use alike.

[48] In "Foreign Country," Rackin argues that "extreme virility…is not only depicted as consistent with men's erotic desire for other men, it also seems to be expressed in it" (69). Rackin suggests that "a man effeminated by passion for a woman suffered a double degradation: the enslavement of his higher reason by his base, bodily appetities [sic], and the subjection of the superior sex to the inferior one" (70). While I agree with Rackin that heteroerotic desire appears to be more immediately fraught in its implications for the desiring subject's masculinity, she does not address the "enslavement of…higher reason" attendant upon *all* forms of desire, nor the potentially problematic conjunction of homoeroticism and sodomy. Rackin frequently elides the distinction between heteroerotic desire and desire as such, as when she

Concern about the irrationality of desire and its potential to erode boundaries is perhaps most noticeable, however, in discourses surrounding sex acts between humans and non-humans, primarily bestiality. According to Courtney Thomas, early moderns "reacted with horror at the idea of men engaging in lewd acts with an animal."[49] Although generally considered a "victimless crime" (that is, it was not seen as a transgression against the animal in question), bestiality was regarded "as the antithesis of being human because it eroded the barriers between the species and, as such, it was *offsensa cujus nominatio crimen est*—the offence it was a crime to name."[50] Obliterating an even more fundamental distinction than that between women and men, bestiality threw the very idea of human identity into question and thus had to be repudiated. Karen Raber offers a more nuanced take when she identifies eroticized human-animal relations that "involve a reciprocal confusion of identities in which human and animal trade places, merge, or inhabit one another's defenseless, porous bodies," showing bestiality to be not only a "specter that threatened to dismantle efforts to distinguish the human self" but also "a particular kind of pleasure."[51] While Raber is in the main refreshingly open to the possibility that early moderns were quite a lot less anxious about maintaining corporeal and psychological boundaries around the self than has often been argued, she too identifies pervasive "anxiety caused by the experience of ecstasy and self-transcendence

(rightly) notes that "[e]xcessive passion in either sex was condemned, but it was especially dangerous to men because it made them effeminate" (74), a claim that undercuts her earlier argument that men's erotic interest in other men "reaffirms" masculinity (70).

[49] Thomas, "Bestiality," 150.

[50] Ibid. 150; 154.

[51] Raber, *Animal Bodies,* 79; 84.

that marks sexual union" both in bestial and non-bestial contexts.[52] As this survey indicates, then, for many critics of the period, early modern theories of sex were marked most by their various anxieties about its irrationality, its destabilizing effects on the individual subject, and its implied dissolving of the categorical distinctions that anchored these subjects within the social order.

However, while anxiety is one early modern response to the vulnerability of self and category exacerbated by erotic encounters, it is neither a necessary nor universal reaction to the dangers of sex in the early modern period. In "Sexuality and the Self," I locate a significant counterdiscourse in the period's poetry, one that deployed erotic language and imagery to dissolve boundaries of the self and break down distinctions between different categories of being; rather than anxiously distancing themselves from the implications of such dissolving, however, the poems clearly take imaginative, rhetorical, and erotic pleasure therein. Sex's ability to expand the contours of the self and break down the categories to which the individual subject belongs opens up new avenues of identification and pleasure by confusing boundaries of self and other; male and female; plant, animal, and human; and human and God. Rejecting the necessity or desirability of maintaining either stable subjectivity or categorical coherence, these poems instead take pleasure in the intermediate spaces between genders and species, thinking outside of preexisting, hierarchical structures of relationality to imagine diffuse, unbounded forms of self and self-other relations. This poetry constitutes a significant yet largely overlooked body of sexual theory from the early modern period, one less anxious (if

[52] Ibid. 76.

perhaps more, or differently, perverse) than has thus far been recognized. Furthermore, refusing the impulse to articulate a self-contained, stable male subjectivity, these poets further reject the early modern equivalent of what is today called toxic masculinity; embracing breakdown and coconstitution with female or nonhuman others, this poetry offers relational, vulnerable, and ethical models of selfhood and embodiment that stand in direct opposition to normatively-construed masculinity predicated on control of body and self, and often violently-enforced difference from and dominance over others.

Critics have often been reluctant to acknowledge this sense of pleasurable categorical breakdown, often either attempting to recuperate the poems' erotic configurations within twentieth- and twenty-first century constructions of early modern normative social formations, or pathologizing the poets as sick, perverted, or misogynistic; it is not a coincidence that the poems I here discuss, when not interpellated into recuperative models that flatten out the radical implications of the sexual configurations they articulate, have historically provoked strong, and often negative, critical reactions. Stanley Fish famously characterizes Donne as "sick," for example, and Marvell's disinterest in heteroeroticism has led him to face charges of misogyny, pathological fear of women, and even pedophilia, Michael DiSanto going so far as to suggest that he is a Renaissance precursor of *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert.[53] There has been and frequently remains, I think, a feeling of uneasiness with the forms of eroticism these poems describe, even twenty-five years after what Jean Howard has characterized

[53] Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force," 222; DiSanto, "Marvell's Ambivalence," 165-66; see also Kerrigan, "Nymphets" and Silver, "Ambivalence and Little Girls."

as the "homoerotic turn" in Renaissance studies.[54] Critics are, it seems, often simply grossed out (or, perhaps better, turned off) by the sexual scenarios represented or alluded to in these poems; while few would today show their hand so clearly as to endorse C.S. Lewis's characterization of Shakespeare's Venus as reminiscent of "certain horrible interviews with voluminous female relatives in one's early childhood," even in this millennium critics like Rebecca Ann Bach, for example, can call Donne's writing "misogynistic screed[s]" for all its "glorious poetry."[55] My dissertation seeks to correct this critical trend; rather than pathologizing or attempting to explain away nonnormative forms of desire, I demonstrate how these poets open up a matrix of early modern erotic relations that has yet to be systematically discussed or even recognized as such.

While some of these responses are at least partially prompted, it seems, by an aversion to the sexualities these poems envision, critical overinvestment in early modern sovereign (male) selfhood and insistence on the ubiquity of masculine anxiety may also reflect a desire for stability of, and, perhaps, mastery over the texts. Speaking in the context of Donnean criticism, Catherine Bates (to whose work I am greatly indebted) charges scholars with "creating a continuous, unified, self-identical, fully bodied, irreducibly biographical writing subject with whom the critic can identify."[56] In a similar

[54] E.g., Howard's 1998 article "The Early Modern and the Homoerotic Turn in Political Criticism."

[55] Lewis, *English Literature*, 498; Bach, "(Re)placing Donne," 260.

[56] Bates, *Renaissance Lyric*, 226. C.f. Simons, who, in *Sex of Men*, suggests that "'[a]nxiety,' having provided insights as a core hermeneutic principle in the 1990s, has come to offer too easy, trite, and superficial an explanation for complex social processes, one that tends to avoid issues of responsibility and inequalities of power" (73-74).

vein, Cynthia Marshall criticizes the New Historicist preoccupation with self-fashioning, suggesting

> Both as critical thematic and as careerist opportunity, the concept of 'self-fashioning' provided a late-twentieth-century academic version of self-reliance, rhetorically ensuring the autonomous subject against the incursions of poststructuralist theories that had threatened to dissolve the concept of self altogether.[57]

At least superficially, self-fashioning constitutes an important strain in early modern poetry—one needs think only of Spenser's claim that *The Faerie Queene* will "fashion a gentleman" (even as the experience of actually reading *The Faerie Queene* makes one wonder about the practical efficacy of this text as self-help guide).[58] However, by attending to the interstitial spaces of lyric poetry, we can locate a more complex (and more interesting) vision of the early modern self than that proposed by either the anxiety model or the self-fashioning model, one that embraces its own ambiguity and even dissolution. It can of course be charged that I am simply replacing the idol of the sovereign subject with that of polymorphous perversity, no less projecting modern preoccupations onto sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts than the critics I have cited above. And indeed, it would be dishonest to claim that I could entirely avoid this, writing from the twenty-first century queer feminist perspective I inhabit. While I am conscious of this bias, I am not entirely convinced that it is a problem (and, perhaps more to the

[57] Marshall, *Shattering*, 26.

[58] Spenser, "Letter to Ralegh," 734.

point, I doubt that it's particularly avoidable). What may be termed my presentism is, I hope, informed by a rigorous historicism whereby my claims are grounded not only in the texts themselves, but also in the historical contexts and discourses out of which they emerge. In this dissertation, I aim to demonstrate the *possibility* of these different articulations of bodies, selves, genders, human identity, and desires within the context of early modern sexual theory without thereby claiming their universality, ubiquity, or exclusivity.

"Sexuality and the Self" builds on the work of a smaller group of critics who see and value the self- and categorical-shattering (erotic and otherwise) early modern literature can enable. In *The Shattering of the Self*, Marshall discusses the pleasure of "psychic fracture or undoing" derived from violent spectacle on the Renaissance stage, problematizing the idea that early moderns pathologically avoided the possibility for self-dissolution; rather, they sought it out regularly through visits to playhouses where scenes of extreme, disarticulating violence were not only commonplace, but indeed a major part of theater's appeal.[59] Daniel Juan Gil claims in a similar vein that early modern sexual encounters have the potential to dissolve both the individual and, however temporarily, that individual's social positioning. In *Before Intimacy*, Gil argues that

> [T]he confused state of early modern thinking about the connection between emotions and selves opens the door to using emotions to define sexual limit experiences in which selves are temporarily unmoored from their own normal positions in the social world and recoded into an

[59] Marshall, *Self-Shattering*, 1.

> emotional space where they can enter into powerful connections with other, socially unmoored selves.[60]

Sexual self-shattering comes about when "people are driven together by the allure of a shared humanity only to be plunged apart at the last moment by a resurgent sense of fundamental blood-borne difference and almost bodily incompatibility," which for Gil primarily registers in class difference.[61] Both Gil and Marshall situate their theories against a backdrop of traumatically conflicting epistemologies and ontologies in the late sixteenth century, at the nexus of emergent and residual modes of thinking about the self and its place in the social structure. Marshall suggests that the impulse to self-shattering "resulted from the uneasy consolidation of early modern subjectivity," that is, at the site of rupture between a newer, liberal and autonomous subject and an older model in which individuality was largely suspect.[62] For Gil, this discourse "is built out of the friction and turmoil generated by the conflicted, contested, and uneven emergence of a modern social formation" in which claims of universal subjectivity clash with notions of literally blood-borne status difference.[63] Though "Sexuality and the Self" is indebted to the work of these scholars, I am less interested in explaining this tendency toward self-shattering as a response to ontological trauma caused by the collision of older and newer concepts of subjectivity and sociality. Rather, my goal is to show how poets exploit language of

---

[60] Gil, *Before Intimacy*, xii.

[61] Ibid. xi.

[62] Marshall, *Self-Shattering*, 27; Marshall further suggests that the impulse for breakdown comes from a masochistic undercurrent in Renaissance humanism (34-44).

[63] Gil, *Before Intimacy*, xi.

erotic self-shattering to imagine and embrace diffuse forms of sex, self, sociality, and gender; how early modern poetics opens up a complex, polyvalent matrix of erotic relations undiscussed in the extensive scholarship on this body of poetry; that investment in erotic breakdown constitutes a significant nexus of early modern sexual theory; and that these poems both derive and offer a great deal of pleasure from their articulation of unbounded, nonnormative constellations of desires, bodies, and selves.

The texts that comprise the focus of "Sexuality and the Self" are poetic (primarily lyric), male-authored, and largely canonical. This constellation of attributes raises several important questions about both politics and form that I would like to briefly discuss here. To begin with the former, I am cognizant of the danger of reinscribing a traditional, male canon—for a long time, in fact, I resisted an all-male set of authors, wanting to include a female writer largely for the sake of having a female writer. Realizing that such a desire is representative of a well-meaning but ultimately misguided tokenism (not to mention gender essentialism), however, my attention turned from looking for a woman writer to include to considering why it was male writers in whose work the discourses of self-dissolving and self-shattering I track here are most prominent (while by no means disallowing the possibility of early modern women writers sharing in these discourses). The most obvious answers—that men had more access to the coterie networks in which the conventions of erotic poetry circulated; that, under most circumstances, men had more warrant to produce erotic poetry than women and thus the surviving textual corpus is far greater—are not wrong as far as they go, but recourse to book history seems somehow insufficient. Instead, I would also suggest that the particular vulnerability of

male subjectivity discussed above makes a significant contribution to this imbalance. The male self, that is, is at greater risk of collapse than the female within early modern humoralism, and that collapse has greater, more negative, individual and social implications. As such, the frisson produced by subjective breakdown is both greater and more readily available to the male individual. I also recognize that "Sexuality and the Self" remains largely within the established canon; this, however, I see primarily as a strength, as it demonstrates that the discourses I here identify are not eccentric, but rather a key part of texts that have historically been at the center of our understanding of the sexual poetics of the period. The canonicity of the dissertation demonstrates, that is, that an embrace of erotic-self shattering should be understood as a critical part of early modern sexual thought. Finally, the body of texts I have assembled is meant to be representative rather than exhaustive, and further work on early modern embrace of erotic self- and categorical breakdown would, I think, productively flesh out the discourses I here illustrate.

To proceed to the latter concern, that of form, I do not mean to suggest that self-dissolution is an exclusively poetic discourse, and my selection of texts no doubt partially reflects my own personal preference for poetry over prose or drama; however, self-shattering does seem to me to show up most frequently within a poetic context. There is not, I think, a single reason for this, but the conditions for the emergence, or at least prominence, of this motif arise out of a nexus of overlapping conditions obtaining to lyric poetry generally as well as late Tudor and Stuart poetry specifically. Most importantly, lyric is particularly well-suited to questions of desire and selfhood. As Bates suggests,

"lyric not only tells the story of the desiring subject but specifically the story of the desiring 'I.'"[64] Expanding on this, Melissa Sanchez has shown how

> Poetic disjunctions between sound and sense, metrical and grammatical units, semiotic and syntactic events, as well as the interruptions, silences, juxtapositions, and opacities that exist between one poem and another, all register the fragmentary, incoherent nature of desire and subjectivity—the propensity to confuse and delude self no less than other.[65]

Thematically and formally, that is, lyric is both fundamentally concerned with desire and subjectivity, and yet consistently reveals the incoherence of both. Second, the relatively smaller scale of lyric enables dissolving of boundaries between self and other in ways less available to extended narrative forms like epic, romance, or drama. We might take as an example the original ending of Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, in which the characters Amoret and Scudamor merge in a blissful, explicitly intersubjective and hermaphroditic union. When Spenser returns to the epic several years later, he cancels this original ending, not only separating the lovers' psyches but also their bodies; they narrowly miss meeting one another and are separated at the beginning of the fourth book. One implication of this revision is that physical and subjective annihilation is harder to maintain when trying to tell a continuous story, even if (as in romance) that story is one of dilation and deferral. Third, there are two broadly-defined traditions of erotic poetry current in early modern England, English Petrarchism (along with what Heather Dubrow

[64] Bates, *Masculinity and the Hunt*, 36.

[65] Sanchez, *Queer Faith*, 17.

calls its counterdiscourses) and Ovidianism. Both traditions are preoccupied with male subject formation (indeed, in many cases, with incomplete male subject formation, as Dubrow shows) as well as with erotic mutability, thus providing a useful ideological backdrop for erotic self-shattering.[66] An additional generic consideration can be adduced from the fact that many of the texts here discussed come from what has retrospectively become known as the Metaphysical poetic tradition—a tradition that, according to Michael Morgan Holmes, "ingeniously disturb[s] and estrange[s] fictions of 'natural' perception, desire, and identity" and "encourage[s] habits of mind that can accommodate non-normative desires and identities," a contention with clear application to the concerns of this project.[67] Finally, much of my critical procedure involves an intensive focus on the logic of individual images, scaling them up to explore the latent perversities and incoherencies often glossed over by modern critics. Imagery is not exclusive to lyric, of course, but early modern poetry is particularly visual and figurative in ways that lend themselves to my hermeneutic procedures. While Gil and Marshall have both demonstrated the deployment of self-shattering in dramatic contexts, then, I suggest that poetry is for these reasons a particularly germane site for conducting experiments in erotic self-dissolving.

The first half of "Sexuality and the Self" is primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with poetic negotiations of gender. The first body chapter argues that Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* does not "reverse" gender roles, as it is often

[66] Dubrow, *Echoes*, e.g. 82-84.

[67] Holmes, *Metaphysical Literature*, 1; 2.

understood to do; rather, it confuses boundaries of gender, species, and bodies with such abandon that these categories become meaningless as indices of difference in the poem. *Venus and Adonis*'s sexualized rhetoric destabilizes the discrete selfhood of its title characters, and its culmination in the establishment of a queer family—composed of a male boar, a boy, a flower, and a goddess—betrays no anxiety about the erotic blurring that characterizes its pleasures. Because *Venus* was Shakespeare's most popular text in his lifetime, this chapter establishes not only the existence of this understanding of sexual breakdown, but also its wide dissemination and relatively unproblematic contemporary reception.

In the second body chapter, I examine several of Donne's most popular secular lyrics, showing that, far from attempting to reify gender difference (as he is often understood to do), Donne's inventive use of erotic imagery suggests a theory of gender as almost limitlessly malleable. This deconstructive impulse, I argue, is not to efface woman and reinforce a masculine self—another charge Donne has often faced—but rather to express eroticism and love in ways unlimited by a misogynist gender binary; indeed, I suggest that Donne's gender play entails his embrace of a vulnerable masculine selfhood. By locating this attempt to think outside a gender binary in *the* paradigmatic Renaissance love poet, I show the limitations of our current understanding of Donne and the many poets influenced by him as operating within either a (proto)heterosexual or exclusively homoerotic matrix, as well as how his theories of sexuality complicate our understanding of English Renaissance gender and sex alike. This chapter draws upon work I have already published in *Philological Quarterly* and *Modern Philology*.

My final three chapters move away from gender as the primary site of difference to explore disruptions of human identity in the seventeenth century. Extending my argument temporally and categorically demonstrates that this understanding of sex's effects on the self is not eccentric but rather a constitutive element of much early modern poetry, consequential in our understanding of Renaissance selfhood, sexuality, gender, and human identity. In the third body chapter, I examine the love of plants in Robert Herrick and Andrew Marvell, both of whom express desire not only to have sex with plants but also to become plants (or part plants) themselves. Both poets reject the purported superiority of the human form and mind; through his detailed fantasies of plants replacing human genitalia, Herrick embraces a human-plant hybridity and thinks through the pleasures plants offer and experience in a serious way. Marvell's abiding investment in botanophilia throughout his poetry goes even further as his speakers yearn for passive, masochistic experiences at the hands (or, rather, tendrils) of plants that annihilate both body and subjectivity and wholly integrate the individual into his environment. The seventeenth century has garnered a bad reputation in many works of early modern ecocriticism, which posit that the rise of Baconian new science and Cartesian dualism brought about an alienation from and exploitative eye toward the natural world; this chapter demonstrates the possibility for radically different postures toward both nature and the self that view the two as fundamentally inextricable via their mutually-constituted desires.

The last two chapters move from earth to heaven, discussing contrasting ways in which seventeenth-century poets sexualize their relationships to God. Borrowing from the Song of Songs, Christian poets frequently employ erotic language to express desire

for the soul's union with God, but Richard Crashaw and Thomas Traherne, the subjects of the fourth and fifth body chapters respectively, use sexualized rhetoric rather different from, more corporeal than, and in excess of that which can be explained through recourse to tradition. In the fourth body chapter, I explore Crashaw's bizarre, fascinating transformations of Christ's body into a series of infinite orifices, examining the complex relationship he adduces between the physical and the spiritual in his attempts to establish erotic contact with and, ultimately, merging into God. The final chapter examines mystic poet Thomas Traherne's ecstatic metaphysical experiences with a sensualized Godhead. Whereas Crashaw uses the language of eroticism to effect closeness to God, Traherne neatly reverses this paradigm, using the lack of boundaries between individual and God he assumes throughout his poetry to bring about an erotic relationship. These chapters move beyond the human and worldly, showing how the erotic self-dissolving this poetry documents ultimately allows these poets to renegotiate their relationship to the divine and their own existence in this world.

My dissertation thus intervenes in debates about the configurations of eroticism and the individual in early modern poetry, but has implications that reach into English literature, sexuality studies, history, environmental humanities, and religious studies more generally. The project demonstrates how writers exploit the language of self-shattering to negotiate desire across ontological difference. It shows how poets reject toxic ideals of masculinity predicated on rigid self-control, erotic mastery, and absolute difference from others, and think outside preexisting structures of social hierarchy to imagine new forms of self and self-other relations. It also shows how our presumptions of erotic normativity lead us to overlook or reject the apparent strangeness of many of the period's squarely

canonical texts. And, finally, the dissertation seeks to recapture some of the delight, the playfulness, and the pleasure these texts take—and offer—in reimagining sexuality and the self.

II. GENDER AMBIVALENCE AND QUEER EROTICISM IN *VENUS AND ADONIS*

In a famous set piece from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593), Adonis's horse breaks free from his restraints to chase after a "breeding jennet, lusty, young and proud" (260).[1] After a lengthy blazon (295-300) of the "strong-necked steed" (263), and despite Adonis's infuriated attempts to regain control of his stallion, both horses escape, presumably to consummate their attraction offstage. While seemingly a digression from the failed seduction of Adonis that constitutes the main action of the poem, this episode is a perennial site of interest for literary scholars, who often adduce a relationship between the horses' mutual concupiscence and Adonis's aggressively anti-venereal stance. Historically, critics have considered this scene to be moral commentary on Venus's many attempts to seduce Adonis, suggesting that the latter's implacability evinces his mastery over the bestial lust that consumes his stallion; the horses may act "naturally," this line of reasoning goes, but are hardly suitable role models for humans.[2] In perhaps the most influential articulation of this argument, Robert Miller suggests that the courser demonstrates "what Adonis would do if he were the kind of man Venus wishes him to be"; however, per Miller, the courser's actions are "degenerate," and the episode critiques "[t]he ritual of romantic courtship…as an activity unworthy of the nature of man."[3] In his more recent treatment of this miniature drama, Robert Merrix takes the opposite tack to argue that "the horses, a part of the world of nature, as are Venus and Adonis in the

[1] All *Venus* quotations from Roe (ed.), *The Poems*.

[2] For example, see Miller, "and the Horses"; Streitberger, "Ideal Conduct," 288; Allen, "On *Venus and Adonis*," 107-9; and Dubrow, *Captive Victors,* 74-75.

[3] Miller, "and the Horses," 255; 264.

pastoral setting, mate as they should."[4] While these arguments may appear opposed, both are clearly grounded in an appeal to normativity: desire and (hetero)sex are either natural and thus bad, or natural and thus good—the point of contention is the moral value of the "natural," not the characterization of heteroeroticism as being such. Madhavi Menon usefully rejects the appeal to the normative so often found in these readings, suggesting instead that, while the horse episode indeed comments on the lack of consummation in the poem, it highlights the anti-teleological character of Venus and Adonis's (non)sexual relationship rather than critiquing or exalting a supposedly natural desire: while the horses presumably go on to have sex, they have to leave the poem to do so. For Menon, the horses' inability to copulate within the poem's boundaries parallels Venus's inability to consummate her own desires.[5] Others, trying to resolve these conflicting points of view, argue somewhat naively that the episode shows us only that animal behavior does not make useful allegory for human interactions, a case Anthony Mortimer makes most bluntly when he says that "[t]he horses…represent a sexual situation too simple to be of any relevance to the complex motivations of Venus and Adonis."[6] Whether the horses endorse, condemn, or have nothing to do with Adonis's rejection of Venus, then, the implications of their (literally) unbridled lust have garnered the lion's share of scholarship on the episode.

Conversely, I begin with the horses not because I am interested in the moral lessons they may or may not offer but rather because the narrator's account of the courser

[4] Merrix, "'Sexual Conflict," 348.

[5] See Menon, "Spurning Teleology," 504.

[6] Mortimer, *Variable Passions*, 79-82.

suggests in miniature how sexual language and imagery will destabilize gender throughout the poem. As I have shown, critical attention to the episode is primarily interested in the connection between the horses' mutual lust and presumably consummated relationship and the lack of both mutuality and consummation in Venus and Adonis's relationship. If we may read this interpolation as having some bearing on the sexual ethic of larger narrative (and I would argue that we can), however, we may also read it as relevant to a discussion of how *Venus and Adonis* engages questions of gender. More specifically, although the horses seem to be more stably and normatively gendered than either of the poem's title figures (insofar as it makes sense to describe a horse as occupying a normative gender position, at least), a number of formal and imagistic details that pertain precisely to the erotic tenor of the episode undermine the narrator's ability to convincingly sustain this gender coherence; this difficulty will become exponentially more pronounced when the poem turns its attention to Venus and Adonis. The courser seems at first overwhelmingly, violently, male: he "wounds" the "bearing earth with his hard hoof… / Whose hollow womb resounds like heaven's thunder" (265-66), his penetration of the fruitful, "bearing earth" to her very "womb" underscoring his virility. The stallion's ears are "up-pricked" (271), his "braided hanging mane / Upon his compassed crest now stand[s] on end" (271-72), and "he rears upright (279)—the language insists that his entire body is erect in his "hot courage and his high desire" (276). The horse is, in fact, so hot that he is literally radiating: "As from a furnace vapours doth he send; / His eye...scornfully glisters like fire" (274-75). The horse's humoral configuration, that is, tends to the hot and thus male. Whereas Adonis is rendered passive for the first two-thirds of the poem, the courser is all action:

"Imperiously he leaps, he neighs, he bounds" (265). The line's parallel structure and its dynamic monosyllabic verbs impel the reader's eye and ear through the verse as the horse "trots" (276) and "rears upright, curvets and leaps" (279); "breaks asunder" (266) the saddle girth; and "crusheth 'tween his teeth" the "iron bit" (269) thereby "[c]ontrolling what he was controlled with" (270). In brief, the courser is a paragon of hot, erect, and active equine masculinity.

However, the courser's courtship of the jennet inaugurates an interesting humoral change: "Then like a melancholy malcontent / He vails his tail, that like a falling plume / Cool shadow to his melting buttock lent" (313-15). The internal rhyme on "vails" and "tail," along with the repetition of the letter "l" in "melancholy," "malcontent," "vails," "tail," "falling," "plume," "cool," "melting," and "lent" within these three lines, gives the passage a gentle, lilting, and feminine quality. Furthermore, the courser is now aligned with melancholy; this should not be mistaken as simply an attitudinal adjustment, but rather, as a change in the literal composition of his body. Although the melancholic temperament was an affliction common to Elizabethan lovers, it was born from an excess of black bile—a cold, and thus feminized, humor; in the horse's case, it lends "[c]ool shadow" to an otherwise "melting buttock." This language of melting further suggests unexpected morphological flux in such an otherwise solidly masculine figure. The physiological and temperamental difference between the "hot courage" and "melancholy malcontent" was not insignificant, reinforcing the high degree of self-instability (including the unmooring of gender) occasioned by desire.[7] Just as interestingly, for a

[7] For more on the potentially effeminizing qualities of melancholy, see n.9 of the introduction above.

horse to "vail" its tail, it must first raise its dock, or the base of the tail. Under normal circumstances, this is a fairly common gesture for either a mare or a male horse, whether stallion or gelding, to make. However, as Karen Raber points out, specifically "in copulation, raising the dock of the tail is the signal given *by the mare* that she is ready to mate, because it grants access by revealing the vulva."[8] Form, image, and physiology combine, then, to trouble the courser's hold on his hot, aggressively erect masculinity by the end of the episode.

The disruption of gender categories enacted by the courser is relatively minor, emerging only at the tail of his narrative; however, *Venus and Adonis* as a whole undermines these categories to such an extent that gender becomes functionally meaningless as an index of difference in this poem. Both Venus and Adonis are ambiguously, ambivalently, and excessively gendered: they are characterized with anatomical, behavioral, and metaphorical language that suggests both maleness and femaleness, often simultaneously. The poem's formal qualities reinforce this gender trouble, deploying rhyme, meter, and alliteration to further unmoor gendered selfhood. While it is a critical commonplace that *Venus and Adonis* plays with gender roles (most often, that the title characters invert them), scholars have yet to recognize the extent to which the poem interrogates the legitimacy of gender as a category altogether. Similarly, even as *Venus*'s bestiary is widely noticed, the use of animals to undermine stable barriers among species is far less often remarked upon.[9] In this chapter, I will first argue

[8] Raber, *Animal Bodies*, 95 (emphasis in original).

[9] For a notable exception, see Raber, *Animal Bodies,* 79-85.

that, rather than inverting gender roles, Venus and Adonis cannot be signified within a binary (or ternary) understanding of gender; the poem instead accedes to a pleasurable proliferation, confusion, and, ultimately, obliteration of gendered difference. I will then demonstrate that Adonis's encounter with the boar and subsequent "birth" of the flower problematize the stability of human identity alongside gender in erotic encounters; (re)productively confusing gender and species, Adonis's sexy, fatal meeting with the boar leads to the creation of a queer family, one comprised of a goddess, a youth, a male boar, and a flower. This instability throws into question two of the fundamental divides of the early modern self-concept, male/female and human/nonhuman; Adonis's final metamorphosis only further troubles these categories, as his death and botanical resurrection suggest that there is nothing particularly permanent about his humanity in the first place.

These forms of categorical breakdown provide the poem not only with its narrative thrust, but also with many of its linguistic, imagistic, and imaginative pleasures; however, nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics have famously had difficulties with *Venus*. While the poem was wildly popular in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, running to six editions by 1599, ten by 1613, and sixteen by 1640, it fell into obscurity and disrepute by the end of the seventeenth century.[10] Although later reincorporated into the Shakespearean canon, it has always been something of a redheaded stepchild, even as its most recent interpretations are less uncharitable toward

[10] Kolin, "Venus and/or Adonis," 4; Duncan-Jones, "Much Ado," 490, 499. Its lack of appearance in the first folio likely didn't help its subsequent reputation, but I submit that the strangeness of much of the poem's eroticism and characterization would have nevertheless rendered it one of Shakespeare's more dubious works in later criticism, even had it been included in the 1623 volume.

the perceived indecorousness so vexing to nineteenth- and many twentieth-century critics. Until quite recently, readings of *Venus* have for the most part castigated or attempted to contain the poem's excesses in a gesture that reveals at least as much about critical discomfort with its oddness as it does the poem itself.[11] C.S. Lewis is probably *Venus*'s (and Venus's) most famous detractor; his oft-cited remark comparing Venus's interactions with Adonis to "[c]ertain horrible interviews with voluminous female relatives in one's early childhood" that dismisses her as a "flushed, panting, perspiring suffocating, loquacious creature" bears repeating given how influential this view would become (and for its amusing, revealing, mean-spiritedness).[12] "If the poem is not meant to arouse disgust," Lewis claims, "it was very foolishly written."[13] Lewis may be taken as representative of one strain of *Venus* criticism, objecting strenuously to the poem's apparently unseemly and incongruous tone, as well as the vulgarity of its depiction of Venus as the embodiment of fleshy female sexuality. While not as overtly hostile to the poem, other critics have essentially discarded *Venus* as a work in its own right, seeing it primarily as anticipatory of Shakespeare's later, greater genius. This trend began in the nineteenth century, when Samuel Taylor Coleridge, despite his attempts to recuperate the by then largely-forgotten poem, wrote that *Venus* gives "strong promises of the strength, and yet obvious proofs of the immaturity, of [Shakespeare's] genius."[14] Coleridge's

[11] See Kolin, "Venus and/or Adonis," 13-14.

[12] Lewis, *English Literature*, 498.

[13] Ibid. 498. Don Cameron Allen offers his own variation on this misogynistic theme when he suggests that Venus acts like "a forty-year-old countess with a taste for Chapel Royal altos" ("On *Venus*," 101). See Kolin for a brief discussion of the poem's nineteenth- and twentieth-century detractors ("Venus and/or Adonis," 12-14).

[14] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 199.

developmental view of *Venus*, in which its most attractive feature is its intimation of Shakespeare's later genius, ultimately became the chief witness for the defense, a way of recuperating the poem without conceding the artistic merit of its weird eroticism. Nancy Lindheim, for example, argues, "[a]lthough not a great poem, *Venus and Adonis* is still fully Shakespearean and repays examination as a pivotal work in its author's technical as well as intellectual development," a comment reminiscent of Don Cameron Allen's suggestion that *Venus* is "clearly the work of a young and unfinished artist."[15] Critics like Lindheim and Allen locate much of *Venus*'s value outside of the poem; it gains significance, they claim—and respectability, they imply—when viewed against Shakespeare's later work, but is flawed in itself. A related strain in *Venus*'s apology tour similarly evinces discomfort at the poem's luxurious licentiousness, but, rather than viewing the poem as an artistic or a moral failure, tries to integrate its apparent incongruities into an ordered structure. Heather Asals, for example, influentially suggests that the poem stages Venus's education in and ascent up the Neoplatonic ladder of love; Miller tells us that the poem rebukes lust; and Allen and W.R. Streitberger argue that the poem is pedagogical, Adonis a model for the fashioning of an Elizabethan gentleman.[16]

---

[15] Lindheim, "Shakespearean *Venus*," 190; Allen, "On *Venus*," 101. See also Levy-Navarro, "Resisting Fatphobia," for some implications of this reading strategy.

[16] Asals, "Education of a Goddess," 32-34; Miller, "And the Horses" and "Mars's Hot Minion"; Streitberger, "Ideal Conduct," 286; Allen, "On *Venus*," 109-10. See also Baldwin, *Literary Genetics*, for another influential example of this type of criticism-by-containment. In a related vein, Pablo Maurette shows that *Venus* was seen as educational in its own time, functioning as an *ars amatoria*:

> [I]n the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries *Venus and Adonis* was read as an erotic pamphlet of sorts, indeed an *ars amatoria*, as attested in plays by Thomas Middleton, Thomas Heywood, and later Lewis Sharpe, as well as in satirical poems by John Davies and Edward Guilpin. ("Kiss Poetry," 355)

Echoing this point, Chantelle Thauvette shows how "*Venus and Adonis*'s notoriety eventually earned the poem a place on the library shelf of 'Love's Academy,' a repository of arousing books imagined by the author of the pseudonymous pseudo-sexual advice pamphlet, *The Practical Part of Love* (1660)" ("Pornography," 29). Neither Maurette nor Thauvette, however, seek to normativize the poem as do earlier

While this account is by no means exhaustive, I point to these examples to demonstrate the prominent impulse in *Venus* criticism to reject its discomfiting instability, either by pathologizing the poem or by recuperating it, awkwardly fixing its unruly qualities into a neatly packaged moral paradigm.

Much of this critical discomfort, I suggest, stems from the way in which *Venus* raises potentially troubling questions about gender, species, and selfhood. However, in this chapter, I will demonstrate the ways in which *Venus* forecloses the possibility of reading either gender or species as a stable or even a particularly meaningful site of difference. In so doing, I hope to recover some of the delight in the categorical and psychic fracture that *Venus* stages through its erotic imagery and language. Given *Venus*'s overwhelming popularity in its own time, this chapter demonstrates that many early moderns were comfortable with its embrace of erotic instability. The poem's resistance to recuperative readings suggests that the unstable self, while provoking anxiety in some quarters, can also be understood as an occasion for pleasure.

To suggest that Venus exceeds normative gender roles is nothing new; already by 1983 Gordon Williams designates Venus's "usurping of the male role" as "oft-noted."[17] Venus has been variously described as "reversing female and male roles," "usurp[ing] masculine behavior," and "emulat[ing] the stereotyped mode of male behavior."[18] Other critics,

---

critics like Asals; Maurette in particular is interested in the ways in which the poem uses kisses to explore the liminal spaces of identity ("Kiss Poetry," 377).

[17] Williams, "Coming of Age," 770.

[18] "reversing," Kolin, "Venus and/or Adonis," 31; "usurp[ing]," Iyengar, *Shades*, 147; "emulat[ing]," Sansonetti, "Out-Oviding Ovid," 177. See also Belsey, "Taxonomies of Desire," 261; and Bate, "Sexual Perversity," 87.

however, have stressed Venus's overwhelming, sometimes threatening, femininity: she is "the very incarnation of desirable femininity" and a "representation of aggressive female sexuality"; representative of "lust, simple procreation, sexual materialism, [and] even the *femme fatale*"; and characterized by "female loquacity."[19] These critics occasionally gesture beyond the logic of role adherence or reversal; Sujata Iyengar suggests that *Venus and Adonis* "is polymorphously perverse" and "a hermaphroditic narrative," largely because of Venus's fusion of female-coded verbosity with male-coded aggression.[20] Richard Rambuss similarly suggests "the poem shows Venus taking on both [male and female] roles herself," and Pablo Maurette mentions in a brief aside that "Venus is both male and female."[21] However, even critics sensitive to the poem's nuanced portrayal of gender do not thoroughly track the repeated confusions and ambiguities in Venus's gender presentation, declining to develop the radical readings their comments might allow. Careful attention to imagery and form alongside plot and characterization, however, precludes a description of Venus as male, female, or a masculine woman; rather, her mutable, unstable figuration exceeds the boundaries of a gender binary altogether. Furthermore, the insistent use of animal imagery to characterize the goddess suggests that her morphology cannot be limited to the anthropic, however outsized she may be.

---

[19] "very incarnation," Kahn, "Self and Eros," 352; "representation," Rambuss, "For a Boy," 247; "lust," Merrix, "Sexual Aggression," 344; "female loquacity," Iyengar, *Shades*, 146. See also Nona Fienberg, "Thematics of Value," *passim*.

[20] Iyengar, *Shades*, 145.

[21] Rambuss, "For a Boy," 247; Maruette, "Kiss Poetry," 378. See also Enterline, "*Venus and Adonis*," 464.

Most famously, the aggression Venus exhibits in her pursuit of Adonis marks her words and actions as masculine, whether in the sixteenth- or twenty-first century.[22] Appropriating the role of the Petrarchan lover, Venus is "like a bold-faced suitor" (6) and, in a feat of unfeminine strength, is able to "pluck [Adonis] from his horse" (30); her unusual physical power is reemphasized only a dozen lines later, when she "governed him in strength" (42). Venus's words are similarly overpowering, not merely in sheer prolixity, but also in their assertion of erotic dominance tinged by violence, such as when she promises to "smother [Adonis] with kisses" (18). The imagery through which her actions are presented often has similarly violent and predatory connotations: she is an "empty eagle, sharp by fast, / … / …devouring all in haste, / Till either gorge be stuffed or prey be gone" (55-58); she "feedeth" on [Adonis's breath] as on a prey" (63); and, like a "vulture" (551) that "With blindfold fury…begins to forage" (554), "glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth" (548) on her "yielding prey" (547). Beyond these somewhat unsettling images of predatory consumption—images that suggest Venus can be contained by species little better than she can by gender—she is further described in terms of imprisonment and bondage, trapping Adonis as "a bird lies tangled in a net" (67) as well as in "a gaol of snow" and "an alabaster band" (362-63). These images of violence extend into recurring descriptions of Venus in martial terms, whether in her body itself—her "lips are conquerors" (549); her complexion is a "fighting conflict" where "white and red each other did destroy" (345-46)—or in her actions, such as when

[22] Here and throughout the project, I will refer to masculine and feminine traits and embodiment. This is not to suggest any essentialist or prescriptive notion of male or female, but rather to describe how particular modes of embodiment and behavior were coded in the early modern period.

she pulls Adonis onto her: "she [is] in the very lists of love, / Her champion mounted for the hot encounter / … / He will not manage her, although he mount her" (594-97). This latter conceit again associates Venus with an animal, this time a horse, and evokes masculine battle before concluding on an interestingly ambivalent image that hangs on the different meanings of "will": while Venus fails to achieve her desired outcome, the description of Adonis's refusal—"he will not manage her"—also suggests that, despite Venus's subordinated position in the rider-steed dyad (a relationship fraught with erotic associations in the period), she remains in control and cannot be "manage[d]."[23] Venus's gestures too can signify dominance, such as when she strokes Adonis's cheek in line 45, an act that would have demonstrated erotic hierarchy in the sixteenth century: chin-chucking, as Will Fisher terms it, was a gesture an "active," dominant lover performed on their partner.[24] Venus's masculine physicality is further emphasized when she is described as having a "swelling passion" (218), a phrase rife with phallic connotation in its suggestion of tumescence as a response to love. Adonis himself characterizes Venus with masculine pronouns in his angry rebuke to her suit:

> Call it not Love, for Love to heaven is fled
> Since sweating Lust on earth usurped his name,
> Under whose simple semblance he hath fed
> Upon fresh beauty, blotting it with blame. (793-96)

[23] "Manage" here referring not only to the general sense of "controlled" but also to the act of putting a horse through its paces, a continuation of the animal metaphor.

[24] Fisher, "Chin Chucking," 150. Whether or not this gesture would have carried erotic import in all contexts is debatable, but the poem's suffusion with sexual meaning makes this a viable implication.

While Adonis is talking about the abstractions Love and Lust, it seems reasonable to take Lust to represent Venus in his speech: she is Love herself (though clearly not aligned with Adonis's conception thereof); engages in behavior that Adonis characterizes as that of Lust; and is frequently (and famously) sweaty in the poem. Claiming Love has been "usurped" by "sweating Lust," Adonis's use of male pronouns to characterize both entities here genders Venus as male. The image thus represents Venus as a man engaged in the masculine action of usurping and corrupting the place of another man. In brief, then, Venus's violent wooing and aggression imbue her with masculine qualities expressed not only in her actions, but also in the patterns of imagery used to describe those actions.

However, the poem problematizes this apparent masculinity by simultaneously emphasizing Venus's femininity; many of her descriptors, in fact, gender her ambiguously by simultaneously evoking both masculine- and feminine-coded traits. We might begin by noting that, while the Petrarchan tradition Shakespeare invokes generally features an aggressive male lover and reluctant female beloved, the Ovidian corpus from which the character of Venus is derived includes a number of female wooers and male beloveds; that is, by fusing an Ovidian story to contemporary Petrarchan convention, Shakespeare creates the preconditions for gender ambiguity that he will explore throughout the poem.[25] This ambiguity is redoubled when one notices that many of the images I have just adduced as evidence of Venus's masculinity also carry feminized connotations. The "gaol of snow" and "alabaster band" (362-63) of Venus's imprisoning

[25] See Keach, *Erotic Narratives*, 19, and Rambuss, "For a Boy," 247, for more on female aggression in Ovid.

hand and the "conquerors" (549) that are her lips assert masculine erotic dominance; they also, however, evoke common attributes of the Petrarchan lady, her fairness and conquering beauty.[26] Similarly, the "fighting conflict" (345) of red and white in her face comes straight out of the grab-bag of stock Petrarchan tropes in the period. These seemingly simple images, then, demonstrate a more sophisticated negotiation of gender than language of inversion would allow. Even Venus's strength and size need not be read as connoting only masculinity; Valerie Billing aptly argues that "Venus's physical largeness is essential to the construction of a female-centered queer erotics in the poem," and Elena Levy-Navarro points out how Venus's feminine fatness is part of the poem's erotic appeal.[27] Ambivalent images such as these are present from the beginning of the poem, where the narrator informs us that "Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him, / And like a bold-faced suitor gins to woo him" (5-6). Venus indeed shows herself a masculinized, bold-faced suitor throughout the poem. However, complete identity with this role is foreclosed by the use of simile: Venus is "*like* a bold-faced suitor." While this comparison emphasizes Venus's gender-transgressive behavior, simile establishes distance as much as it does proximity. Venus's gender is not here firmly established; she is not a bold-faced suitor exactly, but it's not entirely clear what else she is. The feminine rhyme of "unto him" and "woo him" also introduces a formal femininity into this apparent demonstration of Venus's masculine power.[28] By my count, Shakespeare

[26] See Iyengar, *Shades*, 140-58, for more on the importance of color in indicating gender in early modern poetry generally and *Venus and Adonis* specifically.

[27] Billing, "Queer Erotics," 131; Levy-Navarro, "Resisting Fatphobia," *passim*.

[28] The first entry for "feminine rhyme" in the *OED* dates from 1578, originating in Henry Wotton's translation of Jacques Yver's *Courtlie controversy of Cupids Cautels*; its gendered significance would thus have been available to Shakespeare in 1593.

employs 126 feminine rhymes out of 597 rhymes total; this is 21 percent, or over one-fifth.[29] While I do not wish to put too much stress on this unusually high proportion of feminine rhyme, it does seem to have more significance than merely making the verse "jingly" and comical, as has been suggested by Heather Dubrow.[30] (Or part of the "languid" and "sicklied" style adduced by Douglas Bush.[31]) Particularly as Shakespeare's use of the form often extends his lines into hypercatalexis—that is, it spills out of the normative poetic line—I would argue that this frequent use of feminine alongside the more common masculine rhyme enacts a formal reproduction of the gender play going on in the text of the poem.[32] The rhyme of "unto him" and "woo him," for example, unites a male-coded activity—wooing—with a feminine metrical pattern. Similarly, rhyming "encounter" (595) and "mount her" (597) when Adonis is atop Venus not only reinforces the comedy of the situation, but also sonically reinforces the disjunction between Adonis's male positioning as rider having "mount[ed]" Venus and his feminized inability or refusal to "manage" her. These images cannot be adequately described as masculine or feminine, then; rather, the literary and formal conventions they employ produce a complex matrix of gender unable to be simplified into a binary rubric.

Many of Venus's visual or metaphorical self-descriptions similarly belie straightforward gendering as male or female, however intuitive they may initially feel.

---

[29] When endings that are typically multisyllabic but scan monosyllabically in a regularizing reading of the text (such as "fire" and "desire") are included, the number rises to 140, or 23 percent.

[30] Dubrow, *Captive Victors*, 33.

[31] Bush, *Mythology*, 145.

[32] See Bates, *Renaissance Lyric*, for a discussion of hypercatalexis as a sign of abjected masculinity in *Astrophil and Stella* (56-57).

This is demonstrated most interestingly in the famous deer park passage, where Adonis is invited to "Graze on [her] lips, and if those hills be dry, / Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie" (233-34). In proceeding southward, Adonis will find "Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain, / Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough" (235-36). While Rambuss argues that this suggests an instance of the "outsized female form" that provoked such horror in Lewis, this body seems more ambiguously gendered than he allows.[33] At the very least, there is nothing necessarily female in this blazon; while "pleasant fountains," "sweet bottom-grass," and "rising hillocks" gesture toward erotic meaning, it is unclear to me that these images have to designate a female body, either through anatomical specificity or imagistic convention. (It is also unclear to me what we gain by attempting to stabilize them as such.) Furthermore, the description lacks what we might expect in a quasi-pornographic blazon of a nominally female body, particularly one that enjoins its auditor to "stray lower": there is no identifiable reference to female genitalia. The case could be made for the "pleasant fountains" Adonis will find should he fulfill Venus's request, but the ejaculative quality of a fountain makes it at least as potentially phallic as it is vaginal, particularly given the importance of seminal projection in early modern conceptions of masculinity.[34] A similarly ambiguous anatomy can be found when Venus blazons her beauty for Adonis, saying "Mine eyes are grey and bright and quick in turning, / My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow, / My flesh is soft and plump, my marrow burning" (140-42). While Venus's beauty is emphasized, greyness,

[33] Rambuss, "For a Boy," 245.

[34] See Simons, *Sex of Men* for more on the centrality of ejaculation to early modern masculinity (e.g. 1-13).

brightness, and quickness are not traits coded as particularly male or female, and while female bodies were (and are) more commonly represented as "soft and plump" than male bodies, the association is by no means definitive. More directly sexual is Venus's later claim that she "by her good will / Will never rise, so he will kiss her still" (479-80), yet here again Venus genders herself ambiguously, even without obvious reference to her body. The repetition of "will" three times in two lines calls to mind Sonnet 135 and its repeated punning on the term; "will" carries a multiplicity of meanings, including intention and sexual desire as well as both male and female genitalia.[35] Although this passage invokes explicitly neither the body nor the bawdy, the proximity of "will" and "rise"—often signifying "to have an erection"—suggests that a genital resonance is available here, even if it is not the dominant or intended meaning.[36] Venus's "will"—desire, intent, and ungendered genitalia—thus contributes to the difficulty attendant upon stabilizing her gender in a sustained way.

I have thus far shown how Venus's body has been described in both masculine and ambiguously gendered terms; other anatomical images call up more decidedly feminine qualities. Interestingly, however, while this group of images emphasizes Venus's femininity, they simultaneously render malleable the contours of her body, gendered stability counteracted by morphological flux. This femininity is often located in Venus's maternity, as most influentially documented in Coppélia Kahn's essay on the poem. In a characteristic psychoanalytic move, Kahn reads Venus as fusing the roles of

[35] See Partridge, *Bawdy*, 218-19.

[36] See Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 67, on the shift whereby the language of erection becomes more explicitly male across the sixteenth century.

mother and lover.[37] This role confusion is reflected in the poem's imagery of the milch doe; unlike the deer park, where gendering remains indeterminate, the doe is decidedly female: Venus is "Like a milch doe whose swelling dugs do ache, / Hasting to feed her fawn hid in some brake" (877-78). Venus is compared to an animal with breasts swollen from a surplus of milk, a strikingly feminine image. The point has rarely been raised (perhaps because it seems so obvious) but here, even as Venus's gender is momentarily fixed, her species once again becomes destabilized. This simultaneous insistence on gender coherence and destabilization of the body recurs when Venus describes her inability to control her sorrow, saying "Grief hath two tongues, and never woman yet / Could rule them both without ten women's wit" (1007-8). Venus refers to herself explicitly as a woman here, and clams an inability to rule the two tongues of grief, reimagining her somatic boundaries. Apologizing for her words and implying that her tongue(s) have gotten away from her, Venus here recognizes her own garrulousness, a trait gendered predominantly female in the early modern period (and today).[38] Venus metaphorically metamorphoses many times throughout the poem, not only into the doe but also into various birds (such as the "empty eagle" who "Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh, and bone" [55-56]). As Rambuss points out, throughout these species shifts, Venus's pronouns remain resolutely female; an emphasis on Venus's femininity correspondingly deemphasizes her human (or anthropomorphized goddess) status, as

[37] See Kahn, "Self and Eros," *passim*.

[38] See Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies*, 8-35.

though the gender stabilization requires a corresponding loosening of species and bodily contours.[39]

For all the misogyny attendant on his account, then, Lewis is not wrong when he characterizes Venus as "voluminous"; she contains multitudes, unfixable within gender categories, and, though less obviously than Adonis, gestures to the insufficiency of species categories as well. Venus's utter instability, her body shifting with each new turn of her rhetoric, suggests a self in which even the most basic, fundamental categories are in flux; that Venus can be elided with love itself further demonstrates the ways in which erotic desire acts as a deconstructive force, breaking down not only barriers between the self and other but also those of gender and species alike. Venus's desires may be frustrated, but their prolixity and rhetorical exuberance demonstrates the centrality of Shakespeare's interest in destabilizing the contours of bodies, gender, and species to *Venus and Adonis*.

Venus's mutability is reflected in her desire to dissolve the barriers between herself and Adonis; her instability can be read as of a piece with her wish for "an eros that merges lover and beloved."[40] However, Adonis's desires in the poem, whether the rejection of Venus or the pursuit of the boar hunt, entail firm "boundaries between subject and object" that "gesture toward emergent paradigms of subjectivity and semiotics that are not sufficiently manifest to be clearly represented"; throughout the poem, he insists on his

[39] Rambuss, "For a Boy," 245-46.

[40] Shohet, "Eager Adonis," 88.

self-sufficiency and implacability, refusing to compromise his discrete self by giving into Venus's desires.[41] As Anthony Mortimer suggests, "[f]or Adonis the self is created by the erection of barriers, by a refusal to let the world impinge on one's precious identity."[42] However, despite his preference for ontological stability, Adonis's self is no less mutable than Venus's; regardless of his repeated attempts to establish himself as categorically and morphologically unchanging, his claims to both his masculinity and humanity are complexly destabilized throughout the poem, leading up to his final, most significant transformation from a boy to a flower.

Like Venus, Adonis occupies an ambiguously gendered position, although unlike Venus, his gender is complicated by his status as a youth, a change Shakespeare made from the Ovidian original; Ovid's Adonis was not *puer* but *iuvenis*, suggesting a man in his twenties rather than the teen boy Shakespeare imagines.[43] In Elizabethan England, boys constituted something of a third gender; not wholly male but definitely not entirely female, boys were softer, sexier, and more feminine than men, but lacked the threatening otherness that characterizes women in masculinist thought.[44] Shakespeare's choice to make Adonis a boy, to situate him at a liminal position between male and female, further opens up possibilities for gender play within his characterization, which we see from Venus's initial salute:

---

[41] Ibid. 88; 96.

[42] Mortimer, *Variable Passions,* 31. Nona Fienberg similarly argues that Adonis is defined by "fixity and absoluteness" ("Thematics," 21).

[43] Lindheim, "Shakespearean *Venus and Adonis,*" especially 196.

[44] Orgel, *Impersonations,* especially 31-82.

"Thrice fairer than myself," thus she began,

"The field's chief flower, sweet above compare,

Stain to all nymph, more lovely than a man,

More white and red than doves or roses are: (7-10)

Simply put, Adonis is pretty. He is "fair" and "white and red," a description largely associated with the (female) Petrarchan beloved. The first object to which Adonis is compared is Venus herself, placing his beauty both in relation and opposition to a (nominally) female figure. He is "more lovely than a man," a phrase rife with ambiguity—is he the paragon of men, or lovelier than a man is capable of being? Or, perhaps, is he, like Venus, unable to be contained within gender categories? He is lovelier than a man, but the lack of positive comparison suggests that there is nothing to which he can be precisely compared. This similetic indecipherability returns when Venus accuses Adonis of unnatural coldness, saying "Thing like a man, but of no woman bred" (214).

As in the previous example, we have the language of similitude, not identity: Adonis is only *like* a man. And once again, a negative comparison is made without any corresponding positive definition; Venus tells us what Adonis is not, but not what he is. Adonis here operates outside of a gendered space, poorly performing the role Venus would like him to play but not possessing any clear gender of his own. Another technique used to highlight Adonis's gender ambiguity is the disjunction of gender-coding in imagery and plot. We might, for example, consider how Adonis is described as "swoln with chafing" (325) after being rendered impotent and immobile by the loss of his courser. The image is one of masculine sexual arousal and anger—the product of a hot, choleric temperament—but the plot suggests he is a failed horseman (and thus,

insufficiently masculine) and contrives to delay his pursuit of the manly sport of boar hunting.

Adonis does not always exist in this nebulously gendered space, however; many of his descriptors have distinctly feminine overtones. Importantly, both Venus and the narrator ascribe feminine qualities to Adonis—even if she is unreliable, that is, our only other source reiterates this feminization. In her bombastic rhetorical display, Venus makes the argument that refusing sex as Adonis does effeminizes; speaking of Adonis's horse, she suggests that, until the courser "held [his] petty bondage in disdain" (304) by chasing after the mare, he was "like a jade" (301). Again we have the language of similitude—the courser was not quite a jade, but merely bore similarities to one. However, Venus's point is that the refusal of sex with women effeminizes men. She had already tried this tack when she earlier argued "Thou art no man, though of a man's complexion, / For men will kiss even by their own direction" (215-16). Even as Adonis here possesses "a man's complexion," granting both his appearance and his humoral configuration an unusual degree of masculinity for a boy with a "hairless face" (487), Venus says, he is no true man because he will not kiss her. The argument that Adonis's lack of desire marks him as insufficiently masculine is somewhat ill-advised, given that, as discussed in the introduction, early modern "women are dangerous to men because sexual passion for women renders men effeminate."[45] Effeminacy more typically arises from men's indulgence in, not refusal of, sex with women; the irrational nature of sex and heteroeroticism's requirement of physical and psychological proximity to a female other

[45] Orgel, *Impersonations*, 26.

threatens the discrete self-control that characterizes the male subject in early modern thought. Venus's effort to correlate effeminacy and disinterest in sex with women, then, cannot have been terribly appealing to a young Adonis eager to prove his virility in the boar hunt.

Venus further attempts to feminize Adonis through anatomical language both bawdy and idealizing; as has been already remarked, Adonis's red and white complexion would have been instantly recognizable as that of the Petrarchan lady. In the first six stanzas alone, he is "Rose-cheeked" (3), "fairer" than Venus (7), and "More white and red than doves or roses" (10); will somehow gain lips even more "red, and pale" from Venus's attentions (21); and "blushed and pouted" (33) while remaining "red for shame, but frosty in desire" (36). The narrator, interestingly, also has a particular fascination with Adonis's mouth, which is described as "the ruby-coloured portal" that "to his speech did honey passage yield" (451-52). While there are no firm anatomical descriptors here, this nevertheless seems remarkably vaginal in its emphasis on the mouth as a "portal" that "yield[s]" "honey passage" to his speech. Anticipating this erotic feminization of the mouth is the narrator's earlier description of Adonis's dimples:

> [I]n each cheek appears a pretty dimple;
> Love made those hollows, if himself were slain
> He might be buried in a tomb so simple,
> Foreknowing well, if there he came to lie,
> Why there love lived, and there he could not die.
>
> These lovely caves, these round enchanting pits,

Opened their mouths to swallow Venus' liking. (242-48)

The narrator characterizes Adonis's dimples as "caves" and "pits," rather suggestive of female genitalia.[46] Such an impression is deepened by the passage's language of the death of love—"tomb" and "die"—as well as that of sex—"lie." The feminine rhyme of "dimple" with "simple" formally reinforces the gender of the thematic content, as does the pairing of "liking" and "striking" in lines 248 and 250. Venus's later accusation that Adonis's body is nothing but "a swallowing grave" (757) echoes this description in its emphasis on holes associated with death. This frequent recourse to feminized language to describe Adonis foreshadows the futility of his project of entrenching firm boundaries around the self; the rhetorical world Shakespeare creates in *Venus* precludes any functional distinction between male and female, let alone between self and not-self.

Even in what is often called, somewhat reductively, Venus's transgender fantasy, where she seems to imagine herself as a man and Adonis as a woman, neither she nor Adonis attain a stable or coherent gender. The passage starts, "Would thou wert as I am, and I a man, / My heart all whole as thine, thy heart my wound" (369-70). Initially, it seems Venus and Adonis exchange genders, although it's worth noting that Venus does not explicitly refer to herself as a woman; instead, she wishes that Adonis would be "as I am," whatever that may mean—a woman, perhaps, but perhaps a god(dess) or even simply a reciprocating lover. Venus then wishes that Adonis's heart would be as wounded as hers—her heart becomes "whole as thine," while his becomes her "wound." To engage a perhaps perverse reading, it seems to me as though Venus wishes to displace

[46] C.f. Donne, "Loves Progress," which describes Cupid as dwelling in "pits and holes" (30).

her vagina, her "wound," inside Adonis's heart, a decidedly queer image regardless of the genders of the participants.[47] The possible homophonic pun on "whole" and "hole"—slang for both the pudenda and the anus—used to describe Adonis's current cardiac situation and Venus's desired goal for herself even further complicates this already knotty dispersal of gender. The seemingly simple gender transposition here imagined, then, becomes rather more complex than it might initially seem.

Lauren Shohet has noticed the ways in which Venus's erotics entail the "breaching of boundaries" between the title figures; the narrator seems to endorse this with his many descriptions of the goddess and the youth that link them via similar metaphorical and imagistic conceits.[48] Both are metaphorized repeatedly as birds, for example, often within lines that stand in close proximity to one another. Venus's "empty eagle" (55) is quickly followed by Adonis's "bird…tangled in a net" (67) and "dive-dapper" (86); he is a "wild bird" (560) just nine lines after she is a "vulture" (551). While the preceding examples suggest a difference—Venus as predator, Adonis as prey—they are sometimes described as identical birds as well, such as when the narrator suggests that they are "like two silver doves" (366). These metaphors rhetorically establish a similarity between Venus and Adonis while simultaneously positing a lack of fixity in their bodily contours, however metaphorical —adumbrating Adonis's later translation, Venus and Adonis leave their human forms behind. Their human(oid) bodies have some similarities beyond their common gender indecipherability as well. Each describes the

[47] See Partridge, *Bawdy*, 221-22 for sexual connotations of "wound."

[48] Shohet, "Eager Adonis," 89.

other's voice as sirenic, Venus castigating Adonis's "mermaid voice" (429) and Adonis her "wanton mermaid's songs" (777). Both are pretty, Venus "prettily entreat[ing]" (73) Adonis's "pretty ear" (74). And famously, both have sweaty palms, Adonis at line 25 and Venus between 143-44. In one of her many tactics of seduction, Venus directly invokes the idiom of erotic similitude when she says "Look in mine eye-balls, there thy beauty lies: / Then why no lips on lips, since eyes on eyes" (119-20). Using language similar to Donne's roughly contemporary "Sapho to Philaenis" (which, despite relying on a different argument, is also about an unrequited, unconsummated desire), Venus claims that kissing is a natural progression from looking. The eyes and lips are undifferentiated, and Adonis's beauty inheres not in his body but rather in Venus's vision, his body thus reliant on hers. Another crucial similarity, one with immediate implications for their gendering, is the use of the language of physical impression to describe both Venus and Adonis. Venus first leaves her mark on Adonis, whose "tend'rer check receives her soft hand's print, / As apt as new-fall'n snow takes any dint" (353-54). This places him in a normatively feminine position: impression was considered something that men did to women, whether it was masculinized pen inscribing feminized paper or male sperm shaping female ova.[49] Adonis, however, returns the favor. In describing his lips, Venus says "Pure lips, sweet seals in my soft lips imprinted" (511). Venus too is capable of being "imprinted," and what more, "seal" could function as yet another euphemism for the phallus, here masculinizing Adonis on the anatomical level.[50] Both Venus and

[49] See Wall, *Imprint,* 219, and Crawford, *Blood, Bodies, and Families,* 57.

[50] See Greene, "Poetics of Discovery," 139, and Young, "'Pornography and Imperial Politics," 44.

Adonis, then, imprint (a masculine activity) and are imprinted (a feminine passivity) alike, shifting genders in parallel ways across the poem. This pattern of parallel gender ambiguity continues even when Venus and Adonis are in direct contention with one another. To return once more to image of Venus's imprisonment of Adonis, we see "A lily prisoned in a gaol of snow, / Or ivory in an alabaster band: / So white a friend engirts so white a foe" (362-64). Their hands are alike in their fairness—whiteness imprisoned by whiteness—and the characters become nearly indistinguishable by the final line of the passage, the "friend" and "foe." These similarities culminate in the image derived from the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus near the midpoint of the poem—"Her arms do lend his neck a sweet embrace; / Incorporate then they seem, face grows to face" (539-40).While this is perhaps the most striking articulation of the similarities between Venus and Adonis (and the closest to sex with Adonis that Venus will get), it is of a piece with the poem's imagery in general, which often emphasizes the hermaphroditic similarities between the title characters.

The title characters of *Venus and Adonis*, then, are not transgendered, as so many critics have contended, but, to borrow the language of modern gender theory, neither are they cisgendered. Rather, Shakespeare's portrayal of Venus and Adonis defies binaryand stable gender logic altogether. The poem's conception of gender is mutable to the extent that it makes little sense to say Venus is a butch or masculine woman and Adonis a femme boy; to sort out the gender here is ultimately a futile (and normativizing) critical project. In its rejection of normative gender categories, the narrative evacuates gender as a meaningful index of difference altogether.

The gender ambivalence characterizing Venus's attempts to seduce Adonis continues even after her definitive failure, carrying over into the fatal meeting between Adonis and the boar. The second act of the poem exploits this gender trouble to establish a queer family unlimited by gender, species, and morphology in its closing lines. The starting point for the creation of this family unit is the characterization of Adonis's goring as not an excruciatingly painful death, but rather a sexy assignation. Critics have long noticed the sexualized quality of Adonis's interaction with the boar, but have tended to elide the (admittedly minor) inconsistencies of gender in the boar's description as well as to minimize the species difference between the swine and the youth. For earlier scholars, this erotic entanglement was generally construed as a phobic substitution for Adonis's proper object of desire, Venus. Coppélia Kahn notices the sexualized language but argues that Adonis "could never love a boar" because it is "an ugly creature"; rejecting the "enviable chance to prove his manhood" that Venus provides, he chooses the boar in a narcissistic act that, for Kahn, demonstrates his fear of normative adult heterosexuality.[51] Gordon Williams, though less quick to pathologize Adonis for his rejection of Venus, argues that Adonis's death, "far from being a punishment, is a consummation devoutly to be wished" but views the boar as a fairly straightforward Venus substitute, in his metaphor, the Elaine to Venus's Mrs. Robinson.[52] Adonis's narcissism (in Kahn) and sexual inexperience (in Williams) render him unable to engage in supposedly healthy,

[51] Kahn, "Self and Eros," 366; 352. The homophobia of this version of the classic psychoanalytic account of homosexuality on which Kahn draws has been well established and hardly needs additional rehearsal here.

[52] Williams, "Coming of Age," 770; 776. See also e.g. Cantelupe for similarities between Venus and the boar ("Iconographical Interpretation," 14).

"normal" adult heterosexuality; his encounter with the boar is not, then, an encounter with the boar qua boar (or, even, with an entity gendered other than female), but rather a first experience of sexuality, explicitly (mis)labeled as heterosexual. More recently, critics such as Rambuss and Goran Stanivukovic have noticed the homophobic impulses underlying this heterosexualizing imperative.[53] In an insightful reading of the poem, Rambuss suggests that "[a]s rendered by Venus with such palpable, voluptuous detail, the coupling of the boar and the boy stands as one of the most graphically sexual figurations in Renaissance poetry of male/male penetration, of tusk in groin, of male body 'rooting' male body."[54] Rambuss further argues that "*Venus and Adonis* can be read, at least *vis-à-vis* Adonis and the boar, as a protogay text."[55] In this, Rambuss echoes Stanivukovic, who suggests that "the death scene [is] an allegory of violent union between men."[56] Such claims constitute a necessary corrective to the earlier critical tendency to read Adonis's death as punishment for his rejection of Venus and, consequently, heterosexual passion. However homophobic such earlier critical equations of the rejection of heterosexuality with narcissism and immaturity may be, in their attempt to suggest *Venus and Adonis* is a (proto-)gay poem, both Rambuss and Stanivukovich foreclose other queer possibilities that the text offers. Rather than a (proto-)straight or (proto-)gay encounter, I argue, we can more productively see the meeting between Adonis and his porcine paramour as queer, characterized once again by the gender indecipherability of

[53] Rambuss, "For a Boy"; Stanivukovic, "Kissing the Boar."

[54] Rambuss, "For a Boy," 249.

[55] Ibid. 252.

[56] Stanivukovic, "Kissing the Boar," 88.

the two main participants—who, lest it be forgotten, are also of two different species. This copulation in turn leads to the establishment of a complicated, interspecies family: the youth Adonis, the boar, their flower-child, and the goddess Venus, the adoptive mother/lover of the flower.

The eroticism of Adonis's eventual meeting with the boar is foreshadowed in Venus's prophetic vision of the hunt. She first suggests that Adonis is incapable of penetrating the boar: "thou know'st not what it is / With javelin's point a churlish swine to gore" (615-16). Adonis lacks the phallic prowess and experience necessary to penetrate the swine with his "javelin." Venus goes on to characterize the hunt as an erotic encounter:

> And more than so, presenteth to mine eye
> The picture of an angry chafing boar,
> Under whose sharp fangs on his back doth lie
> An image like thyself, all stained with gore;
> Whose blood upon the fresh flowers being shed,
> Doth make them droop with grief and hang the head. (661-66)

In Venus's vision, Adonis takes the position of the female partner in a normative iteration of heterosexual coupling: Adonis, lying on his back, has been penetrated by the boar's "sharp fangs," causing him to bleed—the image is one of defloration. The motif of defloration gains linguistic resonance from the "fresh flowers" in line 665; continuing the thematic of gender reversal throughout the poem, however, these flowers, rather than signifying the loss of female virginity, seem an image of phallic detumescence as they "hang the head." This language of de- or nontumescence continues throughout the

passage, although it is later applied to Adonis. Venus commands Adonis to "Lie quietly, and hear a little more; / Nay do not struggle, for thou shalt not rise" (708-9). Venus is nominally telling Adonis to remain with her, but the sexual overtones of "rise," particularly in conjunction with "Lie," are difficult to miss: Venus is commanding Adonis to avoid sexual excitement. While this might seem counterproductive, given her evident desire for Adonis, it seems that Venus is rather attempting to say "do not rise [for the hunt]"—that is, to neither go hunting nor become aroused by the prospect.

Venus's prohibition feminizes Adonis by barring him from the boar hunt, which was often perceived as a paradigmatically male pursuit. Inevitably, Adonis ignores Venus's pleas and embarks upon the hunt with a coterie of his male friends. As Rambuss points out, this constitutes hunting as "distinctly male domain."[57] Indeed Adonis has been attempting to reestablish homosociality ever since the loss of his courser: "For all my mind, my thought, my busy care, / Is how to get my palfrey from the mare" (383-84). Adonis wants to separate the apparently successful heteroerotic coupling of courser and jennet in order to regain a cross-species male bond. In escaping Venus to enjoy quality bro time and hunt with his friends, he finally establishes an (unseen, temporary) homosociality. This homosociality is reinforced by the early modern understanding of boar hunting as a particularly macho endeavor. As Bates remarks,

> Of all forms of hunting, the boar hunt classically represented the ultimate test of a man's fighting ability: its encounter with a single, wild, male animal—that does not flee, that stands its ground, that is armed (literally)

[57] Rambuss, "For a Boy," 241.

> to the teeth, that is extraordinarily strong and many times the hunter's body weight, that must be attacked at close range with a single spear—making it the closest thing to heroic human combat.[58]

In sum, the boar, often a "symbol of overbearing masculinity," is an aggressively male and highly dangerous animal, the pursuit of which serves as the ultimate trial of human male prowess.[59]

While the boar in *Venus and Adonis* is indeed heavily masculinized, however, in what is perhaps a predictable maneuver at this point, his gendering is somewhat more complex than this designation might allow, further queering his sexualized goring of Adonis. Venus initially characterizes the boar as overwhelmingly phallic: "On his bow-back he hath a battle set / Of bristly pikes that ever threat his foes (619-20); the boar possesses not one (metaphorical) phallus, but a "battle" of them, the unusual collective noun obviously implying violence as well as quantity. In his movements, he "rushes" through the "thorny brambles and embracing bushes" (629-30); recalling how the courser pierces the earth to her very womb, this description suggests penetration of a feminized natural world. The fuller articulation of this initial image, however, is marked by two feminine rhymes, "armèd" and "harmèd" (625, 27) and "bushes" and "rushes" (629, 30). While this does not diminish the boar's phallic qualities, it creates an ambiguity even within this hypermasculinized description. Later, chasing after Adonis, Venus encounters the boar and realizes that something has gone terribly wrong: "she spied the hunted boar,

[58] Bates, *Masculinity and the Hunt*, 1.

[59] Hatto, "And the Boar," 355.

/ Whose frothy mouth bepainted all with red, / Like milk and blood being mingled both together" (900-2), a fascinating image that briefly destabilizes the boar's masculinity. The boar's mouth is red and white, a sinister resignification of the Petrarchan color scheme pervading the poem. However, the colors are compared to bodily fluids, blood and milk. The boar's froth, a symbol of his masculine rage, is rhetorically aligned with milk, a normatively feminine and maternal fluid. Milk itself is a polysemic signifier here, as its "frothy" whiteness also suggests semen. The boar is thus in this moment masculine in his physical body and spermatic froth; feminine in his production of milk; and childlike in the milk mustache that evokes the image of infantile nursing. Despite the boar's usual alignment with hyperaggressive masculinity and virility, here the imagery precludes a full identification with maleness—or, really, with any gendered position.

However indecipherable the boar's gendering might be when he physically appears in the poem, it is true that he is associated with extreme phallic power in his "conquest" (1030) of Adonis; despite his earlier excitement for the virile boar hunt, Adonis becomes increasingly feminized throughout this sexualized encounter. Venus's first sight of Adonis after his goring is rendered in erotic language; she sees "the wide wound that the boar had trenched / In his soft flank, whose wonted lily white / With purple tears, that his wound wept, was drenched" (1052-54). Given the association between "wound" and female genitalia in the period, Adonis is again feminized by his bleeding wound—he is penetrated, bleeds, falls, and dies, with all the usual connotations

of such death in the period.[60] Adonis then becomes multiply wounded as Venus's gaze compounds these lacerations:

> Upon his hurt she looks so steadfastly
>
> That her sight dazzling makes the wound seem three,
>
> And then she reprehends her mangling eye
>
> That makes more gashes where no breach should be. (1063-66)

In an almost Crashavian moment, Venus's "mangling eye" tears Adonis's flesh anew, piercing and penetrating the body "where no breach should be." The effect of Venus's ocular violence is to further penetrate Adonis's body, rendering it a collection of bleeding orifices. It also aligns Venus with the bestial boar, an identification she will develop in her later admission that "Had I been toothed like him, I must confess, / With kissing him I should have killed him first" (1117-18). Venus's language bespeaks not only a cross-species identification with the boar and his desires; her use of "him" to designate both the boar and Adonis elides the species distinction between those two figures as well.

While Adonis's body is initially rhetorically feminized, Venus complicates this straightforward gendering in her increasingly phallic description of his death, rendered in largely homoerotic terms:

> 'Tis true, 'tis true, thus was Adonis slain:
>
> He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
>
> Who did not whet his teeth at him again,

[60] I certainly do not mean to suggest that being penetrated is the exclusive or inherent provenance of the female body; rather, I suggest both that being penetrated is typically construed as being normatively feminine, and that the language of female genitalia and Adonis's bleeding and death are suggestive of this feminization.

But by a kiss thought to persuade him there;

And nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine

Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin. (1111-16)

This figuration is doubly penetrative and aggressively phallic: Adonis pierces the boar "with his sharp spear," and the boar reciprocates as he "sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin." The repeated use of male pronouns, rather than names or nouns, to describe both Adonis and the boar highlights their similarities; they become almost indistinguishable in their love-embrace. Even in this hypermasculine passage, however, gender is again problematic. For example, the boar is described as having "sheathed" his tusk in Adonis's groin; the Latin for "sheath" is "vagina," making this another instance of the poem's use of feminized imagery to describe Adonis. Furthermore, the queer potential of this union is highlighted by the fact that this is quite literally a bestial encounter. As Dympna Callaghan suggests, "the risibly gruesome *ars verse* of Adonis's preposterous death carries inescapable (and ultimately tragic) imputations of human as well as bestial buggery."[61] Adonis's tryst with the boar, then, is simultaneously homoerotic, heteroerotic, gender transitive, and bestial, unable to be contained within virtually any category.

Remarkably, this union is fruitful: Adonis's body dissolves and from his blood "A purple flower sprung up, check'red with white, / Resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood / Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood" (1168-70). The flower resembles its parents, the boar and Adonis, who are both repeatedly described in the

[61] Callaghan, "(Un)natural Loving," 61.

language of red and white. Once again, we see the category contamination that has characterized the poem: from the conjunction of a male boar and a boy comes a flower. Venus's subsequent adoption of that flower further complicates matters, adding a god to the animal-vegetable-human family. It also evokes incest. Adonis was himself born of the incestuous union of Myrrha and her father Cinyras—and, intriguingly, born after Myrrha was transformed into a tree—and his relationship with Venus can be construed as a family romance.[62] As I suggested above, the undercurrent of a maternal-filial relationship alongside the erotic is frequently noticed in criticism.[63] The relationship between Venus and the flower registers a similar ambivalence. Just as she plucks Adonis from his courser, Venus plucks the flower from the ground and puts it in her breast:

> Here was thy father's bed, here in my breast;
> Thou art the next of blood, and 'tis thy right.
> Lo, in this hollow cradle take thy rest,
> My throbbing heart shall rock thee day and night;
> There shall not be one minute in an hour
> Wherein I shall not kiss my sweet love's flower. (1183-88)

Venus's language vacillates between the maternal and the erotic (or, perhaps more accurately, it refuses to stabilize these categories as distinct poles); her bosom becomes the flower's "cradle," suggesting that the flower is her child. She also, however treats it as an Adonis-substitute—she shall every minute "kiss [her] sweet love's flower."

---

[62] Bate, "Sexual Perversity," 82. See also Newman, "Myrrha's Revenge."

[63] See Kahn, "Self and Eros"; Callaghan, "(Un)natural Loving"; Williams, "Coming of Age"; Enterline, "Psychoanalytic Criticism"; and Lindheim, "Shakespearean *Venus*," for only a few examples.

Recalling Kathryn Schwarz's comments about ambivalent representations of the breast as a potential site of autonomous female desire in early modern England, Venus's breast here is simultaneously a maternal space, the "swelling dugs" of the doe (377) and the breast to which Adonis was "bound" in "sweet embrace" (811-12).[64]

Beyond the incestuous implications of Venus's relationship to the flower, her desire to keep it in her breast entails its uprooting; to borrow Lee Edelman's terms, this constitutes a refusal of reproductive futurity.[65] Venus "crops the stalk" of the flower (1175) to "wither in [her] breast" (1182).[66] Once cropped, the flower, Adonis's only descendent, will die.[67] While Adonis has a child, then, this lasts only one generation; after the flower "wither[s]," his line will die out. In the Ovidian version of the myth, Adonis's death is also an etiological story about the anemone; here, however, there is no indication that the flower is the progenitor of a new species. This change constitutes a revision of not only the tale in the *Metamorphoses*, but also the myth of Adonis more generally: Adonis was "construed as a spirit of vegetation" and "was commonly identified as the sun and thus as a virile and heavenly force of generation."[68] Shakespeare's changes to Ovid foreclose the continuation of the self through reproduction, and thus reject the stability and permanence of the self altogether.

---

[64] Schwarz, "Missing the Breast," 154-55.

[65] See Edelman, *No Future*.

[66] See Menon, "Spurning Teleology," for a discussion of the poem's rejection of teleology of all sorts.

[67] This is also discussed by Anthony Mortimer in *Variable Passions,* although he does not link it to reproductive futurity. Rather, he sees the flower's death as emblematic of the death of Adonis's virginity.

[68] Daigle, "Some Traditional Contexts," 40. See also Lindheim, "Shakespearian *Venus,*" 197.

Venus and Adonis goes beyond inverting or reconfirming normative gender roles, instead destabilizing the notion of coherent gender, species, or selfhood altogether. Both Venus and Adonis are excessively, contradictorily gendered in the lavish imagery that constitutes one of the major pleasures of the poem; their bodies too undergo many metaphorical metamorphoses, shifting species with each new twist of rhetoric. Such gender and species confusion continues in the encounter between the boar and Adonis, which is not only simultaneously hetero- and homoerotic, but also bestial. This cross-species eroticism, as Callaghan suggests, reveals the "discrete taxonomies of human and animal" as "demonstrably artificial categories."[69] This relationship produces a child of yet another category, a flower, whose immediate cropping in turns signifies a rejection of teleology and futurity at the same time as it embraces incest. The poem's ending in death and destruction of genealogy could perhaps, on the one hand, be read as an attempt to contain the threat posed by the queerness of this encounter. However, I am not convinced that this is the only or best way to understand *Venus*'s ending. Rather, we can see the *Venus and Adonis* as a poem in which category contamination is the constitutive element of eroticism—indeed this is the confused, conflicted, "Perverse" (1156), and identity-effacing version of desire Venus proposes in the final lines. The ending, with its continued destabilization of categories of gender, eroticism, and species, poses an alternative to teleological sexuality, hetero- or homoerotic; even as it is short-lived, this queer alternative—and its pleasures—cannot be wholly effaced by the death of Adonis or his flower.

[69] Callaghan, "(Un)natural Love," 75.

III. GENDER PLAY IN DONNE'S SECULAR LYRIC[1]

If *Venus and Adonis* was a runaway hit in its medium of print, John Donne's poetry was similarly popular in the more limited milieu associated with manuscript circulation; indeed, Donne's poems are "found in more surviving manuscript documents than the work of any other English Renaissance poet."[2] This chapter continues my exploration of poetry's use of eroticism to dismantle the self and its constituent categories, here focusing primarily on gender. I argue that in many of his poems, rather than frantically reasserting gender distinctions (and the corollary sovereign male subject) as has often been claimed, Donne's poetry expresses imaginative, intellectual, and erotic pleasure in confounding and ultimately dissolving stable gender positions. In particular, I am interested in how the imagery of Donne's poems, much of which is either explicitly or implicitly gendered, is exceedingly portable; that is, male and female figures in Donne's poetry are regularly characterized with imagery that both affirms and contradicts their nominal gender. By focusing primarily on four of his more enduringly popular pieces—the elegies "The Comparison" and "To his Mistress going to bed" as well as two poems from the *Songs and Sonets*, "The Flea" and "A Valediction forbidding morning"—I show not only that this gender malleability is a constitutive component of Donne's poetic imagination, but also that the presence of such nonnormative configurations of gender has not inhibited his appeal. Although Donne's poetry is often taken to reflect either the pinnacle of early

[1] Material in this chapter has been adapted with permission from two previously-written articles: "'Spermatique issue of ripe menstrous boils': Gender Play in Donne's Secular Lyric," *Philological Quarterly* 95, no. 1: 1-23. Copyright 2016, Gina Filo; and "Gender, Genre, and Donne's 'The Flea,'" *Modern Philology* 117, no. 2: 214-32. Copyright 2019, *Modern Philology*.

[2] Marotti, *Manuscript*, 24.

modern heteroerotic love or the nadir of the period's misogyny (both positions relying on the assumption that Donne believed, or wanted to believe, in the existence of firm and reliable distinctions between men and women), I instead argue that it radically unmoors gender from any stable referent; for Donne, not only is gender is malleable and fungible, but gender play is sexy. While Donne's frequent denaturalization and erasure of gender difference (and thus gender itself) might be read as an attempt to undo the threat women pose to the sovereign male subject by erasing them altogether, I show instead that it is a bid to both reject precisely that sovereign male subjectivity and express eroticism, perhaps even love, in ways uncircumscribed by the limitations of a gender binary. Even as Donne at times seems to retreat into his famed "masculine persuasive force," ultimately his poetry embraces the vulnerability and malleability of both feminine and masculine identifications and forms of embodiment, insisting, as Nancy Selleck suggests, "on a sense of selfhood that is never securely bounded, that even embraces its own penetration from without."[3] By explicating this attempt to circumvent the limitations posed by the gender binary, this chapter demonstrates that Donne had far less of an investment in maintaining gender differentiation than is often assumed; his poetry opens up a vast array of possible articulations of gender, sex, and love often overlooked not because they do not exist, but because assumptions about Donne and early modern culture prevent them from being noticed.

[3] Selleck, *Interpersonal Idiom*, 59.

Writing in 1693, Dryden famously objected to Donne on the grounds that "[h]e affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love."[4] While I (and, I suspect, many of Dryden's female contemporaries) predictably do not find his to be a particularly compelling account of the workings of either the hearts or minds of "the fair sex," Dryden's familiar reading of Donne is nevertheless a useful starting point for this chapter because it establishes an enduring preoccupation of Donne criticism—the posture Donne's poems adopt toward women.[5] Dryden suggests that Donne overvalues women's intelligence by misdirecting his appeal to their wits rather than their passions. For readers disinclined to agree with this assessment of either women's intellectual capabilities or the workings of desire, then, Donne actually comes off looking rather good while Dryden unconsciously reveals the limitations of his understanding of both. This is not to make Dryden a whipping boy—to do so would be unfair and perhaps even hypocritical. The assumptions underpinning his argument are through temporal and ideological distance more naked than many that underlie modern criticism of the poems; however, their visibility reminds us that all criticism is necessarily inflected by the time, place, subject position, and disposition of the individual reader.[6]

[4] Quoted in Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets*, 15.

[5] See DiPasquale for a discussion of other early responses to Donne's portrayals of women ("Spectre of Misogyny," 683-86).

[6] This is perhaps an obvious point, but I think worth reiterating given the extreme polarity of response Donne's representations of women have provoked.

While Donne's treatment of women has been of concern throughout his entire critical history, in the last fifty years it has become one of the central debates occasioned by his poetry, a development tracking roughly with the rise of feminist criticism in English departments. Ilona Bell nicely summarizes the remarkable range of responses to Donne's representations of women:

> Donne has been termed many things: a misogynist who loathed women's bodies and scorned their minds; a metaphysician less interested in emotion than intellection; an egoist and careerist who used women for his own advantage; a wit willing to say anything for the sake of the poem or a rhetorician undone by his own verbal power; and a poet/lover…who was supremely attentive to the woman's point of view.[7]

To roughly schematize, we might say with Ben Saunders that critical responses tend to view Donne as either sexy or sexist, as a reverent lover of women or a misogynist filled with contempt at their sinful, fungible bodies (and at his lamentable susceptibility to the temptations they pose).[8]

Most influential has been the latter line of reasoning, which adduces various cultural and individual pathologies to associate Donne with the masculine anxieties traced in my introduction. If masculine selfhood is predicated on the erection of firm boundaries between the sovereign self and the instable feminine other, the erosion of those boundaries and loss of control brought about by sex threaten the self's coherency,

[7] Bell, "Gender Matters," 201. See also DiPasquale, "Spectre of Misogyny," for a somewhat more even-handed critical history of Donne and gender.

[8] Saunders, *Desiring Donne*, 114.

and, thus, the power and position accruing to the male subject. Given the erotic tenor of much of Donne's oeuvre, it has thus been often argued that he must rhetorically reinforce his masculinity or be rendered both troublingly effeminate and literally selfless.[9] For John Carey, Donne attempts to assert an autocratic level of control over women, compensating for his thwarted political ambition by rhetorically controlling and demeaning the female presence in his poetry.[10] Stanley Fish similarly sees Donne's version of masculinity as contingent on his rhetorical dominance: "[t]he masculinity he asserts is inseparable from his ability to persuade—that is, to control."[11] Fish's Donne recognizes the slipperiness of gender, but almost hysterically attempts to ward it off; if "[m]asculine authority can be asserted only in relation to a firmly defined opposite," any beloved "must be unmistakably and essentially a woman."[12] While Fish is primarily interested in what he considers to be Donne's use of rhetoric to stave off instability and change—what Donne is actually afraid of is the power of language, not the power of women—Achsah

---

[9] A welcome exception is Selleck's recognition of the centrality of interpersonal models of selfhood to Donne's poetry; as she suggests,

> Donne's poems portray the interdependence of self and other at times as an ideal of oneness, at times as a dangerous threat, and at times, subtly, as both. But whether his speakers lament, fear, denounce, acknowledge, or embrace the inconstancy of the other (and they often move through several of these stances), the upshot is always an exploration of how the necessity of embracing that inconstant other belies attempts to construct a stable selfhood. (*Interpersonal Idiom,* 147)

C.f. Duffy's argument in "Epistolary Copulation" that Donne's verse letters both recognize and elicit "interdependence of the self" (74), reflecting his desire to be "dissolved into" (82) the subjectivity of another. Duffy, however, suggests that this posture is reflected through Donne's manipulation of contemporary epistolary tropes, and is limited to his early verse letters to other men (86).

[10] See Carey, *John Donne*, especially chapter four.

[11] Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force," 232.

[12] Ibid. 233. In "Autopoeisis and History," Richard Halpern makes the similar case that "women are threatening to Donne insofar as they represent a possible blurring of the lines of difference" (202).

Guibbory makes similar claims in an influential essay explicitly concerned with gender and power in the *Elegies*. Guibbory argues that,

> Like Aristotle, Donne presumes clear sex distinctions…Donne like Aristotle is concerned to enforce firm sex distinctions. But whereas Aristotle assumes fixed, stable categories, Donne's poems embody strong anxiety about transgressions of hierarchical distinctions between the sexes—an anxiety understandable in a culture in which those categories, both physiological and social, could no longer be assumed to be fixed or stable.[13]

More recently, Rebecca Ann Bach characterizes Donne's posture toward women thus: "[w]omen, Donne's speakers insist, cannot love equally with men. Women are categorically inconstant…the earthly manifestation of the sin of venereal lust, a sin, by definition, prodigious and restless."[14] Donne's poetry, she suggests, is nothing more than a series of "misogynistic screed[s] dressed in glorious poetry."[15] If Arthur Symons could write in 1899 that "if women…were ever to read Donne, they would say, He was a great lover; he understood," that no other poet "has known as much of women's hearts…and the interchange of passionate intercourse between men and women," for the most

---

[13] Guibbory, "Politics of Love," 826.

[14] Bach, "(Re)placing Donne," 273. Bach argues that contemporary critics are particularly inadept at "dealing with the virulent sexual misogyny that pervades Donne's oeuvre" (262) and that Donne's embeddedness in a social system that deprivileges both women and heterosexual relationships in favor of men and homosociality would preclude him from being not only proto-heterosexual (as many critics have claimed or implied), but also from having anything resembling respect for a woman.

[15] Ibid. 260. See also Carr, "Donne's Masculine Persuasive Force"; Benet, "**S**exual Transgression"; Holstun, "Lesbian Elegy"; Halley, "Textual Intercourse"; and Docherty, *Undone*, for only a few of many examples of this critical understanding of Donne.

influential late-twentieth-century criticism Donne has been unequivocally misogynistic, necessarily invested in the attempt, however impossible, to establish insurmountable physical and psychological barriers between himself and women.[16] Writing in 2009, Andrew Barnes exemplifies a recent articulation of this argument when he claims that Donne attempts to "stabilize his subjectivity in relationship to the body of Woman," a body that his speakers repeatedly demean, abject, and scorn.[17] Such criticism relies on what many scholars see as Donne's almost pathological iterations and reiterations of sexual difference: in order to maintain his own discrete male identity and establish a subjective authority to replace the political power he forfeited with his elopement, Donne needs to continually reassert boundaries between himself and the threatening female other, whose constant lability reveals the essential instability of his masculinity and the selfhood and power founded thereupon.

Writing against this posture, others have emphasized Donne's anticipation and incorporation of a female perspective in his poetry, as well as the queer possibilities and identifications the poems open up. Much of Bell's output has been dedicated to refuting this depiction of Donne as arch-misogynist; Donne, she suggests, was instead incredibly sensitive to the implied female addressee of his poems: "Donne shows a negative capability, an instinctive empathy for the lady…unrivalled by any Renaissance lyric poet."[18] Dennis Flynn also notes Donne's imaginative anticipation of female audience, arguing that, not only did Donne write in many cases for a female coterie, but also that he

[16] Symons, "John Donne," 743; 742.

[17] Barnes, *Post-Closet Masculinities,* 46.

[18] Bell, "Role of the Lady," 128. See also Bell's "Oral Sex" and "Courting Anne More."

has a "peculiar ability to articulate a woman's deft and challenging wit."[19] Janel Mueller similarly emphasizes the importance of Donne's female audience both within and without the poems, and stresses the mutuality of his great love lyrics: "[i]nsofar as Donne's speakers associate the full mutuality of this human recognition with heterosexual intercourse freely undertaken and enjoyed, they rather strikingly represent the man and the woman as equals in love."[20] These critics and other like them, while proposing valuable correctives to the account of He-Man-Woman-Hater Donne, troublingly assume a (proto-)heterosexual tenor to Donne's writing; they show that Donne values women, but engage relatively little with the "conception of women as blurring the lines of difference, and of Donne as a threatened masculinist who attempts to reinscribe that line or to control the threat of the feminine," as Saunders summarizes the position exemplified by such critics as Guibbory and Bach.[21] While not wholly discounting the attentiveness and sensitivity to women these critics have adduced (nor indeed wholly discounting the idea that Donne's poetry at times expresses misogynistic sentiments), I would suggest that a reading of Donne must also account for the obvious enjoyment he derives from not only blurring but ultimately demolishing the boundaries between male and female in his poetry. Taking a queerer approach, Saunders demonstrates how Donnean poems that "appear overtly to reinscribe sexual difference can be shown simultaneously to partake of

[19] Flynn, "Female Coterie," 128. Barbara Estrin similarly claims some of Donne's speakers recognize themselves as "produced by the construct [the woman] determines. Imagining her writing agency, Donne begins to see her…as a writing subject" (*Laura*, 179).

[20] Mueller, "Woman among the Metaphysicals," 146.

[21] Saunders, *Desiring Donne*, 230n.22.

fantasies that collapse that difference, at the level of desire."[22] Susannah B. Mintz similarly argues that Donne has "not only an ability to recognize women's separate identity, but also, at his most explicitly revisionary, a desire to exceed the restrictions of binary gender roles."[23] It is in this tradition, finally, that I would like to place my argument for Donne's poems: throughout his poetic corpus, Donne is not only willing but eager to transgress and subvert formulations of gender as fixed, binary, and stable, reinscribing sex, desire, and love outside of a binary paradigm not with anxiety, but with a palpable sense of pleasure and delight.

According to Diana Treviño Benet, the *Elegies* are fundamentally concerned with "the distinctions and the relations between the sexes," issues that "The Comparison" stages rather spectacularly with its veritable proliferation of genitalia.[24] "The Comparison" is, at least nominally, a dramatic contrast between the speaker's mistress and that of a rival; one might expect, then, that the speaker's mistress would be presented in idealized terms, and the rival's in correspondingly unidealized. However, as many critics have pointed out, both descriptions tend toward the negative.[25] Elizabeth Bobo proposes that this poem is not the contrast of a good and a bad mistress, or even two competing perceptions of the same woman, but rather, a "comparison between two similar objects—one very bad; the

[22] Ibid. 138.

[23] Mintz, "Gender and Play," 577.

[24] Benet, "Sexual Transgression," 4.

[25] See e.g. Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force," 225-227.

other, even worse."[26] While this conceit may not appear promising for my contention that Donne is invested in and unthreatened by dismantling stable conceptions of male and female, the poem's imagery, though often negative, proposes a rather more interesting conception of gender and difference than this plot summary might suggest.

"The Comparison" opens with a bombastic, fourteen-line excursus comparing the women's bodily odors, a conceit with misogynistic overtones, to be sure; the speaker's rhetoric, however, begins to blur the lines of gender even in these opening moments. While the speaker's mistress's perspiration is portrayed in ambivalent terms at best (between comparisons to roses and "balme," it is likened to "that which from chaf'd Muscatts pores doth trill" [2], both the civet musk used to make perfume and a potential reference to prostitution),[27] it is the account of the rival's mistress that here intrigues me.[28] The speaker's gleefully malevolent depiction of the other woman reads "Ranck sweaty froth thy Mistress brow defiles / Like spermatique issue of ripe menstrous boils" (7-8). While one of Donne's recent editors curiously proscribes reading "spermatique" (or "spermatic") as having to do with male generation, the first three definitions in the *OED* are as follows: "containing, conveying, or producing sperm or seed; seminiferous" (from 1541); "of the nature of sperm; resembling sperm" (from 1541); and "directly derived from sperm" (from 1577).[29] These definitions all relate to semen in some way

[26] Bobo, "'Chaf'd Muscatts Pores,'" 168.

[27] Ibid. 169.

[28] When available, Donne quotations are from their Variorum editions; for poems without a published Variorum, I have used C.A. Patrides (ed.), *Complete English Poems of John Donne*.

[29] See Robin Robbins's notes to the poem in his Pearson edition of *The Complete English Poems*. Per Robbins, "The analogy is with the secretion of the sperm-whale rather than semen" (301). For definitions of "spermatic," see the *OED Online*, "spermatic." Indeed, not a single definition in the entry for refers to

and were in use well before Donne composed the poem, almost certainly in the 1590s. This is not to say that there may not be a reference to ambergris as well; invoking ambergris, the sperm-whale's secretion valued for its role in perfume-making, would connect this image of the "bad" mistress with the "chaf'd muscatts pores" that characterize the speaker's mistress's scent, emphasizing their fundamental similarity. However, surely a poet as attuned to the witty possibilities of language (and to sex, for that matter) as Donne would not have missed the seminiferous connotations of "spermatique." The woman's spermatic sweat is thus described in masculine terms. The sweat is not only sperm-like, however; it also emerges from "menstrous" boils. In other words, the male fluid of generation issues from a boil—a hole, to put it crudely—that also secretes menstrual blood, which normally signals a woman's capacity for reproduction. This image, used to describe a woman, thus combines male- and female-coded reproductive fluids in a striking, if grotesque, manner.

Of course, the image is used as a spectacular insult, hardly a clear affirmation of a non-binary gender paradigm. Some may view Donne to be here expressing the popular contemporary identification of the hermaphroditic or nonbinary with the monstrous. Relatedly, this negative portrait of an androgynous woman may be seen to exemplify the broader cultural anxiety surrounding discourses of hermaphrodism and intersexuality in the period. As part of the "ugly beauty" tradition catalogued by Heather Dubrow, while the women in the poem are "associated with androgyny," the poem might be interpreted

---

the sperm whale. While "seed" was used to describe both male and female ejaculate, "sperm" has always denoted a male emission, again per the *OED*.

as a smokescreen for "antagonism towards all women" and "misogynistic jokes."[30] In context, then, one might read "spermatique issue of ripe menstrous boils" as part of a larger tradition that reflexively penalizes individuals who do not conform to conventional ideas of gender and sex on either a physical or a social level.

However, the speaker's rhetorical exuberance suggests something more complicated than a reactionary revulsion toward a figure he characterizes with this admittedly bizarre image and the lability of gender it demonstrates. The speaker's hyperbolized and outrageous language suggests that he relishes the image, whether for its illustration of the transgressive nature of his imaginative powers or, more subversively, for the destabilizing implications of such non-normative imagery. Whichever of these readings is preferred, what we see is a poet uniting seemingly incongruous images of both male and female reproductive fluids into a single, bizarre, simile and deriving a sense of perverse enjoyment from doing so.

The speaker reveals early his proclivity for non-normatively gendered images, and, as one might expect, when he inevitably proceeds to describe the women's genitals, this gender confusion becomes increasingly pronounced. First, he describes his own mistress's vagina, using an extended alchemical conceit:

> Then like the Chimicks masculine equall fyre
> Which in the Limbecks warme wombe doth inspire
> Into th'Earths worthless durt a Soule of gold
> Such chearishing heate her best lov'd part doth hold. (35-38)

[30] Dubrow, *Echoes*, 241-42.

At least two potential readings arise from this description. First, in the more gynogenic interpretation, the mistress's genitals are "the Limbecks warme wombe," the alembic or alchemical still that transmutes the speaker's penis into gold, clearly placing a high value on the mistress's vagina, if also, unsurprisingly, on his penis. However, Bobo complicates this when she points out that

> [A]n alembic is not simply a womb-shaped vessel, nor is it the ultimate locus of the transformative or generative process; it is comprised of two parts: a gourd-shaped vessel or *cucurbit* containing the substance to be distilled and the head or cap, the 'alembic proper, the beak of which conveyed the vaporous products to a *receiver,* in which they were condensed' (*OED*). Technically an alembic itself is not an appropriate metaphor for the womb but rather for [the] phallus, the head with a beak out of which products flow into the receiver.[31]

In this reading, it is not the mistress's vagina that confers value upon the penis, but rather the reverse; the vagina then becomes the "worthlesse durt" into which the penis can "inspyre…a Soule of gold." Bracketing for the moment the troubling devaluation of female genitalia this reading seems to entail, if we remain with the image *as image* for a moment longer, it becomes clear that the phallus/limbeck has a "wombe."[32] That is, the speaker's fantasized penis has components of both male and female reproductive anatomy; the female body thus cannot be entirely repudiated within the logic of the

[31] Bobo, "'Chaf'd Muscatts Pores,'" 170, emphasis in original.

[32] Donne is here likely playing on contemporary alchemical treatises' fascination with parthenogenesis and hermaphrodism; see Long's *Hermaphrodites* for a thorough discussion of the role of androgyny and self-reproduction in alchemical texts, especially 109-162.

poem. Melissa Jones suggests that such "fantasy role-playing" can somewhat mitigate Renaissance misogyny, but cautions that, given the concomitance of femininity and shame in many imaginative excursions into the hermaphroditic, such play "seems at the same time to uphold the very binary logic that sustains gender inequality."[33] While this may be true in cases in which the feminine is associated with humiliation, in "The Comparison," no such embarrassment occurs. Rather, the speaker here considers this gender ambivalence to be a desirable attribute; it is the apogee of his fantasy, whereas before, it was a creative, if rhetorically delightful, insult. Furthermore, this cannot be called merely appropriative, as the gender play is bidirectional; that is, while the speaker here adopts a womb, the rival's mistress is multiply endowed with phalluses throughout the text. In this way, "The Comparison" lacks a stable posture toward genderfluid images, which can be used as insult, or, with no apparent increase of anxiety, as gendered or sexual fantasy; the imaginative and rhetorical needs of the moment are what ultimately seem to dictate the speaker's deployment of gender.

The description of the rival's mistress's genitals is similarly ambivalent about its gendered commitments:

> Thyne'is like the drad mouthe of a fired gun
> Or like hot liquid metals, newly run
> Into Clay molds, or like that Etna
> Wher round about the gras is burnt away. (39-42)

[33] Jones, "Spectacular Impotence," 93.

The phallic qualities of these images are more readily apparent here than in those describing the speaker's mistress, although once again, a straightforward identification of images as wholly masculine or feminine is frustrated upon a second look. The rival's mistress's sex organs are like "a fired gun"—an ostentatiously phallic image if ever there was one—but, more particularly, the similitude is to the gun's "mouthe," its opening. They are like "hot liquid metals" filling "Clay molds," an image that again evokes both male and female genitalia (and, also again, male emission). Finally, they are compared to a volcano, which is, as Bobo puts it, "at once convex and concave, an opening in the earth and a source of spouting emissions…the culminating instance of the gender confusion that pervades the descriptions of both mistresses throughout the second half of the elegy."[34] Alongside their more obviously phallic and ejaculative qualities, these images all evoke heat, emphasizing their masculinity on the humoral level and perhaps calling to mind the belief that a sudden excess of warmth could provoke a gender change as well. While these images are potentially destructive, then, they are also associated with heat and thereby "masculine" potential within a female body, further complicating any generalization about the speaker's attitude toward the blurring of gender categories. The poem denies stability to its multiply-gendered images, as the speaker refuses to assign any single value to them. It is not, as Richard Halpern charges, that "The Comparison" "hopes to separate—and in the end, does separate…not one woman from another, but woman from man," but rather that the text refuses to separate, and does not separate, one

[34] Bobo, "'Chaf'd Muscatts Pores,'" 171.

woman from another nor woman from man, and exhibits surprisingly little anxiety in the process.[35]

This is not to suggest that the poem does not participate in a number of discourses troubling from a feminist perspective; whether or not one thinks the women are represented as particularly different, both women's bodies are objectified to serve as a proxy ground for competition between men. While I am apt to think that the speaker's hyperbolic persona is deliberately ironic, the poem's content nevertheless remains at some level troubling. However, my aim here is not to suggest that "The Comparison" is in any straightforward way a proto-feminist poem (nor do I think that a particularly useful metric by which to understand or evaluate early modern poetry, for that matter); rather, my point is that, despite general critical opinion, it is also not in any straightforward way a particularly masculinist one.[36] It is also worth noting that, while Donne's speakers occasionally evince sexual jealousy, such male competition transacted on women's bodies is not a common conceit of his. However, as I shall show, this exploration of fluid concepts of gender is not local; rather, it shows up in a variety of genres and tones, suggesting an abiding investment and interest in these discourses and images.

Like "The Comparison," "To his Mistress going to bed" refuses to stabilize its gendered imagery, although the latter's tone of erotic reverence produces a rather different effect than the gleeful grotesquerie of the former. The lability of gender exhibited by "Going to

[35] Halpern, *Shakespeare's Perfume*, 16.

[36] For arguments about "The Comparison"'s masculinism, see for example, Guibbory, "Politics of Love," 116, and Meakin, *Articulations of the Feminine*, 20.

bed" is perhaps surprising for a poem of heterosexual seduction, where one might reasonably expect that the genders of seducer and seduced would remain constant; while its common title "To his Mistress going to bed" (where the noun "Mistress" and pronoun "his" insist on the distinct genders of its figures) is unlikely to have originated with Donne, the poem explicitly designates a female addressee and almost certainly evokes a male speaker. The apparently heteroerotic tryst that forms the central drama of "Going to bed"—a poem so sexy as to be banished from the first edition of Donne's poetry—is frequently singled out as representative of Donnean misogyny: John Carey is characteristically vitriolic when he asserts that the speaker is a "despotic lover…ordering his submissive woman-victim to strip, and drawing attention to his menacing erection," but other critics suggest that the poem "confirms what is seen as the legitimate, rightful mastery of man" and is "a hymn not only to individualistic monarchy (a form of despotism perhaps) but also…praise to the primacy and potency of the male, and specifically to the authority of the male voice," to name only three prominent examples.[37]

However, such unmitigated assertions of misogyny are precluded by a number of images that deconstruct the apparent male/female binary upon which these critiques are predicated. (They also misread "the thrill of erotic discovery" and "re-awakening of sensory joy" that Ronald Huebert astutely identifies as the poem's primary tone.[38]) The first such image occurs in the second line with the speaker's pun on "labor": "Come Madame, come; All rest my powers defy / Untill I labor, I in labor ly" (1-2). With

[37] Carey, *John Donne,* 91; "confirms," Guibbory, "Politics of Love," 822; "a hymn," Docherty*, Undone*, 80.

[38] Huebert, "Problems with Privacy," 7.

beautifully compressed diction, Donne's speaker calls up two meanings of "labor"—the masculine sexual labor he wishes to perform, as well as the paradigmatically female labor of childbirth.[39] The speaker thus "uses female tumescence and imminent childbirth paradoxically to describe the distended male member prior to climactic discharge"; tumescence is figured here in simultaneously pre-coital, male, and post-coital, female, terms.[40]

The speaker's use of childbirth to gender himself female returns at the end of the poem, when he assumes the role of midwife, an occupation still largely dominated by women in the 1590s: "Then since I may know, / As liberally as to a Midwife show / Thy selfe" (43-45). Elizabeth Harvey views this assumption of the midwife's role as an encroachment into one of the few arenas in which women claimed institutionalized power in this period.[41] While there is certainly legitimacy to the historical trajectory of these claims—the Renaissance saw the increasing medicalization of the parturient body by male physicians to the deliberate exclusion of female practitioners such as midwives—Harvey fails to notice that Donne not only often deploys masculinized imagery to describe women in his poems (an ascription of male-coded embodiment and social roles to women making claims of appropriation, of attempting to vitiate female power, hard to sustain), but also uses this particular image to articulate desire in non-normatively

[39] While the trope of an enwombed male speaker was not uncommon in the period, it was generally used as a metaphor for the process of poetic production rather than the more literal treatment we have here.

[40] Labriola, "Painting," 51. Labriola follows this up with the curious assertion that "[i]f by this analogy the speaker casts himself as an impregnated female, his listener becomes masculine" (51); his essay generally considers this poem in context of seeking patronage in the court of Elizabeth I, which adds another dimension to its play with gender dynamics.

[41] Harvey, "Matrix as Metaphor," 141.

gendered ways. Rather than reinforcing masculine supremacy by appropriating one of the few traditionally-sanctioned all-female spaces, Donne's speaker imagines an intimacy with his lover in not only male-female, but female-female terms, again foreclosing easy categorization of gender difference (or, indeed, easy assimilation to modern paradigms of sexuality). While I'm not convinced that reminding a woman of the potential of pregnancy and childbirth is a terribly advisable seduction strategy—particularly given the speaker and mistress's apparently unmarried state in an age without reliable contraception—in so doing, Donne's male speaker articulates his desire for a woman in terms of female-female intimacy, metaphorically adopting both female genitalia and at least two feminized social roles, midwife and mother. Rather than evincing fear of "slipping or falling into the feminine," then, Donne's speaker willingly adopts femaleness; that he does not maintain this posture throughout the poem demonstrates less a rejection of a feminine subject position and more a view of gender as mutable and contingent rather than as fixed and absolute, something that can be adapted to the emotional, rhetorical, and intellectual needs—and desires—of the moment.[42]

It might be here objected that the speaker's embrace of a feminized position merely serves to reinforce what has often been seen as the appropriative and colonizing character of the infamous passage beginning "Licence my roving hands, and let them go / Behind, before, above, betweene, below" (25-26), in which the speaker articulates his desires in terms borrowed from the nascent English imperial project. In this vein, while she suggests that the speaker ultimately "loses control" over the woman, Malgorzata

[42] "slipping or falling," Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites*, 30.

Grzegorzweska argues that "the sustained metaphor of Donne's poem reduces a woman to a mere object of the coloniser's desire."[43] Sensitive to the speaker's fundamental lack of control over the situation, Grzegorzweska's reading (and others like it) however seems to me to miss not only the speaker's tone of wonder ("Oh my America, my newfound land" [27]), but also the crucial verb that opens the passage: "Licence." The speaker, that is, cannot explore the mistress's body without first obtaining her license.[44] Guibbory reads this word with characteristic cynicism regarding the speaker's motives:

> At the beginning of this passage the woman is the monarch, providing a license; but the moment she gives this license she loses her sovereignty. What was implicit from the first now is clear. The man becomes not only explorer but conqueror, and she becomes *his* land and kingdom.[45]

This reading acknowledges but discounts the necessity of the woman's permission, implicitly arguing that any erotic pleasure derived from domination and submission is inherently exploitative. As Guibbory's own language suggests, however, power in this construction ultimately lies with the woman, who retains the sovereign right to grant or deny the license as she wishes. While this licensure would indeed open the woman up to the speaker's explorations, even possession, I question the move to pathologize the willing exchange of power that these lines entail, as this seems to deprive the woman of her sexual agency far more than Donne's speaker might; indeed, as Melissa Sanchez

[43] Grzegorzewska, "John Donne's Maps," 276.

[44] See also DiPasquale, "Hearing the 'harmonious chime,'" for a similar argument that the speaker is responding to the lady's desires throughout the poem (20-22).

[45] Guibbory, "Politics of Love," 822 (emphasis in original).

demonstrates, while grounded in the "laudable aspiration to protect women from violence and injustice," the argument that "any eroticization of power is incompatible with feminist aims" ultimately "could promote conservative ends by limiting what count as proper and healthy female desires."[46] We might briefly compare this with Donne's other famously colonial piece, "The Sunne Rising"; although this poem is less concerned with blurring gender difference than "Going to bed," it similarly makes and qualifies claims of erotic possession and territorial control in the lines "She'is all States, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is" (21-22). Mintz hears a pun in the "I" of line 21, arguing that it can be read as "aye" rather than "I." This reading shows the line to be an assertion not of domination, but rather of affirmation and "profound acknowledgment of one woman's utter completeness."[47] While some may reject this reading as less than convincing on its own, Bell draws our attention to the following line, "Princes doe but play us" (23). Per Bell, while the speaker may have mistakenly asserted superiority to his partner, in employing the plural pronoun "us" he recognizes his mistake, folding the woman back into terms of equality.[48] While Donne's imagery in these instances certainly has important colonial implications outside the scope of my argument here, on the level of gender it is not particularly concerned with asserting permanent dominance; rather, its invocation of eroticized hierarchy adds to the poems' sexual *frisson*.[49] The requested act of sexual licensure in "Going to bed," then, cannot be so easily dismissed as rapacious

[46] Sanchez, "Early Modern Sexualities," 493; 496.

[47] Mintz, "Gender and Play," 603.

[48] Bell, "Role of the Lady," 121.

[49] See Young, "Oh My America," for an influential postcolonial reading of this poem.

male colonization of a helpless female body, but can be alternately understood as a temporary, contingent, and sexy exchange of power between two consenting subjects.

The poem's notorious, elaborately-fantasized striptease has similarly drawn critique for its supposed demonstration of the speaker's despotism, but once again, closer attention to the imagery reveals persistent destabilization of gender that precludes such straightforward criticism.[50] Considering the speaker's sartorially-detailed narration of the mistress's disrobing, Allison Spreuwenberg-Stewart notices that "all the items [the speaker] mentions in the poem were worn by both men and women."[51] Female fashion was masculinized more generally in the court of Elizabeth I, who used male-coded clothing to visually reinforce the legitimacy of her claims to power.[52] Such gender-bending fashion provoked much reprobation from moral authorities; gender identity (as well as class identity) was constructed by dress—four hundred years before Butler would give a name to gender performativity, there was a widespread understanding that clothes really did make the man (or woman). However, Donne's speaker seems more aroused than threatened by the woman's potentially masculinized sartorial choices, his punning on the busk being the most obvious example of the erotic possibilities this clothing promised. Busks were controversial feminine attire as moralists fulminated that they "not only attract men but, worse, they interfere with procreation by deforming the body."[53] That is, they were thought to promote female sexual freedom, encouraging erotic license

[50] See e.g. Carey, *John Donne*, 91.

[51] Spreuwenberg-Stewart, "'To His Mistress,'" 25.

[52] Ibid. 27. See also Feinstein, "Donne's Elegy 19," 62.

[53] Feinstein, "Donne's Elegy 19," 66.

by reducing the risk of pregnancy from pre- or extramarital sex. The sexual associations accruing to busks in the period are emphasized in Donne's overwhelmingly phallic description of the garment: "Off with that happy buske whom I envy / That still can be, and still can stand so nigh" (11-12). As Spreuwenberg-Stewart puts it,

> Line 12 personifies and eroticizes the busk. Enclosed inside the corset, a feminine garment (here feminine because it is worn by a woman…), the busk suddenly has determinedly masculine attributes in its stiffness…The woman is wearing a phallic object that helps her to look more masculine and to have a phallus-shaped torso in costume; the busk also represents the masculine phallus enclosed within a feminine garment.[54]

To summarize, the busk, a garment worn by both men and women, maintains a perpetual stiffness despite its proximity to the woman's body, thus resembling an idealized, permanently tumescent, male member. Suggestive on multiple levels, the busk both shapes a woman's torso to look more phallic and flat-chested, thereby destabilizing appearances of gendered difference, and itself penetrates the bodice—or "bodies"—over which it lays.[55] Spreuwenberg-Stewart suggests that the speaker's request for its removal is symptomatic of a broader psychopathology, characterizing it either as "an attempt to emasculate [the mistress]" or as necessary "to make room for the expression of…masculine desire," "masculine" here apparently confined to the body of the speaker.[56] Ronald Corthell also proposes a psychoanalytic reading; he argues that Donne

---

[54] Sprewenberg-Stewart, "'To His Mistress,'" 44.

[55] For "bodies," see Feinstein, "Donne's Elegy 19," 67.

[56] Sprewenberg-Stewart, "'To His Mistress,'" 44.

desires to "imagine himself in the position of male and female at once," but at the same time "seems exceedingly anxious to affirm the penis as the signifier of sexual difference in this poem."[57] However, in his equation of penis and busk, itself "a defense against the fear of castration," Donne "seems to efface difference" in a masturbatory act of "phallic exhibitionism."[58] Both of these readings characterize Donne or his speaker as anxious about his virility, and indeed, one must admit that envying a piece of clothing its permanent hard-on suggests some nervousness about the ability to sexually perform. (Such envy also belies Carey's characterization of the erection as anywhere near "menacing," as quoted above.) Further, if the woman's clothing is associated with androgyny, one could perhaps argue that the speaker is attempting to stabilize the female body by removing its confusing trappings to reveal some sort of essentially gendered truth underneath.

However, pathologizing the speaker or Donne himself seems to me excessive, particularly as such a move fails to notice the general flexibility of gendered imagery, and genitalia more specifically, that Donne layers throughout this and other poems. (Not to mention the fact that removing one's clothing is a necessary precondition for the speaker's desired state of "full nakedness" [33], for that matter.) While Donne's speaker certainly makes several references to his penis, as has been shown, he also metaphorizes himself as both a woman in labor and a midwife, images intimately associated with female reproduction. Perhaps even more to the point, the mistress's androgyny is not

[57] Corthell, *Ideology and Desire*, 68.

[58] Ibid. 68. Docherty similarly argues that the poem is an exercise in autoeroticism in which the woman is merely the "instrument of the revelation of Donne's phallus" (*Undone,* 81).

restricted to her clothing, but extends to her anatomy as well; simply removing the busk will not stabilize her gender. The woman seems to figuratively possess both male and female genitals: she has a phallic torso, as mentioned above, but her characterization as the speaker's "mine of precious stones" (29) suggests a vagina. If we further read "stones" as "testicles," a meaning well established in the sixteenth century, we have another image containing both male and female genitalia.[59] Additionally, there are two genital references that seem ascribable to either party. In the third line, immediately after having compared himself to a woman in labor, the speaker says, "The foe oft times having the foe in sight / Is tyr'd with standing though they never fight" (3-4).[60] In these lines, the speaker and the mistress are described in identical, if adversarial, terms. While the depiction of lover and beloved as enemies is a familiar Petrarchan conceit, Donne's figuration of the two in identical language here suggests the absence or irrelevance of gender difference, despite the oppositional quality evoked by "foe." It stands to reason that, if one "foe" is "tyr'd with standing"—has an erection—the other could be equally fatigued. (Or, at the very least, if the identical language does not entail identical physical states, it is unclear which "foe" possesses the erection.[61]) Somewhat after evoking this

[59] See "stone" in the *OED Online*.

[60] In *Dryden and Future Shock*, an early, hesitant, treatment of this topic, William Frost admits that he "[has] sometimes taken" the opening of "Going to bed" "to be a daring transsexual metaphor," but finds lines 3-4 to "emphatically reassert" masculinity (57); Frost's anxiety about affirming the non-normatively gendered image of male parturition is underscored by the haste with which he characterizes the following couplet as reestablishing the speaker's maleness.

[61] One might contend that to "stand" could also be a metaphor for female sexual arousal at this time; in 1559, Renaldus Columbus, one of several (male) Europeans claiming to have discovered the clitoris, said, "if you touch [the clitoris], you will find it rendered a little harder and oblong to such a degree that it shows itself as a sort of male member," although "erect" was beginning to have more definitively masculine connotations by the time Donne was writing (qtd. Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 64). However, even if we accept that both male and female genitals could be figured as "standing," this does not negate the fact that both

penis, the speaker alludes to a similarly unattached vagina when he says, "Full nakedness, all joyes are due to thee; / As Soules unbodied, bodyes uncloth'd must bee / To tast whole joyes" (33-35). It is not difficult to hear the sexual pun on "whole," particularly given its proximity to "tast." However, as suggestively vaginal and seemingly physicalized as this image may be—referring to bodies, nakedness, holes, and tasting—its implicit theological overtones bear on the question of gender in the poem. As Theresa DiPasquale argues,

> "[W]hole ioyes" may…allude slyly to the completeness that the *Summa Theologica* claims for resurrected bodies when it says that "all members that are now in the man's body"—including the male and female genitals—"must needs be restored [into one body] at the resurrection." [62]

The image is thus suggestive of a form of divinely-sanctioned hermaphrodism, a resolutely embodied but multiply-gendered state. This sacred gender play is available to both speaker and mistress, as the image is detached from the individuated participants; that is, both bodies are able to "tast whole joyes," which suggests an act of cunnilingus performable by either party.[63] Should the woman be the active participant in this exchange (that is, the taster rather than the tasted), this once again gives us a male speaker with female genitalia, evoking an act of female-female eroticism and calling back

---

parties are described in identical language—"the foe"—which suggests similitude in the standing appendages.

[62] Theresa M. DiPasquale, "Donne's Naked Time," 35 (brackets in original).

[63] While I assume the "whole" to be a vagina, it is not impossible that it refers to an anus instead. This would not greatly affect the reading other than to evoke rimming, a somewhat differently transgressive sexual activity.

to his self-description as both a laboring mother and a midwife.[64] Such passivity would also be seen as gender-transgressive, as passivity and receiving penetration were and are aligned with women. Rather than attempting to assimilate everything into what we might today call a heteronormative (or cis-normative) paradigm, then, Donne is in this poem and elsewhere interested in representing desire beyond that afforded by a stable gender binary.

Immediately following "whol joyes" come images of Atalanta's balls, which too play with our expectations by reversing the gender roles of their Ovidian source. The speaker makes what sounds a misogynistic charge against the mistress specifically and women generally, saying:

> …Gems which you women use
> Are as Atlantas balls cast in mens views,
> That when a fooles ey lighteth on a gem
> His earthly Soule may covet theirs not them. (35-38)

A gendered dichotomy seems to be here reintroduced; bodies are again differentiated, and women are accused of using gems to deceive foolish men to cause them to fall in love with their rich apparel rather than the body (or self) underneath—although it is not clear whether this practice or the fools it ensnares are the primary targets of the critique. In any case, this is a peculiar gender reversal of Ovid's story of Atalanta, in which Hippomenes throws three golden apples to distract the virgin huntress and beat her in a footrace,

[64] Saunders suggests that we might see something similar in "Sapho to Philaenis": "Donne does not seem to imagine and inscribe female-female desire in terms of his own marriage so much as he attempts to reimagine and reinscribe his marriage in terms of female-female desire" (*Desiring Donne*, 139).

thereby gaining her hand in marriage and thus her virginity.[65] In "Going to bed," by contrast, the male speaker accuses women of using shiny objects to keep men focused on their clothing rather than their bodies, by employing an allusion to a man using shiny objects to distract a woman and take her virginity. Once again, the genders associated with the reference are irrelevant; in this and throughout the poem more generally, the speaker imaginatively recombines and reconceives gendered images against the grain of their normative significations. More remarkably, this deconstructive impulse opens up a field of erotic pleasure, rather than one of anxiety and censure. Donne's speaker decouples gendered terms from the misogynistic associations they acquire within a gender binary not to distance himself from nor appropriate the embodiment of his partner, but rather to express a rapturous desire for a woman.

Along with "Going to bed," "The Flea" is one of Donne's most frequently anthologized and enduringly popular works. Donne's lyric participates in the sixteenth-century genre of the flea poem, which typically deploys the omnipresent vermin to expose a woman's body to the voyeuristic gaze of a male poet and audience imagining its perambulations on and incursions into a woman's flesh. Karen Raber suggests that these poems

> [R]elied on the idea that where the flea could travel, the lover wished to go but couldn't. Intimate, yet alien, the flea occupied the body of its host like

[65] Intriguingly, the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes is a narrative interpolation in Ovid's account of Venus and Adonis; Venus recounts the tale as a warning to Adonis before he embarks upon the hunt.

> a tiny explorer searching its fleshly world like a cornucopia, the most secret or taboo places wide open to its small hairy feet.[66]

Following the pattern set by the genre's inaugural poem "Carmen de Pulice" (or "Elegia de Pulice"), flea poems provide detailed accounts of the insect's explorations and invasions of a woman's body, with particular and predictable emphasis on those parts to which the voyeur lacked scopic access.[67] The speaker of "Pulice" describes his envy of a flea's unmediated proximity to the most intimate parts of his mistress's body; in a depressing but unsurprising twist, the poem culminates in his threat to turn flea himself and rape the woman if she does not willingly submit to his advances. With a few notable exceptions, flea poetry of the sixteenth century follows the rough conventions set by "Pulice," using the flea as a vehicle to explore, colonize, and control female bodies.[68] Donne's relatively late contribution to the genre, however, crucially does not rely on these tropes of violation and voyeurism in the attempt to gain his lady's virginity; unusually, he addresses her directly, and it is her reactions upon which the argument of the poem relies.

---

[66] Raber, *Animal Bodies*. 26.

[67] On "Pulice," see Brumble, "'The Flea'"; Redpath, ed. *Songs and Sonets*, 175; Gardner, ed. *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*, 174. See also Otto Friedrich Gruppe, *Minos*, 491; and Schenkl, "Zur Kritik," 44. While the poem's origins remain unclear, it was probably written by the late medieval poet called Ofilius Sergianus, traditionally identified as pseudo-Ovid. Nineteenth-century German philologists claimed that German reformer Melchior Goldast discovered the medieval manuscript of "Pulice" and published it under the name Ofilius Sergianus, chosen for its phonic similarity to "Ovidius," but their evidence is inconclusive. See Otto Friedrich Gruppe, *Minos*, 491 and Schenkl, "Zur Kritik," 44.

[68] An important exception can be found in Catherine Des Roches's flea poetry, in which she not only responds to male poets' characterizations of her in their own flea poems, but also figures the flea as a virtuous, feminized figure fleeing the rapacious Apollo. See Chang, *Into Print*, 72-86; Jones, "Contentious Readings"; Yandell, "Of Lice and Women"; and Larsen, "Catherine Des Roches's *Responces*" for a discussion of Des Roches's poetic resistance of generic and gendered convention.

While incorporating a female response is significant, rejecting the earlier poems' violence by attempting to persuade rather than invade is not Donne's only generic innovation. More interestingly, Donne invokes the deconstructive potential of the flea, its indifference to human distinctions of gender, class, and species allowing him to radically undermine the male-female gender binary.[69] The poem's characters—speaker, woman, and flea—are gendered in nonnormative and unstable ways throughout the poem's three stanzas; the mistress inhabits both conventionally feminine and masculine positions as she moves from being sucked to crushing the flea beneath her fingernail, while the speaker remains in a passive, non-penetrative role, despite his display of rhetorical prowess. The flea itself becomes an unstable signifier, variously figured as both masculine and feminine, sometimes within a single image. The vehicle of the flea poem combines with fleas' capacity to problematize binaries and boundaries to allow Donne to not only innovate on poetic tradition, but also articulate a witty, pleasurable, and profound conception of gender as malleable and unbounded.[70]

Donne's flea poem not only incorporates an (implied) female response to his suit, but also shifts its persuasive strategy in ways dictated by the woman's actions. As Bell says of the *Songs and Sonets* as a whole,

> [W]e must perforce think of [the lady]…as a real character who plays an independent and influential, if tacit, role in Donne's dramas…the unconventional brilliance of Donne's love poems arises (at least in part)

[69] Raber characterizes the flea's leveling powers thus: "[i]nterior and exterior, cleanliness and filth, corrupt and sanctified—binaries and boundaries fall prey to these miniscule mortifiers" (*Animal Bodies*, 27).

[70] This reading is indebted to Mintz's brief account of the same in "Gender and Play" (584-85).

> from his unprecedented capacity to elicit and articulate and respond to the woman's point of view.[71]

For the first two stanzas in "The Flea," the argument runs, essentially, that the lovers' "two bloods" have "mingled" in the body of the flea (4); having already mixed bodily fluids, the lovers might as well have sex.[72] However, between the second and third stanzas, the lady kills the flea, forcing the speaker to change his argument. If we have sex, he now claims, it will be nothing more than a little loss of blood: "when thou yeeld'st to me," he tells the lady, you will lose "just so much honor" as you did by the flea's death, which also caused your blood to be spilled (26). In this way, the argument shifts to respond to the lady's actions, and she controls access to her body; even though she is (presumably involuntarily) bitten by a flea, the speaker does not attempt to conflate his desired penetration of the woman with the fleabite. That is, although he (facetiously) argues that fleabites and sex are functionally equivalent, they are not identical; the flea provides not an avenue for him to penetrate her body, but rather the opportunity to make a comic argument in hopes that she will be sufficiently entertained to yield, a major departure from earlier flea poems in which the speaker violates the woman's body through a pestiferous proxy. Rather than fantasizing about uninvited penetration of the woman, then, Donne attempts to gain access to her body by using the flea as a witty analogy, not a threat; while he seeks to persuade, he does not rhetorically invade or rape the female body as many earlier flea poets had done.

---

[71] Ilona Bell, "Role of the Lady," 115-16.

[72] Certain Renaissance conceptions of coition, largely based on Aristotelian physiology, suggested that intercourse was primarily a mingling of bloods. See Gardner, *Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, 174-75nl.4.

This tacit inclusion of the woman's response into the textual interstices brings up the question of the seduction's success, which the poem does not answer. Because the lady has the power of refusal, unlike her generic predecessors, it is unclear whether or not the speaker will achieve his goal; while speakers of earlier poems may not have been literally transformed into fleas, they nevertheless effect an imaginative violation and possession of the female body, which is what they wanted in the first place. This question of outcome has been one of the longest-standing problems of "The Flea"; many critics have claimed that the speaker succeeds, and just as many have claimed that he fails.[73] For me, this question is interesting primarily because of the impossibility of coming to a wholly satisfactory conclusion; assessments of the suit's efficacy, I submit, tell us rather more about the individual critic's disposition—whether or not he or she is seduced—than they do about the text, which can be read as supporting either the speaker's failure or his success.

For this reason, perhaps assessing the suit's success is not the most productive question we can ask of "The Flea." Instead, I am more interested in the way that figuring the text as an exchange, rather than an invasion, provides Donne with the opportunity to experiment with gender in ways unseen in earlier iterations of the genre. Not only is each of the characters—the speaker, the lady, and the titular insect itself—figured in a series of non-normative gender positions, but the speaker expresses no anxiety about such

[73] To name only a few examples, Perrine, in "Explicating Donne," suggests that the seduction fails; Hester argues in "Preface" that "the poem traces its own failure" although he does allow that the lady might "be seduced by the rigor of an erect wit" (377). Spacks, in "In Search of Sincerity," Bell, in "Courting Anne More," and Raynie, in "The Woman's Body," conversely believe that the seduction is successful. Given the diversity of response, perhaps Theresa DiPasquale is right to suggest that "the outcome of the seduction—as any undergraduate will tell you—is 'up to the reader'" (Receiving a Sexual Sacrament," 83).

unconventional postionalities. Instead, he embraces a sexually passive position, a masculinized mistress, and a genderfluid flea; as in the elegies that I have already discussed, Donne again collapses gender distinctions, demonstrating their constructed nature and taking pleasure in doing so.

Donne most clearly engages in gender play with the character of the flea itself, which is figured as inhabiting masculine and feminine roles at various points in the poem, sometimes even occupying both positions at once. The flea's primary attribute in the first stanza is its ability to penetrate, which I will continue to advisedly regard as a normatively masculine practice. This is not to say that penetration is inherently or exclusively a male sexual act, but rather that social, cultural, and legal discourses tend to construct it as such (just as receptivity is associated with women, although it is by no means a necessarily gendered posture). Indeed, in England, women were legally and definitionally incapable of penetration at this time.[74] The flea's promiscuous, penetrative, bite is clear from the beginning of the poem:

> Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
> How little that which thou deny'st me is;
> It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
> And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;
> Thou know'st that this cannot be said

[74] Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism,* 165. England is unusual in its lack of prosecution of tribades or "fricatrices"; most other European countries not only had sodomy statutes that regularly mentioned female-female sexual activity, but also occasionally executed women found guilty of penetrating other women or men. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the complicated matrix of gender relations in early modern England can be collapsed down to a penetrating/penetrated rubric. However, because penetration was highly gendered and plays such a role in this poem, it will be a major focus of the following discussion.

A sinne, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,

Yet this enjoyes before it wooe,

And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two

And this, alas, is more than wee would doe. (1-9)

The flea penetrates not only the mistress, as it would in earlier poems, but also the speaker, showing a lack of discrimination in object choice. The "immediately titillating ambiguity" engendered by the long S of early modern print, whereby "suck'd" and "fuck'd" would be difficult to distinguish upon first glance, further emphasizes the flea's masculine powers of penetration.[75] The evocation of a "maidenhead," which the flea "enjoyes" (a common sexual pun in the period) enhances the imagery's sexual valences and the flea's phallic prowess; while the speaker claims that the fleabite will not bereave the woman of her virginity (and, by extension, that he remains himself inviolate), his denial necessarily reminds her of that very possibility. However, the flea's penetrative powers do not remain the speaker's focus for long. Instead, he turns toward the insect's receptive and reproductive capacities. In line four, the speaker's and mistress's bloods are "mingled" in the flea's body. While this is obviously consonant with a flea's morphology, the poem's overtly sexualized language invites us to see this description of the flea's physiology as furthering the speaker's blurring of gender boundaries, and to consider the flea to be here occupying both the masculine (i.e. penetrative) and feminine (i.e. receptive) roles of normatively constructed heterosexual intercourse. As the speaker

[75] Docherty, *Undone,* 54. This frequently-repeated claim about the long S has some obvious limitations, most notably that "The Flea," along with the majority of Donne's poetic output, was not printed during his lifetime. Despite this, it remains an attractive idea, particularly given Donne's wit and linguistic hyperawareness, although it is not necessary for the acceptance of my larger argument.

argues that he and his mistress engage in sex-by-proxy within the body of the flea, then, it becomes a hermaphroditic figure, simultaneously occupying oppositely gendered positions. This hermaphroditic imagery continues when the blood is more than merely "mingled" in the flea's body; rather, the flea "swells" from satiation. Like the laboring speaker of "Going to bed," this image of distension suggests both pregnancy and phallic tumescence, both feminine and masculine roles in reproduction.[76]

While the flea begins in a primarily penetrative position, it remains largely passive for the rest of the poem, ultimately subject to an ignominious death at the lady's hand (specifically, her fingernail). The flea's death is characterized in language that is perhaps most obviously Christic: "Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since / Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?" (19-20). While the imagery here and throughout certainly has Trinitarian undertones, it is not wholly spiritualized, and indeed, one cannot completely separate the registers of the sacred and the erotic in the period (as I shall discuss in the final two chapters of this study).[77] Given the speaker's earlier evocation of "maidenhead" and the potential subterranean pun on *puce* (flea) and *pucelage* (virginity) common in earlier flea poems, the flea's death in "blood of innocence" can be seen as a figurative defloration, a loss of specifically sexual innocence. Like Adonis, the flea is penetrated, bleeds, and dies, with the requisite sexual pun on death. In fact, the speaker explicitly equates the flea's death with the loss of the woman's virginity at the poem's conclusion:

---

[76] Docherty notices the image of tumescence (*Undone*, 53-54), and a number of critics, including Bell, notice the figure of pregnancy ("Courting Anne More," 67-69), but to the best of my knowledge, no one has yet remarked on how both possibilities simultaneously inhere in this image.

[77] See Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, for an account of the imbrication of the sacred and the profane in the early modern period. For two influential accounts of the poem's Christian overtones more generally, see Hester, "Preface" and DiPasquale, "Sexual Sacrament."

"Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee, / Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee" (26-27). The lady's yielding and the flea's death are one and the same. Exploiting the early modern belief that fleas were hermaphroditic, Donne's flea begins in a primarily masculinized position, occupies a transitional space in which it is figured in simultaneously masculine and feminine terms, and finally ends in a primarily feminized position; it is a thoroughly genderfluid figure, one that the speaker seems to consider not monstrous, but sexy.[78]

Not only does the flea shift gendered positions throughout the poem, but it also changes dramatically in size, rendering the contours of its physical body even more contingent. Initially, it is figured literally, as a tiny insect. Given Donne's frequent recourse to tropes of macro- and microcosm, however, it is unsurprising that the flea does not retain its small size for long. Rather, it grows to become the "mariage bed" and "mariage temple," complete with "living walls of Jet" (13, 15).[79] Despite the grotesque quality of the image if taken literally—once again, I admit to questioning the advisability of Donne's seduction tactic, here, an invitation for a woman to envision herself wedded and bedded within a bloody, pulsating, flea—the speaker imagines it as a sanctified space in which not only will he and the lady have sex, but the larger civil and theological institutions that have a stake in marriage will sanction the deed; it is a bed, yes, but it is also a consecrated space of worship and community. The boundaries and significations of

[78] According to Brumble, early moderns believed fleas to be parthenogenic and hermaphroditic, a view based on both classical and contemporary sources, including Pliny, Aristotle, DuBartas, and Isidor of Seville ("'The Flea,'" 147-48). The etymological affinity between the Latin *pulex*, flea, and *pulvis*, powder, encouraged a further belief that fleas were literally made from dust.

[79] Docherty is interested in the flea's permutations in size and suggests that the temple is a specifically vaginal image; see *Undone*, 54.

the flea's body become unstable, growing and shrinking with Donne's imagination. The flea itself thus exists in a state of total flux where both its gender and its very physical form are inconsistent. No longer a substitute for the speaker's contact with an unobtainable woman, Donne's flea is a mediator whose body and gender are available for the speaker to discursively manipulate as he attempts to persuade the lady to yield.

While the flea is the most spectacular example of gender play in this poem, Donne's rhetorical manipulation of gender constructs does not stop there, but rather extends to both the speaker and the lady. The only human action in the poem is performed not by the speaker, but by his mistress; despite engaging in a display of rhetorical prowess, then, the speaker remains fixed in a largely passive position throughout the text. Even the form of sexuality he experiences—being "suck'd"—places him in a passive, conventionally "feminine" role: as Mintz says,

> [T]he male seducer becomes identified with the female seduced through the mutual sucking of the insect…the speaker takes on the position not of the invasive flea whose behavior serves as vehicle of his argument, but rather that of the woman herself.[80]

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker and the woman are undifferentiated in their identical, passive, sexual experiences. Wisam Mansour suggests that "the 'mingled' blood that signifies loss of virginity through heterosexual copulation equates the male seducer with the female seduced as he shares in her vaginal bleeding and loss."[81] The

[80] Mintz, "Gender and Play," 584.

[81] Mansour, "Donne's 'The Flea,'" 8.

fleabite, Mansour argues, is a bleeding (thus vaginal) orifice, the speaker's figurative defloration here mimicking the desired outcome of the seduction. The speaker thus places himself into a feminized position as he attempts to analogically argue the lady into what will be rather queer intercourse, despite its heteroeroticism on the level of material embodiment. And while the woman eventually moves out of a condition of being passively "suck'd"/fucked, it remains unclear if the speaker will do so as well; this is dependent not upon his own actions, but on the lady's response to his argument. However, even should the lady repulse his suit, argues Mintz, the speaker still derives pleasure from the encounter, not with the lady, but with the flea:

> Coursing beneath the overt terms of the seduction is a longing to do the passive thing, not just to penetrate but to be "pampered," not simply to suck but to be sucked (with implications both of being nursed and of being "fucked"). And this sucking occurs before seduction and erection, which emphasizes that pleasure can be obtained prior to the more explicitly and conventionally masculine forms of sexual arousal signalled by "wooes" and "pampered swells."[82]

The speaker's pleasure here arises from passivity, from a non-penetrative sexual role; "masculine forms of sexual arousal" belong to the flea, which here effaces not only a gender binary, but also species difference—Mintz's reading raises the specter of bestiality in the flea's sucking of both speaker and mistress. This experience of being both penetrated ("fuck'd") and "suck'd" by the insect does not seem to alarm the speaker,

[82] Mintz, "Gender and Play," 584.

despite the sexual language in which he couches the experience. While it might be argued that since the poem stages a man's attempt to seduce a woman, the speaker remains invested in normatively masculine (human) sexuality, what this shows is that these two conceptions of pleasure are not mutually exclusive; the speaker enjoys being penetrated and sucked by a flea even as he hopes for a heterosexual encounter (which is, after all, by no means necessarily characterized by male penetration of a woman).

It might also be argued that when the lady kills the flea, she crushes the speaker's hopes and genderfluid appeal along with the insect. This reading would suggest that the lady is not only exasperated with the speaker's persistence, but also potentially anxious about the erasure of gender boundaries this flea brings about. However, such an assertion is belied by the sexualized, masculinized way in which she does this. The mistress penetrates the flea with her fingernail, causing "blood of innocence" to appear (20), taking its maidenhead with (in M. Thomas Hester's delightful phrase) a "digital dildo."[83] Despite the speaker's attempts at masculine persuasive force, it is the woman who takes on the penetrative sexual role. This could mean that she is imagined to possess a penis, or might characterize her as a tribade, the "masculine" woman capable of penetrating others that constituted a persistent bugaboo in early modern medical texts and moral tracts.[84] Neither of these options would be particularly comfortable to a physician or theologian looking to reaffirm distinctions between male and female. (Or to the critical approach to Donne that sees him as "exceedingly anxious to affirm the penis as the signifier of sexual

[83] Hester, "A Preface," 380.

[84] See Gilbert, *Early Modern Hermaphrodites,* especially 149-54; Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, especially 192-97; and Long, *Hermaphrodites,* especially 49-76.

difference," for that matter.[85]) However, the indefatigable speaker continues with his suit even after the mistress kills the flea, suggesting that neither he nor the lady is particularly anxious about either the queerly gendered transaction that is the death of the flea or the penetrative role she adopts in its execution. In "The Flea," then, to an even greater degree than in "The Comparison" or "Going to bed," Donne blurs gender with a sense of erotic and imaginative investment, his speaker committing to we might call a passive, and thus normatively feminized, posture; the lady shifting from this feminized position into a penetrative, and thus masculinized, one; and the flea itself occupying a largely genderfluid space where even the boundaries of its body are indistinct, a space Donne's speaker himself inhabits in a number of other poems.

As I hope is clear, the models of gender and desire (and, if I may dare, perhaps love) adduced thus far remain congenial to the poems often considered to be Donne's great love lyrics, such as "A Valediction forbidding mourning," "The Extasie," or "The good-morrow," poems in which an intersubjective and thus (apparently) androgynous union is actively sought after. While some recent critics have rejected this view as idealized, arguing instead that these poems that seem to welcome the merging of lover and beloved are simply reflexes of Donne's misogyny with better PR,[86] more convincing is A.R. Cirillo's comment that they reflect a commitment to "the annihilation of sexual differences and of individuality in which both lovers become one as a consummation of

[85] Corthell, *Ideology and Desire*, 68.

[86] For examples of this attitude dating from the current millennium, see e.g. Barnes, *Post-Closet Masculinities*, 50; Grzegorzewska, "John Donne's Maps," 279-83; and Bach, "(Re)placing Donne," 273.

the ultimate meaning and end of love."[87] This is, I think, a good starting place for exploring Donne's gender play in what have often been characterized as the poems of mutual love; however, it does not go far enough in engaging the specifically embodied forms of gender play Donne undertakes in these lyrics. In this brief final section, I read "A Valediction forbidding mourning," suggesting that, despite the speaker's desire for an intersubjective union capable of transcending vast physical separation, the poem's most arresting imagery derives much of its power from its reverent descriptions of insistently embodied yet mutably gendered lovers.

"A Valediction forbidding mourning" is frequently remembered for its beautiful images emphasizing union within separation. However, despite its general reputation as a great (proto-)heterosexual love poem, we are left with the remarkable fact that the genders of both the speaker and the addressee are utterly ambiguous within the text. Most critics tend to rather heteronormatively assign the poem to a male speaker addressing his mistress. While I concede this seems the likeliest suggestion and is the assumption from which I will proceed, it is worth briefly noting that this is by no means inevitable. Mansour assigns the poem to a female speaker, arguing that there is no conclusive evidence to suggest otherwise, and that several key words point to the speaker's being a woman.[88] While the poem does not support a conclusive gendering of the speaker in this way (and indeed, such a reading ignores Donne's frequent inversion and deliberate confusion of tropes of gender), it is an intriguing argument and shows the extent to which

[87] Cirillo, "Fair Hermaphrodite," 91.

[88] Mansour, "Gender Ambivalence," 19.

gender remains ambiguous in this text; by extension, there is no conclusive evidence of gender *difference* here either. There is little textual evidence to preclude a reading in which both lovers are either male or female, and indeed, Donne was certainly capable of writing passionate poems to other men, as the verse letters would suggest; as "Sapho to Philaenis" shows, he also wrote at least one erotic poem from one woman to another (although here critics are more divided as to his success). The point is not that one particular reading is more radical than another (although given the dangers attendant upon heteroerotic passion in the period, it might not be too great a stretch to suggest that expressing passionate love for a woman would be more fraught than repeating the same sentiments to a man); rather, it is the indeterminacy itself that is important. Donne again seems unconcerned with attempting to fix gender; while there is anxiety in the poem, it stems not from the subjects' unclear gender positions, which actually underlie the poem's most affecting images, but rather concerns about the speaker's impending departure and its implications for the lovers.

In the poem, Donne's speaker, leaving on a journey, first tries to comfort his mistress (and, one suspects, himself) by claiming superiority to "Dull sublunary lovers" (13) who are unable to "admit / Absence" (14-15), i.e., endure physical separation. Conversely, the speaker and mistress's love is at first represented as wholly spiritual, "so much refin'd" that they "know not what it is" (17-18), and "Inter-assured of the mind," so that they "Care lesse, eyes, lips, hands to misse" (19-20). The speaker strives for an intersubjective and undifferentiated union. Indeed, the relationship is initially one of identity; the poem opens with a simile comparing the lovers with a man's body and soul: "As virtuous men passe mildly away / And whisper to their soules, to goe" (1-2).

However, even this metaphor, despite its emphasis on unity, opens up an intriguing contrast between the genders of the lovers and that of the dying man and his soul. To literalize, the departing male speaker is figured as the soul—itself a frequently, though not invariably, feminized entity—leaving the body; the woman then becomes that male body. Thus, in the first two lines, we already have another, if subtler, imagistic disruption of sexual difference between two (presumably) oppositely-gendered lovers.

However, a wholly spiritualized love is insufficient, as the imagistic and metrical lingering over anatomy ("eyes, lips, hands") in line twenty would suggest, and the speaker resorts to increasingly physical metaphors to assure the relationship's continuance over distance. The first, the "gold to ayery thinnesse beate" (24), reiterates the rarefied quality of their love, and, importantly, its value and expansiveness, as gold leaf's ability to be stretched infinitely thin constitutes much of its beauty and value. This first simile attempts to preserve a physical and psychical union between the two lovers, who are again undifferentiated by gender, androgenized, within the single sheet of foil. The other famous simile, and that which is more interesting for my purposes, is the compass. More than the homogeneous sheet of gold leaf, the compasses cannot but maintain a twoness despite their unity: "If they be two, they are two so / As stiffe twin compasses are two" (25-26). In the space of twenty-five lines, then, the speaker has gone from rejecting the "dull sublunary" physical love of the "laity" (13, 8) to imagining his love in largely corporeal, and indeed, dualistic terms as his impending departure pressures him to secure the union. Even in this state of twoness, however, the lovers' identities are not wholly distinguishable. While there is a conditional admission of

duality—"If they be two" (25)—this is offset by the concatenation of unclear (and nongendered) pronouns in the penultimate stanza:

> And though *it* in the center sit,
>
> Yet when *the other* far doth rome,
>
> *It* leans, and hearkens after *it,*
>
> And growes erect, as *that* comes home. (29-32, my emphases)

This pile-up of pronouns without immediate referents frustrates a definite identification of which lover is which in this image. While the poem as a whole moves from images of unity toward images of duality, then, Donne's syntax renders difficult an attempt to finally, definitively differentiate the two lovers.

This radical ambiguity is further complicated by the center leg's "grow[ing] erect" upon the other's return. Just as Donne exploits the flea's literal anatomy to create a queerly gendered image, he here takes advantage of the physical motion of a closing compass to destabilize the genders of the partners. In particular, rendering the stationary leg as "erect" makes it a predominantly masculine-coded image.[89] Moreover, in the final two lines, the addressee is credited with "firmnes," which makes the speaker's "circle just" (35-36); this not only underscores the addressee's virility, but also endows the speaker with a penetrable orifice, a "circle," suggestive of a vagina (or anus), adding yet another layer to the already complex depiction of gender in this poem. To make sense of this image, Thomas Docherty suggests that "the gender of the speaker of the poem

[89] In "Gender Ambivalence," Mansour cites this "obviously male" image as evidence of a female speaker (21). This observation is complicated by the description of the "stiffe twin compasses" in line twenty-six, easily overlooked in favor of the more obvious pun on "erect." If both legs are initially stiff, then the image of erection is less "obviously male" than Mansour would like to argue, or both lovers must be men. Of course, it is equally possible that a mistress is again figured with masculine imagery.

changes at this point; the 'male' speaker discovers the 'female' as constitutive of his authority. Hence the firmness could be the erect penis, the 'stiff leg,' as it were, and the circle could be the vagina."[90] While Docherty's deconstructive reading usefully points out the difficulties in this passage, the notion of the speaker changing genders at this point in the poem seems to me needlessly convoluted, particularly given Donne's tendency to mix gendered imagery with abandon; we might instead consider the assumptions with which we started the poem. If we accept the conventional reading that the mistress occupies the center position, her possession of a penis may initially seem unusual, but it is not unprecedented in Donne's poetry, as has been shown; a male speaker's endowment with a vagina is even more common. And if we reject this reading, the alternative is to see the center occupied by the man, a reading that "reverses conventional expectations about constancy" by implying that it is the man who is stationary and the woman who has more physical and sexual freedom.[91] To sum up, in a reading that assumes a heterosexual pairing, Donne's image of the erect compass leg either grants the mistress a penis and imagines her penetrating the male speaker's "circle," yet another disruption of gender on an imagistic level, or imagines the man in the stationary center position, a disruption of gender on a social level. In both readings, the poem embraces contingency of gender, even as it makes explicit a desire for physical stability in the lovers' relationship across distance.

[90] Docherty, *Undone,* 75. Docherty also raises the specter of a male-male relationship in the poem, but dismisses this reading as "too contrived," 75.

[91] Mintz, "Gender and Play," 600.

Donne was not a (proto)feminist; indeed, I am skeptical that plotting Donne's (or any early modern writer's) views of gender on a conservative/progressive axis is a particularly useful pursuit. However, given that the primary evidence offered for Donne's apparent misogyny is a nearly pathological reinscription of firm boundaries between male and female in an attempt to stave off the threatening feminine other, this reading of Donne's portrayal of gender seems deeply inadequate, difficult to reconcile with the obvious enjoyment his poems evince at the blurring and effacing of normative gender configurations, anatomical and otherwise. (It's also a curiously humorless reading of a poet who is so paradigmatically witty.) Donne plays with and subverts gender norms, anatomical and behavioral, throughout his oeuvre, demonstrating not a poet who was anxious to contain and eliminate gender ambiguity, to stave off the erosion brought about by feminine lability, but one whose imagination, intellect, and, it would seem, erotic interests, were stimulated by, perhaps even required, the blurring of gender boundaries. In these poems, Donne does not seem terribly invested in maintaining a stable, masculine self, but rather with the dissolution of the sovereign self altogether in the breakdown of binaries, thereby articulating complex, irreducible conceptions of gender, sex, desire, and the self, for his pleasure, and for the reader's.

IV. VEGETABLE LOVE IN HERRICK AND MARVELL

It is a curious fact that, although early moderns understood plants to reproduce asexually, botanical metaphors were central to the tropological matrix of desire in Petrarchan and post-Petrarchan poetry.[1] The Aristotelian tradition inherited by the Renaissance viewed plant reproduction not as a sexual process, but rather as an offshoot of its nutritive faculties; as Julius Sachs summarizes, Aristotle "found a causal connection between organisms' sexuality and locomotion (*Ortsbewegung*)," concluding that

> [I]n all animals possessing the power of locomotion, the female is distinct from the male…In plants, on the contrary, these powers are mixed with one another, and male and female are not distinct; each plant thus reproduces from itself (*aus sich selbst zeugen*), discharging no fertilizing material.[2]

For Aristotle and his followers, plant reproduction was asexual, the lack of seminal emission relegating it to the realm of the nutritive. While the implications of such a conception of plant reproduction are suggestive, in the early modern period the queer potential of plants' hermaphroditic, digestive, reproductive autoeroticism was elided in favor of the view that they existed outside the sexual realm entirely. In his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Thomas Browne, for example, claims that a plant "begets and reseminates itself"; having "no distinction of sex," plants "beget and propagate

[1] See Swann, "Vegetable Love," 140.

[2] Sachs, *Geschichte der Botanik*, 406-7, my translation. The original reads "[Aristotle] die Sexualität der Organismen in eine causale Beziehung zu ihrer Ortsbewegung feste. Bei allen Thieren…welche Ortsbewegung haben, ist das Weiblich vom Männlichen getrennt, und ein Thier weiblich, das andere männlich…Bei den Pflanzen dagegen sind diese Kräfte vermischt und das Männlich vom Weiblichen nicht unterschieden, daher sie auch aus sich selbst zeugen und keinen Befruchtungsstoff ausstoßen."

themselves without commixtion."[3] Despite having at least eleven children himself (none of whom, I assume, were begotten after the manner of trees), Browne famously wishes that "we might procreate like trees, without conjunction," insisting on and fantasizing about the asexual quality of plant reproduction.[4] Francis Bacon could similarly claim in his *Sylva Sylvarum* (1627) that "*Generation* by *Copulation* (certainly) extendeth not to *Plants*."[5] Only in 1676 did botanist Nehemiah Grew publically, if haltingly, identify the sexual functions of pollen in a paper given to the Royal Society (unpublished until 1682); the disreputable nature of Grew's assertion can be seen in his projection of the discovery onto the apparently fictional Sir Thomas Millington, who was said to have "told [Grew] he conceived, That the *Attire* doth serve, as the *Male* for the *Generation* of the *Seed*."[6] Grew's hypothesis remained undemonstrated until the 1690s, when Rudolph Jacob Camerarius was able to definitively show that plants reproduced sexually, though his observations remained controversial through the mid-eighteenth century.[7]

Even as plants were largely understood to be not only asexual but positively nonsexual beings, they nevertheless provided a rich garden of metaphors through which poets could express fecundity, the allure of the love object, and the desire engendered in the speaker by that love object. *Venus and Adonis* is, as I have shown, positively bursting with such examples, from the "rose red chain" in which Venus ensnared Mars (110) to

[3] Browne, *Selected Writings,* 262.

[4] Ibid. 73.

[5] Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum,* 155.

[6] Quoted in Zirkle, introduction to *Anatomy of Plants*, xv.

[7] See Sachs, *Geschichte der Botanik*, 406-35.

the characterization of "rose-cheek'd" Adonis (3) as the "field's chief flower" (8) to Venus's self-description as the grassy "park" (231) upon which Adonis should "feed where [he] wilt" (232). The *Sonnets* too are rife with floral imagery, the beloved urged to bless some "uneared womb" with the "tillage of thy husbandry" (3.5-6) to prevent the death of "beauty's rose" (1.2), to name only two of many examples. As even the most casual reader will notice, roses and lilies are everywhere in the English sonnet tradition; Stella's face, figured as Cupid's shield, depicts "roses gules…borne in silver field" (13.11) and is elsewhere described as having both "rose cheeks" (91.7) and "roses for to kiss" (Tenth Song, 29). In Daniel's *Delia,* Delia's beauty is the "half-blowne Rose" (31.1) and "the fairest flowre that euer sawe the light" (32.6); Drayton's mistress in *Idea* has a cheek "now flush with roses" (8.9); and Spenser imagines the mistress reading his *Amoretti* holding his "happy…leaves" in her "lilly hands" (1.1). Writing in a more sexualized vein, the title character of Barnfield's *Affectionate Shepheard* hopes to "sucke" the "sweete and faire flower" that is his beloved (97), and Donne imagines the "flowry meads" he will find beneath his mistress's gown in "Going to bed" (14). Rather like the limitless reproduction of trees, such examples could be allowed to proliferate ad nauseam; however, I hope this brief catalogue will suffice to highlight the peculiar conceptual quirk whereby, even as flowers themselves did not reproduce sexually in the early modern mind, they nevertheless provided a language of beauty that easily slid into expressions of sexual desire.

While the speakers of early modern poems frequently trope their desires through the language of flowers, it seems that in most instances this language operates in a primarily metaphorical register. The various substances that make up the beloved's body

in the blazon tradition, precious and beautiful as they may be individually, would ultimately produce not a woman, but a grotesque assemblage of plants, stones, and metals, as the famous frontispiece to Charles Sorel's *The Extravagant Shepherd* (1653) demonstrates. Globes for breasts, a naked Cupid on her forehead, pearls for teeth, lilies and roses tattooed on her cheeks, and darts shooting from her eyes—the literalized conceits combine to make a terrifying image of the ostensibly beautiful woman. In this way, when Donne imagines his beloved as a primrose, contemplating how many petals she should have (apparently five; four is not enough and six is rather too much woman for Donne), we are not to understand, I think, that his speaker's desires lie with the flower itself. Similarly, the rosy cheeks and lily breasts and hands of sonnet mistresses are in the main not the result of poets imagining that their beloveds are actually flowers; while I am resistant to the idea that any metaphor is truly dead, the primary function of the botanical language is to vehiculate desire through an established series of tropes of love and beauty. Perhaps the nearest example of a literalization of the botanical metaphor can be found in *Venus and Adonis*, where Adonis's floral beauty, though initially figurative, adumbrates his eventual transformation into a flower. However, Venus's troping of Adonis again does not seem to suggest her desire that he *be* a flower; his metamorphosis is an ironic realization of her language, not the fulfilment of a latent vegetal desire. These conceits, then, remain largely figurative; that is, they trope a love object's beauty or desirable qualities using the language of flowers, trees, and vines, but do not express desire for the plants themselves. This is not to say that the vehicle is unimportant or uninteresting—to notice this language's conventionality is not to explain it, and the use of a floral idiom to trope desire subtly destabilizes the integrity of categories of human and

plant. However, it is to say that such language is primarily metaphorical, the speakers' desires lying most directly with the beautiful lady or boy the flower describes, rather than the flower itself.

Against this general convention, however, Robert Herrick and Andrew Marvell—two of the most prolific botanical poets of the English Renaissance—think beyond the metaphorical possibilities of plants in their poetry; rather than using plants only to express the beauty of a lady's face or the whiteness of her breast, their speakers desire the plants themselves. The title of Herrick's *Hesperides* suggests an interest in gardens borne out through a text positively saturated with images of flowers, meadows, and vines. Although Herrick employs many of these images in conventional ways, as symbols for beauty, youth, and the fleetingness of both, he is also keenly interested in the relationship between humans and actual plants. In his etiological poems, Herrick further suggests that flowers are the end product of human sexual activities, a truncated articulation of the queer family established in *Venus and Adonis*. Herrick is also palpably intrigued in the erotic possibilities that would arise were human genitalia metamorphosed into plants. In "The Vine," Herrick's penis becomes a vine, and in "The Captiv'd Bee," his mistress Julia's vagina becomes a flower. In both fantasies, the botanical overtones are not merely metaphorical: Herrick rigorously thinks through the logistics of sexual activity enabled by this unusual genital configuration. In the former, Herrick luxuriates in twining, binding, clinging, and creeping on the surface of his mistress's body with his plant-penis; in the latter, Julia's flowery anatomy attracts the amorous oral attentions of a passing bee. Both of these episodes, then, destabilize the integrity of the human body, fusing it with a plant for the purpose of proliferating erotic pleasures.

Marvell too is famously a poet of gardens, meadows, and flowers, and similarly extends his botanical-sexual conceits beyond metaphor. In his mower series, the mower's initially reciprocal erotic relationship with the botanical world is disrupted by human manipulation of plant sexuality: contemporary horticultural practices are viewed as corrupting an initially unmediated and innocent—but still sexual—version of nature where the border between human and plant is relatively blurred. These preoccupations carry over into "The Garden" and *Upon Appleton House*, both of whose speakers subtly critique the imposition of human sexuality onto the natural world and at the same time express a pronounced erotic interest in plants that ultimately, if temporarily, dissolves their subjectivities altogether. In "The Garden" and *Appleton*, Marvell expresses sexual interest not in beautiful women who are like plants, but rather in the plants themselves. Decrying men who "amaze" themselves (and thus get lost in "a-maze") to attain the metaphorical "palm," "oak," and "bays" ("The Garden," 1-2), Marvell's garden world is one where lovers do not carve the names of women into trees—instead inscribing the names of trees into their own bark—and where vegetal life is not only the object of sexual desire, but often its active agent, ensnaring, binding, pelting, tripping, and penetrating a speaker who surrenders willingly to the plants' sexual interest. Unsurprisingly, critics have often ignored, minimized, or pathologized these botanophilic desires; when taken seriously at all, these poets' erotic imaginations have tended to be read as infantile, stunted, or downright perverted (with all the negative baggage that the term implies). However, such anxious responses to plant-directed desires is the reflex of critical heteronormativity, and not a particularly compelling reflex at that. In this chapter, I instead demonstrate how early modern poets' embrace of the annihilating power of

eroticism is not limited by but rather extends beyond the anthropocentric. I further show how the botanophilic thrust of both Herrick's and Marvell's characterization of eroticism problematizes the stability of the individual subject and of humanity as a category altogether.

Robert Herrick's poetry is undeniably erotic; however, his interests lie not with genital or end-driven sexuality, but with looking, kissing, touching, smelling, and tasting. Traditionally, critics have adduced this investment in scopic and tactile pleasures as evidence of Herrick's sexual and psychological immaturity, of "fear and disgust" directed toward women.[8] Gordon Braden succinctly articulates this position thus:

> The emphasis on foreplay and nongenital, especially oral, gratifications, and the fixation on affects (smells, textures) and details (Julia's leg), and the general voyeuristic preference of perception to action…are all intelligible as a wide diffusion of erotic energy denied specifically orgiastic focus and release. What is missing in the *Hesperides* is aggressive, genital, in other words, 'adult' sexuality.[9]

While Braden attempts to distance himself from the normativizing implications of labeling genital sexuality as "adult" through quotation marks, he nevertheless understands "aggressive, genital…adult" sexuality to be "missing" in the *Hesperides*—that is, its absence constitutes a palpable lack. William Kerrigan similarly identifies

[8] Baker, "Uncanny Stranger," 16.

[9] Braden, *The Classics,* 223.

Herrick's fantasies as "regressive sexual imaginings" that "make contact with a primal innocence," relegating Herrick to an anterior (if ethically superior) psychological state.[10] Lillian Schanfield does one better than Kerrigan and Braden, arguing that the supposedly stunted sexuality exhibited in Herrick's poems reveals the poet as suffering from a variety of psychosexual maladies:

> Through the course of hundreds of poems the poet-priest Robert Herrick (or a stand-in) lurks, leers, glides, spies, melts, yearns, swoons, heaves, pants, and dreams. He expresses sexual interest, analyzes sexual desire and offers sexual advice. He perseverates about women's physical parts, body movements, and clothing. He mentally disrobes his idealized mistresses as they bathe or go about their daily activities, in raptures about their lips, breasts and nipples, hair, teeth, legs, bellies, buttocks, waists, calves, thighs, skin, feet and sundry "parts." He praises their shoes, fabrics, petticoats and other articles of feminine clothing. He sniffs sweat, perfumes and other odors. He fantasizes about kissing (besides the usual lips and hands) beds, beads, nakedness, breasts, knees, legs, feet, footsteps and insteps, the threshold of a door, the altar of love, and even a kiss itself…the narrator of many of the poems—whether one persona or several, or even Herrick himself—is a man with sexual problems related to immaturity, passivity and possibly impotence.[11]

[10] Kerrigan, "Kiss Fancies," 158.

[11] Schanfield, "Tickled with Desire," 63-65.

Self-consciously collapsing the distance between poet and speaker, Schanfield suggests that Herrick's non-genital sexual proclivities—his fetishizing of clothing and bodies; his pleasure in the ocular and olfactory; his feminized gestures of melting, yearning, swooning, heaving, and panting; his preference of kissing to genital sexual behaviors; his delight in dreams and imaginations—indicate "sexual problems" of "immaturity, passivity and possibly impotence." For Schanfield (and for the particular body of psychoanalytic theory upon which she draws), Herrick's preferred articulations of eroticism are inferior to genital sexuality culminating in orgasm. In fact, they are stunted, sick, and emasculated. Characterizing Herrick elsewhere as "unmarried, celibate, sexually inexperienced [and] alcoholic," a bumbling pervert interested in what she calls "a garden-variety of adolescent behavior," Schanfield renders painfully explicit her discomfort with Herrick's erotic imagination.[12] While Schanfield is unusual in the degree of disgust she articulates, her representation of Herrick as fundamentally sexually deficient is common in criticism of the poet.

It is not difficult to see that this reading of Herrick's (portrayal of) sexuality as lacking, failed, or immature relies on a particular normative understanding of sexual behavior where erotic contact outside of a genital-genital paradigm is acceptable only if it relatively quickly moves to and culminates in male penetration of a woman and subsequent ejaculation. Such a coercive model of mature sexuality finds its most

[12] Schanfield, "Tickled with Desire," 81; 70. See also Baker, "Uncanny Stranger," 15-21. Similarly adducing Herrick's investment in objects and body parts, Baker adopts Nancy Vickers's model of the blazon to argue that Herrick dismembers and fetishizes women in order to assert masculine control over the unruly bodies of both women and his poetry: "Herrick denies woman's body its full fleshliness in two ways: by eroticizing a part of the woman's clothing or by fragmenting the female body and fetishizing the scattered members," both strategies serving to "focus attention on the shaping power of the male imagination" (17).

enduring theoretical articulation in Freud's account of perversions in *Three Essays*, which are for him

> [S]exual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.[13]

While Freud stipulates that perversions "are constituents which are rarely absent from the sexual life of healthy people," he ultimately concludes that they become pathological when they replace, rather than precede, genital-genital contact.[14] Herrick's poetry, conversely, reimagines sexual behavior outside of this single-minded arc toward penetration and ejaculation. While Herrick's speakers enjoy any number of non-genital sexual pleasures (as Schanfield helpfully enumerates above), I would here like to focus on his frequent recourse to tropes of botany, and more particularly, the poems in which Herrick's speakers reimagine genitalia—his own or his mistress's—as plants, fusing human and plant bodies to create a proliferation of tactile, non-penetrative pleasures. Herrick's speakers' palpable delight in the queer potential of sex-as-plant allows him to theorize a sexuality that rejects not only a teleological model that culminates invariably in (male) orgasm, but also the value of maintaining a stable human morphology; in poems like "The Vine" and "The captiv'd Bee," Herrick imagines the proliferating, non-

[13] Freud, *Three Theories*, 16.

[14] Ibid. 26-27.

penetrative pleasures to which he and Julia gain access when they abandon their human forms and give themselves over to the botanical realm.

Like any self-respecting Petrarchan, Herrick frequently compares his beloved to the natural world: the "*Roses*" ("Upon Julia's Recovery," 2), "*Violet*" (4), and "*Primroses*" (5) proclaim their "sister-hood" (8) with Julia; her lip is "the Land, or Cherry-Ile" ("Cherrie-ripe," 6) and her breast the "flowerie Nunnery" ("Upon Roses," 4) where "ruffled Roses" (2) nestle; carnations play "*Hide* or *Seek*" in Lucia's cheeks ("To Carnations: A Song," 2); an unnamed but apparently impressive mistress is a veritable bouquet, at once a "*Tulip*" ("A Meditation for his Mistresse," 1), a "*July* flower" (4), a "Rose i'th'bud" (7), a "faire-set Vine" (9), a "dainty *Violet*" (16), and "the *Queen*" (19) of all flowers; and, somewhat more licentiously, Julia's nipples are either a Tudor rose, "a red-Rose peeping through a white" ("Upon the Nipples of Julia's Breast," 2), or "a Cherrie (double grac't) / Within a Lillie" (3-4). Set in the frequently botanical realm of the *Hesperides*, though, these thoroughly conventional attributes feel less like shop-worn clichés and more like essential pieces of worldbuilding, filling out a landscape where the Parliament is comprised of roses ("The Parliament of Roses to Julia"); lilies and roses wed one another ("Upon one Lillie, who married with a rose"); whitethorn trees become a tabernacle ("Corinna's Going a-Maying"); meadows bear conscious witness to fresh young maidens ("To Meadows"), who make wreaths of willow when neglected by their lovers ("To the Willow-tree") and turn to primroses when afflicted with the greensickness ("How Primroses came green"); olive trees speculate about suitors' success ("The Olive Branch"); and pansies comfort ill-fortuned lovers in their grief ("To Pansies"). Herrick's

floral imagination extends to sexy etiologies—where Shakespeare spends twelve hundred lines detailing Venus's pursuit of Adonis and yet never situates the latter's death as the origin story for the anemone, Herrick revels in just-so stories, telling us that lilies were blanched by a strikingly ejaculatory stream of milk shot from Venus's breast ("How Lilies came white"); violets turned blue when an envious Venus thrashed and thus bruised them ("How Violets came blue"); and roses, once pale, went red with shame when they could not be as fair as the luminous Sapho ("How roses came red"). Plants, desire, and love are unmistakably bound up for Herrick, creating a thoroughgoing and realized imaginative investment in flowers, vines, and other forms of botanical life.

However, while the sheer mass of floral references and their complexly-articulated relationship to beauty and sex already set him apart, even more interesting is a fantasy Herrick invokes less often, but more strikingly—in poems like "The Vine" and "The captiv'd Bee," Herrick imagines his or his mistress's genitals transforming into plants, dismantling their human bodies in order to offer access to a variety of botanical erotic pleasures. In "The Vine," Herrick's speaker describes an extended sex dream in which his penis is "Metamorphoz'd to a Vine" (2), thereby imagining himself as a human-plant hybrid while initiating an erotic encounter with his mistress Lucia.[15] As has been noticed in Herrick's oeuvre as a whole, the speaker is not terribly interested in penetrative intercourse; what excites him about the vine is its potential to proliferate superficial (that is, surface-level—I do not imply a value judgement) pleasures as its many tendrils wrap around her body: the vine,

[15] Herrick quotations are from Martin (ed.), *Poetical Works of Robert Herrick*.

Crawling one and every way,

Enthrall'd my dainty *Lucia*.

Me thought, her long small legs & thighs

I with my *Tendrils* did surprize;

Her Belly, Buttocks, and her Waste

By my soft *Nerv'lits* were embrac'd:

About her head I writhing hung,

And with rich clusters (hid among

The leaves) her temples I behung; (3-12)

Herrick's interest in the vine does not lie in its stem, that is, the part one might suppose most structurally similar to the penis; rather, the speaker emphasizes its "*Tendrils,*" "*Nerv'lits*," "rich clusters," and "leaves," anatomizing the vine just as he does his mistress's "Belly, Buttocks, and…Waste." Herrick highlights the vine's profusion of surfaces—rather than investing primarily in the central stock, he draws attention to the diffuse, widespread, and external contact with Lucia it allows. Thus, even as he instrumentalizes the vine to effect an erotic encounter with a human woman, he retains an interest in the physical structures and movements of the vine itself. Further, while it seems that the vine is primarily his penis—when he wakes, he is disappointed to find himself with a "*Stock*" (23)—within the dream, the speaker's entire identity is subsumed into the various parts of the vine, which are designated with the pronoun "my": "my *Tendrils*" (6), "my soft *Nerv'lits*" (8), and "My curles" (13). The vine's actions are also displaced onto the speaker: "I with my *Tendrils* did surprize" (6); "About her head I

writhing hung" (9); "her temples I behung" (11); and "I crept with leaves" (18). The vine thus functions not only as a prosthesis or a synecdoche, but as the speaker himself.

Assuming the identity of the vine, the speaker's "fleeting pleasures" (20) are located primarily in his ability to entwine, entangle, and enwrap Lucia's body—he is not interested in exploiting his newfound length to probe her interior. The speaker "embrac'd" her (8); "writhing hung" around her head (9); and "did craule" around her neck, arms, and hands (12-13). The bulk of the poem is composed of these superficial pleasures directed everywhere, it seems, but the genitalia. Even when the speaker perhaps inevitably makes his way to what are presumably Lucia's genitals ("Those parts, which maids keep unespy'd" [19]), he seeks not to penetrate, but rather tries "with leaves to hide" them (18). This last action causes "Such fleeting pleasures … / That with the fancie [he] awook" (20-21), the vine that enabled such pleasurable, diffuse contact with his mistress's body contracting into a disappointing singularity: "And found (Ah me!) this flesh of mine / More like a *Stock*, then like a *Vine*" (22-23). The speaker's palpable regret ("Ah me!") at his morning wood shows that the locus of his pleasure is not in the single stock, but rather in the proliferation of touch the vine allows him.

Interestingly, in imagining his penis as a vine, Herrick reverses the normative gender significations of the plant: vines are more typically construed as feminine, seductively twining around a hard, straight masculine trunk or stock. In *Paradise Lost*, for example, Eve's hair "in wanton ringlets waved / As the vine curls her tendrils" (*PL* 4.305-6); one of the tasks she and Adam undertake in the garden, in fact, is to marry the vine and elm:

> …they led the vine

To wed her elm: she spoused about him twines
Her marriageable arms and with her brings
Her dow'r, th'adopted clusters, to adorn
His barren leaves. (*PL* 5.215-19)

The vine "curls" and "twines," wrapping itself around the elm, both supported by and supporting the tree. The passage also emphasizes the vine's fertility, as she brings "clusters" to remedy the elm's "barren leaves." These physical attributes are precisely those that Herrick arrogates to his vine-penis in "The Vine," taking pleasure in the kinesthetic experience of envinement, as well as, perhaps, the fertility represented by the "rich clusters" (10) he hangs around Lucia's head. However, the vine is still quite resolutely a penis—that is, it is difficult to map stable gender positions in this poem, as the logic of the plant-penis exceeds a human gender binary. Lucia's gender too is destabilized as she becomes the masculine trunk, the solid figure about which the vine wraps itself; her figuration as Bacchus (13), a male deity, also suggests the gender instability that underlies this poem.

Despite its suggestive gender instability, the poem is rather less interested in the gendered implications of its fantasy than in its kinky violence:

…my Lucia seem'd to me
Young *Bacchus* ravisht by his tree.
My curles about her neck did craule,
And armes and hands they did enthrall:
So that she could not freely stir,
All parts there made one prisoner (12-17)

In this bondage fantasy, the speaker seeks total physical control over Lucia's body, which is "ravisht," "enthrall[ed]," and "made one prisoner" by his snaky tendrils. I do not want to rule out the possibility that she enjoys the experience—the poem simply does not provide evidence in either direction. While not particularly interested in Lucia's erotic affects—that is, focused only on his own sexual pleasure—the speaker is nevertheless remarkable in his willingness to surrender the humanity of his physical body, to merge pleasurably with the vine—if not with Lucia—in order to achieve a heightened erotic experience.

While the speaker of "The Vine" is relatively uninterested in Lucia's response to his horticultural ravishment, in "The captiv'd Bee," the lady not only willingly surrenders to her (insectile) seducer, but also commands him to return after their encounter, asserting her desire and dominance. Sharing "The Vine"'s imaginative transformation of genitals into plants, "The captiv'd Bee" stages an erotic encounter between the "Sweet *Lady Flower*" (13) and a passing bee. While Herrick is less concerned with the mechanical possibilities offered by plant genitalia than he was in "The Vine," he again articulates a sexual fantasy reliant on botanical morphology, in this case, the symbiotic relationship of bees and flowers.[16] Even more interestingly, in contrast to "The Vine," where Lucia's interest in the erotic encounter is beside the point for the speaker, in "The captiv'd Bee" Julia enthusiastically consents to a tryst with the bee. While the bee first "took the lip / Of

[16] At first glance, this may appear to be an apiarian variation of the traditional flea poem. As discussed in chapter III above, poems in this genre deployed the figure of the flea to violate a woman's body; equating lover and insect, the speaker threatens to transform into a flea and simply take what he wants should the lady refuse to yield. Herrick's bee, however, does not seem to be an author-avatar; in fact, the poem depicts a self-contained encounter with no intrusion by the narrator and lacks the threatening undertones (or sometimes, just tones) characteristic of flea poetry.

Julia (5-6) as she "a-slumb'ring lay" (1)—that is, while Julia had no means to protest or reject his advances—once she awakens and hears his excuses, she not only forgives him but invites him to return:

> …she smil'd; and bade him goe
> And take his bag; but thus much know,
> When next he came a pilfring so,
> He sho'd from her full lips derive,
> Hony enough to fill his hive. (27-31)

It is not that Julia simply fails to object to the bee's attentions; rather, she commands him to return for a second, more satisfying encounter: on his next visit, she promises, even more honey will flow from her "full lips." Where Lucia's response to the envined speaker's suit was immaterial within the poem, Julia, at least, seems to be having a very good time.

The human-plant hybridity of "The captiv'd Bee" is in many ways less startling than that of "The Vine," and indeed seems in many ways to be a logical extension of the common equation of women and flowers in Petrarchan poetry; if Julia's lips are flowers, Herrick suggests, it stands to reason that she would have an erotic encounter not with a man, but with a bee. In fairly literal figurations of Julia as flower, the bee directly refers to her as his "Sweet *Lady-Flower*" (13) and "The flower that gives me nourishing" (20). Elsewhere, though, her floral qualities are distanced through the bee's admission that he mistook her for a plant, suggesting that she is merely *like* a plant. I think the encounter makes most sense if her flower is taken literally—it seems somewhat unlikely although not impossible that Julia would enjoy a bee sucking her human flesh—but the description

is elusive and unstable. In any case, she is sufficiently floral for the bee to perceive her lips as flowers, an act to which he twice admits using the sexually-charged language of "taking": "For some rich flower, he took the lip / of *Julia*" (5-6), and, excusing himself, he claims

> But taking those rare lips of yours
> For some fresh, fragrant, luscious flowers:
> I thought I might there take a taste,
> Where so much sirrop ran at waste (15-18)

Julia's "lips" have several floral attributes: theyare "fresh, fragrant, [and] luscious," and, when they are "suckt" (7), they yield an excess of "hony" (8): the bee "drank so much he scare co'd stir" (8), and yet, at the end of the poem, Julia promises an even greater yield, providing "Hony enough to fill his hive" (31). While Herrick is not overly concerned with exploring the specifics of Julia-as-flower, then, he is fascinated by the pleasure and power she derives from the bestial encounter with the bee provoked by these botanical qualities.

As in "The Vine," Julia's botanical transformation is localized in one part of the body, specifically, her lips (5). And indeed, describing the lips as flowers (usually roses) is a fairly standard compliment in love poetry; "honey-tongued" too is a frequent appellation, although its connotations are more ambivalent those accruing to Julia's in this poem. However, the forms of eroticism this poem describes are not, I think, only oral. We might, for example, see Julia as a maternal figure, feeding the bee as he sucks from her body. Further complicating this proliferation of erotic zones, the "lips" can be plausibly understood as referring to not only the mouth, but also the labia; the tenor of

this poem's sexualized language, both overdetermined and polysemous in its significations, points to a genital register alongside the oral and maternal. After he "began to sip" (6), the bee "suckt" her lips (7), playing on the possibilities engendered by the long S ("ſuckt") mentioned in the earlier discussion of "The Flea." The quantity of the lady's "Hony," enough to fill the bee's "bag" (28)—itself an interesting, complexly gendered figure suggestive of both the scrotum and the womb—may allude to not only milk but also the seed that women were believed to expel upon orgasm. Justifying his theft with the claim that "so much sirrop ran at waste" (18), the bee plays on a pun of waste/waist, another allusion to genitalia, and the repeated language of "taken" (lines 5, 17, and 26) reminds the reader of the word's specifically genital valences. The poem's botanical language allows Herrick to represent not only a charming encounter between a bee and a woman, but, more covertly, an act of cunnilingus that the woman clearly enjoys. This ambiguity is perhaps the point—the lady's (metaphorical or literal) botanical transformation, located at the lips, breast, or genitals, highlights the polymorphous pleasures offered by floral metamorphosis. Herrick's florally-genitaled figures are not concerned about ceding their humanity to embrace hybridity with plants, nor do they worry about having sexual experiences that defy categories of species. These transformations, in fact, are valued precisely because they open up such non-nonnormative encounters, desires, and pleasures.

Like Herrick, Andrew Marvell is frequently accused of possessing an immature, perverse, or downright perverted sexual ethic, at least, when the sexual sensibility he expresses is taken seriously at all. Even as Marvell's poetry is populated with delicately virginal

nymphs, seductively brawny mowers, and surprisingly sexy fruit, critics have historically been disinclined to accept that the poems' eroticism is indeed erotic. With only the occasional exception—William Empson's cheerful explication of the homoeroticism of Marvell's mowers, for instance—most scholars have insisted that the unusual sexuality expressed in Marvell's poetry is either trivial or mere metaphor, the claim in either case being there's nothing funny to see here.[17] Harry Berger, for example, influentially positions Marvell's "The Garden" as a paradigmatic example of his "green world" concept; while he allows that the poem figures some kind of sexual experience, he dismisses it as a thought exercise:

> We do not directly confront Andrew Marvell in orgy; rather, we stand beside the amused poet as he creates or imagines himself in orgy. The saying of the poem is an aspect of the poetic experience which interposes itself between us and the image. Seen this way, the poem as it unfolds becomes an experimental staging of the green-world sensibility.[18]

According to this logic, we needn't worry about the erotic content of *any* poem: unless we "directly confront" the poet participating in a sexual experience (how we're to do that, I'm not certain), we can distance the sexual aspects through "the saying of the poem," which allows the poet an ironic glance back at the sentiments he or she expresses. While I am not suggesting that poetry allows us the immediate apprehension of experience,

---

[17] See Empson, *Using Biography,* 15. Empson also notices the eroticism of "The Garden" in *Pastoral* (126), although he does not discuss the poem's sexual content beyond labeling it as "witty." See also Paul Hammond, "Marvell's Sexuality"; Hammond notes the poems' homoeroticism, but is to my mind too invested in proving that was Marvell homosexual to be entirely convincing.

[18] Berger, *Second World*, 278.

sexual or otherwise, this does seem to me a straightforward way to defuse and diffuse not only the sexual energies of a poem, but also the entire project of discussing representations of sexuality altogether. This trend of minimizing the centrality of sexuality to Marvell's poems has continued in recent criticism, where critics such as Anthony Funari suggest that Marvell's poetry wholly rejects eroticism in a rejoinder to Baconian new science and its exploitative sexualization of nature.[19] Rightly suggesting that refusing Bacon's heterosexualization of the relationship between "man" and nature is a step toward a more ethical relationship with the natural world, Funari characteristically fails to consider the non-heterosexual, non-misogynistic erotic paradigms that appear in Marvell's poetry.

If some critics insist that there is nothing sexy about Marvell's poetry, others do acknowledge the erotic content but are clearly uncomfortable with the particular forms Marvell's sexual imagination takes. Although less overtly phobic than many, William Kerrigan adumbrates this response with his idiosyncratic suggestion that, not only were Marvell's primary erotic desires pedophilic, but that these pedophilic predilections constituted an important part of his genius:

> His famous lyrics are pedophilic, such that this is an erotic genre predicated and implied by the poetry, and by the same token the pedophilia is poetic, such that the lyrics draw into their own excellence the troubled logic that creates and sustains this erotic genre.[20]

[19] Funari, "'Companions of My Thoughts,'" *passim*.

[20] Kerrigan, "Marvell and Nymphets," 8.

Even as Kerrigan explicitly identifies Marvell as having pedophilic inclinations, he is untroubled by it, as pedophilic fantasy constitutes "a category of healthy eroticism in [Kerrigan's] view."[21] Kerrigan's blithe diagnosis of Marvellian pedophilia is, however, fairly isolated; much more common is the suggestion that Marvell's poetry is "sick" in its refusal and apparent fear of "healthy" adult heterosexuality. Victoria Silver argues that Marvell's interest in young girls indicates his fear of change, time, and suffering, the "love of little girls" a "magical bulwark against the depredations of time and sex upon the speaker."[22] For Silver, Marvell is stuck in a state of static "infantile luxury."[23] Michael DiSanto goes further, suggesting that "[t]he presence of powerful and attractive nymphets and threatening adult women in Marvell's poems…is the manifestation of a disturbance in Marvell's thought concerning women and adult sexuality."[24] For DiSanto, Marvell is disturbed, his supposed fear of women and "adult sexuality," rendering him a genuinely dangerous pervert.

Such accounts clearly reveal more about critical discomfort with nonnormative sexual preferences than they do Marvell in their attempts to minimize the poetry's sexual content and pathologize non-normative, non-heterosexual erotic modes. (Indeed, despite using the phrase fifteen times in the body of his short article, as well as in the title, DiSanto never defines "adult sexuality," though I assume he means heterosexual, penetrative, vaginal sex.) By either deflecting or pathologizing Marvellian amatory verse,

---

[21] Ibid. 7.

[22] Silver, "Ambivalence and Little Girls," 35.

[23] Ibid. 41.

[24] DiSanto, "Marvell's Ambivalence," 166.

these readings produce a bizarrely limited definition of acceptable eroticism and, more to my point here, an impoverished understanding of Marvell's complex, ambiguous, and sexy poetry, poetry that not only articulates desires outside the matrix of heteroerotic "adult sexuality," but also uses these desires as a way to retheorize the self and its relationship to the world around it. In the remainder of chapter, I examine Marvell's botanical poetry, focusing on the mower sequence, "The Garden," and portions of *Upon Appleton House* to explore only one facet of Marvell's complicated sexual imaginary: his interest in the possibility of sexual relationships between humans and plants. In the mower poems, Damon's initially healthy and reciprocated erotic relationship with his environment is disrupted when human-directed sexuality intrudes and either attempts to reroute plants' desires to serve horticultural ends or to project violently unequal heterosexual relationships onto nature. In "The Garden" and *Appleton House*, however, Marvell's speakers experience and indeed demand erotic encounters with the vegetal world surrounding them. While these sexual experiences are not depicted as harmless, they are not exploitative, but rather mutual—as opposed to human attempts to manipulate and coopt vegetal sexuality in the mower sequence, in these poems Marvell's speakers seek a reciprocal (if kinky) sexual relationship with the plants they desire. In so doing, Marvell's speakers not only embrace the annihilating effects of erotic desire, but also articulate an erotic stance vis-à-vis plants that openly problematizes their own humanity.

Anthony Funari argues that, in contrast to an apparently presexual bliss that characterizes the earlier parts of the mower sequence, "sexuality becomes a destructive, alien force"

when it imposes itself onto the speaker's consciousness.[25] Throughout the sequence, Funari claims, Damon the Mower increasingly projects a sexualized framework onto the gardens, thereby alienating himself from the nonsexual pleasures the natural world offers.[26] This neat chronology between the pre- and postsexual, however, holds only if we limit our definition of sexuality to a heteroerotic imposition of man's will on a feminine nature: the mower does not critique sexuality itself but is rather concerned about human exploitation of plant sexuality, attacking a world in which human voyeurs and petty-god horticulturalists manipulate and corrupt plants by forcing them to breed in unnatural ways rather than enjoying sexual relationships with the botanical world themselves.[27]

In "The Mower against Gardens," the titular mower rails against what he sees as the perverted sexuality humans bring to their horticultural practices.[28] Suggesting that human wantonness has corrupted innocent flowers, the mower sets the stage for his critique of horticultural sexuality by castigating "luxurious man" (1) for embedding plants into "luscious earth" (7); given the sexual overtones of both "luxurious" and "luscious," human motives are called into question even before they begin meddling with reproduction specifically.[29] The mower's charge of avarice-induced lechery is heightened

[25] Funari, "Companions," 16.

[26] Ibid. *passim* but see e.g. 23.

[27] This is not to detract from Funari's larger point, which is a persuasive reading of Damon as rejecting a Baconian imperative to cast nature as feminine and exert manly scientific control over her.

[28] The mower poems ("The Mower against Gardens," "The Mower's Song," "Damon the Mower," and "The Mower, to the Glowworms") are not designated as a group by Marvell, but are commonly taken as such by critics. While I am treating these poems as a group, my argument is not contingent on doing so; whether or not originally conceived as a discrete sequence, the poems share a number of concerns that justify their treatment as a unit.

[29] All Marvell quotations from Smith (ed.), *Poems of Andrew Marvell*.

in his characterization of crossbreeding for color as the unnatural use of cosmetics to increase sexual desirability. Emphasizing the artificiality of the process, he accuses "With strange perfumes he did the roses taint, / And flowers themselves were taught to paint" (11-12). Procurer-like, man not only tarts up the flowers, teaching them to paint themselves, but corrupts them more fundamentally by realigning their aesthetic preferences, inducing them to want to wear cosmetics: "The tulip, white, did for complexion seek; / And learned to interline its cheek" (13-14). "Complexion" is here an interestingly ambiguous term; it means both "cosmetics" and "natural complexion," suggesting that the tulips ultimately come to regard their painted complexions as natural. Man's corrupting influence on the natural world is reflected in the shift of agency between lines twelve and thirteen; though initially "taught" to paint, tulips eventually "seek" complexion themselves. While the posture of the poem itself toward this somewhat misogynistic if conventional account of makeup is unclear—the speaker is relatively ironized—the mower clearly finds it a smutty travesty that leads into his real concern, the interbreeding of plants: man has

> …dealt between the bark and tree,
> Forbidden mixtures there to see.
> No plant now knew the stock from which it came;
> He grafts upon the wild the tame:
> That the uncertain and adult'rate fruit
> Might put the palate in dispute.
> His green *seraglio* has its eunuchs too;
> Lest any tyrant him outdo.

And in the cherry he does Nature vex

To procreate without a sex. (21-30)

For the mower, crossbreeding plants is a sexual vice. The fruit produced by hybridization is "forbidden," "uncertain," and "adult'rate," evoking anxieties about species purity and legibility. It also brings about sexual disorder, again hinted at by "adult'rate" but more obviously in the evocation of the "*seraglio*" and "eunuchs," the italics highlighting the former's foreignness. Associated with luxury, indulgence, tyranny, and what the early modern English would consider heathenry and likely sodomy, the language of the harem here serves to further denaturalize human incursions into botanical sex lives. The image of cherries "procreat[ing] without a sex" picks up on the eunuch conceit earlier in the lines—lacking a biological sex, procreation becomes simply artificial, "enforced" (31) from without. The poem closes oddly, the mower turning to a praise of the labor undertaken by "fauns and fairies" to "till" the meadows (35) and of the "statues polished" (37) that "adorn the gardens" (38). This shift to embrace artificiality reminds the reader that whatever professions of naturalism the mower wishes to make can only be ironic given his occupation. However, the human manipulation of plant sexuality is in this poem presented as explicitly negative, harmful to the flowers and evidence primarily of humans' conjunction of corrupt commerciality and sexual perversity.

While the mower castigates human perversity in "The Mower against Gardens," in "Damon the Mower," Damon lives in an apparently symbiotic, erotic relationship with the natural world around him; only the intrusion of human-directed eroticism causes his pain and ultimate fall. Describing his relationship to nature, Damon uses strikingly sexual language:

I am the mower Damon, known

Through all the meadows I have mown

On me the morn her dew distills

Before her darling daffodils.

And, if at noon my toil me heat,

The sun himself licks off my sweat.

While, going home, the ev'ning sweet

In cowslip-water bathes my feet. (41-48)

In his headnote to the mower sequence, Nigel Smith points out that "[t]o 'mow' in the seventeenth century meant to have sexual intercourse."[30] Damon's self-assertion as "the mower Damon" who has "mown" "all the meadows" takes on a libidinal charge that is only enhanced by the erotic relationship with nature he posits in the rest of the stanza. Damon claims that the morning, the sun, and the evening all exchange fluids with him, a common figuration of sexual intercourse in the period. The moon and the evening are here female, engaging Damon in a heteroerotic relationship (although an emphatically non-human one), but the sun is male, retaining his usual gender designation as he "himself licks off" Damon's sweat. This image is strikingly homoerotic, the reflexive pronoun "himself" redoubling the emphasis on the sun's masculine erotic behaviors. These experiences, compressed into just one stanza, suggests Damon's queer, non-human polyamory—he does not reject sexuality altogether, but rather experiences it as an

[30] Smith, ed. *Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 130.

epiphenomenon of his total submersion in his environment. Damon's relationship to the fairies too is cast in fairly sexual language:

> The deathless fairies take me oft
> To lead them in their dances soft
> And, when I tune myself to sing,
> About me thy contract their ring (61-64)

While "take" of course has many meanings, the phrase "take me oft" positioned before a line break (thereby delaying the prepositional phrase that specifies the form of taking) offers the tantalizing possibility of a sexual relationship with the fairies. The suggestiveness of these lines is heightened when the fairies "contract their ring." While most proximately referring to both fairy rings and the circle of fairies surrounding him, there is also the suggestion of either the vagina or anus contracting about Damon's erect figure. In recounting his past relationship to the landscape, characterizing it as "happy" (65), then, Damon does not reject sexual desire, but rather posits mutual eroticism as the ideal relationship to the meadows he so sensuously mows.

However, when Damon begins to experience heteroerotic passion for Juliana, his sexual imaginary and experiences become suffused with violence. Damon finds himself unpleasurably penetrated and castrated, as seen in the first lines of the poem: "Hark how the mower Damon sung, / With love of Juliana stung!" (1-2). The rhyme of "sung" and "stung" links the ideas of poetry, penetration, and lament, which the poem carries throughout its eighty-eight lines. Though his pain gives him occasion to "all the day complain" (67) and write this poem, Damon does not celebrate the poetically productive power of his sexual failure; instead, he dwells most explicitly on images of pain,

penetration, and loss. Damon's hopes are "withered" (8) and "burn[ed]" (20), the former's suggestion of castration reinforced when he recounts his rejected gift of "the harmless snake… / Disarmed of its teeth and sting" (35-36). Unable to find the "cool cave" (27) or "gelid fountain" (28) that would offer him relief, Damon's frustrated impulses manifest in an increasingly violent pattern of behavior; where once his mowing was an erotic act that "discovers" (51)—or dis-covers—the meadows, by the poem's conclusion it becomes an act of genocidal fury: "he threw his elbow round, / Depopulating all the ground" (73-74). Damon's final action is to cut himself with his scythe, legible as an act of self-castration and clearly a penetrative image as he bleeds and falls. This final act consolidates his feelings of impotence and self-indulgence, suggesting that the rewards for heteroerotic passion are suffering and castration. The mutually satisfactory sexualized relationship with his environment is left behind, but this heterosexual passion is understood not as progress toward "adult sexuality," but as a literal fall.

The mower's sexual aggression, awakened by both his disgust at what he sees as corrupt practices of cross-breeding and his anger at Juliana's rejection, is more fully redirected toward the gardens themselves in the final poem of the mower sequence, "The Mower's Song." Telling a story with a distinct temporal inflection—before and after Juliana—the mower first tells of a time when he felt a kinship with his environment that is disrupted by his sexual desire for Juliana:

> My mind was once the true survey
> Of all these meadows fresh and gay;
> And in the greenness of the grass

Did see its hopes as in a glass;

When Juliana came, and she

What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me. (1-6)

Juliana's interruption of the mower's mind is not only reported but seen on the page: Marvell's usual iambic tetrameter gains two feet, each stanza ending in a heptameter refrain as the mower obsessively circles back to the figure of the disdaining beloved. The mower claims that Juliana's disruption of his life also disturbs his once-serene relationship with the meadows "fresh and gay." Despite his positive portrayal of the meadows, though, in his attempt to claim an identity relationship with them, the mower reveals his narcissism, as nature is here seen as a stage for his own interior experience; the green grass showed him his "hopes as in a glass," becoming a mirror to his mind rather than an entity in its own right.

Because the natural world is correlated primarily with the mower's interior state, as he despairs of Juliana he begins to project a specifically sexual anxiety onto it:

But these, while I with sorrow pine,

Grew more luxuriant still and fine;

That not one blade of grass you spied,

But had a flow'r on either side (7-10)

While perhaps still attempting to claim kinship with his environment through a fairly lame pun on "pine," the mower separates his sorrowing self from a denaturalized nature that ornaments itself through flowers, growing "fine." This is for the mower a specifically sexual kind of corruption, the "luxuriant" meadows' sexuality evident in their production of flowers (which, as William Badley notes, are described in a configuration reminiscent

of male genitals).[31] Furious at the treachery of the "Unthankful meadows" (13) and their betrayal of "A fellowship so true" (14), the mower decides to enact a botanical holocaust, leveling everything to his condition of "common ruin":

> But what you in compassion ought,
> Shall now by my revenge be wrought:
> And flow'rs, and grass, and I and all,
> Will in one common ruin fall. (19-22)

Reminding one of nothing so much as a modern incel, the mower horrifyingly proclaims total destruction a fitting response for the meadows' indifference to his sexual frustration. In a castrating fury, the mower levels the fields, bringing about a "common ruin" and "fall" not because of sexual activity, but rather its denial. The mower remains an ironized figure, his grandiose protestations undercut repeatedly through this and other poems; here, as he imagines that the meadows "Shall now the heraldry become / With which I shall adorn my tomb" (27-28) the reader is reminded of the impotence of his final gesture—the botanical world will indeed recover from his petulant masculinist outburst. However, the anger with which he lashes out is indicative of the view of sexuality and nature in the mower sequence, where humans can have egalitarian relationships with the natural world but where other sexual impulses—whether the manipulation of plant sexuality or the heterosexual passion for another human—are corrupting and destructive. It is not only that the mower sequence depicts sex with plants and the environment as

[31] See Smith, ed., *Poems of Andrew Marvell* 145n8.

acceptable—it is also that such passions are the only beneficent expressions of sexuality in the sequence.

Whereas the mower's nature-directed erotics remain largely in the background (and, indeed, the past tense), in "The Garden" and *Upon Appleton House* Marvell's speakers actively solicit sexual encounters with the natural world, pleading to be wholly integrated into their environments so as to lose their humanity altogether. In this section, I hope to demonstrate that in these poems, Marvell's speakers evince a reciprocal, nonpathological sexual desire for the plant world in which they are immersed. In so doing, I will show that not only are these desires highly erotic (a claim that has been made with surprising infrequency), but also that they culminate in the speakers' fantasies of becoming wholly integrated into the natural world themselves.

The plants of Marvell's gardens stand out among contemporary evocations of sexy flowers insofar as they are desired as plants, rather than as tropes for human relationships; as Stephen Guy-Bray says in his reading of "The Garden" (one of the few critical treatments of the poem that takes its plant-directed eroticism seriously), plants "occupy the center of a poem's world, not as a metaphor but as the things themselves."[32] We see this from the beginning of the poem where the speaker decries

> How vainly men themselves amaze
> To win the palm, the oak, or bays;
> And their incessant labor see

[32] Guy-Bray, "Animal, Vegetable, Sexual," 204.

Crowned from some single herb or tree,

Whose short and narrow verged shade

Does prudently their toils upbraid;

While all flow'rs and all trees do close

To weave the garlands of repose. (1-8)

The speaker suggests that the "palm, the oak, or bays," emblems of military, civic, and poetic achievement, are valuable not symbolically but as the plants themselves; rather than wasting time going after the referents of these symbols, men should instead pursue the symbols themselves, indeed, should pursue "all flow'rs and all trees." Marvell's vegetable world is imbued with agency as it "upbraid[s]" the vanity of men and "close[s]" on and "weave[s] the garlands of repose" for those wise enough to take advantage of the proffered retirement.

This suggestion of active, agential plants takes on an erotic cast in the third stanza, where the speaker declares "No white nor red was ever seen / So am'rous as this lovely green" (17-18). Rejecting the trope of the red and white beauty so often found in Petrarchan poetry, the speaker claims that true beauty lies in the green of the garden. This "lovely green" is also "am'rous," that is, a sexually desiring subject.[33] The plants' desires

[33] Editors have typically wanted to suggest that "am'rous" must mean "lovely," attempting to erase both the sexuality and the vitality of the garden. The garden becomes in this gloss the object of the speaker's gaze, not a being in its own right. However, not only does this reading make the line somewhat redundant, it also fails to pick up on the sexual agency, even aggression, that the natural world exhibits throughout the poem. The primary meaning of amorous was and remains "inclined to love," according to the *OED.* Interestingly, the first two definitions of the word both insist that this fondness is for someone of the opposite sex; it is unclear if heterosexuality is integral to the word's definition or if this is another example of critical heteronormativity, though I tend to suspect the latter.

become increasingly aggressive, culminating in the famous fifth stanza where the speaker is overwhelmed by sensual fruit:

> What wondrous life is this I lead!
> Ripe apples drop about my head;
> The luscious clusters of the vine
> Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
> The nectarene, and curious peach,
> Into my hands themselves do reach;
> Stumbling on melons, as I pass,
> Insnared with flow'rs, I fall on grass. (33-40)

These lines, culminating with the speaker's ensnarement and tripping, have typically been read as a metaphor for the Fall; though there are clear resonances of the descent into the postlapsarian world, this explanation fails to account for the "human sexuality that is directed towards plants" or, perhaps better, the plant sexuality that is directed towards humans in these lines.[34] Even as plants were understood as asexual in early modern botany, Marvell's speaker clearly encounters them as sexually desiring beings that aggressively press themselves onto the hapless speaker. While the speaker might be forgiven for being alarmed at this attack from preternaturally sexually aggressive fruit, he instead takes obvious pleasure in the encounter, evincing no signs of resistance or concern. Though the fruit is indeed assertive in its advances on the speaker—the apples "fall about" him, the grapes "crush" themselves into his mouth, the nectarine and peach

[34] Guy-Bray, "Animal, Vegetable, Sexual," 207.

"reach" themselves into his hands—the assonance of "luscious," "clusters," and "crush," as well as the consonance in "Ripe apples drop" have a luxurious and playful sonic texture, rather than one of threat. And while the speaker "fall[s] on grass" after his encounter with the rapacious fruit, his mind immediately "from pleasures less / Withdraws into its happiness" (41-42). Even as he characterizes these encounters as either lesser or diminishing to the mind, the speaker nevertheless describes them as "pleasures" that enable the mind to retreat into happiness, an unlikely outcome if the plants were perceived as a genuine threat.[35] The potentially mutual character of the stanza's eroticism is demonstrated in the line "Insnared with flow'rs"; the preposition "with" works ambiguously here, signifying either that the speaker is ensnared *by* flowers, or that he has become integrated so fully into the garden that he is incapable of separating himself from it—he is fully *with* the plants. In "The Garden," plants possess an active sexuality rarely accorded them while the speaker retreats into a largely passive position. Plants exhibit human agency (or human agency is revealed to be not so human), and even as their sexual impulses are aggressive, they are largely unthreatening to—and desired by—the speaker. Exemplifying what Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari term "libertine botany," Marvell's plants possess an erotic life that "is not a dim or muted reflection of human desires or subject positions," but rather "instantiates a material flexibility that includes and invokes humans in the pleasures it makes possible."[36] In Marvell's garden, it

[35] See Empson, *Pastoral*, 124-25.

[36] Meeker & Szabari, "Libertine Botany," 479. Meeker and Szabari demonstrate the presence of libertine botany, or plant-based eroticism, in Renaissance French texts such as the writing of Cyrano de Bergerac and Guy La Brosse. While Meeker and Szabari's interest lies in early modern French literature, their model translates nicely to the botanical erotics exemplified by Marvell and Herrick in the English context.

"is not human sexuality that organizes plant sexuality…but plant sexuality that allows for human pleasures to assume new contours and forms."[37]

Plants desire humans in this poem, but humans also desire plants, even to the exclusion of other humans. As I mentioned earlier, Marvell points out that the traditional symbols of success—"the palm, the oak, or bays" (2)—are *plants*; rather than coveting the glory they represent, we should instead desire the entire plant world, allowing ourselves to be pleasurably "insnared with flow'rs." Adumbrating the oral pleasures the plants offer in stanza five, the speaker appreciates this vegetal world by calling it "delicious solitude" (16). As has been often noticed, this idealized isolation excludes women; the speaker says "Such was that happy garden-state, / While man there walked without a mate" (57-58). This has predictably fed into assertions that Marvell was misogynist or feared women; in Michael Morgan Holmes's words, "[i]t is not a huge step to see in this rejection of the first woman a dismissal of all women from 'paradise.'"[38] However, that need not be the only reading of these lines, which do not suggest that the speaker wishes that women specifically were never made, but rather that he longs for perfect solitude, eschewing the company of *all* humans:

> But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
>
> To wander solitary there:

---

[37] Ibid. 480. Cf. Shannon Kelley's discussion of how desiring plants both figure and experience queer and crip forms of desire in Lyly's *Endymion*.

> While Lyly invites us to compare humans and plants as a way to justify crooked yearning, his humans are also treated as plants whose crooked yearnings cannot be straightened. Just as human bodies and desires are culturally constructed as straight, queer, or crooked, so too are the bodies and desires of lunary and Aspen, whose mysterious erotic potential floods the Greenwich stage in Endymion. ("Crooked Yearning," 23)

[38] Holmes, *Metaphysical Literature*, 74.

Two Paradises 'twere in one

To live in Paradise alone. (61-64)

True, there are no women here, but there are no male companions either. DiSanto finds this absence of women "troubling," arguing that it contributes to what he calls Marvell's "avoidance of adult sexuality."[39] However, in addition to the concerning heteronormativity of DiSanto's charge, it seems to me that what is celebrated in these lines is less the absence of women and more the joys of solitude and the company of plants, a distinction many critics fail to make; the speaker's lack of erotic interest in other humans in favor of plants may not be normative, but it does not have to indicate an underlying pathology or hatred of women.

Not only does the speaker desire plants, but he also wants to be a plant, or at least to be more fully integrated into the natural world than his human body will allow. I have already shown how the ambiguity in "insnared with flow'rs" hints at this desire for connection; it is expressed more clearly when the speaker says

Casting the body's vest aside,

My soul into the boughs does glide:

There like a bird it sits and sings,

And whets, and combs its silver wings (50-53)

While the speaker here desires to be a bird, rather than a plant, "casting the body's vest aside" deepens his intimacy with nature (and allows him to make his home in "the boughs"), rather than estranging him from it as might be expected from the familiar

[39] DiSanto, "Marvell's Ambivalence," 180; 167.

conjunction of world and flesh. His later suggestion that timekeeping—a human activity that can be viewed as an attempt to control nature—is best done "with herbs and flow'rs" (71-72) again bespeaks an effort to bring humans and the natural world into closer proximity and, more importantly, suggests that humans do not have priority over the environment—the herbs and flowers, not men, are in charge of time. This prioritization of plants may seem to be problematized in the speaker's famous claim of "Annihilating all that's made / To a green thought in a green shade" (47-48), where he is figured as mentally unmaking the world, what Jonathan Crewe characterizes as "an escape from the body through which masculine agency can be reclaimed" in favor of a celebration of the "omnipotent mind."[40] As Bruce Smith points out, however, a "green thought" can be read as "an *amorous* thought."[41] Furthermore, the poem immediately proceeds to the image of the speaker's casting aside of his body in order to assume an avian, rather than human, state. In this vein, I think this embrace of annihilation can well be read as a variation of sexual self-shattering; attempting to completely meld with the vegetable world, the speaker must unmake the structures of that world altogether. In so doing, the speaker destroys not only the distinctions between plants and himself, but all distinctions whatsoever, dissolving into a pleasurable nothingness before he reemerges as a bird in the following stanza.

This undercurrent of violence in Marvell's annihilative desires crops in "The Garden"'s fourth stanza, where the speaker invokes the stories of Apollo and Daphne and

[40] Crewe, "Garden State," 274. Crewe suggests that this attempt to reinscribe masculine agency is unsuccessful (and, indeed, that the speaker is not particularly invested in its success).

[41] Smith, *Key of Green*, 36 (emphasis in original).

Pan and Syrinx. In the speaker's account, Apollo hunted Daphne "only that she might laurel grow" (30) and Pan Syrinx "not as a nymph, but for a reed" (32). While the gods' preference of plants to women reflects the speaker's own inclinations, these references introduce into the idyll the threat of sexual violence, coercion, and grossly unequal power structures. In a similar evocation of violence, the speaker's apostrophe "Fair trees! Wheres'e'er your barks I wound, / No name shall but your own be found" (23-24) proclaims not only his love for trees but also that the way in which he initially goes about loving them, a play on the trope of lovers chiseling the names of their beloveds into trees, will result in a physical "wound" inscribed on the beloved. Critiquing violent expressions of human desires, the speaker criticizes not eroticism itself, but rather eroticism that harms its object, whether human or botanical.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to briefly consider Marvell's sprawling country house poem *Upon Appleton House*, which is perhaps the most fully-articulated explication of Marvell's sexual ethic and botanical erotics. In *Appleton,* Marvell both aligns young women with the natural world, showing the violence they encounter as they approach heterosexual maturity and marriage, and expresses his speaker's own, apparently untroubling if rather masochistic, desires for the plant life surrounding him—desires both to have sex with plants and to be a plant himself.

Marvell's interest in virginal girls has been frequently noted (and almost as frequently treated as a symptom of a greater sexual pathology), but less often noticed is how his young virgins are likened to plants, vulnerable to corruption by human sexuality.

While not alleging that Marvell was a pedophile, as does DiSanto, Silver suggests that his love of little girls reveals an unhealthy erotic interest:

> [T]he love of little girls or sexual neuters in Marvell is prophylactic, since in every instance they are represented as a kind of magical bulwark against the depredations of time and sex upon the speaker, who anticipates suffering at the hands of both: they must fend off time because in the pastorals it presages the elegiac sensations of disappointment and loss, and sex because women's erotic complexity or "coyness"—their sexual reluctance in the face of men's sexual urgency—hastens just those eventualities.[42]

Claiming that his love of little girls acts as a "prophylactic," that is, allows him to evade sexuality altogether, Silver sees something anxious in Marvell's representations of young women. Marvell's speakers, it is true, often seem to regret the aging of his girl-queens, attempting to "compound" (17) and "parley" (18) with Little T.C., for example, before she emerges into violent adult sexuality where she will "wound" (19), "triumph over" (21), and "despise" (22) anyone who dares to love her. However, as Melissa Sanchez notes, Marvell's interest in young girls need not be read as a symptom of sexual immaturity, misogyny, or pedophilia, but rather as his recognition of the "coercive identification of procreative marriage with English religion and liberty that constrains erotic satisfaction" as these girls grow into women.[43] In *Upon Appleton House*, the young

[42] Silver, "Ambivalence and Little Girls," 35-36.

[43] Sanchez, "Straightness," 83. Holmes makes a similar point, saying "it is difficult not to detect at the very least an ambivalence—if not a deep discomfort—vis-à-vis [Mary Fairfax's] relation to heteronormative and dynastic Fairfaxian ideals" (*Metaphysical Literature*, 87).

virgins Isabella Thwaites and Maria Fairfax must learn to contain their desire, rerouting it along heteroerotic lines in order to secure the fiction of patrilineal transmission of the Appleton estate from one generation to the next, a process Marvell represents as being one of violence and coercion.

The violence of this interpellation into married life recalls Marvell's poetry of botanical sexuality, where the imposition of human sexuality onto the plant world is figured as destructive and corrupting. It is thus interesting that both Isabella and Maria are described using botanical imagery that, besides being conventional compliment, rhetorically aligns them with the gardens. In her first appearance in the poem, Isabella is described as "the blooming virgin Thwaites" (90), the phrase highlighting both her virginity and her floral qualities. Isabella, a young heiress, is supposed to marry William Fairfax; however, a speech by some "subtle nuns" (94) causes her to reconsider. While the female homoeroticism the nun evokes as an alternative to marriage is fascinating in its own right, I regretfully restrict my focus to the garden-like quality of the convent and its unnatural fecundity. The convent's walls "hedge" the nuns' liberty (100), allowing them freedom from the "wild creatures, called men" (102) that dwell in the wilderness beyond its confines. Within these hedged walls, Isabella will receive a crown of "lilies" (142), and the nuns partake in a variety of crafts and domestic labors that transform the natural world into the domestic and decorative:

> So through the mortal fruit we boil
> The sugar's uncorrupting oil:
> And that which perished while we pull,
> Is thus preserved clear and full.

For such indeed are all our arts;

Still handling Nature's finest parts.

Flowers dress the altars; for the clothes

The sea-born amber we compose;

Balms for the grieved we draw; and pastes

We mould, as baits for curious tastes. (173-82)

The nuns corrupt the natural world by turning its unadulterated materials into artistic productions—they "dress" and "compose" clothes for the altars with flowers and amber; they "draw" balms for mourners and "mould" pastes, the latter having no purpose but to tempt "curious tastes." Recalling the mower's critique of horticultural practices, the nuns take natural materials and direct them to inappropriate human ends. Even their making of preserves, which Katie Kadue reminds us was "a foundational practice of thrifty housewives and central to a lived philosophy of frugality," is "not intended to nourish" as the nuns "[pass] off rotten fruit…as 'clear and full.'"[44] The nuns' corruption of nature is underscored by the descriptions of fertility that pervade the passage. Isabella is seduced by these "thoughts long conceived" (96) even as they are presented as arising "by chance" (96): this unnatural pregnancy, carried far beyond its term, "sucked her in" (200) as she capitulates to the nuns' temptation. However, this is not the nuns' only problematic pregnancy; even while the convent is most memorably depicted as a fantasy space of cozy lesbian sleepovers, its garden yields fruit that suggests that sex with men is also on

[44] Kadue, "Preserving Patriarchy," 648.

the agenda. As William Fairfax attempts to rescue and/or abduct Isabella, he accuses the nuns of illegitimate pregnancies: "I know what fruit their gardens yield, / When they it think by night concealed" (219-20). Continuing the imagery of corrupted fruit and flora, Fairfax says that the nuns' garden will produce not plants but rather aborted fetuses and dead babies, giving a horticultural twist to the "commonplace of scurrilous anti-Catholic propaganda that nuns buried their illegitimate babies at midnight in the nunnery grounds."[45] The nuns, then, are likely to corrupt the "blooming" Isabella as they incorporate her into their decadent, heretical, lesbian summer camp. However, Isabella's response to her "rescue" is both silent and ambivalent; standing at the altar, she "weeping" (264) accedes or concedes to Fairfax, leaving both the convent and the poem behind.

The nuns' misuse of nature is reminiscent of the mower's railing against gardens, where both the cosmetic and reproductive excesses of botanists are castigated; however, "blooming" Isabella's emergence into sexuality, heterosexual or otherwise, is not unproblematic, apparently a painful process that strips her of language and even representation, subsuming her individuality into the Fairfacian genealogy that produces the "young Maria" Fairfax who emerges as a guiding spirit toward the end of the poem. Maria serves in many ways a disciplinary function throughout the last hundred or so lines, attempting to reimpose order and "straightness" (691) onto the unruly speaker and his woods and meadows: "See how loose Nature, in respect / To her, itself doth recollect" (657-58). While she has the "wondrous beauty" (690) of the gardens, she attempts to

[45] Ormerod and Wortham, quoted in Smith, ed., *Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 222n.ll.219-20.

disclaim this botanical appearance, as "she, to higher beauties raised, / Disdains to be for lesser praised" (705-6); Maria prefers to "[count] her beauty to converse / In all the languages as hers" (707-8), speaking with "wisdom" rather than "noise" (710). However, Maria's attempts to transcend her beauty and dwell in the realm of ideas and wisdom are ultimately fruitless, as she goes on to be described as "a sprig of mistletoe, / On the Fairfacian oak" (739-40), a horticultural description that highlights her vulnerability to dynastic marriage. Redefined in botanical terms, Mary too suffers the same fate as Isabella, her selfhood undermined by dynastic necessity. The violence of this fate is emphasized in the language describing her wedding, where, "for some universal good, / The priest shall cut the sacred bud" (741-42). Mary becomes a young "bud" nipped and grafted onto another tree to serve the "glad parents" (743) and some vaguely defined "universal good" with her sacrifice. Mary's entrance into marriage and thus human sexual relationships is dangerous and violent, and whosever interests it serves, it is likely to do her harm.

Despite her disciplinary function, however, Maria is unable to fully control the sexual weirdness of the rest of the poem, where the speaker both wishes to become, and be fucked by, plants. The poem's ending in retreat to the domestic space ("Let's in" [775]) cannot completely recuperate the speaker's queer desires—indeed, one of the poem's trippiest perceptual shifts, when the slow-motion "viscous air" (673) "sucks" the "azure dye" (674) of the kingfisher into a "jellying stream" (675), arises as a direct

response to Mary's emergence into the visual field.[46] As in "The Garden," the speaker claims a sort of identity-relationship with the world around him:

> Thus I, easy philosopher,
> Among the birds and trees confer:
> And little now to make me, wants
> Or of the fowls, or of the plants.
> Give me but wings as they, and I
> Straight floating on the air shall fly;
> Or turn me but, and you shall see
> I was but an inverted tree.
>
> Already I begin to call
> In their most learned original:
> And where I language want, my signs
> The bird upon the bough divines. (561-72)

The speaker initially claims to be a "philosopher," perhaps indulging in green thoughts in this, his green shade "among the birds and trees." However, quickly he shifts to the claim that only anatomical difference bars him from full participation in this natural life: already able to communicate with birds and plants through both language and gesture, he needs only wings or to invert his body to become a bird or tree. The speaker thus eagerly

[46] Interestingly, Maria is also described in terms strikingly similar to those characterizing Philaenis in Donne's lesbian elegy "Sapho to Philaenis"; Mary is "more pure, sweet, straight, and fair / Than gardens, woods, meads, rivers are" [695], and Philaenis is "not soft, and cleare, and strait, and fair, / As *Down* as *Stars, Cedars*, and *Lillies* are" [21-22] because her beauty exceeds all comparison.

and unhesitatingly sheds his humanity in the attempt to bring himself closer to both flora and fauna, and begins to physically incorporate himself into the natural world in the subsequent stanzas:

> The oak leaves me embroider all
>
> Between which caterpillars crawl:
>
> And ivy, with familiar trails,
>
> Me licks, and clasps, and curls, and hales. (587-90)

Here, art is not imposed onto the natural world; rather, the tree spontaneously "embroider[s]" the speaker, making him part of its tableau. The ivy, suggestively "familiar," "licks," "clasps," and "curls" the speaker, who, "languishing with ease…toss[es]" (593) on "pallets swoll'n of velvet moss" (595). The homophone of "hales"/"hails" further suggests both that the ivy calls to him—reinforcing the speaker's ability to communicate with plant life—and makes him healthy, "hale." Lying and physically thrashing on a "swoll'n" bed, then, the speaker has an erotic experience with the handsy (tendrilsy?) moss, ivy, oak, and caterpillars. The pleasure seems to be not only in the stroking, licking, and clasping (although there is clearly pleasure to be had therein), but also in the speaker's shedding of his discrete self and full incorporation into the scene.

The conjunction of the erotic and the shedding of humanity is perhaps clearest in one of the most sexual passages in Marvell's verse:

> Bind me ye woodbines in your twines,
>
> Curl me about ye gadding vines,
>
> And oh so close your circles lace,

That I may never leave this place:

But, lest your fetters prove too weak,

Ere I your silken bondage break,

Do you, O brambles, chain me too,

And courteous briars nail me through. (609-16)

Even as this is most often interpreted as a perverse *imitatio Christi*, "clearly meant to evoke Christ's crucifixion," it is difficult to suppress the heightened erotic affect of the passage.[47] Marvell begs—indeed, topping from the bottom, he commands—to be bound, laced, chained, and nailed into place by series of woody, thorny plants: woodbines, vines, brambles, and briars. As Sanchez notes, the form itself mirrors the speaker's desires: "[w]rithing about the speaker, the intricately rhyming twines, woodbines, and vines represent a desire that is supple and flexible."[48] Tied and penetrated for all time—"That I may never leave this place"—the speaker imagines himself losing his humanity and merging with the natural world around him intellectually, sexually, and existentially.

Herrick and Marvell exemplify Timothy Morton's suggestion that "[t]ree hugging is indeed a form of eroticism, not a chaste Natural unperformance. To contemplate ecology's unfathomable intimacies is to imagine pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts."[49] For Herrick

[47] Smith, *Poems*, 236n.l.616.

[48] Sanchez, "Straightness," 89. Sanchez curiously sees this passage as "eroticized celibacy," which, although it has roots in St. Benedict's attempts to purge himself of erotic desire by rolling on brambles, seems to me to undercut the erotic possibilities of the passage—the desire to have sex with plants does not make one celibate, unless sex is defined as an exclusively human-human event.

[49] Morton, "Queer Ecologies," 280

and Marvell, sex as or with plants and other figures of the natural world offers the speakers heightened degrees of erotic pleasure not vectored onto normative, bounded, or genital-directed models of the erotic body. Whether twining about Lucia with viny tendrils, experiencing a battery of sexual fruit, or begging to be nailed by briars, these speakers are strikingly unperturbed by the possibility of losing one's humanity through erotic encounters with the environment surrounding them. In fact, they embrace such experiences, willingly calling for the self to be unmade, to dismember and dissolve their human bodies altogether.

V. THE BODY OF CHRIST IN RICHARD CRASHAW

The final two chapters of this project turn from earthly forms of difference to spiritual, examining how Richard Crashaw and Thomas Traherne leverage the erotic in attempts to dismantle the distinction between human and God. While early modern subjects were enjoined to police the contours of their physical bodies as well as the coherence of their selves, genders, and humanity, the subsumption of human into divine was the logical endpoint of many varieties of religious experience writ large. As Gary Kuchar suggests, within an early modern context, "[t]he devout subject must pursue…that which is excess of itself, that which remains so close its presence is experienced in the form of a dialectic between an insistent absence and a terrifying (if ultimately reassuring) proximity."[1] In its most fully-articulated form, this terrifying proximity leads to the annihilation of the individual, which, as Ross Lerner explains, "is the solution to the fact that human beings are constituted by the nothingness of sin. Only annihilation can lead to union with God."[2] As will be familiar to many students of pre- and early modern religious cultures, writers and thinkers frequently deployed the erotic to move toward this self-annihilation in the face of the divine. Both mysticism and sensuality, as Georges Bataille points out, cultivate "a spontaneous surge of life that…bursts forth in freedom and infinite bliss."[3] Within a Christian context, the use of erotic tropes to map the affiliation between man and God derives much of its warrant from the Song of Songs, which inspired a long mystic tradition that figured this relationship as that a bridegroom and his bride. This

[1] Kuchar, *Divine Subjection,* 21.

[2] Lerner, "Donne's Annihilation," 410.

[3] Bataille, *Erotism,* 247.

tradition frequently invokes and then abstracts away from the body; as Bataille remarks, the sensual relies on "the intervention of real and intentional physical activity" whereas the mystical is confined "to the domain of inner experiences."[4] We see a commitment to this shift from physical to metaphysical planes in Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on Canticles, one of the most influential texts in this erotic-mystical tradition:

> But he, he of whom they speak, let *him* speak to me. Let him kiss me with the mouth of his mouth…O happy kiss and wonder of amazing self-humbling which is not a mere meeting of lips but the union of God with man. The touch of lips signifies the bringing together of souls.[5]

Beginning with the physical actions of speaking and kissing, Bernard soon moves to suggest that the true effect of the "kiss with the mouth of his mouth" is "the bringing together of souls." While Bernard recognizes that "no created spirit can act upon our minds by itself, that is, without the intermediary of the instrument of the body," he insists that the relationship between the bridegroom and bride, that is, Christ and the soul, is fundamentally internal:

> And so when the Bridegroom, the Word, came to me he never made any sign that he was coming; there was no sound of his voice, no glimpse of his face, no footfall. There was no movement of his by which I could know his coming; none of my senses showed me that he had flooded the

[4] Ibid. 247.

[5] Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 2, I.2-II.3 (emphasis in original).

> depths of my being. Only by the warmth of my heart…did I know he was there.[6]

Bernard can neither see nor hear nor otherwise perceive the presence of the Bridegroom. While his language cannot wholly abstract away from the body—Christ "flooded the depths of [his] being" and generated "warmth of [his] heart"—he takes pains to insist on the nonsensory character of the relationship between soul and Christ by his repeated emphasis on its imperceptibility to outward sense.

Within the Bernardine tradition, the body is the necessary ground for the human-God relationship, but represents only the starting point of what should be an essentially non-physical connection. In this chapter, however, I will examine the work of Richard Crashaw, who refuses to deny the importance of the body as even as he tries to effect the "union of God with man" that Bernard suggests is point of sacred experience. Not only do Crashaw's speakers approach God in both implicitly and explicitly sexualized language; they also insist on the physicality of the bodies they invoke, whether those of their speakers, of saints and angels, or of Christ and God himself. While there is an orthodox substratum to their often sexual, indecorous, grotesque, or bizarre conceits, their constant emphasis on the palpable, labile, and physicalized body problematizes an attempt to reduce them to the doctrinally-warranted. (And, in any case, while I would argue that the eroticism found in Crashaw's religious poetry exceeds the boundaries of "the tradition," to identify something as traditional, conventional, or metaphorical is not to explain it; the convention itself, as well as the individual writer's use, revision, and

[6] Ibid. Sermon 5, II.8; Sermon 74, II.6.

transformation thereof surely demands our attention.) "Rapture and rhetoric," according to Michel de Certeau, are the hallmarks of mystical writing, a "withdrawal (ecstatic) brought about by the seduction of the Other, and a virtuosity (technical) in making words confess what they are otherwise unable to say"; in this chapter, I will demonstrate the ways in which Crashaw deploys a rhetoric of sexuality to attempt to achieve rapture, showing how, when articulated on simultaneously physical and metaphysical planes, it can dismantle difference not only among earthly creatures but also between the human and divine.[7]

While he insists on the material presence of Christ in many of his poems, Crashaw renders him unrecognizable in human terms through his use of strange, unstable, and intensely libidinal anatomical imagery. Crashaw's representation of Christ is undeniably weird, as Jesus's body becomes both purely orificial and purely superficial, little more (or less) than a profusion of weeping eyes, bleeding wounds, and kissing mouths. The various articulations of the Christic body are not only strange in this proto-Surrealistic way, however; just as interestingly, they are highly unstable, the speakers uninterested in the attempt to affix a single morphological form to the deity. This impulse to constant material flux is found in poems like "Upon the Bleeding Crucifix," "Upon the Body of Our Blessed Lord," "The Weeper" (although here the destabilized figure is Mary Magdalene, rather than Christ), and a number of the *Divine Epigrams*, including most notoriously "Blessed be the Paps" and the various wound poems that close out the sequence. In this mode, Crashaw's poetic is resolutely material, insisting simultaneously

[7] Certeau, *Mystic Fable,* 29.

on the presence and instability of Christ's physical body. On the one hand, as Richard Rambuss suggests, this corporeal and fluid rendering of Christ "provide[s] the means for identification with him…for making the Passion commutable from the Son of Man to man"; that is, the sexual language used in these depictions helps to blur the distinctions between human and divine.[8] Yet on the other, despite the sexualized language these speakers use to attempt to create relationships with Christ, their insistence on unstable physicality—the refusal of transcendence—blocks both the material and ontic melding the speakers (apparently) seek.

However, these poems of ecstatic grotesquerie are not Crashaw's only foray into human-divine erotics; he further has a number of slightly less spectacularly corporeal—but still highly sexual—lyrics, such as his St. Teresa sequence, his poems to various gentlewomen, "Sancta Maria Dolorum," and "The Hymn of Saint Thomas." These poems similarly articulate the relationship between the human individual and God in erotic terms, but are less preoccupied with charting the shifting morphology of the physical body; while interested in, they are not limited to the physical. In the former group of poems, Crashaw's repeatedly shifting images short-circuit the union of speaker and Christ—the strangeness and insistence on the body's unstable presence limit the efficacy of the complete erotic communion they seem to desire; in the latter, Crashaw is able to more immediately access divine love through the simultaneous sexualization of both physical and spiritual planes.

[8] Rambuss, *Closest Devotions*, 35.

This distinction—and indeed, my assertions of the success of either type of poem—may seem, in effect, to affirm a conservative understanding of Crashaw's poetry uncomfortable with the more embodied and often grotesque forms of devotional eroticism he proposes, one unable to take these poems seriously as simultaneously deeply religious and deeply sexual documents. This is, however, neither my intention nor, I think, the necessary outcome of such a distinction. To suggest that the more embodied poems do not attain the complete integration with Christ achieved by the less purely physicalized poems is not to call them failures, nor to reaffirm a misguided and even elitist belief that devotion can only be experienced in a non-somatic and rarefied register. The reasons these poems don't quite achieve such an aim are several; most importantly, their continual metaphorical shift, though successfully denaturalizing Christ and suggesting he is beyond the ability of humans to represent in language (Crashaw's spin on the *via negativa* tradition), is such that the reader is unable to move beyond the insistent and stubbornly material iterations of embodied—and only embodied—presence they articulate.[9] Even as it would be wrong to call this Christ (or Magdalen) purely human, the weirdness and continual fluctuation of the conceits make it difficult for the speaker to develop or sustain any non-physicalized relationship with the divine figure. In such poems, Crashaw's Christ is not only alien but conceptually and morphologically unstable, rendering the loss of the speaker's identity and merging into Christ all but impossible. This problem—if indeed it is a problem—is neatly solved in other poems, where, although Crashaw continues to meld the language of physical eroticism and that

[9] See Young, *Richard Crashaw*, for Crashaw's unique blending of the *via negativa* tradition with sensual mysticism (99-108).

of religious desire (which, again, cannot be wholly separated in the period), the focus shifts from the alterity of the Christic body to the permutations of the desiring soul. In these latter poems, Crashaw writes himself out of the impasse—but does so without rejecting the remarkable, discomfiting quality so singular in his devotional poetry, a quality provoked by his worldview "that transcendent and immanent domains, spiritual and material, signifier and signified are not just connected, but utterly indistinguishable."[10]

Inevitably, this intensely corporeal, erotic religious poetic has provoked a higher degree of alarm and approbation to be directed toward Crashaw than perhaps any other devotional poet in the English tradition. Until Rambuss's 1998 reevaluation of his oeuvre, critics had in the main either attempted to slot Crashaw into a tellingly-diverse array of literary and religious contexts (frequently contexts that place him firmly outside the bounds of Protestantism, Englishness, and masculinity) or dismissed his conceits as being in "bad taste," or revealing "a perversity of feeling."[11] For Austin Warren, Crashaw "had an epicure's instinctive feeling" and was "almost purely a creature of sensibility" rather than intellect, coding Crashaw as an effeminate or effete thinker and writer.[12] This charge of effeminacy (itself, of course, a criticism with misogynistic undertones) has been an enduring feature of Crashavian criticism as well; while few today would agree with

[10] Netzley, *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist,* 66.

[11] Adams, "Taste and Bad Taste," *passim;* Eliot, *Metaphysical Poetry*, 181. See also Warren, *Richard Crashaw*, which, despite its generally appreciative tone, characterizes the epigrams as "repugnant to normal taste" (88). Cf. Reid, "Crashaw's Gallantries," which updates this take by suggesting Crashaw is somehow deficient as a poet with the marvelously backhanded compliment that "[i]f Crashaw is not a great poet, he is an extraordinary artist" (242).

[12] Warren, *Richard Crashaw*, 98.

Mario Praz's assessment that Crashaw's "Baroque art" is "incapable…of a concise style, of rendering severe and manly feelings in a few strokes," much less Eliot's claim that

> Subtract from Donne the powerful intellect, substitute a feminine for a strongly masculine nature, posit a devotional temperament rather than a theological mind, and add the influence of Italian and Spanish literature, take note of the changes in the political and ecclesiastical situation in England, and you have Crashaw,

the general sense that Crashaw is somehow distinctly feminine remains in relatively recent accounts such as those of Kuchar and Maureen Sabine.[13] A similar impulse—of distancing Crashaw from the center of the respectable, male English literary tradition can be found in the remarkable regularity with which he is read as a Catholic (read: luxurious, excessive) and European poet. Crashaw was for a long time exiled to the continent in not only his own life but also the annals of literary criticism, which characterized his work as emphatically yet variously Spanish, Italian, Baroque, and Catholic.[14] Only recently and

[13] Praz, "Crashaw and the Baroque," 251; 245; Eliot, *Metaphysical Poetry,* 162. Kuchar's *Divine Subjection* devotes its chapter on Crashaw to examining the poet's "female-centered sacramental vision" (93); see also Sabine, *Feminine Engendered Faith*, *passim*. Cf. Mintz, "Crashavian Mother," which uses Kleinian object relations theory to suggest that Crashaw's poetics are characterized by an ambivalence toward women and maternal figures more generally (e.g. 111-14).

[14] For three important accounts of Crashaw's continental influences, see Warren, *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility,* Praz, "Crashaw and the Baroque," and Young, *Richard Crashaw and the Spanish Golden Age*; the titles, I think, are sufficient to indicate the interpretations of Crashaw's religious and aesthetic commitments found therein. Although it is beyond the scope of this present study to consider in detail, there are suggestive overlaps between characterizations of the baroque style as "exuberant, rhetorical, sensual, grandiose" (Warren*, Richard Crashaw*, 65), valuing "disorder, excresence, exuberance, the irrational, the grotesque, the cryptic" (Canfield, *English Neoclassical Literature*, 15) and the models of selfhood I have been tracing throughout the dissertation. J.M. Cohen's *The Baroque Lyric* somewhat uniquely draws together English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, and even some Dutch models, suggesting that writers such as Donne, Traherne, and Marvell can be productively seen as working within this paradigm (see e.g. 44-45, 112-13, 125-28; 185-89; and 89-100 for these poets respectively). However, despite Robert T. Petersson's claim that "one could almost say that baroque poetry is an image superimposed on the image of Metaphysical poetry, with not much individual difference left on either

still rarely has he been afforded a space within English Anglicanism in the work of critics like Thomas Healy, Joseph Teller and N.K. Sugimura.[15] Historically, Crashaw's excessive fleshiness has rendered him suspicious and perverse, operating at an oblique angle to mainstream literary and religious tradition alike.

Rather than relitigating the underpinnings of Crashaw's doctrinal commitments, I am interested in his representation of the body of Christ not for its Eucharistic implications (another frequent topic of consternation) but rather for the erotic sensibility it implies. As Kuchar suggests,

> What Crashaw's poems aim toward is a sacramental space that is in excess of unredeemed language; they open a liminal site in which hyperbole and metaphoric transpositions work to extend language beyond the normal limits of representation. It is in and through this liminal space, this site of excess, that sacramental identity is forged.[16]

---

side," his contention that Crashaw is "the only English poet to whom the word [Baroque] is applied without challenge" largely stands today (*Art of Ecstasy,* 101).

[15] Healy argues that "Crashaw's viewpoint was sympathetic with many of the ideals sought by Cambridge 'Laudian' or 'High' Anglicans" (*Richard Crashaw,* 3); Sugimura claims that Crashaw's portrayals of ecstasy are fundamentally Laudian: "Crashaw's politics of mysticism allowed him to negotiate his way out of Protestantism without abandoning the fundamental tenets of Cambridge Laudianism to which he had initially subscribed" ("Divine Annihilations," 618); and Teller demonstrates that Crashaw's notorious liquid devotional eroticism has a long history within a Protestant textual tradition ("Not Catholic," *passim* but especially 241-44).

[16] Kuchar, *Divine Subjection*, 101. C.f. Kimberly Johnson, who somewhat idiosyncratically argues that Crashaw's fixation on the body actually reveals a deep anxiety about the persistence of the carnal in his Eucharistic theology:

> Crashaw's participation in the corporeal expressivities of incarnational Christianity is not enthusiastic but fretful, undertaken with an ambivalence that communicates…both adoration and horror—the horror in this case arising out of the blunt sensuality of a practice of adoration that denies the legitimacy of the sensual. (*Made Flesh*, 138)

Healy, writing somewhat earlier, argues similarly that "Crashaw seeks for God not through the modest illumination provided by reason but in the inflamed excitement provoked by enraptured spiritual love."[17] This enraptured spiritual love is, as Rambuss suggests, undeniably physical: for Crashaw, "[a]n orifice or perforation in the body becomes the portal for devotional access to Jesus: one thus enters him or is entered by him, and Christ and Christian together are deluged in the salvific streams that flow from the penetrated body"; James Bromley similarly claims that Crashaw "welcomes the corporeal into intimate relations with God."[18] In this chapter, I follow in this tradition, extending our understanding of Crashaw's use of the physical body in his attempts to effect closeness to Christ. I show how Crashaw's dual impulses to destabilize and adore only the wounded, human body of Christ inhibit the transcendence he seems to seek; conversely, when his speakers express both physical and spiritual desire, their individual subjectivities are annihilated, merging pleasurably with God in a state of mystic rapture.

Evidence of Crashaw's fascination with Christ's embodiment is easily (and famously) locatable within any number of his early epigrams, which tend to figure a blunt yet dynamic account of Christ's wounded, secreting body. Most notorious, perhaps, is his rewriting of Luke 11, "Blessed Be the Paps Which Thou Hast Sucked," in which, as Kuchar notices, Crashaw "risks carnalizing the spiritual out of existence by illuminating

[17] Healy, *Richard Crashaw*, 12.

[18] Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, 39; Bromley, "Intimacy," 1.

its presence through a deepened inscription of human physicality."[19] The short lyric reads:

> Suppose he had been tabled at thy teats,
>
> Thy hunger feels not what he eats:
>
> He'll have his teat ere long (a bloody one)
>
> The mother then must suck the son.[20]

The grotesquerie of the poem's imagery works by "tempting readers toward an interpretation focused on the physicality rather than the spirituality of the Eucharistic event," that is, by emphasizing Christ's body as body, rather than pointing to this body's spiritual or salvific implications.[21] While the poem remains firmly, perhaps even aggressively, confined to the physical realm, this physicality has the peculiarly unstable quality idiosyncratic to Crashaw's portrayal of Christ's embodiment. This is noticeable, for example, in the problematic quality of the word "sucks," its typographic affinity to "fuck" suggesting what Kimberly Johnson calls the "transgressive corporeality" of the poem:

> Whatever transgressivities "suck" introduces into the physical relationship between Mary and Jesus by virtue of its extra-ritual terminology, this sense of indelicacy is intensified by a feature of early modern typography

[19] Kuchar, *Divine Subjection,* 113.

[20] All quotations from Crashaw from Rambuss (ed.), *Complete English Poetry.* C.f. "Upon the Infant Martyrs," which similarly evokes both "The mothers' milk, the children's blood" (2).

[21] Kuchar, *Divine Subjection*, 105. In *Richard Crashaw,* Healy nicely demonstrates the recuperative tendencies of much Crashavian criticism when he says that "Paps" will "not strictly bear a 'literal' sense" given the lack of "scriptural authority" for the imagery; rather, it "directs the reader to consider the figurative uses of the expression ['suck the son']" (140).

> that appears in all seventeenth-century printings of Crashaw's epigram. The elongated initial "s" transforms "suck" into a verb whose frank corporeal valences preempt any possibility of reading Mary's act as a disembodied, spiritualized mingling with Christ.[22]

As Johnson suggests, the easy elision of "suck" into "fuck" makes the epigram difficult to read in a wholly or even primarily spiritualized manner (and, indeed, introduces incestuous overtones into the poem). However, I think Johnson goes too far when she suggests that "suck" "transforms" into "fuck"; given the ubiquity of the long –s in early modern typography, surely the latter term does not replace the former—rather, the two terms are uncomfortably copresent. Such instability pervades the poem more generally, as the continual shift of imagery and subject position blur Christ, Mary, and addressee—the "you" apostrophized in the first line, surely the reader as well as the woman of Luke 11 from whose benediction of "blessed be the paps" gives rise to the dramatic situation of the poem—in ways that are difficult and, perhaps, unproductive to separate. Though Jesus is initially being nursed, the epigram seems to shift to show him nursing others in a permutation of the maternal Christic imagery so well documented by Carolyn Walker Bynum.[23] However, the language here remains ambiguous; both "have" and "suck" can work in either direction, so it is initially unclear whether Christ is laying claim to another's breast or gaining a "teat" of his own, whether Mary is giving Christ suck or nursing from him. This confusion of bodies is intensified by Crashaw's choice of the

[22] Johnson, *Made Flesh,* 142.

[23] See e.g. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 113-25; Healy, *Richard Crashaw*, 20.

word "teat," whose coarseness is more associated with milking livestock than with nursing women; this choice too throws the stability of a divide between divine and profane into question. Insistently concrete and insistently slippery, the poem both highlights Christ's physicality to such an extreme that it becomes difficult to recall the devotional conceit subtending the lyric and refuses to pin that physicality to a single morphology or to clearly articulated actions—it does not, that is, guide the reader to a definite doctrinal interpretation. Despite Healy's claim that, "in Crashaw's poetry images and language which initially appeared designed to produce a sensual and physical effect are also directed at spiritual ends," the ambiguously, vaguely sexualized physicality of "Blessed be the paps" ultimately serves not to create a connection between reader and Christ, but rather to emphasize the insurmountable breach of understanding between the two.[24]

Crashaw similarly short-circuits a potential move to transcendence in "Upon the Body of Our Blessed Lord, Naked and Bloody," a poem most known for its weird conceit of Christ's torso as wardrobe and blood as garment:

> They'have left thee naked, Lord, O that they had!
> This Garment too I would they had denied.
> Thee with thyself they have too richly clad;
> Opening the purple wardrobe in thy side.
> O never could there be garment too good
> For thee to wear, but this, of thine own blood. (1-6)

[24] Healy, *Richard Crashaw*, 142.

As its title suggests, Crashaw's poem emphasizes the physical vulnerability of Christ incarnate, his human body exposed, covered only with his own blood. Wounded and bloodsoaked, little of the divine remains in this description of Christ's material body. Like "Blessed be the Paps," the poem has a strange, alienating effect; the grotesque quality it derives from its imagination of Christ's blood as a garment is heightened by the division between body and blood—oddly, Christ's blood is not only separate from the body, but also a "garment too good" for even Christ himself to wear. This poem drives a wedge between Jesus the man and Christ the Son of God, its focus on the spectacle of the wounded, bleeding Jesus occluding his divinity to the point that he is unworthy to wear his own blood. Despite the poem's unsettling tenor, it nevertheless contains sexual undertones in its interest in Christ's naked body. Rambuss characteristically highlights the eroticism of the poem, astutely pointing out that Crashaw considers the garment to be "a lamentable covering for a body he says he would prefer to envision as remaining wholly naked."[25] Perverse as this reading may be, the poem possesses an undeniable erotic charge in its loving attention to Christ's body, a body clothed only with itself; however, it again stops with the physical, uninterested in anything past the jarring metaphors that make up its surface.

"On the Wounds of Our Crucified Lord" intensifies and augments this somatic instability while attempting to articulate at least the potential for human-God connection in its focus on the bleeding, weeping body of a crucified Christ:

O these wakeful wounds of thine!

[25] Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, 28.

Are they mouths? or are they eyes?

Be they mouths, or be they eyn

Each bleeding part some one supplies. (1-4)

Each wound on Christ's body is characterized as first a mouth and then an eye, before the speaker decides that this difference is in fact indifferent: "Be they mouths, or be they eyn," the specificity of the "bleeding part" is irrelevant. Uninterested in distinguishing the two types of orifices, the speaker renders Christ's body not only grotesque, but also imagistically unstable, the seeping wounds oscillating between eyes and mouths. This depiction of "wounds…as sites that constantly emit and provoke ecstatic ejaculations," in Ryan Netzley's phrase, focuses the erotic attention of the devotee on the ever-changing surface of Christ's body, which is in the subsequent stanzas reframed into a fairly recognizable if nightmarish version of the Petrarchan beloved:[26]

Lo! a mouth, whose full-bloomed lips

At too dear a rate are roses.

Lo! a bloodshot eye! That weeps

And many a cruel tear discloses. (5-8)

Christ's body may or may not be feminized here—while I take Rambuss's point that we should be on guard against the tendency to read devotional conceits as heterosexual merely because they are erotic, it's nevertheless the case that the weeping, bloody orifices explicitly described as "wounds" (a reasonably common vaginal euphemism in the

[26] Netzley, "Oral Devotion," 259.

period) seem at least plausibly feminized.[27] More to the point, though, is the speaker's recasting of the wounded Jesus as a Petrarchan beloved, characterized by "full-bloomed…roses" of lips and "cruel tear[s]" (even if these tears are differently cruel than those of the Petrarchan "cruel fair"). Such a body inspires erotic attention from its devotees:

O thou that on this foot hast laid
Many a kiss, and many a tear,
Now thou shalt have all repaid,
Whatsoe'er thy charges were.

This foot hath got a mouth and lips,
To pay the sweet sum of thy kisses:
To pay thy tears, an eye that weeps
Instead of tears such gems as this is.

The difference only this appears
(Nor can the change offend)
The debt is paid in ruby-tears,
Which thou in pearls didst lend. (9-20)

[27] Rambuss "insist[s] on the homoerotic currents of devotional desire against the grain of a significant amount of current scholarship that, in its own dehistoricizing ways, has pronounced devotion 'pure' of sexual expressiveness or has found the erotic present here only by heterosexualizing it" (*Closet Devotions*, 56). Rambuss is speaking most immediately of Donne and Traherne in this passage, but the point holds for all of the devotional writers he examines in the text.

The eyes and mouths receive payment in kind from their worshippers, who "repaid" the "charges" with kisses and tears of their own. The poem interestingly suggests the potential for reciprocity between God and human that contrasts to other representations of this relationship in the period; it is difficult, for example, to imagine Herbert suggesting the possibility of human requital of divine sacrifice in any but the most deflationary of terms. As in "Blessed be the paps," this epigram is both highly somatic and highly unstable—it is immaterial (or, perhaps better, unimportant despite its material qualities) whether the secretions are tears or kisses, and indeed, they seem to be both and neither simultaneously, the lover's offerings of pearls further transformed into rubies after their initial contact with the body of Christ. However, this instability is at the very least mutual; though never moving from the physical to the metaphysical, that is, Christ and devotee, lover and beloved, are united through their somatic indecipherability.[28] In this poem, the intractable materiality of the bodies and their constant oscillation between tears and blood and kisses, mouths and eyes, rubies and pearls, serve both to bring the worshipper's experiences nearer to those of Christ on the cross and to emphasize these experiences' resistance to being rendered in language.

Perhaps the most spectacular of Crashaw's epigrams, though, is "On the Bleeding Wounds of Our Crucified Lord," the central metaphor of which depicts Christ as an ocean of blood. While the version of Christ here presented is frequently regarded as Catholic and alien to the English tradition (a reading often informed by a tacit preference

[28] James Bromley makes a similar point when he suggests that, for Crashaw, "[i]ntimacy with the divine…is guaranteed through the believer's participation in the pleasures of the excesses of the boundaries of the body" ("Intimacy," 24).

to regard Anglicanism as moderate and decorous, to be sure), as Joseph Teller makes clear, this liquid Jesus is perfectly available in an orthodox seventeenth-century Anglican "devotional tradition that vividly imagines Christ's open, bleeding, and suffering body as the font of Christian identity, a piety that was immensely popular among Protestant readers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."[29] Teller goes on to suggest that the peculiarly liquid elements of Crashaw's devotion can be assimilated to this neo-Bernadine tradition, which fostered works that

> [D]well on the vividly presented wounds of Christ, regularly imagining fountains and rivers of blood that transform Jesus' body to a melting mass of running liquid…[this tradition] also identifies the crucifixion with surreal liquefaction, with the melting of Christ's body into rivers, streams, and floods of blood.[30]

However, even as Teller rightly problematizes accounts of Crashaw as foreign, un-English, and more than a little morally suspect, the poem's hyperbolic account of Christ's blood, particularly when considered with the rest of Crashaw's corporeal poetics, maintains a sense of transgression, of excess, that contributes to the lyric's erotic frisson. The poem is, I think, one of Crashaw's "devotional rhapsodies rung on what is outside that body that can be used to open and enter it…as well as what can be made to stream out from it, once penetrated, in an unending flow."[31] The erotics of Crashaw's Christ, that is, depend on his penetrability and liquifacience—the latter quality perhaps not as alien to

[29] Teller, "Not Catholic," 241.

[30] Ibid. 244-47.

[31] Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, 32.

an Anglican tradition as has been assumed, but one that nevertheless locates Jesus in an unrecognizable, inhuman state.

As the title emphasizes, "On the Bleeding Wounds," is all but literally awash with blood:

> Jesu, no more, it is full tide
>
> From thy hands and from thy feet,
>
> From thy head, and from thy side,
>
> All thy purple rivers meet. (1-4)

The rhyme of "tide" and "side" suggests the close association between Christ's body and the "purple rivers" of his blood, although, as in "Naked, and Bloody," there is an interestingly surrealistic quality to the blood; while clearly the blood of Christ, the extended conceit of a "purple river" at "full tide" distances Jesus the man from the rivers of blood streaming from his body. This impression is heightened in the speaker's later assertion that Christ's feet "swim, alas! in their own flood" (8) and in his identification of the river with the Nile in line 14.[32] In fact, Christ is not any of these rivers, but rather represents them all, as the speaker argues when he says

> But while I speak, whither are run
>
> All the rivers named before?
>
> I counted wrong; there is but one,
>
> But O that one is one all o'er. (29-32)

[32] This and the reference to the Red Sea in line 26 of this poem are traditional typological figures for Christ's blood.

Not only is Christ's body estranged from itself, producing rivers and seas of blood, but these various water sources collapse into themselves, becoming "but one." The repetition of "one" three times in two lines—"one / But O that one is one all o'er"—and the visual alliteration of the letter O further suggest a loss of distinction, the merging of all bodies of water into the single, undifferentiated deluge of Christ's blood.[33] This poem, like the other epigrams here examined, thus destabilizes corporeal difference via the erotic. The "erotically liquescent" qualities of Christ's body are sexy, receiving lavish attention from the speakers of this poem and the other epigrams; however, this overwhelmingly unmoored body is difficult for the speaker to grasp, its excessively corporealized and alienated self preventing him from fully merging with Christ on either the physical or spiritual level.

The leaky, fungible qualities of this Christic body are shared by Mary Magdalene in "The Weeper." While the Magdalen (and more specifically, her weeping) is highly eroticized in the poem, the speaker positions her not as the end goal of his erotic or spiritual telos but as a conduit crossing human and divine registers—a waystation between man and God; as such, the poem attempts to provide a means through which the speaker can effect a relationship with Christ through sexualized intermediaries. Given the

[33] While these lines are marked most explicitly by the collapse of all rivers into a single source, the lines also engage the language of reproduction to destabilize Christ's gender, representing it alternately as male and female. The "Pharian tide" (15) and "double Nilus" (14) are neither "Half so fruitful" nor "half so flowing" as Christ's literal bloodstream, suggesting the maternal and nurturant capacities of this blood, similar to those seen in "Blessed be the paps." Christ's blood is opposed to phallic pride when the speaker says that other "Rain-swoll'n rivers may rise proud" (33) but ultimately "themselves are drowned too" (36)—the fertility of Christ's blood overwhelms the "ris[ing]" rivers that come to compete with it. However, the blood is also inseminating, as the thorns surrounding Christ's head "Conceive proud hopes of proving roses" (24). While the thorns may be criticized for their pride, then, the frequent association of Christ and roses in both Crashaw's work and Christian iconography more generally suggests that the thorns' hopes may not be entirely futile. In any case, whether or not the thorns actually conceive roses, the hope of conception is engendered through their contact with the blood of Christ.

grotesquerie of much of the imagery, as well as the poem's oft-noted rosary structure (where each stanza seemingly operates more or less separately from those surrounding it), it is of little surprise that earlier critics had particular ire for the poem, seeing it as representative of Crashaw's poetic failure and suspect doctrine. Adams, for example, suggests "The Weeper" to be a paradigmatic example of Crashaw's "bad taste," his "grating and dynamic plebianism" that "distorts [the Magdalen] out of all resemblance to humanity."[34] While less ungenerous to the poem, Young similarly believe that, whatever Crashaw was trying to do in the poem, "The Weeper" is ultimately "unsatisfactory."[35] More recently, "The Weeper" has been read as an illustration of Crashaw's Eucharistic theology, gender politics, investment in erotic liquefaction, and use of the emblem tradition, all of which are important contexts for the poem.[36] However, what has been less noticed is the way in which the Magdalen's eroticized, unstable corporeality allows the speaker to construct her as an intermediary between human and divine, and yet how her destabilized body ultimately fails to effect the connection the speaker seeks.

As with Christ in other Crashavian poems, the speaker is most preoccupied with the Magdalen's bodily secretions (here, tears), every description reemphasizing their liquid nature:

Hail, sister springs!

[34] Adams, "Taste," 67; 69. To be fair to Adams, he does adduce a warrant for such "bad taste" within the context of devotional poetry, where the poet "can scarcely be blamed for assuming, and asking his readers to assume for the moment, a definition of reality which includes more than the humanly demonstrable" (70).

[35] Young, *Richard Crashaw*, 38. Cf. Praz's claim that "*The Weeper* has an air of unbearable luxuriance like certain works of Southern baroque architecture, in which the design is obscured by stuccoed stalactites and a glitter of glassy ornaments" ("Flaming Heart," 229).

[36] See e.g. Netzley, "Oral Devotion," 250; Rambuss, *Closet Devotions,* 32; and Horn, "Safe Space," 422.

Parents of silver-footed rills!

Ever bubbling things!

Thawing crystal! snowy hills,

Still spending, never spent! I mean

Thy fair eyes, sweet Magdalene! (1-6)

The emphasis in these lines is on the processual nature of her tears—through the use of the present participles "ever bubbling" and "still spending," the tearful eyes are perpetually in a state of change and internal alteration. As the poem continues, Crashaw repeatedly uses language of perpetual motion, characterizing the eyes as "weeping motions" (113) that "weepest still" (138) to emphasize their active participation in a process of continual change. This impression is heightened by Crashaw's use of five distinct images to characterize the eyes in these initial lines—they are "silver springs," "silver-footed rills," "ever bubbling things," "thawing crystal" and "snowy hills" in the first four lines alone. This imagistic instability is one of the hallmarks of this poem, where the eyes and their tears are also "ever-falling stars" (8); "seed[s]" (9); "stars" again (14); the "cream" in "milky rivers" (22, 21); cherub food (26); "pearls" (42) for Sorrow; "dew" (43, 45, 53); "balsam" (50, 60); "maiden gem[s]" (61); "wat'ry blossom[s]" (65); "crystal vials" of "wine" (70, 72); April showers (83); "Beds of chaste loves" (85); "milky doves" (87); "wells" (88, 104); a "Fountain and garden" (90); "floods," "fires," "suns," and "showr's" (101); Christ's foot bath (108) and "walking baths" (113); "faithful fountains" (112); "Portable, and compendious oceans" (114); a "wand'ring mine" of silver (124) and "voluntary mint" (125); a metronome (140); "weeping gates" (145); "bright brothers" (163); "fruitful mothers" (165); and "nests of noble sorrow"

(168). This list gives a sense of the variety of lexica from which Crashaw draws his descriptions of the Magdalen's tears; more significantly for my purposes, it also highlights the morphological and imagistic instability of the tear and emphasizes the parallels between the destabilized representations of Christ's body in the epigrams and the tears of "The Weeper."

Mary Magdalene's eyes are notable not only for their instability, however; they are also eroticized and fertile, attributes that suggest their utility as potential conduits to Christ. The tears' fertility is signaled early when Crashaw suggests that her eyes are "Heavens of ever-falling stars" (8), continuing with the observation that "Tis seed-time still with thee / And stars thou sow'st" (9-10). Again, there is an emphasis on the perpetually active nature of the eyes though the word "still," but here, they're characterized as always fertile, in "seed-time still." Toward the end of the poem, this emphasis on fertility is redoubled when the speaker addresses the tears directly:

> Say, ye bright brothers,
> The fugitive sons of those fair eyes
> Your fruitful mothers!
> What make you here? what hopes can 'tice
> You to be born? what cause can borrow
> You from those nests of noble sorrow? (163-68)

Fascinatingly, these tears are not the product of a mother and father, but rather a lesbian union of two "fruitful mothers." While they remain unborn, it is not for lack of a paternal principle, but rather, it seems, from the lack of a skillful midwife—likely another female figure—to "tice" the babies out from the womb (or, rather, here, the eyes). The fertility

here implied is an exclusively female preserve, itself a destabilization of the mechanics of reproduction and gender. The erotics implied by this maternal principle are adumbrated earlier in the poem, which imports language from both the Song of Songs and Petrarchan convention to describe the Magdalen's face:

> O cheeks! Bed of chaste loves
> By your own show'rs seasonably dashed.
> Eyes! nests of milky doves
> In your own wells decently washed.
> O wit of love! that thus could place
> Fountain and garden in one face.
>
> O sweet contest; of woes
> With loves, of tears with smile disputing!
> O fair, and friendly foes,
> Each other kissing and confuting!
> While rain and sunshine, cheeks and eyes,
> Close in kind contrarieties. (85-96)

While the poem insists on the "chaste" and "decent" character of the language, the tone is clearly erotic. This conceit—the eroticization of the relationship between the chosen soul and Christ—is thoroughly conventional and orthodox, yet the excessive quality of the language, the protesting of its decency, and its situation within a larger poem pervaded by very strange, very sexual language, make these lines' weird eroticism unrecuperable through reference to convention.

The Magdalen's simultaneously sexual and maternal qualities unite in the description of her tears as cream:

> Upwards thou dost weep,
> Heav'n's bosom drinks the gentle stream.
> Where th' milky rivers creep,
> Thine floats above; and is the cream.
> […]
> Every morn from hence
> A brisk cherub something sips
> Whose sacred influence
> Adds sweetness to his sweetest lips.
> Then to his music. And his song
> Tastes of this breakfast all day long. (19-30)

Mary Magdalene's creamy tears are sipped by a "brisk cherub" who derives both nutriment and sweetness from this breakfast. This fusion of the maternal and erotic roles points to the function of the Magdalen's tears within the poem; she is, ultimately, positioned as an intermediary between Christ and angel. We see this again when, at a feast, "Angels with crystal vials come / And draw from these full eyes of thine / Their master's water: their own wine" (70-72). Feeding the angels off of her rapidly-changing, sexualized tears, the Magdalene is the fulcrum between God and other divine beings.[37] Despite their ability to bridge this gap, however, the tears are ultimately of limited

[37] These lines also align the Magdalen with Christ through their recollection of Cana and the Eucharist.

efficacy for humans; after nearly 180 lines, the tears themselves decline to remain on the earth: "We go not to seek, / The darlings of Aurora's bed" (175-76); they have no intention "to trace / The fortune of inferior gems" (181-82) found on the terrestrial plane. At an oddly elitist moment within the poem, the tears, though described in any number of images derived from the earth, refuse to stay, instead electing to "go to meet / A worthy object, our Lord's feet" (185-86). The poem, then, ultimately fails to make a connection between earth and heaven, the rapidly shifting metaphors alienating these tears from the humans to whom they would be otherwise connected.

While Crashaw is most often noted for writing in this highly corporeal and liquid rhetorical mode, his figuration of the relationship between God and man in fluid, unstable, and excessively corporealized imagery does not constitute the entirety of his engagement with questions of mystic ravishment and divine presence. In poems like "To the Name Above Every Name," "Sancta Maria Dolorum," "The Hymn of Saint Thomas," and the Saint Teresa sequence, Crashaw continues to articulate the relationship of human and divine in erotic, and, indeed, material terms, but does so in a less insistently physical manner. These poems are in some ways more decorous than the Crashavian lyrics I have already discussed (notably producing far fewer alarmed responses), but they employ the erotic language, excessive troping, and heightened affect that characterize Crashaw's oeuvre as a whole; the distinction is largely one of degree rather than kind. The effect of these poems, though, is slightly different: rather than attempting to effect union with God in almost exclusively physical terms that never quite achieve their aims, in this second

mode Crashaw both invokes and abstracts away from the body to evoke a more mystical experience, one that ultimately brings his speakers closer to the union they seek.

A useful fulcrum between these two modes of engaging the physical and metaphysical can be found in a brief detour to "To the Noblest and Best of Ladies, the Countess of Denbigh," as well as "Prayer, an Ode"; while these lyrics' corporeal language is less spectacular than that of many of Crashaw's other poems, they nevertheless eroticize the relationship between a female figure and God in order to effect both material and spiritual closeness between the two. They also, however, swing in the opposite direction of a poem like "The Weeper," continuing to deploy erotic and material metaphors but expressing overt suspicion of the world and its pleasures. Just as "Countess of Denbigh" and "Prayer" reject much of the language of physical love (though the logic of their imagery entails a more ambivalent response), they also elide the intercessionary relationship so crucial to poems like "The Weeper," "Sancta Maria," "To the Name," and the St Teresa sequence; rather than piggybacking onto an erotic relationship that develops between Christ and a divine intermediary, in "Countess of Denbigh" and "Prayer" the relationship between Christ and the female figures matters for its own sake. In "Countess of Denbigh," Crashaw figures the Countess's heart as awaiting penetration from the "decisive dart" (33) of "Almighty Love" (29). Playing on familiar Petrarchan tropes of love as war, Crashaw develops an extended martial conceit of "Love's siege" (59) on the "fort" of the Countess's "fair self" (67); the love to which he hopes she will give way is not, however, the purely carnal love of the Petrarchan lover (the English Petrarchanlover, at least), but rather the love offered by Christ through the mediating influence of the

Catholic Church. In "Prayer, an Ode," conversely, Crashaw conscripts his addressee, a "Young Gentlewoman" (designated "Mrs. M.R." in the version of the poem in *Steps*), into the position of the Bride of Canticles preparing for her wedding night with Christ. The poem emphasizes the attractiveness of her body—and in particular, her "snowy" (18), "white bosom" (17)—as well as the erotic qualities of the prayer book itself, from whose "constant use" (22) comes a "nest of newborn sweets" (21), a phrase that calls to mind not only sensual pleasures but also the possibility of reproduction.

The prayer book is not, however, intrinsically valuable; rather, its worth lies in its use as spiritual exercise, "studies" (36) and domestic arts (figured as a "housekeeper," 37) that prepare the devotee for the "noble bridegroom" (47). As Christ enters the poem, the speaker's view of sexuality takes on a more negative cast than is customary in Crashaw: sexual encounters with the world, the speaker suggests, are "the devil's holiday" (52); the unchaste, "loitering heart" (48) that "gad[s] abroad" (50) to "take her pleasure and to play" (51),

> To dance i'th'sunshine of some smiling
>
> But beguiling
>
> Spheres of sweet and sugared lies,
>
> Some slippery pair
>
> Of false, perhaps as fair,
>
> Flattering but forswearing eyes (54-59)

—such a heart, the implication is clear, will never possess the true joys offered by Christ's love. The poem's distrust of the world is evident in the ostentatiously artificial language: the brevity of the lines emphasizes their rhyme, and the overbearing repetition

of the soft consonants s, p, and f gives the verse a mellifluous quality, the seductiveness of the verse mimicking the dangers the world poses to the unwary soul. Like Christ, these spheres are "sweet," but the latter's sweetness, like the verse form, is overtly artificial; "sugared" instead of naturally sweet, there is a surfeit, an excess, of false and inferior pleasures here. As a consequence of such faithlessness, the spurned bridegroom will

> …unload
> Himself some other where,
> And pour abroad
> His precious sweets
> On the fair soul whom first he meets (91-95)

Rather curiously undermining his own point—if Christ is so willing to "unload" his "precious sweets" onto the first soul he meets, then he is somewhat less discriminating in his favors than the speaker is at pains to argue—the speaker nevertheless imagines Christ in sexualized terms, the "pour[ing] abroad" and "unload[ing]" of "[h]is precious sweets" sounding like nothing so much as ejaculation. Though the pleasures that the speaker sees in the mystical union are less physical than those of some of the other poems considered thus far, there remains an embodied substrate in this representation of Christ as a jealous, petty lover who will spitefully spill his seed anywhere if his bride is found lacking.

If the soul yields to these "sugared lies," the speaker argues, it will miss out on the superior joys of erotic union with Christ:

> Words which are not heard with ears
> (Those tumultuous shops of noise)
> Effectual whispers, whose still voice

The soul itself more feels than hears;
Amorous languishments; luminous trances;
Sights which are not seen with eyes;
Spiritual and soul-piercing glances
Whose pure and subtle lightening flies
Home to the heart, and sets the house on fire
And melts it down in sweet desire
[…]
Delicious deaths; soft exhalations
Of soul; dear and divine annihilations;
A thousand unknown rites
Of joys and rarefied delights. (63-80)

The speaker denies the purely physical nature of these pleasures; words are felt, not heard, and sights are perceived in the heart, rather than the eyes. However, the language never gets wholly away from the physical, as language (itself an artificial and material form) is felt by the soul—that is, there is a tactile and embodied quality to perception—and sights fly directly to the heart, again, emphasizing the physical (perhaps the extra-physical?) tenor of these pleasures. Such pleasures lead to "divine annihilations," a complete overthrow of individual self and ego and a merging into the "joys and rarefied delights" of the divine.[38] The language, though less ostentatiously artificial than that of

[38] See Allison, "Some Influences," for a discussion of both the mystical and Cavalier-sexual nature of the language of the poem, and Sugimura, "Divine Annihilations," for an account of Crashaw's ecstatic impulses more generally.

"spheres of sweet and sugared lies," is pleasingly and seductively alliterative in its repetition of "d" sounds throughout the last four lines, and the frequent caesuras give the verse a breathy quality that is heightened when the more rapturous tone picks up a few lines down: "O fair, O fortunate! O rich, O dear!" (96) Punctuating his adjectives with the vocative O, the speaker himself seems caught up in the mystical pleasures he imagines for the gentlewoman, pleasures that crescendo to an even higher pitch toward the end of the poem:

> Happy indeed, who never misses
> To improve that precious hour,
> And every day
> Seize her sweet prey
> All fresh and fragrant as he rises
> Dropping with a balmy shower
> A delicious dew of spices;
> O let the blissful heart hold fast
> Her heavenly armful, she shall taste
> At once ten thousand paradises;
> She shall have power
> To rifle and deflower
> The rich and roseal spring of those pure sweets
> Which with a swelling bosom there she meets
> Boundless and infinite
> Bottomless treasures

> Of pure inebriating pleasures. (105-20)

The gentlewoman's heart is figured as a rapacious lover, "seiz[ing]" the "sweet prey" that she shall "rifle and deflower," the violence of the language suggesting the intensity of the heart's desires, unsatisfied with anything but complete mutual annihilation. Again, there is language suggestive of ejaculation (and indeed, a reversion to Crashaw's favored liquid erotics) in the depictions of Christ as emitting a "balmy shower," a "delicious dew of spices" and a "rich and roseal spring," the alliteration once more emphasizing the sexiness of the imagery. The language is not only sensual, but hyper-sensual, the gentlewoman tasting not merely her lover but "ten thousand paradises" of "boundless and infinite" pleasures. While this poem distinguishes the love of Christ from the inferior loves found in the world, then, it nevertheless does not decouple the spiritual and physical pleasures of taking God to be one's lover—rather, the love of God offers pleasures distinct in intensity and duration, but that are of largely the same kind as those found on earth.

In the remainder of the poems I discuss in this chapter, however, the relationship between physical and metaphysical forms of union is less ambivalent; rather, both poles are represented as necessary to meld pleasurably with Christ. Writing of "To the Name above Every Name, the Name of Jesus, a Hymn," Young argues that the poem simultaneously sensualizes the name of Christ and transcends physical bodies:

> [T]he joy available to the devout in the name of Jesus is depicted in metaphors of sensuous pleasure…A divine mystery is celebrated in terms

> of sensuous delight, but sensuous things are themselves lifted onto a higher plane and are reinterpreted as aspects of one essential reality.[39]

While the "sensuous things" are perhaps less immediately apparent than they are in Crashaw's divine epigrams, however, it seems to me less that the spiritual wholly supersedes the physical than that the two work in tandem, their poetic conjunction mirroring their doctrinal inseparability.[40] Perhaps the clearest instance of the copresence of material and metaphysical is in the section on martyrs, whom Crashaw depicts as engaged in simultaneously physical and spiritual combat: the martyrs, he says,

> Fought against frowns with smiles; gave glorious chase
> To persecutions; and against the face
> Of death and fiercest dangers, durst with brave
> And sober pace march on to meet a grave.
> On their bold breasts about the world they bore thee
> And to the teeth of hell stood up to teach thee,
> In center of their inmost souls they wore thee
> Where racks and torments strived, in vain, to reach thee. (199-206)

---

[39] Young, *Richard Crashaw,* 126.

[40] C.f. Netzley's argument that

> Crashaw's poetry consistently avoids recourse to a transcendent realm in which significance or meaning or salvation would reside…Instead of achieving a mystical union via denigration of the worldly senses and the self that undergirds them, Crashaw's Teresan and Marian poems use the indistinction between senses, and between sense and their objects, to…[maintain] that there is no viable distinction between senses and objects, accidents and substance. (*Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist*, 91)

Netzley is not interested in Crashaw's use of eroticism to collapse (or demonstrate the simultaneity of) physical and transcendent realms, but his argument that the devotional work of Crashaw's poetry is to reveal the copresence of signifier and signified, the immanence of God in the material sign, is a useful one.

The passage is full of bodily language: the martyrs' "smiles," "sober pace," and "bold breasts" are set in opposition to the "frowns" and "racks"—punishments administered by and on bodies—of their oppressors. The passage personifies abstract dangers with bodily features as well, referring to the "teeth" of hell and the "face" of death. While it may initially seem that the language of the physical body is associated with suffering and negativity, the martyrs not only "bore" Jesus's name on their "bold breasts," but also "wore" it "[i]n center of their inmost souls." The name is figured as doubly interior, located not only within their "inmost souls," but inscribed into the center of this already interiorized space. The name, that is, is not separated from the body but occupies a physical place within the souls of the martyrs. Reminiscent of Rambuss's observation that Crashaw conceives of bodies "as secret spaces to be penetrated and infused with devotion," the martyrs here are subject to physical torments and pleasure as they bear Christ's name in the cavities of their souls.[41]

These simultaneously physical and spiritual tortures have divergent effects on the martyrs; while their bodies are broken, this physical disarticulation leads them to ecstasy:

Little, alas, thought they
Who tore the fair breasts of thy friends,
Their fury but made way
For thee; and served therein thy glorious ends.
What did their weapons but with wider pores
Enlarge thy flaming-breasted lovers

[41] Rambuss, *Closet Devotions,* 28.

More freely to transpire

That impatient fire

The hearts that hides thee hardly covers. (207-15)

While one might contend that the physical tortures the martyrs undergo prepare them for a spiritual union with Christ, again this union is registered in spatialized language that entails an element of physicality. By tearing the "fair breasts" of Christ's "friends," the persecutors "made way" for Christ, suggesting that they created a literal pathway. The martyrs' wounds are similarly represented as "wider pores" and "enlarge[d]" portals for the "impatient fire" in their "hearts." That is, the violation of the martyrs' breasts means that their bodies will be more fully penetrated by God's "impatient fire," becoming his "flaming-breasted lovers." These wounds not only lead to simultaneously spiritual and physical ecstasy, however (though they indeed do that); they also become a means to connect human and divine:

What did their weapons but set wide the doors

For thee: fair, purple doors, of love's devising;

The ruby windows which enriched the East

Of thy so oft repeated rising.

Each wound of theirs was thy new morning;

And reenthroned thee in thy rosy nest,

With blush of thine own blood thy day adorning,

It was the wit of love o'erflowed the bounds

Of wrath, and made thee way through all these wounds. (216-24)

While in other poems Christ's wounds are troped as physical or architectural spaces, here it is the martyrs' wounds that effect passageways, "doors," between heaven and earth, starting with but gesturing beyond the body. Fascinatingly, these doors reconfirm Christ's power, "reenthron[ing]" him in his "rosy nest." The nest too is simultaneously metaphorical and physical: though it refers most immediately to the sunrise, its color derives from the "blush of [Christ's] own blood" and is thus predicated on his body's material presence. The martyrs' simultaneous physical and spiritual suffering and ecstasy, is a means to effect divine presence within the self.

The martyrs are not the poem's only desiring subjects; rather, the earth and all its natural creatures (including humans) are represented as literally thirsting for Jesus. While the language is in many places reminiscent of the Song of Songs, its conventionality does not diminish the force of its eroticism:

> Come lovely Name; life of our hope!
> Lo we hold our hearts wide ope!
> Unlock thy cabinet of day,
> Dearest Sweet, and come away.
>
> Lo how the thirsty lands
> Gasp for thy golden showers! with longstretched hands
>
> Lo how the laboring earth
> That hopes to be
> All heaven by thee,
> Leaps at thy birth.
>
> Th'attending world, to wait thy rise,

First turned to eyes;

And then, not knowing what to do,

Turned them to tears, and spent them too. (125-38)

Like the martyrs, the collective voice assumed by the speaker in this section asks that the "Dearest Sweet" fill their "hearts wide ope"—the hearts of humankind are physically prepared to receive Christ.[42] Christ's physicality too is emphasized, his body troped as a "cabinet" that needs to be "unlock[ed]" and shared with the people. While the metaphor remains strange, it is, I think, more naturalized here than in "On Our Crucified Lord," part of the background of the poem rather than its focus. The earth itself is "thirsty" for the "golden showers" of Christ, language with fairly clear sexual overtones. This impression is heightened by the idiom of fertility that follows: the earth is "laboring"; it "[l]eaps" at Christ's birth; and "attend[s]" on Christ's "rise," a term that in this context seems to possess phallic overtones even as it simultaneously refers to the second coming (and the sunrise). The earth itself then turns into eyes and tears, reminiscent of the representation of Christ in "On the Wounds," again eliding any strong distinction between the physical and the spiritual. The fascinating representation of bees that shortly follows furthers the sexualized relationship between Christ and the world, again refusing to sublimate the physical into the spiritual. The bees, the speaker says, are like "adoring spirits" (152), and both "are wise / And know what sweets are sucked from out it" (154-55). The sexual overtones of "sweets are sucked" (again with connotations of "fucked") are difficult to miss. Such the language of "suck[ing]" is interesting not only because it is

[42] See e.g. Young, *Richard Crashaw*, 134; and Healy, *Richard Crashaw*, 113, for more on the importance of corporate voice and ceremony to Crashaw's poetry.

sexual, but because its eroticism is associated with a physical action. The "hoard of honey" (148) of the bees and spirits is further physically located in a "hive" (156), again giving a natural and spatial metaphor to the sexual language.

This section on bees transforms almost seamlessly into one of the fullest expressions of "the bliss [Christ's name] offers to the devout" in the poem, which blends the physical and spiritual in telling ways.[43] Christ is first represented in expressly maternal terms:

> Welcome to our dark world, thou
>
> Womb of day!
>
> Unfold thy fair conceptions; and display
>
> The birth of our bright joys. (161-64)

Crashaw feminizes and eroticizes Christ in these lines, which somewhat oddly metonymize him as all "Womb" full of "fair conceptions" to which he will give "birth." Christ is next, however, represented as rather more masculine in his eroticism:

> O thou compacted
>
> Body of blessings: spirit of souls extracted!
>
> O dissipate thy spicy pow'rs
>
> (Cloud of condensed sweets) and break upon us
>
> In balmy show'rs,
>
> O fill our senses, and take from us
>
> All force of so profane a fallacy

[43] Young, *Richard Crashaw*, 125.

To think aught sweet, but that which smells of thee. (165-72)

Begging to be bathed in "balmy show'rs," the speaker represents Christ in strikingly seminiferous terms. The recurring language of sweetness and spiciness plays on conventional erotic language to show Christ's love as being not only a spiritual, but also a physical experience, here of smell and, implicitly, taste.[44] In fact, Christ's scent is the only possible sweetness; the "profane…fallacy" the speaker imagines is not representing divinity in physical terms but rather the failure to do so, to "think aught sweet, but that which smells of thee"—that is, to ascribe a sweet scent to any object that does not smell of Christ. In "Hymn to the Name," then, Crashaw uses the language of eroticism to at least partially erase the boundaries between human and Christ, as both are dissolved in the liquifacient bliss characteristic of his thought. Importantly, however, in this poem neither the physical nor the spiritual is privileged; rather, the success of the poem and its erotic and metaphysical gambits hinges on the copresence of physical and spiritual that allows for total immersion in the divine.

In "The Weeper" Crashaw attempts to use Mary Magdalene to bridge the gap separating human and divine, and in "Hymn to the Name," the martyrs effect a relationship with Christ through their ecstatically suffering physical bodies. These two impulses are conjoined in "Sancta Maria Dolorum," where speaker seeks first to create a highly somatic, eroticized identity-relation between Christ and the Blessed Virgin, and second to identify himself with Mary as a mediatory figure, more or less taking advantage of the transitive property to enter into a relationship with Christ. As Healy

[44] In the earlier portions of the poem (e.g. ll.35-102), Christ's name is also associated with the sense of hearing. See also Netzley, "Oral Devotion," for more on the importance of taste to Crashaw.

suggests, “Mary offers proof of the possible interplay between God and mankind, strengthening the poet’s own experience of it,” a point James Bromley takes further when he argues that “[t]he completeness of the identification of Mary with her son is what makes it possible for her to function as a model of embodied intimacy with Christ.”[45] To create this identification, Crashaw emphasizes mutuality of the relationship between Christ and mother:

> Hanging all torn she sees; and in his woes
> And pains, her pangs and throes.
> Each wound of his, from every part,
> All, more at home in her own heart. (7-10)

While suggesting that Mary’s pains in labor anticipated her son’s subsequent passion is not wholly original, Crashaw is unusual in his claim that Christ’s pains are “more at home” in her than they are in his body; that is, Christ’s pain belongs to Mary even more than it belongs to himself. Internalizing and experiencing the pain suffered by her son on the cross, Mary’s “eyes bleed tears” while “his wounds weep blood” (20). Instead of locating his twin fascinations of blood and tears on a single body, as he does in some of his epigrams on Christ’s passion, Crashaw instead both splits them—Mary is weeping and Christ is bleeding—and reintegrates them across the two persons—Mary bleeds tears and Christ weeps blood; highlighted by the line’s chiastic structure, Crashaw suggests that Mary and her son are in fundamental somatic alignment. This emphasis on their mutual pain climaxes at the end of the third stanza; after the speaker imagines that “son

[45] Healy, *Richard Crashaw,* 133; Bromley, “Intimacy,” 29.

and mother / Discourse alternate wounds to one another" (23-24), he summarizes the metaphysics of these injuries:

> His nails write swords in her, which soon her heart
> Pays back, with more than their own smart;
> Her swords, still growing with his pain,
> Turn spears, and straight come home again. (27-30)

The weapons of the Roman soldiers—nails, swords, and spears—are doubled and redoubled. Originating with Christ, they grow in Mary (although their growth is occasioned by Christ's pain) before returning to Christ. The pain Christ and Mary experience, in sum, is emphatically mutual; to borrow a Donnean term, their bodies are interinanimated, sensation and change in the one inseparable from its effects on the other.

The phallic quality of the foregoing lines—Christ and Mary are repeatedly penetrated with "growing" nails, swords, and spears—is picked up more fully in the remainder of the poem, which creates a triangular, erotic relationship among the speaker, Mary, and Christ. In stanza five, the language begins to take on a more sensual tone as Mary is described as the "mother turtledove" (41) whose breast, simultaneously maternal and sexual, is "the noblest nest / Both of love's fires and floods" (46-47) in which the speaker hopes to "recline / This hard, cold, heart of mine" (47-48). Through his repose in her breast, he hopes that his cold heart "would relent, and prove / Soft subject for the siege of love" (49-50), simultaneously a recasting of a familiar Petrarchan trope; an invocation of the traditional imagery of God softening a Christian's stony heart; and an image of detumescence. Mary, thus eroticized and maternal, becomes a way for the speaker to yield his heart unto Christ's love.

However, the speaker does not imagine that Christ will directly seek him out and pursue him, as the jealous God in Donne's "Batter my heart"; rather, he hopes to be collateral damage in a violent love relationship between Christ and his mother:

> And in these chaste wars while the winged wounds flee
>
> So fast 'twixt him and thee,
>
> My breast may catch the kiss of some kind dart,
>
> Though as at second hand, from either heart. (67-70).

For the speaker, it does not matter whose "kind dart" gives him a "kiss"; rather, he imagines Christ's and the Virgin's relationship as a series of perpetually volleying "winged wounds" that may light upon a lucky bystander. Christ's love is not directed toward humanity at all; rather, it is only through his relationship with his mother that we have any chance of catching the "dart" of his love. Indeed, the speaker later suggests that he may be more easily able to effect a relationship with Mary than with her son, exhorting himself "And if thou yet (faint soul!) defer / To bleed with him, fail not to weep with her" (89-90). If he is not yet capable of joining with Christ, that is, he can at the very least participate in a shared somatic experience with his mother. Regardless of the source, the speaker actively solicits this experience with Christ and Mary, saying "Come wounds! come darts! / Nailed hands! and pierced hearts!" (75-76). The short dimeter lines, broken by exclamation points, emphasize the speaker's breathy ecstasy at the prospect of being wounded by the darts offered by (and simultaneously penetrating) Mary and Christ. The closing stanza rearticulates this desire, again in a particularly heightened iteration of Canticles language:

> O let me suck the wine

So long of this chaste vine

Till drunk of the dear wounds, I be

A lost thing to the world, as it to me. (101-4)

Through "suck[ing]" the "wine" of the "chaste vine" that is here Mary, the speaker desires to "Fold up my life in love" (107), that is, to be a "lost thing to the world" and submerged into divine presence. Though unable to accomplish this on his own, through the sensuous intercession of Christ's mother, then, he hopes to lose himself in the divine.

While hinted at in the various hymns, it is in the Teresa poems that Crashaw most famously uses the erotic to forge a closer connection between human and God. Rather than attempting to eroticize his own soul's relationship to Christ's, the speaker once more invokes a female intermediary who possesses the ability not only to approach God herself but also to bring her devotees (and, by extension, the poems' readers) to something approaching mystical ecstasy. In "A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Saint Teresa," the speaker first imagines Teresa's youthful fantasies of martyrdom; at merely six years old, "though she cannot tell you why, / She can love, and she can die" (23-24). Teresa's knowledge is at this point purely instinctual: she "never undertook to know / What death with love should have to do" (19-20), and she has not yet "understood / Why to show love, she should shed blood" (21-22). With an almost preternatural disposition toward mystical union, Teresa is impelled to both love and die, the latter taking an unmistakably (though certainly not exclusively) sexual cast.

The language Crashaw uses to describe Teresa's yearning for the breakdown of boundaries between herself and God is simultaneously corporeal and spiritual. While

there is perhaps a shade of primarily physical eroticism when the speaker mentions that "Scarce has she blood enough to make / A guilty sword blush for her sake" (25-26), the language of the poem shifts, emphasizing both the spiritual love Teresa desires and the material substrates of that love:

> Love touched her heart, and lo it beats
> High, and burns with such brave heats;
> Such thirsts to die, as dares drink up,
> A thousand cold deaths in one cup.
> Good reason. For she breathes all fire.
> Her weak breast heaves with strong desire
> Of what she may with fruitless wishes
> Seek for amongst her mother's kisses. (35-42)

Maternal affection here is clearly no substitute for divine love and indeed is "fruitless"—mere physical "kisses" can neither sustain nor satisfy Teresa's "strong desire." However, this does not mean that the poem rejects the importance of physical proximity in love, but rather fuses spiritual and corporeal desire. Love "touched her heart," that is, performs a perceptible, physical action. The pronoun "it" in line 35 grammatically reinforces the alignment between love and Teresa's heart, as it initially seems to be anteceded by "Love"; for me, at least, only after rereading is it clear that the line refers to Teresa's heart rather than love. In describing this heart's spiritual needs, the speaker resorts to language of "burns," "thirsts," "breathes," and "heaves," that is, language that refers to the presence—indeed, the biological needs—of her physical body. The heavy alliteration in lines 35-37—"heart," "high," "heats"; "beats," "burns," "brave"; "die, "dares,"

drink"—further emphasizes the lyric's physicality by reminding the reader of the material properties of its language.

Despite her physical desires, Teresa is enjoined not to submit to them fully; rather, the spiritual and corporeal remain in delicate counterpoise as she avoids literal martyrdom:

> Sweet, not so fast! lo thy fair spouse,
> Whom thou seek'st with so swift vows,
> Calls thee back, and bids thee come
> T'embrace a milder martyrdom.
> Blessed pow'rs forbid, thy tender life
> Should bleed upon a barbarous knife;
> Or some base hand have power to rase
> Thy breast's chaste cabinet, and uncase
> A soul kept there so sweet, O no;
> Wise heav'n will never have it so.
> Thou art Love's victim; and must die
> A death more mystical and high. (65-76)

Entreated to not allow her "tender life" to "bleed upon a barbarous knife," a fairly overt image of penetration and defloration, Teresa is encouraged to reconceive of her "martyrdom" in terms of spiritual marriage. In this passage, it may seem as though the physical aspects of love and sex are rejected, as Teresa is told that her "breast's chaste cabinet" must be left intact to preserve the soul it encases and thus "die / A death more mystical and high." However, when the speaker describes the sensations produced by this

death, the language again problematizes an easy distinction between the physical and spiritual:

O how oft shalt thou complain
Of a sweet and subtle pain.
Of intolerable joys,
Of a death, in which who dies
Loves his death, and dies again.
And would forever so be slain.
And lives, and dies; and knows not why
To live, but that he thus may never leave to die.
How kindly will thy gentle heart
Kiss the sweetly killing dart!
And close in his embraces keep
Those delicious wounds, that weep
Balsam to heal themselves with. (97-109)

These lines are marked by paradox, which highlights Teresa's physical experience to the extent that it points out its impossibility or inexpressibility, resorting to oxymoronic and oscillating language such as "intolerable joys" and the pile-up of "lives," "dies," and their cognates in lines 100-4. Beyond the limitations of physical existence lies the mystic experience Teresa undergoes not once, not twice, but in perpetuity, cycling through life and death in order to continually experience mystical union with God.

However, the body itself is not left behind, as Teresa's "gentle heart" "kiss[es]" the "killing dart" before ending up in its "embraces." Rhythmically aligned through the

end-rhyme, both "dart" and "heart" are imagined as physical entities that operate within a material plane. That the "wounds" are not only so physical as to require "heal[ing]" by their self-generated "balsam," but are also "delicious," that is, possess a taste, again emphasizes their sensuous properties. The union here imagined surely takes place on a metaphysical plane, but it does not abstract away from the "physical" half of this dyad; rather, the body and its positioning in space remain central to the experience of love Crashaw's speaker imagines for Teresa. We see this again when the speaker moves to the culminating description of rapture in this poem:

> O what delight, when revealed Life shall stand
> And teach thy lips heav'n with his hand;
> On which thou now maist to thy wishes
> Heap up thy consecrated kisses.
> What joys shall seize thy soul, when she
> Bending her blessed eyes on thee
> (Those second smiles of heav'n), shall dart
> Her mild rays through thy melting heart. (129-36)

"Revealed Life" possesses the ability to "stand"; it also has a "hand" that Teresa's "lips" shower with "consecrated kisses." Such a hand is not, however, revealed life's only body part; it also has "blessed eyes" that are, effectively, "smiles"—a somatic mixed metaphor—that "dart…mild rays." Teresa's soul itself is "seize[d]" by "joys" when seen by revealed life, again setting up a simultaneously physical and spiritual rapture.

This is, of course, not to say that Teresa and her ecstatic experiences are constrained by the limitations of the physical form—perhaps obviously, the forms of

physical intimacy and material forms these poems describe are not naturalistic descriptions of bodies. This point is driven home in "The Flaming Heart," where Crashaw castigates a sculptor for his misguided devotion to gender normative representational practices in his depiction of Teresa. At the outset of the poem, readers (who are simultaneously imagined as viewers) are famously enjoined to

> …transpose the picture quite,
> And spell it wrong to read it right;
> Read him for her, and her for him;
> And call the saint the seraphim. (9-12)

The delightful, gender-bending impulses of these lines—Teresa's "ultra-gendered" quality—have been much remarked upon, so I will not add to that already ample discourse here.[46] However, less noticed is the way in which the apostrophized "Readers" (7) are asked to "transpose," to physically rearrange (and re-spell and reread) the letters of the picture. In order to appreciate the mystical experience, that is, readers must put the image through a process of physical transformation.

The speaker elaborates upon this transposed image, insisting that the cherub's physical properties belong to Teresa; she is not some "pale-faced" (27), "weak, inferior, woman saint" (26), but rather is owed the physical representation the sculptor grants to the cherub:

> Whate'er this youth of fire wears fair,
> Rosy fingers, radiant hair,

[46] Yeo, "Political Theology," 400. See also e.g. Fischer, "Mystical Ravishment," 187-88; and Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, 129-32.

Glowing cheek, and glistering wings,

All those fair and flagrant things,

But before all, that fiery dart

Had filled the hand of this great heart. (31-36)

While the artist's most egregious error is his misplacement of the "fiery dart" that rightly belongs in Teresa's "hand," Teresa's appearance, particularly her face, is all wrong as well. The image of Teresa the sculptor presents is too physically limited, constrained by not only her gender but also the soft and bloodless ("pale-faced") quality of the representation. The speaker does, it is true, later suggest that these characteristics are unnecessary, that, if she is left "the flaming heart" (68) these other attributes fall away in importance; however, his strident objections about the weakness implied by the sculpture suggest the importance of Teresa's physical form to the metaphysics of desire she represents.

The biggest problem the speaker has with the sculptor, however, is that he has given the seraphim, rather than Teresa, the dart of love; he entreats, "Give her the dart for it is she / (Fair youth) shoots both thy shaft and thee" (47-48). In Teresa's hands, the dart becomes an entire catalogue of weaponry, "magazines of immortal arms" (55) and "Heav'n's great artillery" (56). Teresa's heart is simultaneously wounded and wounding, possessed of infinite weapons and yet an infinite series of wounds: "O heart! the equal poise of love's both parts / Big alike with wounds and darts" (75-76). In a fantastically hermaphroditic image, the speaker imagines Teresa's heart as penetrated and penetrating, a sort of switchboard for divine love. This heart performs a series of physical actions: "Live here, great heart; and love and die and kill; / And bleed and wound; and yield and

conquer still" (79-80), the paradoxes drawing attention to the physical nature of the actions described, and the polysyndeton and largely monosyllabic quality of these lines emphasizing the material quality of the language. Teresa's heart exists in a physical place and performs physical actions, and, at the same time, undergoes mystical experience that turns her entire body into both a ray of divine love and an ecstatic wound that receives that love. Through this dual nature, she is able to effect change in her devotees, as the poem closes with the speaker's plea that she "Leave nothing of my self in me" (106), that is, through her mystical experience she drains the speaker of ego and individual self in order to help him attain the union she has already achieved. Erotic on both physical and spiritual levels, the Teresa poems cap Crashaw's interest in female figures of devotion and show how his sacred eroticism relies on both the existence and breach of the physical body of the intercessory figure.

In the brief lyric "A Song," which immediately follows the Teresa sequence, the speaker is finally able to himself follow in the model offered by the saint in his articulation of desire for God:

> Lord, when the sense of thy sweet grace
> Sends up my soul to seek thy face,
> Thy blessed eyes breed such desire
> I die in love's delicious fire. (1-4)

Crashaw's speaker has gone to seek the face of God, and when he does, God's eyes "breed such desire" that the speaker "die[s] in love's delicious fire," the synesthesia pointing to and yet suggesting an excess of sensual experience. Just as Teresa, the

speaker “still…die[s]” and “live[s] again / Still longing so to be still slain” (9-10), oscillating between death and life in a paradoxical mystical ecstasy of “loving death and dying life” (14). Having fully ceded his own subjectivity, the speaker characterizes his annihilation thus: “Dead to myself, I live in thee” (16). Throughout his poetry, Crashaw manipulates the physical into a hyper-real space that simultaneously inhabits and extends beyond the purely carnal, articulating an erotic experience within this metaphysical plane. This can lead him into a level of grotesquerie off-putting to many readers, but it can also take him into mystical raptures that annihilate the barrier between human and God, his sensual and metaphysical experience alike extending far beyond the contours of his own body and self.

VI. BODIES AND BOUNDARIES IN TRAHERNE'S LYRIC

While, until recently, critics of Crashaw have often felt impelled either to recuperate his poetry into an orthodox mainstream or to express their discomfort with, dislike of, or revulsion at the perceived improprieties of his texts and their representations of bodies, the small corpus of literary criticism on mystic writer Thomas Traherne has been relatively appreciative since the 1960s. Traherne's fascinating literary afterlife—in which he disappeared for two centuries, the first of his poetry recovered only at the beginning of the twentieth century with additional poetic and prose works trickling out over the next eighty or so years—is no doubt at least partially responsible for the largely positive (if often condescending) body of criticism on the work; that the poetry is less indecorous than Donne's and less grotesque than Crashaw's (and, one suspects, that Traherne lacks the biographical whiff of Catholicism about which so many critics have implicitly or explicitly been suspicious in the cases of the other poets) certainly helps as well. Although Traherne's earlier critics positioned him as a mystic visionary unfettered by and uninterested in late seventeenth-century sociopolitical discourse, the recovery of additional manuscripts has allowed more recent scholars to connect Traherne's theology and poetics with the intellectual currents of his day, most significantly with Hobbes as well as the Royal Society.[1] Consistent between these two critical takes, however, is an awareness of Traherne's preoccupation with the contours of bodies and selves. Stanley Stewart is perhaps most influential here, with his contention that Traherne invokes a

[1] See e.g. Gorman & Dodd, eds., *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought,* which situates Traherne within the currents of seventeenth-century linguistics, philosophy, and science, and Johnston, "Heavenly Perspective," which connects Traherne's poetry to changes in aesthetics and theories of subjectivity in the later seventeenth century.

"strategy of erosion with which the author undermines the boundaries he himself has imposed…true self-love cannot remain solely focused on the narrow sense of ego; it is impelled outward, toward other manifestations of God's love."[2] Similarly, A.C. Clements contends that, for Traherne, "[t]he isolated ego…must…be given up and over, must itself die, in order that a process of infinite expansion occur, in order that atone-ment [sic] with God, life eternal, be realized."[3] Both authors demonstrate that, in Traherne's poetic theology, the discrete self is the fallen self; only by dissolving the contours of the body and soul can one participate in redeemed life. While Traherne does indeed insist on the unbounded nature of the ego, as Susannah B. Mintz points out he simultaneously expresses desire for a hermetically sealed self, for an "unpermeated self-possession."[4] Traherne is fascinated with the erosion of boundaries and insists that the separation of self from other, perceptor from perceived, is characteristic of the humanity's fallen state; the redeemed self is physically and psychically inextricable from the created world. Curiously, Traherne's poetic also accommodates a number of lyrics in which he attempts to erode distinctions among all things but leave himself separate, while simultaneously claiming that all these unbounded things exist within his sovereign self. These impulses, however, are fairly limited; while his speakers at times do articulate desire for a self completely other to the world, they ultimately seek an ecstatic union with God that involves a total "*loss* of distinction in a non-place where there is a play of identity

[2] Stewart, *Expanded Voice,* 152.

[3] Clements, *Mystical Poetry,* 23.

[4] Mintz, "Strange Bodies," 9.

shifting to and fro."[5] This concern about selfhood and its relationship to the external world is often mediated through Traherne's ambivalent and inconsistent characterization of bodies, which are both the only way to fully participate in God's being and yet inherently estranging in their limited capacities for perception. When the body's perceiving abilities are at their fullest, however, they are materially and metaphysically intertwined with God, the created world, and everything in it, all distinctions thereamong rendered void. Traherne, though at times anxious about the loss of ego, comes to embrace the breakdown of self and body alike. In a neat reversal of the paradigm we have been considering thus far, it is this breakdown, this lack of boundaries between self and world, that allows erotic contact between the individual and God.

The early poems of what is generally called the Dobell manuscript of Traherne's poetry show the poet's delight at assuming a body, and his abiding interest in that body's capacity to perceive and touch other bodies.[6] The opening lines of "The Salutation," for example, take pleasure in the "little Limmes" (1), "Eys and Hands" (2), and "rosie Cheeks" (3) of which the speaker finds himself newly in possession, the "Treasures which [he] now receiv[es]" (12). The primary value of this new body lies in the avenues of apprehending the world they open to the speaker:

[5] Certeau, *Mystic Fable,* 44 (emphasis in original). Certeau is speaking of mystic experience more generally here, but the point holds for Traherne.

[6] Unless otherwise noted, I will be referring to the Dobell manuscript version of the poems as printed in H.R. Margoliouth's Oxford edition. So called because of their rediscovery and publication by London bookseller Bertram Dobell, the poems of the Dobell sequence (which derive from a fair copy in Traherne's hand) are largely superior to the other main stream of Traherne lyrics, those found in *Poems of Felicity*; edited with heavy hand by Traherne's brother Philip—who, it must be said, lacked a mind for theology and an ear for poetry—*Poems of Felicity* are primarily useful as comparator documents, their editing into conventionality highlighting the unusual features of Traherne's lyric and theological imagination.

I that so long

Was Nothing from Eternitie,

Did little think such Joys as Ear or Tongue,

To Celebrat or See:

Such Sounds to hear, such Hands to feel, such Feet,

Beneath the Skies, on such a Ground to meet. (13-18)

The speaker, once "Nothing," rejoices in his newfound "Ear" and "Tongue" and his abilities to "hear" and "feel." These sensations are resolutely embodied, as he emphasizes the contact, the "meet[ing]," between his feet and the ground below them, as well as his hands' physical ability to touch the world around him. Anticipating Phoebe Dickerson's recent argument that the skin is a site of heightened liminality for Traherne, Stewart suggests that "Traherne's poetry is full of figures suggesting a 'mingling' or 'twining' of man with objects outside him."[7] This poem does not articulate a full imbrication of internal and external, of man with the objects outside him, but the point of contact between the self and the not-self is a site of fascination and felicity for the speaker, who delights in the "Glorious Store" (33) of the external world that he can see, hear, and touch.

The importance of embodied existence is heightened in "The Person," where Traherne not only suggests that his body is the best means for apprehending God, but also uses it to articulate a corporeal theory of poetic production. Addressing his "Sacred Lims" (1), the speaker prepares to lay "A richer Blazon" (2), rhetorically elaborating his

[7] Dickerson, "Lanthorn's Side," 35; Stewart, *Expanded Voice*, 144.

"Robes of Glory and Delight" with "Deep Vermilion" (7) "Scarlet" (8), and "Gold" (10). However, he quickly establishes a difference between this and other poetic blazons:[8]

Mistake me not, I do not mean to bring
New Robes, but to Display the Thing:
Nor Paint, nor Cloath, nor Crown, nor add a Ray,
But Glorify by taking all away. (13-16)

Using a bait and switch technique, the speaker claims that the lavish ornamentation he has so far evoked is more attractive when removed than worn—there is nothing more beautiful, he says, than the unadorned body:

The Rubies we behold,
The Diamonds that Deck
The Hands of Queens, compard unto
The Hands we view;
The Softer Lillies, and the Roses are
Less Ornaments to those that Wear
The same, then are the Hands, and Lips, and Eys,
Of those who those fals Ornaments so prize. (41-48)

Not only are hands and lips and eyes superior to lilies and roses, diamonds and rubies, the conventional images of red and white associated with Petrarchan desire (and religious

[8] See Johnston, "Heavenly Perspective," 380-82, and Clements, *Mystical Poetry,* 37-43, for influential accounts of Traherne's use of metaphor and imagery, and its relation to Herbert's "Jordan" poems as well as Petrarchan poetry.

desire in sacred parody of the same), but bodies require no decoration—they are beautiful in themselves:

> Survey the Skin, cut up the Flesh, the Veins
>
> Unfold: The Glory there remains.
>
> The Muscles, Fibres, Arteries and Bones
>
> Are better far then Crowns and precious Stones. (29-32)

The anatomical impulses of blazon are redirected; instead of breaking the woman into a number of discrete, individually-praised parts, these lines invite readers to autopsy themselves, "cut up" their bodies and "unfold" their veins, because the literal stuff of the body—not any rhetorical decoration—is glorious.[9] In these lines, Traherne lavishes praise on anatomically precise body parts, tissues and sinews of the internal body more valuable than "Crowns and precious stones." However, the external body too receives its share of praise; the speaker concludes the poem by praising "My Tongue, my Eys, / My cheeks, my lips, my Ears, my Hands, my Feet" (60-61), all of which possess a "Beauty true" (63) and "Harmony…far more Sweet" (62) than any earthly treasures. The asyndetonic mash-up of these body parts suggests pleasure in the proliferation of physicality untrammeled by conjunctions, the reader's attention directed from part to part in a way that mimics (if never achieves) the unmediated state desired by the speaker.[10]

---

[9] See Sawday, *Body Emblazoned*, for more on Traherne's appropriation of the language of anatomy. For Sawday, Traherne "entirely sabotages the endeavours of 'masculine science'" by manipulating scientific and anatomical language to point to a spiritual reality that cannot be apprehended by reason (264).

[10] Traherne's penchant for asyndeton often overlaps with his use of catalogues. In *Mystical Voice*, Clements suggests that Traherne uses catalogues to "point directly to the naked Reality" (40); similarly, Kuchar suggests that these catalogues "generate a sense of wonder rather than comprehension as understanding" and enact "a sense of astonishment at how even the body itself exceeds the gaze of reason" (*Divine Subjection*, 203; see 197-203 more generally); see also Selkin, "Traherne's Cataloguing Style," *passim*; and Kershaw, "Traherne's Revealing," 91-93.

In the following poem, "The Estate," this blazoned and dissected physical body is the best way to apprehend the world and praise God:

My Palate ought to be a Stone
To trie thy Joys upon:
And evry Member ought to be
A Tongue, to Sing to Thee.
There's not an Ey that's framd by Thee,
But ought thy Life and Lov, to see.
Nor is there, Lord, upon mine Head an Ear,
But that the Musick of thy Works should hear.
Each Toe, each Finger framed by thy Skill,
Ought Oyntments to Distill.
Ambrosia, Nectar, Wine should flow
From evry Joynt I owe,
Or Things more Rich; while all mine Inward Powers
Are Blessed, Joyfull, and Eternal Bowers. (15-28)

In an almost Crashavian moment, the speaker imagines his body as a collection of tongues, all ready to sing God's praises. Every part of his body (including not only obvious ones like the tongue and eyes but also the palate and joints) has its role to play in both sensorily apprehending the world and using this apprehension for worship. The language begins to slide into the overtly erotic when Traherne imagines himself as a conduit of "Oyntments…/ Ambrosia, Nectar, Wine," a proliferation of sumptuous liquids overflowing "From evry Joynt." The erotic tone is heightened in the following stanza,

one that Traherne's brother and editor Philip tellingly omits from his version of the poem altogether.[11] Traherne's body parts "ought, my God, to be the Pipes, / And Conduits of thy Prais" (29), becoming a sort of divine hydraulic system whose parts "Drink in Nectars, and Disburs again / In Purer Beams, those Streams, / Those Nectars, which are causd by Joys" (37-39). This strikingly ejaculatory language eliminates any distinction between God and the speaker, as the latter both "drink[s] in" and "disburs[es]"—in fact, purifies—"Those Nectars, which are causd by Joys." The pure perception and joyous praise enabled by his anatomized body gives the speaker erotic access to the divine, allowing him to experience the "Pure, Transparent, Soft, Sweet, Melting Pleasures, / Like Precious and Diffusive Treasures" ("Speed," 10-11) that feed both body and soul. Indeed, in "The Approach," Traherne locates his ability to perceive God and his pleasures in his participation in the physical world:

> From Nothing taken first I was,
>
> What Wondrous Things his Glory brought to pass!
>
> Now in this World I him behold,
>
> And me enveloped in more then Gold
>
> In deep Abysses of Delights
>
> In present Hidden Precious Benefits. (31-36)

By perceiving God in the world, the speaker is "enveloped… / In deep Abysses of Delights," language that suggests not only pleasure but *sensual* pleasure. The speaker's

[11] For an amusingly disgruntled yet largely astute assessment of Philip's "destructive tampering" in his brother's poetry, see Clements, *Mystical Poetry*, 3-4, 104, 144. For Clements, Philip had no business working on these texts, as he was "not only a bad versifier but also quite definitely no mystic" (63).

early creation, despite being "Wondrous," was not enough; it is only when he sees God "in *this* World" that he experiences true delight.

In "Wonder" and "Eden," Traherne similarly celebrates perception and sensuous apprehension of the world, but begins to articulate the concomitant danger of physicality. On the one hand, Traherne's speaker celebrates his descent to earth "like an Angel" ("Wonder," 1) and the "Native Health and Innocence" that "Within [his] Bones did grow" ("Wonder," 17-18). Asserting that his health and innocence, as well as his ability to perceive the world, are located in the "Bones" of his body, the speaker rejoices in the glories of creation:

> Rich Diamond and Pearl and Gold
>
> In evry Place was seen;
>
> Rare Splendors, Yellow, Blew, Red, White, and Green,
>
> Mine Eys did evrywhere behold.
>
> Great Wonders clothd with Glory did appear,
>
> Amazement was my Bliss.
>
> That and my Wealth was evry where:
>
> No Joy to this! ("Wonder," 41-48)

> Joy, Pleasure, Beauty, Kindness, Glory, Lov,
>
> Sleep, Day, Life, Light,
>
> Peace, Melody, my Sight,
>
> My Ears and Heart did fill, and freely mov.
>
> All that I saw did me Delight.

The *Universe* was then a World of Treasure,

To me an Universal World of Pleasure. ("Eden," 15-21)

In the first stanza, the threefold repetition of "every" emphasizes the totalizing quality of the speaker's perception of the world—the world for him is neither more nor less than a series of "Splendors," "Wonders," "Amazement" and "Bliss." The pleasures outlined in "Wonder" are primarily visual, the conventional use of diamonds and pearls to signify beauty giving way to a magnificent celebration of the visual experience of colors themselves; the speaker later expresses delight in even things as mundane as the experience of wearing beautiful clothing, "Clothes, Ribbans, Jewels, Laces" ("Wonder," 61) not a shameful source of luxury and excess but rather a new series of "Joys" (62). In "Eden," the "Universal World of Pleasure" moves beyond a visual register, emphasizing the aural delights of "Melody"; the stanza accretes abstract concepts that are nevertheless perceived in the physical senses and spaces of the speaker's "Sight," "Ears," and "Heart." The body is the site of the speaker's pleasurable encounter with the world; indeed, it is precisely the moment his senses are breached by sights, sounds, and smells that he feels most access to the "Universal World of Pleasure."

However, a distrust of the world creeps into these poems, which evoke specters of discord, violence, and sin that the speaker himself failed to notice while in rapturous infancy: he does not see "Harsh ragged Objects" ("Wonder," 25); "Oppressions, Tears and Cries, / Sins, Griefs, Complaints, Dissentions, Weeping Eyes" ("Wonder," 26-27); "Envy, Avarice, / And Fraud" ("Wonder," 50-51); the "Serpents Sting / Whose Poyson shed on Men" ("Eden," 8-9); or the "Vain Costly Toys, / Swearing and Roaring Boys" of "Shops, Markets, Taverns, Coaches" ("Eden," 22-25). Writing with a double voice, the

speaker recounts the pleasure of his unmediated interaction with the world while at the same time obliquely articulating its present dangers. This distrust of physical experience can be found again in "The Preparative," which, in leading up to the first climax of the sequence, "The Vision" and "The Rapture," restricts both the phenomenal and epistemological domain to the visual. Temporally backtracking, the speaker imagines himself before his assumption of a body:

> My Body being Dead, my Lims unknown;
>
> Before I skild to prize
>
> Those living Stars mine Eys
>
> Before my Tongue or Cheeks were to me shewn,
>
> Before I knew my Hands were mine,
>
> Or that my Sinews did my Members joyn,
>
> When neither Nostril, Foot, nor Ear,
>
> As yet was seen, or felt, or did appear;
>
> I was within
>
> A House I knew not, newly clothed with Skin. (1-10)

The speaker hints at his persistent attraction to embodiment as he draws attention to the various body parts through which he will encounter the world—the "Nostril," "Foot," "Eys," "Tongue," and "Ear," all sites that mediate the external world and the internal self—as well as the "Sinews" that connect these disparate parts together. However, subsequent stanzas make clear that the speaker took at least as much pleasure in this state of disembodiment as he does within his physical body. The speaker's "Soul, my only All to me" (11) was "A Living Endless Ey, / Far wider than the Skie / Whose Power, whose

Act, whose Essence was to see" (12-14). Completely uninhibited in its powers of ocular perception, the speaker is an "Endless Ey," a transparent eyeball otherwise disembodied but infinite in scope. This disembodied state not only allows the speaker to escape the various privations to which the human body is subject, feeling no "Thirst nor Hunger," no "dull Necessity" nor "Want" (21-23), but also eliminates the gap between sense and understanding: "Without Disturbance then I did receiv / The fair Ideas of all Things" (24-25). Existing is seeing; seeing is understanding; and understanding is, for the speaker, godlike: "evry Thing / Delighted me that was their Heavnly King" (29-30). As Clements suggests, in this primal condition, "the infant does not abstract from experience and divide it into subject and object. He simply perceives, experiences; he *is* the perception, the experience."[12] The body here perpetuates division rather than the primal unity the speaker seeks.[13] The speaker's "Disentangled and…Naked Sence" (61) that is "Unbodied and Devoid of Care" (37) obviates the need for "*Hearing* Sounds" (31), experiencing "Sweet Perfumes" (32) and "*Tastes*" (33), and "*Feeling* Wounds" (34) that come with embodiment. Untrammeled by "Dross" (42) and "gross / And dull Materials" (43-44) and untempted by "any thing that might Seduce / My Sence" (47-48), the speaker's disembodied state is represented as giving him access to greater, fuller, and, indeed, purer pleasures he would be unable to experience were he fettered by physicality.

Traherne has a somewhat ambivalent assessment of the body and its capacities to pleasurably perceive and experience the world—the body, possessing a number of

[12] Clements, *Mystical Poetry,* 73.

[13] Again, these lines were amended by Philip in the Folio version of this text, where the speaker is positioned not as the "King" but rather as the "Heir" of all the world. In the Dobell text, however, the powerful claim that this unlimited visual perception is godlike is apparently unproblematic.

sensory capacities, perceives more completely than the disembodied soul, but these sensory capacities artificially divide and thus limit its understanding. The tension between complete perception and complete understanding informs one of Traherne's signature preoccupations, the desire to completely break down barriers not only between self and other, but among virtually all things. As Stewart suggests, for Traherne, the "truth emanating from the world is that love annihilates the boundaries between the self and the other."[14] More recently, Kuchar articulates a similar point when he claims that "Traherne's view of an embodied approach to divine subjection is uncanny insofar as it involves a breaking down of borders."[15] In "The Vision," Traherne understands bliss to arise from the perception of the fundamental unity of all things in God:

> To see a Glorious Fountain and an End
>
> To see all Creatures tend
>
> To thy Advancement, and so sweetly close
>
> In thy Repose: To see them shine
>
> In Use in Worth in Service, and even Foes
>
> Among the rest made thine.
>
> To see all these unite at once in Thee
>
> Is to behold Felicitie. (33-40)

"Felicitie" derives from a vision of all created life coming together to both serve and rest in God. The asyndeton of line 37, where three anaphoric phrases "In Use in Worth in

[14] Stewart, *Expanded Voice*, 154.

[15] Kuchar, *Divine Subjection,* 194.

Service" are smashed together without conjunctions or even commas, mirrors the way in which "all Creatures," even "Foes," will "unite at once" in God, creating bliss. Importantly, the speaker does not here experience, but merely "behold[s]" felicity. Bliss is located in the experience of losing all boundaries of the self and uniting not only with God, but also with all other creatures, a step the speaker is not yet prepared to take; rather, he takes pleasure in seeing "all things…conjoynd in Him alone" (55), rather than participating in the loss of individuation this entails.

God's ability to unite unlike things is also praised in "The Improvement," where the speaker credits this capability with providing the most fundamental form of pleasure:

> His Wisdom, Goodness, Power, as they unite
> All things in one, that they may be the *Treasures*
> Of one *Enjoy'r*, shine in the utmost Height
> They can attain; and are most Glorious *Pleasures*,
>
> When all the Univers conjoynd in one,
> Exalts a Creature, as if that alone. (25-30)

While likely a happy accident of nonstandardized early modern spelling rather than a deliberate choice on Traherne's part, the word "conjoynd" signals a central component of Traherne's concept of felicity: "joy" is found through being "con[joy]nd." Fascinatingly, however, Traherne's view of joining remains ambivalent. On the one hand, God's "Wisdom, Goodness, Power" (another example of asyndeton minimizing the differences among concepts) "unite / All things in one," and, as such, "are most Glorious *Pleasures*." On the other hand, though, the entire "Universe conjoynd in one / Exalts a Creature, as if that alone." This "one *Enjoy'r*" is apart from, rather than a part of, the larger cosmic

conjunction he celebrates. The "*Marvellous Designe*" (43) of the "Great *Architect*" (45) is appreciated by the speaker, who yet somehow maintains a separation from the breaking down of boundaries he imagines. This ambivalence continues in "Dumnesse," where the speaker sets himself apart from the rest of creation: "There I saw all the World Enjoyd by one / There I was in the World my Self alone" (35-36). Strangely dissociative, Traherne's speaker sees himself enjoying the entire world, yet remains absolutely singular and "alone" within the totality he imagines around him through a "removal from interconnection" with the rest of the cosmos.[16] Traherne later more fully elaborates on his need to both perceive this unity and maintain his individuality:

> To see all Creatures full of Deities;
>
> Especialy Ones self: And to Admire
>
> The Satisfaction of all True Desire:
>
> Twas to be Pleasd with all that God hath done;
>
> Twas to Enjoy *even All* beneath the Sun:
>
> Twas with a Steddy and immediat Sence
>
> To feel and measure all the Excellence
>
> Of Things: Twas to inherit Endless Treasure
>
> And to be fil'd with Everlasting Pleasure:
>
> To reign in Silence, and to Sing alone
>
> To see, love, Covet, hav, Enjoy, and Prais, in one:
>
> To Prize and to be ravishd: to be true,

[16] Mintz, "Strange Bodies," 13. Mintz perspicuously notes ableist implications of Traherne's use of deafness as a trope while rejecting "imperfect" bodies.

Sincere and Single in a Blessed View

Of all his Gifts. (39-53)

Despite his desire to maintain a "true, / Sincere and Single" self, the speaker is penetrated by and "fil'd with Everlasting Pleasure"—indeed, is "ravishd," a particularly intense and sexualized form of pleasure—through perceiving all things as part of a great unity, that of God's larger work. In this way Traherne's speaker has a bivalent view of boundaries, desiring on the one hand to differentiate himself from other creatures and at the same time deriving spiritual and erotic satisfaction from breaking down those very barriers.

While Traherne at times responds to the dissolution of borders by reconsolidating the boundaries around his own self, he more frequently seems less concerned with maintaining his individuality, accepting the breakdown of the self as the only means of fully experiencing the world, and thus fully experiencing God's love. As Kuchar suggests, Traherne accepts and even embraces a "nonpathological deployment of a fantasy structure that articulates the decomposition of the ego for nondefensive reasons."[17] We see this impulse in poems such as "My Spirit," in which the speaker aligns himself with the "Naked Simple Life" (1) that unites perception and self: "The Sence it self was I" (5). The speaker experiences his soul as unbounded, feeling "No Brims nor Borders… / …My Essence was Capacitie" (7-8). Completely pure and free of all delimitation, all boundaries, the speaker experiences the entire cosmos within his self:

O Wondrous Self! O Sphere of Light,

O Sphere of Joy most fair;

[17] Kuchar, *Divine Subjection*, 196.

O Act, O Power infinit;

O Subtile, and unbounded Air!

O Living Orb of Sight!

Thou which within me art, yet Me! Thou Ey,

And Temple of his Whole Infinitie!

O what a World art Thou! (103-10)

The repetition of O and the frequent use of exclamation points lends this passage a rhapsodic and rapturous quality. Traherne's speaker synecdochizes himself as an "Ey" that, through the pure "unbounded Air" of perception, make him into a "Temple of his Whole Infinitie." This passage might seem radically narcissistic, insofar as the speaker's rapturous praise applies to himself, rather than to God or to creation. However, because he contains multitudes, because all creation is located in himself, the speaker's self-praise can simultaneously be construed as a form of worship.[18] By removing all boundaries between self and world (or, more accurately, never erecting those boundaries in the first place), the speaker celebrates the "Secret self I had enclosd within, / That was not bounded with my Clothes or Skin, / Or terminated with my Sight" ("Nature," 19-21). Extending the boundaries of the self beyond the self, the speaker opens himself up to all of the pleasures of God and the world.

This capacity to experience all of creation, to be "the Primitive Eternal Spring, / The Endless Ocean of each Glorious Thing" ("The Circulation," 78-79) containing "All the fair Treasures of his Bliss" (82) conduces to not only human but also divine pleasure.

[18] See Clements, *Mystical Vision,* 9.

In a series of poems omitted from Philip's folio, Traherne remarkably identifies human sensory and perceptual delight as a primary way in which God himself takes pleasure in his creation. In "The Demonstration," for example, Traherne takes human exceptionalism to the extreme, suggesting that humans possess capacities even God himself lacks:

The GODHEAD cannot prize
The Sun at all, nor yet the Skies,
Or Air, or Earth, or Trees, or Seas,
Or Stars unless the Soul of Man they pleas. (43-46)

God, Traherne claims, only values—is indeed only able to value—the physical objects of the universe he himself created when they "pleas" human souls: "The Joy and Pleasure which his Soul doth take / In all his Works, is for his Creatures sake" (51-52). Such pleasure arises because "In them he sees, and feels, and Smels, and Lives, / In them Affected is to whom he gives" (71-72). God vicariously participates in and derives pleasure from the world through identifying with the human senses of sight, touch, and smell. This identification has two preconditions. The first is humans' ability to perceive Truth and "Highest Things" (1), which are surprisingly both "Easiest to be shewn" (1) and "capable of being *Known*" (2). The perception of "Highest Things" "ravish[es] distant Sence" (14) by "violence" (13), which entails breaking down the contours of the individual to allow pure, unfettered perception to filter through the self—to become "all Ey" ("My Spirit," 29). The second condition is only implied, but nevertheless necessary: humans must be open to experiencing God in both the soul and the senses. This conception obliterates, then, barriers between physical world and self as well as barriers between the self and God. "The Recovery" similarly demonstrates the vicarious quality

of God's pleasure; here, though God does not directly participate in the sensory experience of the world (as he does in "The Demonstration"), his pleasure is the direct result of the delight experienced by his creatures:

> To see us but receiv, is such as Sight
> As makes his Treasures infinit!
> […]
> Yea more, His Love doth take Delight
> To make our Glory Infinite
> Our Blessedness to see
> Is even to the Deitie
> A Beatifick Vision! He attains
> His Ends while we enjoy. In us He reigns.
>
> For God enjoyd is all his End.
> Himself he then doth Comprehend. (1-12)

Traherne's God is a god of pleasure but one who can comprehend himself only through being "enjoyd" by his creatures, the erotic valences of the word heightened by the exclamatory tone of the stanza. This God delights in human pleasure: "And since our Pleasure is the End, / We must his Goodness and his Lov attend" (23-24). The point of worship is, simply, "Pleasure," and pleasure that is both received and expressed through "Hands and Lips and Eys / And Hearts and Soul" (41-42). The physicalized sites of both the pleasure and humans' performance of gratitude for God's "Goodness and his Lov"

again reminds us of the centrality of the material body to Traherne's conception of perception and pleasure alike.

The pleasures experienced by God and human in this short subsequence take on the explicitly erotic tone hinted at by "enjoy" and "enjoyd" in "The Recovery," a poem that further characterizes God's delight in the seminiferous terms "Nectar" and "Cream." Similarly, in "The Anticipation," the speaker claims that "His Goodness infinitely doth desire, / To be by all possest" (94-95). God, for Traherne, wishes to be possessed and enjoyed by all, words with specifically sexual undertones in the period. This sensuality is further developed in "Another," the poem immediately following "The Recovery." The poem opens with the line "He seeks for ours as we do seek for his" (1), which highlights the reciprocity of desires the speaker lays out—the line reads as a more decorous version of "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." In the following stanzas, the speaker characterizes God as infinitely and incomprehensibly ardent:

> His Earnest Lov, his Infinit Desires,
> His Living, Endless, and Devouring fires,
> Do rage in Thirst, and fervently require
> A lov, tis strange it should desire.
> […]
> He prizes our Lov with infinit Esteem.
> And seeks it so that it doth almost seem
> Even all his Blessedness. (5-15)

In a happy coincidence of language change having come full circle, we can characterize God as *thirsty* in both the early modern devotional and contemporary memetic sense—

God is here a "fervently" desiring subject seeking relief from the "Living, Endless, and Devouring fires" that "rage in Thirst." While much devotional poetry characterizes the love of the religious devotee for God in such an erotic and violent way, here God is given the aspects of the feverishly desiring lover. God may burn with desire, but he still provides his lovers with a "Glorious Spring" (10) and "fountain" (31), the gushing waters not only suggesting baptism (though surely they do so) but also taking on an ejaculatory quality. It is the duty of the religious devotee to reciprocate God's desire, to be sure, but the important thing here is that God himself is an ardently, erotically desiring subject; only through vicariously experiencing the pleasures of his followers is he finally satisfied. That is, for God, Traherne audaciously suggests, identification with and removal of the barriers between himself and his devotees is the path to pleasure.

Bliss is, for Traherne's speaker, the unmediated appreciation of all of God's creation. As he says in "Dumnesse," his only task is

> To see all Creatures full of Deities;
> Especialy Ones self: And to Admire
> The Satisfaction of all True Desire:
> Twas to be Pleasd with all that God hath done;
> Twas to Enjoy *even All* beneath the Sun:
> Twas with a Steddy and immediat Sence
> To feel and measure all the Excellence
> Of Things: Twas to inherit Endless Treasure,
> And to be fild with Everlasting Pleasure:

To reign in Silence, and to Sing alone

To see, love, Covet, hav, Enjoy and Prais, in one:

To Prize and to be ravishd. (40-51)

In lines again tellingly omitted from Philip's *Poems of Felicity,* Traherne suggests that "all Creatures" are "full of Deities"—everyone contains not just God but gods. Allowing others into the self allows the "Satisfaction of all True Desire," the ability to "Enjoy *even All*" things and to "measure all [their] Excellence." This bringing of others into the self allows the speaker to "see, love, Covet, hav, Enjoy and Prais," the breathless, rushed-together verbs lacking distinctions even as they designate quite different acts and affects. Interestingly, all of these have something of a sexual valence—coveting and loving are the actions of a desiring lover, and having and enjoying are both euphemisms for the sex act itself—even though it is not, I think, the dominant one. This section culminates in the speaker's ravishment, although here, he is not the active agent as he has been throughout the poem; rather, this opening of his soul to "Deities" eliminates the barriers preventing his ravishment by God as the poem switches into passive voice. Traherne similarly understands his relationship to God as a state of ravishment in "Amendment," where "It ravisheth my Soul to see the End, / To which this Work so Wonderfull doth tend" (7-8). As Stewart suggests, for Traherne, "A proper understanding of the world and the imitation of divine self-love are one and the same thing. The truth emanating from the world is that love annihilates the boundaries between the self and the other."[19] This

[19] Stewart, *Expanded Voice*, 154.

erosion of boundaries allows Traherne to become more explicitly erotic, as in the subsequent poem, "Silence":

> His Gifts, and my Possessions, both our Treasures;
>
> He mine, and I the Ocean of his Pleasures.
>
> He was an Ocean of Delights from Whom
>
> The Living Springs and Golden Streams did com:
>
> My Bosom was an Ocean into which
>
> They all did run. And me they did enrich. (69-74)

Reminiscent of Crashavian liquid erotics, both God and the speaker are "Oceans" of pleasures or delights, the shared descriptor semantically blurring the boundaries between speaker and God. God is even more liquifacient, however, pouring his "Living Springs and Golden Streams" into the speaker's "Bosom." The lack of distinction between man and God enables this remarkable ejaculatory image of the speaker's opened breast receiving all of God's "Golden Streams." This poem neatly reverses the logic of Crashaw verse examined earlier: while Crashaw uses erotic language to attempt to break down the distance between his speakers or subjects and the divine, for Traherne, the lack of boundaries is given and allows his erotic contact with God.

The most ecstatic of Traherne's poems is, I think, not coincidentally the one most amenable to an eroticized reading. Giving the title "Christ's Ganymede" to Rambuss's chapter on early modern "homodevotion" (the opening chapter of *Closet Devotions*), Traherne's "Love" is in some ways singular in its intensity of erotic rapture, and yet participates in similar impulses as his other poems that advocate breakdown of the physical and conceptual boundaries of the self. Opening with a series of staccato

exclamations, it is difficult to avoid hearing a rapturous (one might say orgasmic) tone in the first stanza:

O Nectar! O Delicious Stream!
O ravishing and only Pleasure! Where
Shall such another Theme
Inspire my Tongue with Joys, or pleas mine Ear!
Abridgement of Delights!
And Queen of Sights!
O Mine of Rarities! O Kingdom Wide!
O more! O Caus of all! O Glorious Bridge!
O God! O Bride of God! O King!
O Soul and Crown on evry Thing! (1-10)

Though heavily endstopped internally, the enjambment of lines two through four emphasizes how the different entities populating this poem run together in the subsequent exclamatory list. The "ravishing and only Pleasure" of these lines is attributed indiscriminately to "O God! O Bride of God! O King!" suggesting a lack of distinction among the roles. The pleasures that enrapture the senses—the "Tongue," the "Ear"—are specifically liquid ones, God's "Nectar" and "Delicious Stream." These liquids pick up a more explicitly ejaculatory connotation when the speaker alludes to the myth of Danae:

Joys down from Heaven on my Head to shower
And Jove beyond the Fiction doth appear
Once more in Golden Rain to come.
To Danae's Pleasing Fruitfull Womb. (27-30)

Again the heavy enjambment creates the sense of onward-rushing verse, the lines building to a climax deferred until the following stanza. Heavenly joys "shower" down on the speaker, who sees God as being "Jove beyond the Fiction." While the speaker invokes "Danae's Pleasing Fruitfull Womb," he does not take up that identification himself. Rather, he is

> His Ganimede! His Life! His Joy!
> Or he comes down to me, or takes me up
> That I might be his Boy,
> And fill, and taste, and give, and Drink the Cup.
> […]
> I am his Image, and his Friend.
> His Son, Bride, Glory, Temple, End. (31-40)

The homoeroticized relationship between God and his "Ganimede," "his Boy," evokes the sexy young cupbearer who received Jove's amorous attentions and whose name became an eponym for male prostitute in the early modern period; the language of "fill, and taste, and give, and Drink" suggests any number of seminal operations within the speaker.[20] Strikingly, however, while the language of "Ganimede" would position the speaker as the inferior or passive partner to an active God, these actions are described as reciprocal, both active and passive, and are performed by each partner. In fact, the poem closes with a striking admission of reciprocity or equality between God and the speaker.

[20] Although the designation of himself as God's "Bride," while fairly conventional in the Christian tradition, problematizes a reading that suggests that Traherne's speaker inhabits a purely masculine position; rather, as Stewart suggests, "the theme of fullness in love includes…a merging of sexual roles" (*Expanded Voice*, 197). See Rambuss for a discussion of the phrase "His Ganimede" (*Closet Devotions,* 54).

Positioning himself as the "Image" and "Friend" to God—positions available only to equals—the speaker closes the poem with a highly compressed series of images that eliminate distinctions between various forms of being, and between himself and the divine more generally.

The Dobell sequence closes by retreating from this climax and from the more heavily embodied ideas of bliss. Physical bliss, though never vanishing entirely, is subordinated to the "Invisible, yet Infinite" ("Thoughts" I, 11) capacity of the intellect. In "Thoughts" I (one of four poems titled "Thoughts" in the last eight lyrics of the sequence), thoughts are "The Heavenly Streams which fill the Soul with rare / Transcendent Perfect Pleasures" (26-27). The appeal of thoughts is specifically their omnipresence and ability to go where the body cannot; in a rare example from the natural world, Traherne compares them to bees that "flie from Flower to Flower, / Appear in Evry Closet, Temple, Bower; / And suck the Sweet from thence" (73-75). Thoughts retain the greedy orality belonging to the animal world, but can also penetrate the most private of interior spaces, the "Closet," as well as the holiest, the "Temple." This contemplation leads the speaker to what should by now be a familiarly ecstatic stanza:

O ye *Conceptions* of Delight!
Ye that *inform* my Soul with Life and Sight!
Ye Representatives, and Springs
Of inward Pleasure!
Ye Joys! Ye Ends of Outward Treasure!
Ye Inward, and ye Living Things
The Thought, or Joy Conceived is

The inward Fabrick of my Standing Bliss. (49-56)

Soon hereafter described in yet another asyndetonic line as "Quintessence, Elixar, Spirit, Cream" (59), the erotic bliss offered by these thoughts is again highly liquid, "Springs / of inward Pleasure." The language further suggests fertility, using two cognates of "conceived" within these eight lines; that the bliss "*inform*[s]" the soul suggests that bliss not only teaches, but also creates—"in-forms"—the soul. The soul's life and sight, then, is constituted by the permanent, phallic "Standing Bliss" the lines lay out. The distinction between subject and object is blurred again in "Thoughts" (II), where the "Delicate and Tender Thought" (1) is not informed into the speaker, but is rather something he bears himself: "It is the fruit of all his Works, / Which we conceive, / Bring forth, and Give" (3-5). Blurring the boundaries of gender, the speaker suggests that God begets thoughts upon humankind, which conceives and bears these children of bliss. Even as the heightened eroticism of "Love" abates slightly in the "Thoughts" poems, then, they remain preoccupied with eroticizing the elimination of boundaries between self and God as the necessary precondition for bliss.

The impulses of "Love" and the "Thoughts" poems are united in "Ye hidden Nectars" and "Desire," which both employ the overtly sexual language of the former while insisting on the non-corporeal aspects of bliss of the latter. In both poems, bliss is represented as being highly liquid and ejaculatory, the "hidden Nectars" (1) and "Heavenly Streams" (2) of "Ye hidden Nectars" and the explicitly interior yet still physicalized "Living Flowing Inward Melting, Bright / And Heavenly Pleasures" (62-63) of "Desire," the latter's lack of punctuation emphasizing how Traherne's erotic relies on the complete breakdowns of divisions between not only self and other, but within

language itself. The speaker of "Ye hidden Nectars" is "ravished with Joy" (22) when God does "Delight, invade" (27) him, the asyndeton highlighting the close connection between the two actions in the speaker's mind. Through this delightful invasion, God will satisfy the "Incredible Delights" (31), "Fires" (31), "Appetites" (32), "Joys" (32), "Desires" (33) he occasions; this language is mimicked in "Desire," where God provokes "Feasts, and Living Pleasures!" (41), "Bridal Joys!" (44), "High Delights" (44), "Appetites!" (45) and "Sweet Affections" (46). Such longing for God is slaked not through physical means, but through pure perception: "For not the Objects, but the Sence / Of Things, doth Bliss to Souls dispence, / And make it Lord like Thee" ("Desire," 57-59). Through opening oneself inwardly to the experience of God, to the possibility of unfettered pure perception, the subject finally eliminates the distinction between himself and God.

For Traherne, eroticism does not break down the barriers between the self and other, between man and God, allowing for the articulation of new forms of self; rather, the complete lack of barriers within and without his ideal subject creates the preconditions for erotic contact with divinity. Traherne's poetic is, in some ways, supremely egotistical in a manner only dreamt of by Donne—all things are contained within the self, the contours of the body serving only to contain all of creation within. However, this egoism ultimately leads him to direct apprehension of God in ways inaccessible to the other poets within these pages. In many ways reversing the trajectory of desire and identity I have been tracing throughout this project, Traherne begins refusing to delineate boundaries between different things and categories of being. By rejecting the distinction between the self and other, by employing a poetic that

emphasizes conjunction and connection rather than distinction and hierarchy, Traherne articulates an erotics accessible only with the full submersion of self in other and other in self. Ceding the integrity of the individual, as Traherne shows, does not mean losing oneself; rather, it means accessing an unimaginable, finally unarticulable, world of bliss.

REFERENCES CITED

Adams, Robert Martin. "Taste and Bad Taste in Metaphysical Poetry: Richard Crashaw and Dylan Thomas." *Hudson Review* 8 (1955): 61-77.

Adelman, Janet. "Making Defect Perfection: Shakespeare and the One-Sex Model." In *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage,* edited by Viviana Comensoli & Anne Russell, 23-52. Urbana, IL: U. Illinois Press, 1999.

Allen, Don Cameron. "On *Venus and Adonis*." In *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson in Honour of His Seventieth Birthday*, edited by Frank Percy Wilson, 100-11. Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Press, 1959.

Allison, A. F. "Some Influences in Crashaw's Poem 'On a Prayer Booke Sent to Mrs. M. R.'" *Review of English Studies* 23 (1947): 34-42.

Asals, Heather. "*Venus and Adonis:* The Education of a Goddess." *SEL* 13 (1973): 31-51.

Bach, Rebecca Ann. "(Re)Placing Donne in the History of Sexuality." *ELH* 72, no. 1 (2005): 259-89.

Bacon, Francis. *Sylva Sylvarum: or A Naturall History.* London, 1627.

Baker, Moira P. "'The Uncanny Stranger on Display': The Female Body in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Love Poetry." *South Atlantic Review* 56, no. 2 (1991): 7-25.

Baldwin, T.W. *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets*. Urbana, IL: U. Illinois Press, 1950.

Barnes, Andrew William. *Post-Closet Masculinities in Early Modern England*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell U. Press, 2009.

Barnfield, Richard. *The Affectionate Shepheard.* In *The Complete Poems*, edited by George Klawitter. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna U. Press, 1990.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1962.

Bate, Jonathan. "Sexual Perversity in *Venus and Adonis*." *Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993): 80-92.

Bates, Catherine. *Masculinity and the Hunt: Wyatt to Spenser*. Oxford U. Press, 2013.

———. *Masculinity, Gender, and Identity in the English Renaissance Lyric.* Cambridge U. Press, 2007.

Bell, Ilona. “Courting Anne More.” *John Donne Journal* 19 (2000): 59-86.

———. “Gender Matters: The Women in Donne’s Poems.” In *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, edited by Achsah Guibbory, 201-16. Cambridge U. Press, 2006.

———. “Oral Sex and Verbal Tricks: John Donne and Renaissance Sexual Practice.” *John Donne Journal* 29 (2010): 45-76.

———. “The Role of the Lady in Donne’s Songs and Sonets.” *SEL* 23 (1983): 113-29.

Belsey, Catherine. “Love as Trompe-l’oeil: Taxonomies of Desire in *Venus and Adonis*.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1995): 257-76.

Benet, Diana Treviño. “Sexual Transgression in Donne’s *Elegies*.” *Modern Philology* 92, no. 1 (1994): 14-35.

Berger, Harry. *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making.* Berkeley: U. California Press, 1988.

Bernard of Clairvaux. *Selected Works*. Edited by Jean Leclercq & Ewert Cousins. Translated by G.R. Evans. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987.

Bersani, Leo. *The Freudian Body*. New York: Columbia U. Press, 1986.

———. “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (1987): 197-222.

Billing, Valerie. “The Queer Erotics of Size in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*.” *Shakespeare Studies* 45 (2017): 131-36.

Bobo, Elizabeth. “‘Chaf’d Muscatts Pores’: The Not-So-Good Mistress in Donne’s ‘The Comparison.’” *ANQ* 25 (2012): 168-74.

Braden, Gordon. *The Classics and English Renaissance Poetry*. New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1978.

Bray, Alan. *Homosexuality in Renaissance England.* Morningside ed. New York: Columbia U. Press, 1992.

Bredbeck, Gregory W. *Sodomy and Interpretation: Marlowe to Milton*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1991.

Breitenberg, Mark. *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*. Cambridge U. Press, 1996.

Bromley, James M. “Intimacy and the Body in Seventeenth-Century Religious Devotion.” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 11 (2005): 1-41.

Browne, Thomas. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Kevin Killeen. Oxford U. Press, 2014.

Brumble, H. David. “John Donne’s ‘The Flea’: Some Implications of the Poetic and Encyclopedia Flea Tradition.” *Critical Quarterly* 15 (1973): 147-54.

Bush, Douglas. *Mythology & the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry*. Revised ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: U. California Press, 1984.

Cadden, Joan. *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*. Cambridge U. Press, 1993.

Callaghan, Dympna. “(Un)natural Loving: Swine, Pets, and Flowers in *Venus and Adonis*.” In *Textures of Renaissance Knowledge*, edited by Philippa Berry & Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, 58-78. Manchester U. Press, 2003.

Canfield, Douglas J. *The Baroque in English Neoclassical Literature*. Newark: U. Delaware Press, 2003.

Cantelupe, Eugene B. “An Iconographical Interpretation of *Venus and Adonis*.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1963): 141-51.

Carey, John. *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art.* New paperback ed. London: Faber & Faber, 1990.

Carr, Helen. “Donne’s Masculine Persuasive Force.” In *Jacobean Poetry and Prose: Rhetoric, Representation, and the Poetic Imagination,* edited by Clive Bloom, 96-118. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Caserio, Robert L., Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, & Tim Dean. “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory.” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819-28.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. U. Chicago Press, 1992.

Chang, Leah. *Into Print: The Production of Female Authorship in Early Modern France.* Newark: U. Delaware Press, 2009.

Cirillo, A.R. “The Fair Hermaphrodite: Love-Union in the Poetry of Donne and Spenser.” *SEL* 9, no. 1 (1969): 81-95.

Clements, Arthur C. *The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1969.

Cohen, J.M. *The Baroque Lyric.* London: Hutchinson U. Library, 1963.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria: Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions.* New York: Macmillan, 1926.

Corthell, Ronald. *Ideology and Desire in Renaissance Poetry: The Subject of Donne.* Detroit: Wayne State U. Press, 1997.

Crashaw, Richard. *The English Poems of Richard Crashaw.* Edited by Richard Rambuss. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2013.

Crawford, Patricia M. *Blood, Bodies, and Families in Early Modern England*. Harlow, UK: Pearson/Longman, 2004.

Crewe, Jonathan. "The Garden State: Marvell's Poetics of Enclosure." In *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property, and Culture in Early Modern England*, edited by Richard Burt & John Michael Archer, 270-90. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1994.

Curran, Kevin. *Shakespeare's Legal Ecologies: Law and Distributed Selfhood*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U. Press, 2017.

Daigle, Lennet. "*Venus and Adonis:* Some Traditional Contexts." *Shakespeare Studies* 13 (1980): 31-46.

Daniel, Drew. *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance*. New York: Fordham U. Press, 2013.

Daniel, Samuel. *Delia*. In *Poems and a Defence of Ryme*. Edited by Arthur Colby Sprague. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1930.

Daston, Lorraine, & Katharine Park. "Hermaphrodites in Renaissance France." *Critical Matrix* 1, no. 5 (1985): 1-19.

Dickerson, Phoebe. "'The Lanthorn's Side': Skin, Soul, and the Poetry of Thomas Traherne." In *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought,* edited by Elizabeth S. Dodd & Cassandra Gorman, 31-47. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016.

DiGangi, Mario. *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*. Cambridge U. Press, 1997.

DiPasquale, Theresa M. "Donne, Women, and the Spectre of Misogyny." In *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, edited by Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, & M. Thomas Hester, 678-89. Oxford U. Press, 2011.

———. “Donne’s Naked Time,” *John Donne Journal* 29 (2010): 33-44.

———. “Hearing the ‘harmonious chime’ in Donne’s ‘To his Mistress going to bed.’” *ANQ* 21, no. 3 (2008): 19-28.

———. “Receiving a Sexual Sacrament: ‘The Flea’ as Profane Eucharist.” In *John Donne’s Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, edited by Raymond-Jean Frontain & Frances Malpezzi, 81-95. Conway, AK: U. of Central Arkansas Press, 1995.

DiSanto, Michael. “Andrew Marvell’s Ambivalence toward Adult Sexuality.” *SEL* 48, no. 1 (2008): 165-82.

Docherty, Thomas. *John Donne, Undone*. London: Methuen, 1986.

Dodd, Elizabeth S., & Cassandra Gorman, eds. *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016.

Donne, John. *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*. Edited by C.A. Patrides. London: J.M. Dent and Son, 1985.

———. *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 2: The Elegies*. Edited by Gary A. Stringer. Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 2000.

Drayton, Michael. *Idea*. In *The Works of Michael Drayton*, *Volume II*, edited by J. William Hebel, Kathleen Tillotson, & Bernard H. Newdigate. Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1932.

Dubrow, Heather *Captive Victors: Shakespeare’s Narrative Poems and Sonnets.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1987.

———. *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1995.

Duffy, Timothy. “Epistolary Copulation in John Donne’s Verse Letters.” *SEL* 59, no. 1 (2019): 67-90.

Duncan-Jones, Katherine. “Much Ado with Red and White: The Earliest Readers of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593).” *Review of English Studies* 44, no. 176 (1993): 479-501.

Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 2004.

Egan, Gabriel. “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: The Unexpected Return of the Elizabethan World Picture.” *Literature Compass* 1 (2004).

Eliot, T.S. *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926, and The Turnbull Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University, 1933*. Edited by Ronald Schuchard. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994.

Empson, William. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. New York: New Directions, 1974.

———. *Using Biography.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1984.

Enterline, Lynn. "Psychoanalytic Criticism: Reading *Venus and Adonis*." In *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Stanley Wells & Lena Cowen Orlin, 463-71. Oxford U. Press, 2003.

Estrin, Barbara L. *Laura: Uncovering Gender and Genre in Wyatt, Donne, and Marvell.* Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 1994.

Feinstein, Sandy. "Donne's Elegy 19: The Busk Between a Pair of Bodies." *SEL* 34 (1994): 61-77.

Fienberg, Nona. "Thematics of Value in *Venus and Adonis*." *Criticism* 31 (1989): 21-32.

Fischer, Sandra. "Crashaw, Ste. Teresa, and the Icon of Mystical Ravishment." *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 4 (1983): 182-95.

Fish, Stanley. "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne's Verbal Power." In *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, edited by Elizabeth D. Harvey & Katharine Eisaman Maus, 223-52. U. Chicago Press, 1990.

Fisher, Will. "The Erotics of Chin-Chucking in Early Modern England." In *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, edited by James Bromley & Will Stockton, 141-67. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2013.

Flynn, Dennis. "Donne and a Female Coterie." *Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 1, nos. 1-2 (1989): 127-36.

Freitas, Roger. "The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato." *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 2 (2003): 196-249.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Translated by James Strachey. Rev. ed. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Frost, William. *Dryden and Future Shock*. U. Victoria Press, 1976.

Funari, Anthony. "'Companions of My Thoughts More Green': Damon's Baconian Sexing of Nature." *Early English Studies* 3 (2010): 1-29.

Gardner, Helen, ed. *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*. By John Donne. Oxford: Clarendon, 1965.

———. *The Metaphysical Poets*. Cambridge U. Press, 1957.

Gil, Daniel Juan. *Before Intimacy: Asocial Sexuality in Early Modern England*. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2006.

Gilbert, Ruth. *Early Modern Hermaphrodites: Sex and Other Stories*. Basingstroke, UK: Palgrove Macmillan, 2002.

Goldberg, Jonathan. *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities.* Stanford U. Press, 1992.

Greene, Thomas. "The Poetics of Discovery: A Reading of Donne's 'Elegy 19.'" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2, no. 2 (1989): 129-43.

Grew, Nehemiah. *The Anatomy of Plants*. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1965.

Grzegorzewska Malgorzata. "God's Part, the Woman's Part: John Donne's Maps." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 51, no. 3 (2003): 272-86.

Guibbory, Achsah. "'Oh, Let Mee Not Serve So': The Politics of Love in Donne's Elegies." *ELH* 57, no. 4 (1990): 811-33.

Guy-Bray, Stephen. "Animal, Vegetable, Sexual: Metaphor in John Donne's 'Sappho to Philaenis' and Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden.'" In *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, edited by James Bromley & Will Stockton, 195-212. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2013.

Halley, Janet E. "Anne Donne, John Donne, and the Sexual Poetics of Textual Exchange." In *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism,* edited by Sheila Fisher & Janet E. Halley, 187-206. Knoxville: U. Tennessee Press, 1989.

Halpern, Richard. "Autopoiesis and History in Donne's Songs and Sonnets." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6, no. 1 (1993): 185-216.

Hammond, Paul. "Marvell's Sexuality." *The Seventeenth Century* 11 (1996): 87-123.

Harvey, Elizabeth. "Matrix as Metaphor: Midwifery and the Conception of Voice." In *John Donne*, edited by Andrew Mouseley, 133-56. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999.

Hatto, A.T. "*Venus and Adonis*: And the Boar." *The Modern Language Review* 41, no. 3 (1946): 353-61.

Healy, Thomas F. *Richard Crashaw*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986.

Herrick, Robert. *Poetical Works*. Edited by L.C. Martin. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.

Hester, M. Thomas. "'this cannot be said': A Preface to the Reader of Donne's Lyrics." *Christianity and Literature* 39 (1990): 365-85.

Holmes, Michael Morgan. *Early Modern Metaphysical Literature: Nature, Custom, and Strange Desires*. Basingstroke, UK: Palgrave, 2001.

Holstun, James. "'Will you Rent our Ancient Love Asunder?': Lesbian Elegy in Donne, Marvell, and Milton. *ELH* 54, no. 4 (1987): 835-67.

Horn, Matthew. "A Safe Space for the Texted Icon: Richard Crashaw's Use of the Emblem Tradition in His Devotional Lyrics." *Exemplaria* 20, no. 4 (2008): 410-29.

Howard, Jean E. "The Early Modern and the Homoerotic Turn in Political Criticism." *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998): 105-20.

Huebert, Ronald. "'Study our Manuscripts': John Donne's Problems with Privacy." *The Seventeenth Century* 26, no. 1 (2011): 1-22.

Iyengar, Sujata. *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England.* Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

Johnson, Kimberly. *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England*. Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

Johnston, Carol Ann. "Heavenly Perspectives, Mirrors of Eternity: Thomas Traherne's Yearning Subject." *Criticism* 43, no. 4 (2001): 377-405.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Contentious Readings: Urban Humanism and Gender Difference in *La Puce de Madame Des-Roches* (1582)." *Renaissance Quarterly* 48 (1995): 109-29.

Jones, Melissa J. "Spectacular Impotence: Or, Things That Hardly Ever Happen in the Critical History of Pornography." In *Sex Before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England,* edited by James M. Bromley & Will Stockton, 89-110. Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2013.

Kadue, Katie. “Sustaining Fiction: Preserving Patriarchy in Marvell’s *Upon Appleton House*.” *Studies in Philology* 114, no. 3 (2017): 641-61.

Kahn, Coppélia. “Self and Eros in *Venus and Adonis.*” *The Centennial Review* 20, no. 4 (1976): 351-71.

Keach, William. *Elizabethan Erotic Narratives: Irony and Pathos in the Ovidian Poetry of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Their Contemporaries.* New Brunswick: Rutgers U. Press, 1977.

Kelley, Shannon. “Desire, a Crooked Yearning, and the Plants of *Endymion*.” *Renaissance Drama* 44, no. 1 (2016): 1-23.

Kerrigan, William. “Kiss Fancies in Robert Herrick.” *George Herbert Journal* 14, nos. 1-2 (1990/1991): 155-71.

———. “Marvell and Nymphets.” *Greyfriar: Siena Studies in Literature* 27 (1986): 3-21.

Kershaw, Alison. “'Consider it All’: Traherne's Revealing of the Cosmic Christ in *The Kingdom of God.*” In *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought,* edited by Elizabeth S. Dodd & Cassandra Gorman, 84-104. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016.

King, Thomas. *The Gendering of Men, 1600-1750, v. 1: The English Phallus.* Madison: U. Wisconsin Press, 2004.

Knowles, Ronald. Introduction to *King Henry VI: Part II,* by William Shakespeare. Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 1999.

Kolin, Philip C. “Venus and/or Adonis and the Critics.” In *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip C. Kolin, 3-65. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.

Kuchar, Gary. *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne U. Press, 2005.

Labriola, Albert C. “Painting and Poetry of the Cult of Elizabeth I: The Ditchley Portrait and Donne’s ‘Elegie: Going to Bed.’” *Studies in Philology* 93, no. 1 (1996): 42-63.

Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1990.

Larsen, Anne R. “On Reading *La Puce de Madame Des-Roches*: Catherine des Roches’s *Responces* (1583).” *Renaissance and Reformation* 22, no. 2 (1998): 63-75.

Lerner, Ross. “Donne’s Annihilation.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 44, no. 2 (2014): 407-27.

Levine, Laura. *Men in Women’s Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642*. Cambridge U. Press, 1996.

Levy-Navarro, Elena. “Resisting Fatphobia in the Critical Tradition of *Venus and Adonis.*” In *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture,* edited by Elena Levy-Navarro, 175-91. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010.

Lewis, C.S. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954.

Lindheim, Nancy. “The Shakespearean *Venus and Adonis.*” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1986): 190-203.

Long, Kathleen P. *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.

Mansour, Wisam. “Donne’s ‘The Flea.’” *The Explicator* 65 (2006): 7-9.

———. “Gender Ambivalence in Donne’s ‘Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.’” *ELN* 42, no. 4 (2005): 19-23.

Marotti, Arthur. *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1995.

Marshall, Cynthia. *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity and Early Modern Texts.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 2002.

Marvell, Andrew. *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*. Edited by Nigel Smith. Revised ed. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Maurette, Pablo. “Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and Sixteenth-Century Kiss Poetry.” *English Literary Renaissance* 47, no. 3 (2017): 355-79.

Meakin, H.L. *John Donne’s Articulations of the Feminine*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Meeker, Natania, & Antónia Szabari. “Libertine Botany: Vegetal Sexualities, Vegetal Forms.” *postmedieval* 9 (2018): 478-89.

Menon, Madhavi. “Spurning Teleology in *Venus and Adonis*.” *GLQ* 11, no. 4 (2005): 491-519.

Merrix, Robert P. "'Lo, in This Hollow Cradle Take Thy Rest': Sexual Conflict and Resolution in *Venus and Adonis.*" In *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*, edited by Philip C. Kolin, 341-58. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.

Miller, Robert P. "The Myth of Mars's Hot Minion in *Venus and Adonis*." *ELH* 26, no. 4 (1959): 470-81.

———. "Venus, Adonis, and the Horses." *ELH* 19, no. 4 (1952): 249-64.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Gordon Teskey. New York: Norton, 2005.

Mintz, Susannah B. "The Crashavian Mother." *SEL* 39, no. 1 (1999): 111-29.

———. "'Forget the hee and shee': Gender and Play in John Donne." *Modern Philology* 98 (2001): 577-603.

———. "Strange Bodies: Thomas Traherne's Disabled Subject." In *Rereading Thomas Traherne*, edited by Jacob Blevins, 1-20. Tempe, AZ: Arizona State U. Press, 2007.

Mortimer, Anthony. *Variable Passions: A Reading of Shakespeare's* Venus and Adonis. New York: AMS Press, 2000.

Morton, Timothy. "Queer Ecology." *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 273–82.

Mueller, Janel. "Women among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Done For." *Modern Philology* 87, no. 2 (1989): 142-58.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Theory*. NYU Press, 2009.

Netzley, Ryan. "Oral Devotion: Eucharistic Theology and Richard Crashaw's Religious Lyrics." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44, no. 3 (2002): 247-72.

———. *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Poetry*. U. Toronto Press, 2011.

Newman, Karen. "Myrrha's Revenge: Ovid and Shakespeare's Reluctant Adonis." *Illinois Classical Studies* 9, no. 2 (1984): 251-65.

Orgel, Stephen. *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*. Cambridge U. Press, 1996.

———. "Nobody's Perfect: Or, Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (1989): 7-29.

Otto Friedrich Gruppe. *Minos: Über die Interpolationen in den römischen Dichtern; Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Horaz, Virgil, und Ovid*. Leipzig, 1859.

Oxford English Dictionary. "amorous, adj. and n." March 2020. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/6546?redirectedFrom=amorous (accessed March 09, 2020).

———. "feminine, adj. and n." December 2019. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/69184?redirectedFrom=feminine+rhyme (accessed March 02, 2020).

———. "sperm, n." March 2020. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/186308?rskey=CA4OmS&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed March 03, 2020).

———. "spermatic, adj. and n." March 2020. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/186322?redirectedFrom=spermatic (accessed March 03, 2020).

———. "stone, n." March 2020. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/190787?rskey=jMwazl&result=1 (accessed March 05, 2020).

Park, Katharine, & Robert A. Nye. "Destiny Is Anatomy." *The New Republic*, February 18, 1991: 53-57.

Parker, Patricia. "Literary Fat Ladies and the Production of Text." Chapter in *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property,* 8-35. London: Methuen, 1987.

Partridge, Eric. *Shakespeare's Bawdy: A Literary and Psychological Essay and Comprehensive Glossary*. Revised ed. New York: Dutton, 1969.

Paster, Gail Kern. *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1993.

Perrine, Laurence. "Explicating Donne: 'The Apparition' and 'The Flea.'" *College Literature* 17, no. 1 (1990): 1-20.

Petersson, Robert. *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini, and Crashaw.* New York: Atheneum, 1970.

Praz, Mario. "The Flaming Heart: Richard Crashaw and the Baroque." Chapter in *The Flaming Heart*. 204-63. Reprint ed. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966.

Purkiss, Diane. *Literature, Gender, and Politics during the English Civil War*. Cambridge U. Press, 2005.

Raber, Karen. *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture.* Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

Rackin, Phyllis. "Foreign Country: The Place of Women and Sexuality in Shakespeare's Historical World." In *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property, and Culture in Early Modern England,* edited by Richard Burt & John Archer, 68-95. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1994.

Rambuss, Richard. *Closet Devotions*. Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 1998.

———. "What It Feels Like for a Boy: Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*." In *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume IV*, edited by Richard Dutton & Jean E. Howard, 240-58. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

Raynie, Stephen. "The Woman's Body and the Obstacle of Specious Honor in 'The Flea.'" *ELN* 38, no. 3 (2001): 40-52.

Redpath, Theodore, ed. *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1983.

Reid, David. "Crashaw's Gallantries." *John Donne Journal* 20 (2001): 229-42.

Robbins, Robin, ed. *The Complete English Poems of John Donne.* Revised ed. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2010.

Ruti, Mari. "Why There Is Always a Future in the Future." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2008): 113–26.

Sabine, Maureen. *Feminine Engendered Faith: The Poetry of John Donne and Richard Crashaw*. London: Macmillan, 1992.

Sachs, Julius. *Geschichte der Botanik vom 16. Jahrhundert bis 1860*. Munich, 1875.

Sanchez, Melissa E. *Queer Faith: Reading Promiscuity and Race in the Secular Lyric Tradition*. NYU Press, 2019.

———. "'She Straightness on the Woods Bestows': Protestant Sexuality and English Empire in *Upon Appleton House*." In *Atlantic Worlds in the Long Eighteenth Century*, edited by Toni Bowers & Tita Chico, 81-96. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

———. "'Use Me but as Your Spaniel: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities." *PMLA* 127, no. 3 (2012): 493-511.

Sansonetti, Laetitia. “Out-Oviding Ovid in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*.” In *The Circulation of Knowledge in Early Modern English Literature,* edited by Sophie Chiari, 175-87. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015.

Saunders, Ben. *Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 2006.

Sawday, Jonathan. *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Schanfield, Lillian. “‘Tickled with Desire’: A View of Eroticism in Herrick’s Poetry.” *Literature and Psychology* 39, no. 1 (1993): 63-83.

Schenkl, Karl “Zur Kritik späterer lateinischer Dichter.” *Sitzungsberichte der Philosophisch- Historischen Klasse der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 34, nos. 1-2 (1863): 11-73.

Schoenfeldt, Michael C. *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton*. Cambridge U. Press, 1999.

Schwarz, Kathryn. “Missing the Breast: Desire, Disease, and the Singular Effect of the Amazons.” In *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, edited by David Hillman & Carla Mazzio, 147-69. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Selkin, Carl M. “The Language of Vision: Traherne’s Cataloguing Style.” *English Language Review* 6 (1976): 92-104.

Selleck, Nancy. *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne, and Early Modern Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. Edited by Stephen Booth. New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1977.

———. *Venus and Adonis*. In *The Poems*, edited by John Roe. Updated ed. Cambridge U. Press, 2006.

Shepard, Alexandra. *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

Shohet, Lauren. “Shakespeare’s Eager Adonis.” *SEL* 42, no. 1 (2002): 85-102.

Silver, Victoria. “The Obscure Script of Regicide: Ambivalence and Little Girls in Marvell’s Pastorals.” *ELH* 68, no. 1 (2001): 29-55.

Simons, Patricia. *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History.* Cambridge U. Press, 2011.

Siraisi, Nancy G. *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*. U. Chicago Press, 1990.

Smith, Bruce R. *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics*. U. Chicago Press, 1991.

———. *The Key of Green: Passion and Perception in Renaissance Culture*. U. Chicago Press, 2008.

Sorel, Charles. *The Extravagant Shepherd, the Anti-Romance, or, The History of the Shepherd Lysis*. London: 1653.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "In Search of Sincerity." *College Literature* 29, no. 8 (1968): 591-602.

Spenser, Edmund. *Amoretti and Epithalamion*. In *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, edited by William A. Oram, et. al. New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1989.

———. *The Faerie Queene*. Edited by A.C. Hamilton, 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 2006.

Spreuwenberg-Stewart, Allison. "'To His Mistress Going to Bed'; Or, 'Could You Lend Me Your Clothes?' *John Donne Journal* 18 (1999): 25-59.

Stanivukovic, Goran V. "'Kissing the Boar': Queer Adonis and Critical Practice." In *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, edited by Calvin Thomas, 87-108. Urbana, IL: U. Illinois Press, 2000.

Stewart, Stanley. *The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1970.

Streitberger, W.R. "Ideal Conduct in *Venus and Adonis*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1975): 285-91.

Sugimura, N.K. "'Divine annihilations': Richard Crashaw's Religious Politics and the Poetics of Ecstasy." *Modern Philology* 112, no. 4 (2015): 615-42.

Swann, Marjorie. "Vegetable Love: Botany and Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century England." In *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, edited by Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi, 139-59. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Symons, Arthur. “John Donne.” *Fortnightly Review* 72 (1899): 734-45.

Teller, Joseph R. “Why Crashaw was not Catholic: The Passion and Popular Protestant Devotion.” *English Literary Renaissance* 43, no. 2 (2013): 239-67.

Thauvette, Chantelle. “Defining Early Modern Pornography: The Case of *Venus and Adonis*.” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2012): 26-48.

Thomas, Courtney. “‘Not Having God Before his Eyes’: Bestiality in Early Modern England.” *The Seventeenth Century* 26, no. 1 (2011): 149-73.

Tillyard, E.M.W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1943.

Traherne, Thomas. *Centuries, Poems, and Thanksgivings.* Edited by H.R. Margoliouth. Oxford U. Press, 1958.

Traub, Valerie. *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama.* New York: Routledge, 1992.

———. *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*. Cambridge U. Press, 2002.

———. *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*. Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Wall, Wendy. *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1993.

Warren, Austin. *Richard Crashaw: A Study in Baroque Sensibility.* University, LA: Louisiana State U. Press, 1939.

Williams, Gordon. “The Coming of Age of Shakespeare’s Adonis.” *The Modern Language Review* 78, no. 4 (1983): 769-76.

Yandell, Cathy. “Of Lice and Women: La Puce de Madame des Roches.” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 1 (1990): 123-35.

Yeo, Jayme M. “Political Theology in the Poetry of Richard Crashaw.” *Literature and Theology* 25 (2011): 393–406

Young, R.V. “‘O My America, My New-Found-Land’: Pornography and Imperial Politics in Donne’s *Elegies*.” *South Central Review* 4, no. 2 (1987): 35-48.

———. *Richard Crashaw and the Spanish Golden Age*. New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1982.

Zirkle, Conway. Introduction to *The Anatomy of Plants* by Nehemiah Grew. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1965.