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“Forget the Hee and Shee”: Gender and Play in John Donne

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Donne's ambivalence about self-other relations is well known to readers of *Songs and Sonets*. Poised at the brink between leaving and lingering, Donne's speakers navigate the competing urgencies of intimacy and autonomy, what Roy Roussel has described as “the twin inevitabilities of distance and desire.”¹ In fact, we can think of the dilemma as a quadrupled one, overdetermined by the paradox that staying behind with the beloved entails both the pleasure of contact and the risk of being consumed by that contact, while parting rewards the adventurer with independence but no guarantee of his lover's faithfulness. To strengthen a self made vulnerable by the conflictual demands of this crowded psychical threshold, Donne deploys his linguistic skill—the “masculine persuasive force”² so often invoked by critics—in terms that can seem to denigrate the very women for whom the poet professes love and to undermine even the most apparently genuine expressions of devotion.

Yet the threshold is not simply or consistently a space of anxiety in Donne's love poetry, and against the need to safeguard his male identity from threatening contact with women runs a countercurrent of playful transgressiveness where Donne exhibits 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. My goal here is to suggest that Donne frequently depicts self-other dynamics in ways that extend beyond the familiar accounts of his encounters with women (e.g., pleading or arguing with them, curiosity and fear

1. Roy Roussel, *The Conversation of the Sexes: Seduction and Equality in Selected Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 7.

2. Donne, “Elegie XVI, On his Mistris,” line 5, in *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: St. Martin's, 1974). All subsequent references to Donne's poetry are to this edition, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

about their difference from—or similarity to—him, worry that he will never fully know them) toward a more radical gesture of testing the boundaries of gendered identity. Overlapping realms of self and other, male and female, appear throughout the *Songs and Sonets*, in ways that suggest less a rhetorical (and ultimately aggressive) exchange of positions than an eager dissolution of outline: the speaker of “The Relique” claims “we lov’d well and faithfully, / Yet knew not what wee lov’d, nor why, / Difference of sex no more wee knew” (lines 23–25); the speaker of “The Dampe” ambiguously exhorts his audience to “Kill mee as Woman, let mee die / As a meere man” (lines 21–22); the lover of “The Undertaking” suggests we “forget the Hee and Shee” (line 20). Even the “expansion” endured by the parting couple of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”—who like gold are pounded into an “ayery thinnesse” (lines 23–24)—transforms the distance between them as polarized, gendered selves into a continuum of connectedness, uncovering the paradox of a separation that is also a form of union. Often, too, when Donne preserves a sense of self in relation to women without feeling annihilated by proximity to another’s psyche, the connection is articulated through metaphors of sovereignty that describe both speaker and mistress: the lovers in “The Anniversarie,” who “Prince enough in one another bee” (line 14), or in “The Sunne Rising,” whom “Princes doe but play” (line 23).

Donne’s manner of blurring boundaries between male and female has typically been regarded as a way of reentrenching conventional gender roles and of suppressing the assertiveness of female sexuality. In her discussion of the elegies, for example, Achsah Guibbory argues that the “effect” of “transferring conventionally ‘masculine’ terms . . . to the woman is not to question traditional distinctions,” but rather acts as a “strategy” designed to expose the essential monstrousness of the female body and “reassert masculine dominance” with a vengeance.³ Far from transgressing gender difference in any potentially liberatory way, Guibbory contends, Donne’s acts of positioning himself as feminine or rendering the female in traditionally masculine terms are ultimately antifemale, motivated both by intense anxiety about the literal fact of a woman’s monarchical rule and by a more general worry about women’s potential influence over him in psychological or sexual ways. Diana Benet has similarly maintained that the poet is “generally conservative,” his elegies depicting sexual transgression in derisive terms that

3. Achsah Guibbory, “‘Oh, let me not serve so’: The Politics of Love in Donne’s *Elegies*,” in *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), pp. 17–36, quotations on pp. 29–30.

reinforce gender distinctions, making violation a crime to be “guilty” of.⁴ It has become something of a commonplace to speak of Donne’s coercive “ventriloquizing,” as Elizabeth Harvey does in her discussion of “Sappho to Philaenis.” Harvey asserts that Donne’s identification with Sappho “turns out to be an act of colonization”⁵ in which the male poet-speaker overpowers the woman by taking on her voice. Stanley Fish reiterates this notion of Donne as a desperate egotist: because “Donne occupies every role on his poem’s stage,” he is “protected” from “the intrusion of any voice he has not ventriloquized.” Fish also suggests that Donne’s attempts at gender reversal are doomed to collapse “in the face of a fierce and familiar desire to be master of his self”⁶ —a fate that Janel Mueller once described, somewhat differently, as Donne’s inevitably “gendered consciousness, his identity as a man.”⁷

Such discussions of Donne’s efforts to consolidate his masculine identity through rhetorical force recall Thomas Laqueur’s well-known claim that seventeenth-century conceptions of gender were bound up with a one-sex model of human physiology, in which the anatomical similarity between male and female bodies required elaborate discursive and educational codes to stabilize difference.⁸ Following this idea that gender preceded rather than derived from a sexed body, Mark Breitenberg writes that early modern male subjectivity is “inherently anxious,” because the body offered no certain ground of identity: “humoral psychology comprehends the male body as constantly in need of regulating its dangerous but nonetheless essential fluidity.” “If masculine identity is fundamentally unstable,” argues Breitenberg, “then the assertion of gender difference . . . functions as a way to compensate for the lack of anatomical guarantee of difference.”⁹ At the core of this struggle between body and discourse is the fact that “male and female seed were not seen as sexually specific,” as Anthony Fletcher

4. Diana Trevino Benet, “Sexual Transgression in Donne’s Elegies,” *Modern Philology* 92 (1994): 14–35, quotations on 34, 33.

5. Elizabeth D. Harvey, “Ventriloquizing Sappho: Ovid, Donne, and the Erotics of the Feminine Voice,” *Criticism* 31 (1989): 115–38, quotation on 126.

6. Stanley Fish, “Masculine Persuasive Power: Donne and Verbal Power,” in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 223–52, quotations on pp. 246, 242.

7. Janel Mueller, “A Woman among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Donne For,” *Modern Philology* 87 (1989): 142–58, quotation on 145.

8. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

9. Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 14, 31.

explains, so that “there was seen to be in everyone some trace at birth of gender doubleness.”¹⁰ Breitenberg’s claim that early modern male writers “stag[e] masculine loss and vulnerability for the purpose of maintaining control of the performance of one’s gendered identity”¹¹ suggests that the very conceptual ambiguity that allows for Donne’s poetic “inversions” of gender might also be what produces, as Harvey and others maintain, a rhetoric of cementing difference.¹²

Yet Donne’s recurring articulation of gender as a fluid realm of experience indicates that he was able to construe subjectivity and intimacy alike outside of a patriarchal ideology in which “woman” is first constructed and then regulated as a threatening Other. In an article on the sapphic epistle, Janel Mueller describes Donne’s “‘what if’ imaginings” as the poet’s efforts to “[bond] with Sappho across gender difference as a subject of otherwise unimagined or unimaginable possibility,” and to “[write] his way beyond the confines of a Renaissance social context.”¹³ Contrary to the notion of gender play as a carnival of transgressions that always, ultimately, reaffirms power hierarchies, I would agree with Mueller that a “what if” dynamic is at work in a number of Donne’s poems. As I hope to show, Donne’s courting of liminal experience often registers a disruption in discursively enforced gender identity and thus offers the possibility of both identification with women and a recognition of their separateness. By blueprinting Donne’s play within the space-between, such familiar tropes as teardrops, maps and globes, windowpanes, and the compass bring into view this ability to resist the static constraints of the pairs (self-other, attachment-loss, male-female) that they themselves contain, as well as the poet’s fascination with destabilizing gendered identity in a pleasurable, rather than a strictly policing, manner.

The notion of playing with and in threshold spaces, a central concern of object relations psychoanalysis, allows us to think anew about what might be at stake in a seventeenth-century male writer’s figuration of gendered selfhood. D. W. Winnicott’s concept of the “potential space” between subjects in which psychical play occurs provides an especially useful model for considering the ways in which Donne manipulates the paradox of an identity always both “male” and not fully

10. Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500–1800* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 57–58.

11. Breitenberg, p. 6.

12. The word “inversions” comes from Ronald Corthell’s *Ideology and Desire in Renaissance Poetry: The Subject of Donne* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 59.

13. Janel Mueller, “Troping Utopia: Donne’s Brief for Lesbianism,” in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 182–207, quotation on p. 184.

male. (Winnicott himself notes that the “intermediate area . . . appears in full force in the work characteristic of the so-called metaphysical poets.”)¹⁴ By definition a borderland activity, to play in Winnicott’s sense is to invite the paradox of simultaneity; the field of play is at once illusory and real, solitary and connected. In the dialectic of this “intermediate area” between self and other, the individual’s “potential” for creativity and wholeness can be fostered, even as—or perhaps precisely because—the play space imbricates internal psychical reality with the external world. Winnicott defines play as a coalescence of reliability and intimacy, a psychic activity dependent on the self’s trust that the other will neither abandon it nor intrude upon the privacy of its imagination. Anticipated by the “holding” space of nursing, play is intimate and intersubjective, a paradoxical realm in which self and other, interior and exterior, reality and fantasy, autonomy and attachment all coincide. It is the notion of loosening the borders of self in contact with the other—a way of being both “me” and “not-me” at once—that can help us to recognize how a writer like Donne might pose alternatives to his culture’s construction of gender.

Winnicott’s focus on the caregiving “environment” leads to a theory of selfhood in which no individual exists outside of its object relationships: “self” emerges from the “relational matrix,” a subject’s ongoing engagement with real people in the external world as well as with internalized imagos. Because object relations theory does not, then, in Jane Flax’s words, “require a fixed or essentialist view of ‘human nature,’”¹⁵ it becomes a useful method of exploring the representation of self-other relations in Donne’s poetry, particularly in view of what Breitenberg calls “the specifically social basis of subjectivity in the early modern period.”¹⁶ A notion of intersubjective “play” founded on mother-infant interaction also accords with recent historical studies of childhood that have contested earlier conclusions about the formality and emotional indifference of parent-child relations in the early modern period. In an article addressing seventeenth-century attitudes toward infancy and nursing, Patricia Crawford argues that “contemporaries were aware of the close bonding which occurred between mother or nurse and child,” and that “maternal love was recognised as a strong bond,” a very symbol of “the closest human love.” Crawford offers evidence that breast-feeding was believed to provide “comfort” as much as nutrition to babies and to be a source of “pleasure” to infant

14. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. xi.

15. Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 110.

16. See Breitenberg, p. 10.

and woman alike.¹⁷ Linda Pollock cites similar evidence that children were “wanted and valued,” regarded with “concern and interest” by their parents in the seventeenth century, and she contends that “the closeness of the parent-child bond” was “very much a dyadic one.”¹⁸

A further connection between object relations theory and early modern subjectivity derives from the peculiarly indeterminate nature of the body. I would argue that the early modern male infant resided, in effect, in a space of Winnicottian play, always “in-between”—subject to the instability of anatomy as well as to the absence of culturally enforced gender differentiation in the first years of life.¹⁹ To dissolve gender difference in poetic potential spaces—as Donne does—or to rest from the perpetual task of maintaining it is to evince the ambiguity of the body and to call up the psychical doubleness of a male infant’s experience of the wholly female domain into which he was born. As Anthony Fletcher shows, early modern “manhood” was equated with “separation from the mother,” signalling an end to the “sexual twinship which began with conception and the concoction of male and female seeds.”²⁰ But rather than insisting that Donne is forever at work to enforce that separation, denying a changeable self or the possibility of full engagement with women who might remind him of the discomfiting possibility of his own inconstancy, we can instead explore the way in which he plays with that very paradox. In this way, Winnicott’s central paradigms—holding, play, and potential space—help advance a reading of those poems where Donne’s speakers evoke the autochthonous pleasures of relaxing the borders of subjectivity.

Other readers of Donne who make use of psychoanalytic theories of play, most notably Anna K. Nardo in her formidable book, *The Ludic Self*, have tended to discuss threshold experience as the poet’s way of assuaging conflicting fears about separation and engulfment. In Nardo’s study, play becomes a mediatory outlook as much as an actual activity, taken up by the adult poet in order to cope with the resurgence of childhood conflicts newly triggered by the turbulent

17. Patricia Crawford, “‘The Suckling Child’: Adult Attitudes to Child Care in the First Year of Life in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Continuity and Change* 1 (1986): 23–51, quotations on 36, 41, and 32.

18. Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 103, 268, and 203.

19. Pollock writes that “the age of seven, rather than being the age when adult status was achieved, may simply have been the age when gender differentiation was regarded as appropriate.” See *A Lasting Relationship: Parents and Children over Three Centuries* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987), p. 55.

20. Fletcher (n. 10 above), pp. 86, 89.

landscape of widespread social change. Describing the witty contradictions of so many of Donne's images and poems, Nardo presents Donne as a self-conscious "player," fully aware of the fragility of the playworld his language creates.²¹ In a richly contextualized essay, William Shullenberger draws on both Nardo's and Lacan's discussions of mirroring in the mother-infant dyad, but focuses instead on triangulations in which a third party is invoked to witness acts of lovemaking (and acts of poetry making) so as to guarantee the self's stable identity. But while proposing that the most trusting moments of connectedness between adult lovers "have their experiential basis in the totalizing and exclusive intimacy of mother and child," Shullenberger does not address the possibility that Donne's male speakers get beyond an emphatically male identity.²² Indeed, they remain stably, steadily male. And while Nardo does assert that "the conflict [Donne] felt so keenly between separation and union" necessarily entails the female other, her descriptions of Donne's play vis-à-vis that other do not connect the intermediate space with a specific interest in transgressing gender or with reconfiguring male-female relations.²³

Yet it is in such moments of trespass that Donne articulates what may be his most nuanced sense of identity and of gender. Donne's overt linguistic wittiness suggests "play" in a literal sense, but he seems most actively to solicit the dialectic of play when his speakers move beyond the rules of logic and boundary and into intermediate psychical areas where they can enjoy what Winnicott called "rest"—a secure, pleasurable overlap of inner and outer, of self and other. Modern Donne scholarship seems to have moved away from an interest in the poet's "metaphysical" ingenuity and toward accounts of strain and incompleteness, particularly in terms of his relation to women. Psychoanalytic readings tend to combine the two perspectives, suggesting that verbal inventiveness masks, exposes, and assuages anxiety all at once. But there is perhaps another way of thinking about gender and emotion in Donne. In what follows, I understand Donne's playfulness to serve less as a public display of his clever intellect, or as a defense against social upheaval, than as a way of rethinking the possibilities of gender and erotic connection. Through the liminality of teardrops, windows, even the transitional act of breathing, Donne creates poetic potential spaces in which speakers enjoy intimacy without threat

21. Anna Nardo, *The Ludic Self in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

22. William Shullenberger, "Love as a Spectator Sport in John Donne's Poetry," in *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), quotation on p. 53.

23. Nardo, p. 53.

and—even as they enter into imaginative revision of the contours of their own identity—respect the subjectivity of the women they address.

The opening stanza of “The Flea” provides a compelling example of Donne’s play with gender. Here, the male seducer becomes identified with the female seduced through the mutual sucking of the insect:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou denys’ t 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
A sinne, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it wooe,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two
And this, alas, is more than wee would do.

(Lines 1–9)

The stanza radically revalues the domineering, “male” sexuality that the poem seems to be urging the woman toward. 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. He announces that he was “suck’d . . . first” (line 3), and the ambiguity of “this” in line 5 suggests that what “cannot be said / A sinne, nor shame” is at least on some level the speaker’s experience of having been pleased by that sucking—in addition to, or even superseding, the “mingled” blood that represents a more overtly heterosexualized genital coupling (and thus loss of virginity). 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”).²⁴ 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.” Thus the stanza shifts its forward motion of desire and seems instead to linger in a moment of *jouissance*—where sucking and “being fucked” take precedence over the more obvious sequence from solicitation to tumescence to coitus to completion. Moreover, what the flea “enjoyes” seems identified as the specific pleasure of being able to suck both male and female bodies—and at least in part it is this, “alas,” that is more than the male speaker will do. Thus through the knottings of

24. In his discussion of “The Flea,” Thomas Docherty writes that “the letter ‘s’ often took the form of the ‘long s,’ making it look very like an ‘f.’” See *John Donne, Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 54.

one elaborate conceit, Donne manages to identify himself both with the female body and with a kind of “bisexualized” erotic pleasure.²⁵

The speaker of “The Good-Morrow” stakes a similar claim for a kind of sexuality that transcends the binarism of heterosexuality. The mood of wonder that opens the poem feels rich and tactile, and the stanza luxuriates in a polymorphous, sensual pleasure that is childlike and erotic at once:

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?
But suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the seven sleepers den?
'Twas so; But this, all pleasures fancies bee
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee.

(Lines 1–7)

The speaker meets the morning with innocent fantasy and curiosity, as if paying a kind of marveling, rapt attention to the surprise of good feeling. What the speaker wonders about, of course, is what they “did,” prior to a moment of loving that represents being “wean'd” from childish escapades. But the pleasure the stanza records is not the moment of adult sexuality that ostensibly inaugurates this “good morrow”; in fact, it is the pleasure of not being weaned. To be weaned is to be removed from and deprived of nursing at the breast; the speaker remembers—quite delightedly—having “suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly” (line 3). (Crawford writes that since weaning was considered “a major change in the child's life,” the appropriate age for it was the source of much discussion among physicians.)²⁶ “Countrey pleasures” may be, as C. A. Patrides glosses in his edition, “rustic; hence unrefined,”²⁷ but the phrase also connotes something instinctual and unruly.²⁸ The allusion to the seven sleepers' mythic two-hundred-year sleep heightens the atmosphere of snug satisfaction, because it implies not just a space in which danger may be escaped but also a drawn-out replenishment. The speaker increases the sense of restful content

25. See Richard Rambuss's discussion of the homoerotics of Donne's religious poetry in “Pleasure and Devotion: The Body of Jesus and Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric,” in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 253–79.

26. Crawford, p. 34.

27. Patrides, ed. (n. 2 above), p. 48.

28. Ilona Bell renders the phrase “cunt-ry” to underscore not so much the infantile sensuality being described but still a more oral one than the weaning intercourse of “lov'd.” See “The Role of the Lady in Donne's *Songs and Sonets*,” *Studies in English Literature* 23 (1983): 113–29, quote on 123.

with “den” and “snorted,” which suggest a self so deeply comfortable that it can be unconscious of its surroundings.²⁹ In these first few lines, pleasure is associated with deliberately and intensely “childish” behaviors—the greedy orality of suckling, the swaddled protectedness of sleep.³⁰ Moreover, it is pleasure itself that the speaker sucks (rather than a breast or a body), as if it could be absorbed directly into the self—pure and undistilled.

The first is a stanza of affirmations, culminating in the speaker’s unequivocal “’Twas so.” The abundance of pleasure emerges through repetition (“country pleasures” and “all pleasures”), as well as by the fact that in both instances the word is plural: pleasures proliferate. Indeed, in the speaker’s compacted phrasing, “all pleasures fancies bee” (line 5) suggests not so much that all those prior pleasures are mere fancies, but rather—and more emphatically—that all pleasures and fancies exist. But for this adult, complicated, divided love, he seems to hint, pleasure could actually *be*. The ontological importance of the stanza lies in this metaphorical childhood, as a time of immediate gratification. In “The Good-Morrow,” desiring means getting, with no intervening wait to survive: “If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desir’d, and got” (lines 6–7). It is also a time in which being emerges out of a bond between self and other defined by sucking and experienced not as a connection between two ultimately separable things but as undifferentiated pleasure itself. The “dreame”-like quality of this prior existence reinforces its evocation of early attachment between infant and caregiver and the infant’s capacity to “create,” through the illusion of omnipotence, what it needs. But the dreaminess also suggests a desire to do away with the barriers that make adult love so fraught with dangers. Here, difference itself is annulled: “all pleasures fancies bee.”

The fact that those prior pleasures are made meaningful in “The Good-Morrow” by their relation to the speaker’s current love affair reminds us that the explicit comparison also works to affirm the rapture of the “adult” present love over “childish” past dalliances. The poem has traditionally been read in just this way, as a statement of mature, “mutually successful love-making,” to borrow David Daiches’s phrase,

29. Patrides notes that some manuscripts read “slumbred we in the seaven sleepers den?”; “slumbred” connotes, perhaps even more evocatively than “snorted,” a slow, heavy atmosphere (p. 48).

30. As Docherty notes, “there is clearly a great deal of stress laid on the pleasures of orality in the poetry” (p. 232). But he also mentions, in discussing “The Flea,” the orthographic ambiguity of the word “suck’d,” which merely blurs the distinction between those earlier, insignificant dalliances and the current, epitomized affair (p. 54).

in which younger flirtations are dismissed as insignificant.³¹ Yet the way in which the first stanza overlays a nostalgic fantasy of infant joy with those previous “fancies” complicates the idea that the poem charts a clear progression toward reciprocal, adult love. The first stanza of “The Good-Morrow” does not so much depict the activities of a literal childhood as it “wonders,” through the relational vocabulary of play and potential spaces (not being “wean’d,” “suck[ing],” sleeping, and seeing), about the possibility of an intersubjective eroticism free from anxiety and vigilance, physical “slaken[ing]” (line 21), or even actual death. This is made apparent in the first lines of the second stanza—“And now good morrow to our waking soules, / Which watch not one another out of feare” (lines 8–9)—which usher in the spectre of doubt and surveillance. Where many critics take the speaker at his word, supporting his bid for the strength of the relationship (“we are not afraid of anything”),³² I would argue that these lines are haunted by distrust, by a surprising unease that deepens through the remainder of the poem. Why the insistence that their looking at each other is not done “out of feare”? Is it possible that fear prevents them from looking at each other? The hopeful myth, that love “controules” one’s “sight” (and so might stop a woman from looking at other men), leads only to the poem’s poignant, final conditional—“If our two loves be one” (line 20)—a sudden contingency which seems to undermine its own confident assertion of mutuality. Wondering signals openness, but also wariness; the speaker begins the poem by working hard not to ask outright about his lover’s prior loves. That the stanza then moves so quickly to a fantasy about childhood may point less to a kind of self-protective “regression” than, more provocatively, to a way of rearticulating the dynamics of intimacy. It is twoness that troubles the end of “The Good-Morrow,” as if the very difference seemingly required to maintain what Stephen Orgel has called “the integrity of the perilously achieved male identity” ends up unraveling the pleasurable sameness captured by the repetition of “we” at the start of the poem.³³

31. David Daiches, “A Reading of ‘The Good-morrow,’” in *Just So Much Honor: Essays Commemorating the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of John Donne*, ed. Peter A. Fiore (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), 177–88; quotations on pp. 183, 188.

32. Bell suggests that “watch not one another out of feare” stems directly from Donne’s unsanctioned relationship with Ann More: “Donne proclaims the uniqueness of the lovers who are confined to ‘one little roome,’ but he also shows the limitations and worries of lovers who cannot appear together in drawing rooms” (p. 47).

33. Stephen Orgel, “Nobody’s Perfect: Or, Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (1989):15.

If “The Good-Morrow” exalts the love of “thou and I” by rendering all else mere childish trifling, I would argue that it also inverts that trajectory, contrasting the intersubjective “we-ness” of potential space with doubt about the viability of intimacy in an era when conventional narratives about women make “sexuality itself . . . misogynistic.”³⁴ The valediction poems tell similar stories of friction. As speakers prepare to depart across complicated thresholds, their ability to trust their lovers’ faithfulness seems acutely stressed, and often some expression of the imminence of betrayal seeps into the frame of the poem. Nonetheless, Donne registers alongside the fretful worry an important recognition of women’s separateness from the men who leave—an autonomy often indicated by speakers’ suspicions that women have already “departed” long before the literal voyage that may occasion a valediction poem. While Donne may experience separation as a kind of trauma, his fear does not prevent him from acknowledging a woman’s independence from his efforts—literal or poetic—to hold onto her. Again and again, the poems locate in women the very sensation of centered wholeness male speakers wish they themselves could experience. And, recurrently, these poems contain nodal points of pleasurable exchange between male and female subjectivity.

In “A Valediction of My Name, In The Window,” for instance, the speaker’s concerns about what will take place in his absence—about who might take his place—both result from and give rise to a sense of his mistress’s power over his emotional and bodily integrity. As the name in the window expands to represent the body of the absent lover, and as the boundaries between this name-body and the face-self of the mistress begin to merge, he comes to depend upon her eyes’ ability to hold his body and self intact. Far from becoming dismembered by the gaze of a woman that reminds him of his inadequacy, and farther still from being able to strong-arm her vision, this speaker dismembers himself when he senses he is outside of a look that can restore and reconfigure him to wholeness. The power and importance of her look throughout the poem strongly counters such claims as Barbara Estrin’s that “his vision controls.”³⁵ And it strongly evokes the power of the mother’s look, in the mirroring exchange of gazes in which the infant arrives at its own subjectivity even as it learns to negotiate the separateness of the mother who “holds.”

34. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

35. Barbara Estrin, *Laura: Uncovering Gender and Genre in Wyatt, Donne, and Marvell* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 205. See also Estrin’s earlier version of her reading of this poem in “Framing and Imagining the ‘You’: Donne’s ‘A Valediction of my Name in the Window’ and ‘Elegy: Change,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (1988): 345–62.

The “name engrav’d” (line 1) into the window, and by extension the self it represents, is rendered harder than glass, as hard even as the diamond that engraves it. In the first stanza, both the pane of glass and the self embodied there gain value by the lover’s “eye,” which gives “price enough” to the name-engraved window (line 6). She—the female “other”—does the looking. In Barbara Estrin’s reading, this happens only because the speaker “limit[s]—by contraction—the woman’s vision.”³⁶ Yet the imagined overlap of name and face within the window requires a specifically dialectical exchange of looks; she sees both herself and him when she looks into the window, as does he, looking back. The complex visual dynamics of Donne’s windowpane anticipate Winnicott’s notion of a cohering maternal gaze which establishes a fundamental sense of self-integration even as it introduces the presence, and therefore the separateness, of the other. Winnicott describes mirroring as intersubjective and mutual, because what mother and infant see as they gaze into each other’s faces is the simultaneity of their own and the other’s desires.³⁷ In Thomas Ogden’s words, “this constitutes an interpersonal dialectic wherein ‘I-ness’ and otherness create one another and are preserved by the other.”³⁸ To look in this sense is thus once again to blur distinctions of subject and object. “Loves magique . . . undoe[s]” those “rules” (line 11) that demand separate bodies, separate consciousnesses, separate positions from which to “look”; to undo such rules is to transport oneself psychically, to confound the static linearity of gazer and gazed upon, so that the speaker becomes not “more himself” but rather her: “Here you see mee, and I am you” (line 12). Transparent, the window “confess[es]” (line 8) all that occurs on either side of it—glass will not conceal her actions once he has gone, but neither will it hide his watching. At the same time that glass is looked through, however, it can also superimpose their two “bodies”: her face looking, his name being seen.³⁹ The speaker’s manipulation of the frame of the window to capture her gaze and superimpose them leads Estrin to claim that “the ‘I’ binds the woman to him by imposing himself on her.” “When

36. Estrin, *Laura*, p. 205.

37. See D. W. Winnicott, “Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development,” in Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (n. 14 above), pp. 111–18.

38. Thomas Ogden, “On Potential Space,” in *Tactics and Techniques in Psychoanalytic Therapy*, vol. 3, *The Implications of Winnicott’s Contributions*, ed. Peter L. Giovacchini (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1990), pp. 90–112, quotation on p. 94. And as Bell (n. 28 above) writes of “The Sunne Rising,” “the speaker’s eyes are fixed unflinchingly on the lady’s . . . because he is inordinately concerned with her response” (p. 120).

39. Compare the “superscribing” of one name over another in the penultimate stanza of “A Valediction of My Name” (line 57).

the 'I' says 'I am you,' Estrin writes, "he means: 'I want you to think I am you—and I want to make myself think you are I—so that I can be confident that your fidelity and love are what I propose them to be: unfoundering.' But his 'I am you' really is a way of saying 'you are I.' The lady is urged to give up her identity for his."⁴⁰ But the fact of being seen by her ("you see mee") leads less to a consolidation of his autonomous existence through appropriation of her (not "I am me") than to a collapse of their positions as separate selves ("I am you").

Rather than imprisoning the woman within its boundaries, the windowpane functions as a play space whose threshold both speaker and lover cross over, moving beyond their real, physical selves and thus also their divided, gendered identities. It is this blending together, I think, far more than any scopic pleasure produced by, or masculine power producing, the exchange of looks, that brings forth a sense of "intirenesse." The name engraved in the glass retains its shape because it manages to achieve the physical permanence that is otherwise elusive, denied by the kind of "departure" this valediction marks (the "plot" of parting provides a context for more psychological forms of separation). Its integrity cannot be "outwash[ed]" by the inundating fluidity of "showers and tempests" (line 15). But a certain kind of "intirenesse" (line 17)—to be so whole as to include each "point" and "dash," all the smallest "accessaries" of one's "name" (lines 13–14)—the speaker finds only within his lover. She contains the "patterne" (line 18) of him within; he becomes her as she looks upon the overlay of their two "bodies" in the window. Thus while the engraved name may independently claim "firmnesse" and constancy—"all times," he tells her, "[shall] finde mee the same" (line 16)—nevertheless he needs her to "better . . . fulfill" the "intirenesse" (line 17) that will bridge the space between, salve the hurt of parting.

The speaker's experience of being attached to his mistress is not univocal in "A Valediction of My Name." If in one stanza he appears to celebrate their closeness so fully as to dissolve the distinction between them, in the next he reacts to the demands of that intimacy by losing hold of identity altogether, by breaking down into a variety of bones and body parts barely held together any longer by the name carved into the window. In stanza 3, the woman is filled with him in the way her face is "filled" with his name as she looks into the window, and somehow she brings the potential of his entirety into reality by containing the "patterne" of him within her. But no sooner is this sense of being housed within her uttered than it defracts into the "ragged bony name" (line 23) of the following stanza. It is as if the speaker's own expression of being so deeply embedded in the body of his lover (now figured

40. Estrin, *Laura*, p. 204.

explicitly as mother), so thickly entwined with her identity, overpowers the viability of the name that once withstood “showers and tempests.” If, without her, there is nothing to hold him together, if he must depend on her for the blueprint of himself that will “repaire / And recompact” him (lines 31–32), and if there is no fundamental “patterne” of him without her, then the leave-taking this poem commemorates must bring forth fears of chaotic unraveling, a dismembering that leaves his body-self “scattered” (line 32). Simultaneously, though, intimacy is itself a danger precisely because his lover becomes too large—or too constricting. What independent existence can his “self” attain if its very architecture relies, in order to be built, on a pattern she controls?

Thus the “scratch’d name” burgeons into a “deaths head,” ominously warning her of “lovers mortalitie” (lines 20–22). The name that could not be “outwash[ed]” (line 15) just the stanza before now signifies the awful temporality of a love unguaranteed and unguarantee-able, no longer impervious to the effects of tempests both external/poetic and internal/psychic. The glass that was both charmed and “grav’d” (i.e., made serious? legitimized?) by the name it held now shows not a gracefully “accessorized” name that sloughs off rain but a “ragged bony name,” a “ruinous Anatomie” (line 24) that itself seems to “ruin” the glass and the love it is meant to solidify. His fantasy of a window that places them one upon the other seems both to manifest an awareness of and to display back to him the extent to which his identity (signed by his name) is contained within her face, the sign of her personhood. To be her (“I am you”) is specifically to experience himself as within her, to want to be and to feel himself as contained. But this connectedness then evokes fears of being frighteningly loosened and dissolved. No small feat, then, that in the fifth stanza the speaker rebuilds himself. Declaring to his lover that “all my soules bee / Emparadis’d in you” (lines 25–26), he is newly confident that this core of connection between them will refashion again the “house” (line 30) of “Muscle, Sinew, and Veine” (line 29), literally fleshing out the skeletal “rafters” (line 28) that remain following the self-annihilation of the previous lines. In his absence, she will “repaire / And recompact” his “body” within her (lines 31–32).

The casement that contains the name works as a barrier and a passageway between the room within and the world beyond. When he imagined her face reflected in the window surrounding his name, the window became a limit; both her image and the name would look back at her (he would look back at her), inverting and turning inward her act of looking outward. Now, as he imagines her receiving and greeting a new lover, the window once again opens outward—literally, symbolically—to the world the speaker has himself entered, but from

which he cannot help looking back, over his shoulder. These shifting attempts to manipulate and respond to space suggest forms of attachment that are liberating and threatening at once. Framing himself in the casement—to be “encased”—provides some firm sense of embodiment.⁴¹ To be embodied within the “face” of his lover is also to feel whole and (re)integrated. But the window that performs the superimposition also measures the limits of security, for there is a world beyond, one that seems excitingly full of possibilities and disturbingly populated by potential rivals for his lover’s attentions. What happens to his name, his body and identity, if her face no longer looks through it in the window—if, indeed, the window is thrown aside to allow her clear view to another man’s “name”? More central an image, perhaps, than even the name itself, the window is defined by a transparency evocative of a desire to “see-through,” to know but also to be known. Glass can be looked through as well as “look back,” like the eyes of a lover.

The fantasy of experiencing himself contained seems to allow the speaker to stop a motion that is both inevitable (the poem “bids farewell”) and feared. He is like a child looking in at a doorway to remind himself that the mother is there, reacquainting himself with her by her reassuring glance. Since he cannot look through the window in fact (and there is perhaps a voyeuristic wish here as well), he leaves something behind in fantasy and in the poem: a body scattered; a ruined anatomy; his bones, sinews, veins, and muscles—in short, himself, barely held together. In this context the phrase “being still with you” (line 29) takes on multiple meanings. The parts of him are still with her, with her as yet and always, waiting to be “bodied” again at his return. But there is also, I think, a wish to be in a kind of motionless overlap with her. This is what makes engraving so important; it grants a motionlessness to the speaker’s body (and emotions, devotions?) that is itself an expression of her movement away from him and toward other lovers. Estrin suggests that the speaker, by pinioning the face of his mistress against his name in the window, denies the possibility of an “other” capable of moving out of the frame he has created. But the very engraving of the name in the window suggests how far the poem goes to acknowledge her separateness from him. The engraved name will never move as his real body and her real face so emphatically do. The repetition of “Till my returne,” “till I returne” (lines 31, 41) signals visions of the blank space of his absence, which is also

41. Again, I disagree with Estrin, who states that the woman is “imprisoned” by the speaker’s need for her to see and be him, and that “she must remain constantly in place at the window” (“Framing and Imagining the ‘You,’” p. 350). The speaker can engrave only his own name in the fixed location of the window.

her absence from him, conveying both his anxiety about these absences and his determination to return. If there is a subtle warning here, he is also assuring her, and himself as well.

Like the windowpane, the teardrop is one of Donne's most evocative representations of the delicate boundaries that separate as well as connect the self and the external world. Fragile, rarely solitary, of a shape so distinctively recognizable and yet so easily ruptured, the teardrop's thin membrane perfectly imitates the edges between people that Donne is always testing. The teardrop itself, though knowable, meaningful, and extant only on the outside surface of the skin, is also somehow always "looking" inward, because it is so much of the body's interior, always representing some internal state. Winnicott writes that "there comes into existence what might be called a limiting membrane, which to some extent (in health) is equated with the surface of the skin, and has a position between the infant's 'me' and his 'not-me.'"⁴² Accordingly, it is through images of teardrops that Donne articulates his sense that boundaries can be so easily defocused in ways both pleasurable and threatening. The tear—like an eye or window—behaves like a tiny mirror, reflecting the face of the lover looking toward it; at the same time, the exquisitely delicate surface of a teardrop gives it its paradoxical quality, vulnerable to dissolution, but also, thrillingly open to exchange.

The dynamics of looking become ever more taut on the threshold of parting in "A Valediction: Of Weeping." The implied face-to-face positioning of "Let me powre forth / My tears before thy face" (lines 1–2; he specifies her face, rather than her eyes) suggests that looks are being exchanged, that he looks into her face in search of her whole expression, which he then encapsulates in his tears. His tears, not her eyes, accomplish the reflecting; he is the reflecting surface; he looks at her to capture what she looks like and then integrates that look into himself, reproducing her in his tears while she faces him with her own face and being. It seems vitally important to this Donnean speaker that there is another body there, a face that looks back in a mutually created experience.⁴³ Produced from within himself but reflective of her, his tears are now of self and other simultaneously; he seems to experience her as something that both originates from within himself and is superimposed onto his tears and then looked at through the commingling medium of his fluidity.

42. D. H. Winnicott, "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship," in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York: International University Presses, 1965), pp. 37–55, quotation on p. 45.

43. Daniel N. Stern notes the importance of a mutual look in *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 102.

With her image contained in the tears that course across his face, the speaker can “stay” (line 2) and be still; it is as if her face “stays” him from the imminent leave-taking. “Here” (line 2) suggests, therefore, “with you” (and thus not “out there”), but also “over here, where I am, on my side of the boundary between us.” With her image imprinted upon them, but shed only in the “absence” of her as one lover faces another, tears measure an irreducible distance between them. At the same time, however, they contain an impression as vital as the seed of her, as if they could give birth to her. Such fullness is intensely pleasurable—he can contain her within himself, if only on the outskirts of his body, within the fragile membrane of the tear. (The metaphor of pregnancy is prefigured in line 3 by “beare”; they are “something worth” [line 4] for containing her in this way.)

But the fantasy of being pregnant with her—of needing, as it were, to give birth to her—implies that he does not already have a connection to her that fulfills him the way her image “fulfills” the tear.⁴⁴ Those tears are, as he quickly remembers, produced by “much griefe” (line 7), and while the ostensible meaning is clear (he is leaving), the phrase connotes as well something far more interior, as if “griefe” has been accumulating within him over countless unspoken betrayals. Indeed, the rest of the line—“emblemes of more . . .” (line 7)—trails off vaguely, as if he cannot find adequate words with which to articulate the many reasons for these tears. His own descriptive metaphors work to belie what might seem important here to disguise: the progression from tears coined by her image to tears “pregnant” (line 6) with the “seed” of her leads him to the paradox of “fruits” (line 7), a word which carries suggestions of transgression and delight at once, as if the very objects by which he tries to hold her to him (in place?) become symbols of the kind of act that could breach that connection. The tears perform the transgressiveness, in fact, by “fall[ing]” (line 8) as he cries them.

The parts of him that successfully “contain” her—those tears—are always already on the move away from him as soon as they achieve shape and meaning outside of his eyes (he, his body and “self,” can never really hold her as his tears do). Tears always fall; they can never go back in, never return to connect with the body that forms them. It is this incessant “falling” that triggers the shift in tone and emotion in the second part of the first stanza. It is as if his own image of pregnant tears, seeming to grant a wonderful wholeness, requires that he track back to the dangerous sexuality of which pregnancy is a literal fruit

44. Again, there is an echo of “A Valediction of My Name, in the Window” and the speaker’s desire to be “fulfilled” by his lover.

and which causes even further pregnant tears. The tears that “bore” (line 8) her detach from his eyes and give birth to a “fallen” her. His desire, and attempt, to retain a sense of her in his tears ends up “falling,” measuring as it does so how little he can ensure that she will not “fall” after he departs (or, perhaps more acutely, even prior to this moment). Nor can he guarantee in her the stasis that is so important to him; as if to counter his own assurance that “I stay here” (line 2), he seems to accuse her, “thou falst” (line 8).

Nevertheless, the tear maintains its transformative powers, as the speaker redoubles his efforts to locate spaces in which their two subjectivities can experience a pleasurable melding. As the empty “round ball” (line 11) devoid of meaning becomes an identifiable, navigable “All” with maps of the world pasted upon it (line 14), so the value of a tear increases with her reflection “worn” within it; the “impression” (line 16) of her face makes the tear an all, the way she—if she could also be contained within him—might grant him the completeness of a world. It is as if she covers him like the overlain “copies” (line 11) of the continents and fills him from within like tears “pregnant of” (line 6) her, until the space they share “overflow[s]” (line 17) with tiny crystalline worlds of which both have been the creators—she with her face and looks and presence, he as the “workeman” (line 11) who cries the englobing tears. And while it seems that she too has begun to cry—“Till thy teares mixt with mine doe overflow / This world, by water sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so” (lines 17–18)—“thy teares” may also refer, in a way that underscores the spatial and psychic entanglements the poem depicts, to his own tears, which “belong” to her because her face gives them meaning and worth, because it is her relation to the speaker that elicits them, and, too, because they wet her face as he weeps. In the dissolution of tears, then, what is “hers” becomes indistinguishable from what is “his.”

The penetrability of the teardrop further demonstrates the exciting experience of exceeding the limits of one’s boundaries. When lovers cry together, their tears intermingle, blurring distinctions by combining the positions of mourned-mourner, performer-spectator, self-other. The act of crying itself here repeats the reorientation of the gaze enacted by “A Valediction of My Name”: initially, it is the man’s tears that are “pregnant” and pour forth uncontrollably, the man who is uncontained, flowing, fluid, while the woman watches. The many distortions of space (the proportions of the cosmos are stretched from micro- to macrocosmic, with teardrops reflecting faces and encapsulating worlds and a woman expanding to become the moon) exaggerates the poem’s willingness to ignore outline and limitation, its eagerness to experience a comfortable at-one-ness. While it seems clear that, as Mark

Breitenberg points out, water imagery symbolizes a constellation of anxieties in early modern texts—from maternal engulfment to the frightening fluidity of a humoural body to the real danger of shipwreck—Donne's use of the tear also unthinks anxiety, measuring a sensitivity to edges and to various ways of crossing or even dispensing entirely with boundaries—of the body, while crying; of tears, which dissolve; of the self, in love with another.⁴⁵

Of course, these suggestions are not intended to supersede entirely the poem's culminating tone of despair. "More than Moone" (line 19), the woman here is an omnipotent woman who can house or fragment the body of her lover, look back in a mutual gaze, or look away with murderous unconcern. The woman who is more commands his very life; to be close to her is to experience his self as dangerously loosened, so unpredictable is her "spheare" (line 20). She can, and might, "draw up seas" (line 20) to drown him. And the imagined mourning seems to record what is coursing beneath this poem: that once he is gone ("dead" [line 21]), she is free ("dissolved"? [line 18]) to pursue other lovers. Indeed, his pleas to her to "forbeare / To teach the sea, what it may doe too soone" (lines 21–22), to "Let not the winde / Example finde" (lines 23–24), disclose the worry that sadness and separation may happen "too soone" (which sounds like "soon enough" and suggests an inevitability); that whatever actual danger exists in the literal plot of the poem is outweighed by the increase in harm she could cause (she sets an "example" that is more than the moon, the sea, and the wind together). Even the personified "winde"—already perceived as a malevolent force that "purposeth" (line 25) to do him some degree of "harme" (line 25)—might be impelled toward "more harme" by her example. So much danger may be offset by the possibility of them "holding" each other and of being held in a space that staves off unstoppable floods. The intermingling of breaths—her body contains his, his body her breath—works to control their lives and deaths. He wants them to "hold" each others' breaths by not sighing, and so maintain a feeling of keeping-in, of repletion and completion. But of course they cannot hold their breaths forever, and the inevitable breathing out (which he seems to watch and wait for in an agony of anticipation) is thus an unfathomable cruelty that "hastes the others death" (line 27). Yet the very imagery that conveys grief and doubt in "A Valediction of Weeping" serves also to modify, on a perhaps more subterranean level, the poem's tendency toward such expressions. Tears, coins, fruit, globes, maps, tides, sighs—each of these suggests overlap and exchange within liminal spaces that allow the speaker to

45. See Breitenberg (n. 9 above), p. 15.

play with the indeterminacy of selfhood and the undulating limits of relationality.

"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," in a similar way, complicates our sense of which subject position (self-other, male-female, traveler-left-behind) the speaker identifies with most emphatically. The opening analogy between parting lovers and dying men who "passe mildly away" and "whisper to their soules, to goe" (lines 1–2) makes the separation as natural—and the reunion as inevitable—as that of "virtuous" (line 1) bodies and souls. It may be the certitude of rejoining that renders death a mild passing (so subtle is this parting, in fact, that it is nearly imperceptible to others; as Geoffrey Hartman points out, "the evidence of life [hangs] on a word, on less than a word, on a vocal inflection or quantity, the difference between 'now' and 'no'");⁴⁶ on the other hand, the stanza confuses one's sense of which—body or soul—is figured as leaving. It is as if they both "leave": the one "passe[s]," the other is whispered at "to goe," they move away from each other as if simultaneously, and neither "stays." Saying good-bye, the speaker suggests, might be just as internal an event as this parting of body and breath—so private, others can't perceive it; so "mild," it feels less like a wrenching breakage than like melting. Let us part, he seems to say, as if only gradually dissolving, separating out of oneness and into twoness in a way that is simultaneously a melding; and let us do this so quietly that no one else will notice. If the parting of body and soul will look like just one more exhalation of breath, so their parting should feel like just another normal parting.

Despite the speaker's confirmation that it is he who physically leaves ("I must goe" [line 22]), the poem expresses a familiar ambiguity: notice that it is the breath that leaves, not the men who hold the breath; and the soul that goes, not the male body that houses the soul. And if the instruction to "make no noise" (line 5) stems from a wish to protect "our joyes" from the misunderstanding of others, it also serves to soften the distress of separation, to allow each individual to "melt" (line 5). Such blending together seems delicious, rather than inundating. Mere earthly lovers, dependent on the body with its simple sensuality and reliance on the senses, cannot tolerate physical absence. But a love that can withstand "motion" is one independent of physical connection. Not having to rely on sight, touch, even the sound of each other's voices, their love is of the spheres, "innocent" (line 12) of the requirement of constant contact. So "refin'd" (line 17) is that love, they are made pure by it—made so subtle and precise, that they cannot even define what it is that they experience together, though they

46. Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), quoted in Docherty (n. 24 above), p. 106.

nonetheless escape the dull interpretation already belittled in the third stanza. The speaker makes explicit the terms of so fine a fit: to withstand physical separation, lovers must have internalized each other as sustaining imagos, carried within and related to as vividly as their physical selves. To be “inter-assured of the mind” (line 19) is to experience reciprocity and understanding as guaranteed—and “inter-assured” seems just the right phrase, since it conveys the mutuality and exchange that are so vital, along with the sense of being reassured of a continued affection. Separation means destruction to an infant; it feels annihilating, as if both object and self might never return. But when (or more specifically here, because) there is such psychical connection, the lovers’ physical disconnection feels neither obliterating nor even disruptive of love itself: they can “care less” (line 20) about the absence of lips, eyes, and hands. In turn, the speaker can be “careless” about togetherness: he seems jaunty, playful, and confident.

Not to know “what [love] is” (line 18)—to be beyond (even prior to) explanations and definitions that would require observation of oneself and consideration of the self’s interaction with another—suggests a doubled state of simultaneous union and exchange in which conceptions of “twoness” have no meaning. The “inter-assurance” of their minds creates an experience of oneness that, far from presupposing knowledge and experience of dualities, smudges all delimiting outline between their separate selves. So their “two souls therefore, . . . are one” (line 21) and, equally paradoxically, the space that keeps them apart is but a continuation of themselves and thus of their bond, just as the ends of a sheet of gold hammered to thinness stand apart, yet uninterruptedly attached:

Our two soules therefore, which are one,
 Though I must goe, endure not yet
 A breach, but an expansion,
 Like gold to avery thinnesse beate.

(Lines 21–24)

This last image of “gold to avery thinnesse beate” is an index of the speaker’s willingness to tolerate distance, and it sounds less like a but-tressing of a vulnerable self (increasing its sense of identity, in effect, by adding her identity) than like a liberating continuum of connectedness in which confident selves expand toward the other and lose rigid definition in that intimacy. Whatever disappointment might be felt by the loss, even abandonment, that parting entails is assuaged by the ability to remember good feelings and to remain “in contact,” as it were, intrapsychically.

The compass metaphor complicates this fantasy, if only because the physical reality of the device necessitates that the two souls previously figured as one are suddenly returned to a condition of divided twoness. Like one leg of a compass joined to the other, each lover's motion is now contingent upon the other's. She is "the fixt foot," which "makes no show / To move, but doth, if the'other doe" (lines 27–28); he, "the other," which "far doth rome" (line 30). She is "the center" (line 29), still and sure, that marks the home base of the circle circumscribed around her by the speaker's roaming. This would seem to substantiate some critics' belief that the compass is used here as an emblem of constancy and that the speaker means to express his belief in (or anxious wish for) his lover's fidelity.⁴⁷ But the image also, once more, works to destabilize what the solidity of the compass would seem concerned to assure. That the "fixt foot" "makes no show" to move implies that it might at any moment, unpredictably, or perhaps that she moves internally, imperceptibly, emotionally—in short, in some way that cannot be measured by outward show. Her immobility is hardly guaranteed. The apparent readiness to follow after the "the other" foot, then, along with the joint that holds the two legs of the compass together, are both undone by doubts only the grammar works to evidence.

The speaker allows that "though [the fixt foot] in the center sit / Yet when the other far doth rome, / It leanes, and hearkens after it, / And growes erect" (lines 29–32). In a poem that has already subverted its own fiction through implications that it is the female other that "goe[s]" (line 22), and in which issues of selfhood and subjectivity are very much at play, the phrase "the other" seems suddenly to reverse the positions man and woman occupy in the terms of the compass analogy.⁴⁸ Imagistically, "the other" defines the roaming man, but rhetorically it hints, once again, that the "self" of this poem—its male speaker—is aware of the potential roamings of his mistress. At the same time, he fashions himself as a wandering, transgressive other in terms of a stable "center" meant to establish origin and to contain his motion

47. See, e.g., Graham Roebuck's essay "Donne's Visual Imagination and Compasses," *John Donne Journal* 8 (1989): 37–56, in which he states that "the main feature of Donne's famous conceit—the compasses as emblematic of *constantia* (the 'firmness' of the 'fixed foot')—is a commonplace of the period" (p. 37). John Freccero, in "Donne's Compass Image," in *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 11–26, writes that "Donne chose to compliment his beloved on her constancy, her faith, with this emblem" (quotation on p. 23).

48. I prefer to speak in terms of the poem's "fictional" plot, though critics seem to agree with Walton here, that Donne wrote the poem prior to leaving for the continent with Sir Robert Drury in 1611.

around her. Donne maximizes such “misidentifications” by relying on ambiguous pronouns: in four lines, three instances of “it” and one of “that,” detached from their referents, inhibit firm assignment of self and object (indeed, at line 31, “it” applies both to the man and to the woman). Furthermore, the fixed foot moves (already a paradox) not simply in a barely measurable circle controlled by the movement of “the other”; it actually “hearkens after” the other and “growes erect, as that comes home.” In the “hardly gendered bodies” of the seventeenth century, sexual arousal was not imagined in clearly differentiated terms; a woman’s genitals were thought to “swell” and her “seed” to be ejaculated much like a man’s.⁴⁹ Thus the “firmnes” of the center foot of the compass, its excitement at the return of the wandering leg, may emphasize the speaker’s need to ensure his lover’s continued desire for him. At the same time, however (and granting that the fixed leg of a widened compass would, literally, straighten as the other moved inward), the overtly masculine image reverses conventional expectations about constancy, furthering the hint that it is the man who perceives himself as stationary. As she roams in a circle around him—a circle that will be narrowed only by her moving toward him—he wonders after her and grows erect at her return.⁵⁰

“Such,” then, “wilt thou be to mee, who must / Like th’other foot, obliquely runne” (lines 34–35). “Such” here sets up a comparison whose elements are already deeply conflicted and unclear. On the surface, the word recovers the terms of the analogy from whatever may have problematized them in the previous stanza, and seems to confirm that she will be the one to lean and hearken after him. The syntactical progression of these lines, however, pulls out of shape what the simile at first tries to render. “Such” seems to work backward to the immediately preceding phrase—as if to say, “you will be to me ‘as [the one] that comes home’”; to the degree that the penultimate stanza has already confused one’s sense of who stays, who leaves to roam, such a succession reinforces the subtext: he experiences himself as left behind by her. Thus “who” (in “Such wilt thou be to mee, who must . . . obliquely runne”) also seems detached, applicable to either of them grammatically as well as thematically. And which of them is “like th’other foot”? Must she, too, run? Do they both move, both grow erect at the prospect of reunion? Tellingly, the trope that is meant to show

49. See Fletcher (n. 10 above), p. 56.

50. In view of the fact that the twin compasses are both “stiffe” at line 26, Thomas Docherty argues compellingly for a homoerotic element in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” (pp. 74–75).

the two lovers in relation to each other in fact doubles them at first: they are “twin compasses” (line 26), identical.

The effect of so much layering of language and subjectivity (which may also be its point) is to call radically into question both the nature of the mourning the poem seems to prohibit as well as the identity of the individuals involved. The poem piles up images of attachment and motion, only to deny the fixity of meaning those very images seem to strive so much to assure. In the highly determined, seemingly stabilized space inside of which the poem comes to a close—the circle drawn by the compass in which, the speaker says, “Thy firmnes . . . makes me end, where I begunne” (line 36)—a kaleidoscopic interplay of position and movement threatens to bulge the outline of that perfect circularity (the course of “th’other foot” is “oblique”; the poem ends by being “begunne”).⁵¹ Thus the other must be invested with “firmnes” to make things “just,” to make him stop “running.” She must stand firm, straighten up, perhaps, even get excited for him, in order for him to return. He depends on that reliable durability to counter his own ambivalent roaming, to reassure him that his own wanderings are “just,” right, and safe, and to bring him around again to himself. And yet, simultaneously, she is the one moving, circling, wandering. The poem’s figurative language allows two stories to be told at once.

I will conclude with a brief reading of “The Sunne Rising” as one of Donne’s most singular poetic acts of playing with space. Thomas Docherty writes of the poem that the “fundamental point at issue is that the space is relativized and made mutable.”⁵² The world beyond the bed that contains the intertwined lovers is controlled by the speaker, first by a gesture of audacious dismissal, then by an act of encompassing inclusion. The window through which the voyeuristic sun intrudes is both barrier and passageway between two realms (as in “A Valediction of My Name”);⁵³ the pair luxuriates in a loving “wee”-ness (line 25)—reinforced by the repetitions of “us” (lines 3, 23, 28), of “bed” (lines 20, 30), of “warne” (line 28), of “all” (lines 20, 21, 24)—that is distinguished from the particulated world of “boyes,” “ants,” and “the rags of time” (lines 6, 8, 10). It is just this sense of a union so solid as to be condensed into the solemnity of “Nothing else is” (line 22),

51. Roebuck reproduces numerous examples of compasses from maps, emblem books, and navigational guides in use in Donne’s era “to probe the relationship of visual representation to poetic conceit in order to enhance our understanding of Donne’s imagination” (p. 37).

52. Docherty, p. 31.

53. The “Sunne” intrudes like a little boy (“unruly son”) and a meddling father (“old foole”) as well as an aroused voyeur, as if to coalesce the speaker’s multifaceted relation both to the woman he loves and to the world in which that love takes place.

that infuses the speaker with an illusion of magical control over the objects of the world. Secure in his bond with his lover/other, the speaker can make the “out-there” accord with his own expectations and desires—he can define not only the movement and proportion of the world (e.g., “the King will ride” [line 7], and “both the India’s of spice and Myne . . . lie here with mee” [lines 17–18]), but also the very configuration of the cosmos as well (“This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere” [line 30]). The bed and then the room the lovers inhabit in “The Sunne Rising” are first isolated from the bother of kings and suns and “ants,” then expand to encompass all of that, to become the whole world. In Robert Wiltenburg’s words, “The Sunne Rising” strikes us with its “imperative mood, gigantic, engorged with the physical and emotional immediacy and sufficiency of its experience of love,” an experience through which the self discovers “the power not only to shape itself . . . but to shape the world to itself.”⁵⁴

But there is something else at work in the poem, too, other than a childlike belief in magical omnipotence. Rather than representing separation, with disturbing implications of unknowability and loneliness, the window in “The Sunne Rising” takes on the intermediate nature of potential space, allowing the speaker imaginatively, and pleasurably, to push away (“goe chide,” “goe,” “tell” [lines 5–8], “call,” “looke” [line 16]) or pull in (“shine here to us” [line 29]) what lies beyond. The speaker mediates his perception of what lies beyond the threshold of the window through his trust in the depth and durability of his relatedness to his lover.⁵⁵ The intensity of the poem’s articulation of potential space (neither “all-me” nor objects beyond the self’s control) renders the “contract[ion]” (line 26) of the final stanza more an experience of “holding”—in which “wee” are “happy” (line 25) and “warne” (line 28) and the “center” of “every where” (line 29)—than the oppressive space of “The Good-Morrow”’s “one little roome.” In that in-between area, the speaker articulates not so much a fantasy of self-centered omnipotence as an absencing of self in deference to his mistress. Thus the line that critics so frequently seize upon as proof of

54. Robert Wiltenburg, “Donne’s Dialogue of One: The Self and the Soul,” in *Reconsidering the Renaissance: Papers from the Twenty-First Annual Conference*, ed. Mario A. di Cesare (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), pp. 413–27, quotation on p. 421.

55. For a compelling discussion of the importance of thresholds, doors, windows, vehicles, closets, and so forth, in the child’s development of “inner” psychic space and psychological separation from the mother, see Anni Bergman, “From Mother to the World Outside: The Use of Space during the Separation-Individuation Phase,” in *Between Reality and Fantasy: Winnicott’s Concepts of Transitional Objects and Phenomena*, ed. Simon A. Grolnick and Leonard Barkin (New York: Aronson, 1978), pp. 145–65.

Donne's colonizing stance toward women might be more provocatively read as a profound acknowledgment of one woman's utter completeness: less a strident "she is all the states, and I am all the princes" than a loving *She is all states and all princes. Aye*.

The cumulative evidence of the readings I have presented here suggests that the genderedness of Donne's poetic imagination is not as emphatically, certainly not as consistently, "masculine," or masculinist, as has so often been claimed. In a recent study of Donne's "articulations of the feminine," H. L. Meakin juxtaposes "Donne's attempts to 'emprison' the various figures of the feminine" with "the 'excess' which is woman beyond the margins of patriarchal discourse."⁵⁶ In the threshold spaces mapped out by images of liminality, however, it is just this sort of hierarchical schema that Donne reconfigures, repositioning male self and female other in ways that elude stock oppositions of "center" and "margin." If certain poems in *Songs and Sonets* point up the limitations of identifying Donne as consistently evacuating or appropriative of women, so, too, do they suggest that Donne's recognition of women extends beyond simple tributes paid from uncomplicatedly conventional, gendered positions. While there can be no intermediate space without eventual separation, no recognition of separate subjectivity without acknowledging the difference-between, the question of what Donne does with difference remains an intricate one. The very breadth and richness of recent Donne scholarship points to the impossibility of confining Donne to a unified style of relating to female others (there may be no poet so capable of rhetorical escape as Donne), yet I would argue that it is equally untenable to maintain that Donne's identifications with women serve unequivocally, or univocally, to suppress them and to reassert the primacy of his own masculine identity. Through the conceptual metaphors of play and liminal space, Donne liberates his speakers from anxieties about gender by exploiting the very notions that tend to produce anxiety in the first place, maximizing rather than reductively denying the ambiguity of gendered identity. In the kinds of moments explored in this article, acts of identification become ways of questioning—transgressing—the very terms of being male, being a self, and loving an other.

56. H. L. Meakin, *John Donne's Articulations of the Feminine* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 20.