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## Gendered Submission and the Poetics of Privacy: Devotional and Domestic Poetry of the 17th and 20th Centuries

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Aoife Keefe

EN 375: Dark Academia

Professor Maggie Greaves

3 December 2023

**Gendered Submission and the Poetics of Privacy:**

Devotional and Domestic Poetry of the 17th and 20th Centuries

*God dressed up like a whore/ in a slime of green algae....*

*God dressed up like a child,/ all naked,/ even without skin.*

— Anne Sexton<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sexton, Anne. "The Civil War." *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975.

After securing his place in the Dutch literary canon with his 1947 debut novel, *The Evenings (De Avonden)*, author Gerard Reve seemingly disappeared for fifteen years. He returned to the scene with *Closer to Thee (Nader Tot U)*, a 1966 *brievenboeken*, a collection of letters. Later that year, the book would send Reve to the Hague, brought forth on charges of blasphemy (Abelson 182). *Nader Tot U* contained, amongst other tableaux mingling homoerotic and religious themes, a scene in which Reve depicts himself having sex with God, who presents Himself physically as a donkey. The scandal was made larger upon Reve's subsequent conversion to Catholicism, while he simultaneously shared provocative statements about the Church he now followed (Abelson 182-183). *Nader Tot U's* cup overfloweth with homoerotic depictions of and desires for God, and scholar Peter Abelson argues that Reve's religio-sexual fervor was far from blasphemous, but rather an "ironist view" on prayer; *Nader Tot U* was Reve's worship, and his eccentric depictions of God critiqued the widely held belief that language, speech, and writing was enough to communicate with God. Spoken prayer was far too simple and sterile for Reve, hence, the donkey scene represents an idea "based on a certain image of God, and the longing for Him," an image that exists outside of the scope of spoken or written word. Although arguably ironic, Reve's *brievenboeken* is strikingly confessional, an epistolary autobiography that sits at the intersections of the spiritual and the erotic, concerned with matters of the corpus and incorporeal. *Nader Tot U* is the work of a man who yearns for an intimacy and closeness with God, yet he apostrophizes his addressee, knowing his prayer is insufficient; Reve does not want to *talk* to God, he wants to *know* God in a way deeper than language allows: his devotion must become domestic in order to be felt. Reve wants to have sex with God.

While Reve's homoerotic, bestial, religio-sexual writing may seem awfully *sui generis*, the conflation of the devotional and the domestic is not contemporaneous to the 1960s, nor was it antiquated. Devotion and domesticity are, on the surface, at odds with each other; one works to communicate with a force incomprehensibly large, simultaneously all-knowing *and* unknowable; the other is the pinnacle of familiarity, intimacy, boundedness, and control: the home. Domesticity is not the flea that draws blood from the neck of devotion— they are not parasitic in interaction. Symbiotically, domesticity and devotion are used in the same breath to enlarge the intimate and familiarize the abstract. Today, the poetry born from the confessional and metaphysical genres together act as a poetic anthology of privacy and submission. This anthology holds poems that powerfully engage with the various gendered experiences of submission and the forfeiture of privacy and agency; while these acts are exalted in their masculine contexts, framed as willful abandons of control that empower the poet spiritually and sexually, in feminine contexts, surrender was never a choice, rather an involuntary and penetrative violation of privacy and bodily autonomy.

### ***I. "Secret things belong to the Lord"<sup>2</sup>: Poetics of Privacy***

The seventeenth-century metaphysicals and the Cold War era confessionals wrote privacy and submission at the intersections of the domestic and the devotional. Deeply philosophical, metaphysical poetry sported long, and often witty, poetic conceits that allowed the poets to emphasize the complexity of the themes they worked with— love, death, pleasure, piety, and politics. The metaphysicals mused on the abstract and intangible while placing them within physically stable spaces, as W. Bradford Smith suggests in his definition of the mode,

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<sup>2</sup>Deuteronomy 29:29

the word...meta-physics, or coming after physics, the knowledge of the natural world, might well be adapted for a poetry which makes such large and fruitful use of an imagery based upon realistic, physical terms... The metaphysical poet has a way of making his image and his idea become one, the image an explanation rather than an embellishment. (262-263)

It is no wonder then, the metaphysicals intermingled the devotional with the domestic; this resulted in metaphysicals poets like John Donne and George Herbert writing eroticism in the same verse that held God's presence, through religious motifs and spiritual illusions featured inside, and voyeuristically outside, the bedroom and the body. The confessional mode was birthed out of the 1960s postmodernist obsessions, a rejection of the rules imposed on poetic form by New Criticism, which had influenced conservative 1950s academic space; instead of ignoring the historical, biographical, or cultural context of texts, confessional poetry sported a disruption of the boundaries between the poet and the poem's speaker, a breakthrough out of the prison of privacy and conservatism propagated by Cold War era culture into the open air of shame, sex, spirituality, psychoanalysis, and suicide. The metaphysical and confessional modes' captivity with boundaries of devotion and domesticity allowed the violations thereof to become the interactions between the abstract and the corporeal, the spiritual and the erotic. Who is standing outside the poem, looking through its windows? It is devotion that knocks on the door of the domicile. There are no such genres of poetry as immensely invested in privacy, both devotional and domestic, as the metaphysical and the confessional modes.

The poets write constantly, explicitly and/or thematically, about voluntary abandons or involuntary violations of privacy. Those violations can have varying perpetrators, from the forces of Gods and governments to the poet's own lovers and personal desires. The notion of privacy is

period-specific and features complex religious, sexual, and political histories, meanings, and accessibilities. Shifting (in)accessibilities of privacy force the readings and writings of privacy, and its violations therein, to become often tangibly gendered; while male and female metaphysical and confessional poets are similarly preoccupied with the exploration of privacy, they write their meditations differently. In the biographical, cultural-historical, and formalist analysis of poems on privacy, careful consideration of the gendered structures of submission, surveillance, privacy, and autonomy is necessary. The poem on privacy can internally display these themes in an enumerated amount of ways *inside* the verse; additionally, the external, historical context and audience reception of the poem on privacy permits an analysis of the themes *outside the* verse. Consequently, the poem on privacy begs the reader to amalgamate its extramural and intramural levels, almost a direct echo of the poem's conflation of devotion and domesticity. The result is an anthology of poems preoccupied with privacy, internally domestic and devotional in theme and form, and externally informed by the devotions and domiciles of the poet and their environments.

Privacy is a theme deeply entrenched in the poetic inquisition of the body. The Reformation Era's scientific and medical advancements created an academic and public fascination with anatomy and dissection (Parker 1267). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the study of anatomy was not secular; rather, anatomists and laypeople alike "probed the marvels of human anatomy to understand in greater detail the brilliance of its designer, a lesson that all Catholics and Protestants embraced" (Parker 1271). In this way, dissecting the body, and thus violating the privacy of the body, proved God's vast ability and excellence as the creator of mankind, and the study of anatomy opened yet another avenue to admire His great influence. Dissection revealed a knowledge of God that humans did not previously have access

to; as a result, anatomy allowed the link between the body and spirituality, specifically sin, to become inextricable and undeniable. History professor Dr. Charles Parker details the ways in which Reformation Era Catholics, Calvinists, and Protestants alike believed that spirituality, specifically sin or sanctity, could be manifested physically. Reformation Era religious writers more often correlated sin with issues within the body, especially sins sexual and indulgent in nature. Parker asserts that the sexualized body and its sins could be and were distinctly gendered, as “Contemporaries regarded women as prone by nature to sexual assertiveness and blamed the condition on the confluence of cold and moist humors in their bodies...[and] explained sexual aggression in women in terms of anatomical abnormalities” (1277). Donne, Herbert, and other metaphysical poets were writing poetry in a culture that widely accepted the notion that the human body was undoubtedly, even scientifically, connected to and physically affected by sin or piety; the body was a vessel for devotion, and when sin and virtue can manifest themselves visibly corporeally, the body becomes itself the violation of its own privacy.

In the confessional mode, the poem is the devotional body that violated its own privacy—a poetic Ouroboros. The confessional poets, in their ardor for intimate accounts of shame, write studies of anatomy too, psychological ones, in which it is the poet who cut herself open<sup>3</sup>. The violation of privacy in confessional writing is, as opposed to metaphysical, voluntary, as the shrinking or nonexistent wall that separates the poet and the poem’s speaker is integral to the mode; the poet is, as the name suggests, confessing to whatever her sin may be. The confessional poet explores privacy and violates it through self-disclosure, resulting in rejections of the boundaries not only between herself and her work but also between herself and her audience, who upon reading becomes privileged to her disclosures previously only heard by a

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<sup>3</sup> See Sylvia Plath’s “A Birthday Present,” in which the poet depicts a “knife not carve, but enter/ Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,/ And the universe slide from my side.” (59-62).

shrouded priest on the other side of the confession box. According to Cold War poetics scholar Deborah Nelson's "Penetrating Privacy: Confessional Poetry, Griswold v. Connecticut, and Containment Ideology", female poets examined confession and privacy in expressly gendered and domestic spaces. The father of confessional poetry, Robert Lowell, fathered the poetic exploration of the domicile as a space as "a central political and formal metaphor of what it means to be private" (Nelson 75). However, Nelson argues that the daughters of the confessional mode, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton "[amplified] the intense intimacy of the postwar lyric," and differed from Lowell's gendered confession and "codes of self-disclosure associated with upper-class gentlemen" (75); instead, "their interest in privacy was...one of a type, a category of person for whom the home signified the space of identity...Sexton and Plath were supremely interested in houses because they were... married to them... (75). The poet's marriage to the home is clear in their oeuvres. Like Plath's "A Birthday Present" or Sexton's "What's That" and "The House," the female confessional poem's deeply domestic placing cannot be detached from their laments of lack of privacy or autonomy; in fact, violations of privacy and the forcing hand of submission is a direct symptom of the domestic space. The domestic space itself is in submission to the devotional, disembodied oppressive male force that surveils it.

Sexton and Plath were writing in, and responding to, a culture of containment that was categorically political and simultaneously gendered. In the Cold War Era, the looming threat of nuclear war forced the American people and their government to emphasize and value the domestic space at new heights, as the domestic space "became a symbolic bunker into which the individual and the family retreated to secure a measure of control over their lives" (Nelson 76). Naturally, the home's transformation into a war bunker forces the housewife to value and ensure the privacy that the domestic space provides. The increasing value of the home as a protected

space in turn increased the cultural acceptance of domestic gender roles, effectively containing the female body to the home, turning the wife into the housewife. Domestic gender roles perpetrated by the American patriarchal government stood at odds with the supposed privacy the home promised. Instead, the housewife and/or mother was under constant surveillance, the male overhead making sure the housewife maintains and embraces the rigid domestic roles, as Nelson writes, “elevating domesticity to a sacred and quintessentially American virtue silenced the experience of women, the citizens who were to occupy this realm as their exclusive domain” (77). Due to their absence in professional spheres, female confessional poets were now in a position that forced them to violate their own privacy, both their personal privacies and their domestic ones, in order to be, paradoxically, received in public literary spheres. In their poetry, Sexton, Plath, and Olds tore down the boundaries that protected Cold War Era Americans from the physical harm they feared. The poets in effect equated the threat of war and destruction to the threat of domestic violence in the home, both gendered male. Female confessionals warned that the threat “was no longer just ‘out there,’ it was also ‘in here’” (Nelson 77). Violence was no longer solely devotional, lurking and soaring above the United States like an angry God; violence was domestic, inside the very homes that the American people needed protected so ferociously, corning the housewife like a vengeful father or jealous husband.

## ***II. The Holy Spirit: Domestic George Herbert***

George Herbert’s “Love (III)” is a devotional poem set at the hard wooden table in the domicile of the Lord. Biblical allusions are the signature of metaphysical and specifically, Herbertian poetry, and the resulting works are simultaneously entrenched in complex religiosity while maintaining a humble accessibility for the basic reader of the King James Bible. The

religious affiliations of Herbert's poetry have been argued to be anything on or in between the historically influential spectrum of Catholic and Protestant, but I hold Herbert's poetry at a hybrid and flexible conviction that lies somewhere between Anglo-Catholicism and Puritan Calvinism. In the poem, the speaker shows up at the house of God, named "Love", and claims his unworthiness: "Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back/Guilty of dust and sin." (lines 1-2). When Love asks if the speaker "lacks any thing", Herbert is alluding to Psalm 23, in which David says, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." (David, 23.1). As American poet Chana Bloch writes, "readers of [Herbert] are assumed to be readers of the Bible as well...; and the reader... better have the Bible at his fingertips if he expects to enjoy Herbert's poetry with anything like its full resonance" (239). Taking Bloch's advice, one examining "Love (III)" must read the parallels between the poem and Psalm 23; as David, like the speaker, is fed by God, he says "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (David, 23.5-6). The speaker differs from David's embrace of the nourishment of God, replying that he lacks "a guest...worthy to be here", and refuses to look upon Love due to his "unkind, ungrateful" life of sin (line 7, 9-10). Rather than rejecting the speaker for his sin, Love instead "...took my hand, and smiling did reply,/Who made the eyes but I?" (line 11-12). The final stanza details the speaker's submission to Love's reasoning that he is certainly a worthy dinner guest at both the feast of God and in the House of God,

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat. (Herbert, lines 13-18).

After the speaker is absolved of his sin and shame, as Love reminds him, it is Christ who “bore the blame” for his shame because of His martyrdom, the speaker finally gives into Love’s reasoning towards his worthiness of a place at the feast of God. Yet, as the speaker submits to serving Him, Love insists that the speaker be served instead, as the speaker recalls, “So I did sit and eat” (lines 18).

“Love (III)” is strikingly and necessarily physical. The presence of God is no longer simply a feeling of sublime surveillance; rather, the speaker is geographically placed in close intimacy with God, in His house, at His dinner table, and looking into His eyes. Herbert is writing about spiritual privacy akin to bodily privacy as it discusses the desire for somatic proof of the divine, a physicality of faith— *to be seen and to see God*. The poem utilizes visual metaphors and eye motifs to further the corporeal grounding of an abstract God and denotes the gaze as a physical space that one can occupy. To be in that holy gaze is to be known externally and internally by the gazer; the gaze itself is inescapable, as the speaker who cannot bring himself to look at God, which would be to know Him, is met with God’s reasoning that it was He who made his eyes to look upon God. Simply put, God made the speaker's eyes for the purpose of knowing God and to be known by Him. The intermingling of the physical with the spiritual is now metaphorized in God’s creation and, therefore, ownership of the speaker’s bodily attributes. If the speaker’s intimacy with God is defined by His ownership of the speaker’s body, God simply must exist within him, both spiritually and physically. Jeanna Clayton Hunter argues that this Godly ownership is Puritan in nature, writing, “In poetry, as in a sermon, the speaker is

God's instrument of grace...A Puritan preacher will speak of himself as a "penne" in God's hands, of God as tuner of his heart's responses" (234). The Puritan conviction that one may be so closely and familiarly intimate with God so as to act as an instrument of God's grace or teachings destroys any guarantee of human bodily privacy the believer may experience. To be an "instrument" of God is to be physically embodied by Him, in the body that He is the divine creator of. If the believer's body, like the speaker in "Love (III)", is owned by, occupied by, and used for God's divine grade, it is almost as if when the speaker looks upon God, God would just see Himself staring back. Subsequently, Herbert's writing of the gaze of God is one of mutual familiarity and submission, like that of a mirror's reflection.

Herbert communicates sin through sight, as if the gaze of the sinner has the ability to cast sin onto others, shown in the speaker's fear that sin had physically 'marred' his eyes to the point that he cannot look at Love in order to respect him. Translating sin as sight is intentional in Herbert's complex dual-understanding of God as simultaneously completely abstract and corporeal— or perhaps, Herbert's desire for physical intimacy between himself and God is what is being communicated by his complicated conversations of grounding the spiritual. Bloch concludes that the poem exhibits a dialogue between physical spaces representing spiritual experiences: "Herbert's real subject, as his title tells us, is not an idea about heaven but an experience of love" (332). The truest physical motif in the poem is that of the consumption of Love's "meat", the action that is what Love is encouraging the speaker to do throughout the poem. In true Herbertian fashion, this pun on God as domestic host and the sacramental "Host" is clear, and the speaker can now receive, and actively be *served by* God, the feast of the Lord, the eucharist, as he is convinced he is now a worthy communicant. Again, there is a mutual submission between the two, as Love submits to serving dinner to the speaker, and the speaker

submits to being served. Love, the domestic host *and* the sacred Host, gives Himself over and the speaker receives, both submitting to consumptions that violate the natural internal privacy of the body.

Herbert writes bodily privacy most likely inadvertently; nonetheless, he writes it aptly, with metaphors of vision, ownership, and consumption as physical manifestations of faith. Simply put, to know and obey God is to recognize his omniscience, to relinquish the need for privacy for He is all-seeing and all-knowing. What's more, if you are to accept your position as God's instrument, or eat at the feast of Love, He may even physically embody you, destroying the boundaries of bodily privacy and entering the beating heart, and stomach, of man. Herbert, in his desire to be physically connected with God, writes a poem that details religious bodily privacy through submission to divine surveillance— curiously, this surveillance is to an omniscient being that definitionally does not require permission in order to surveil. The speaker, nonetheless, submits to the gaze of God and allows himself to believe he *can* choose differently, that he can choose for his privacy and autonomy to remain intact; rather, God is a being that can and *will* violate his privacy, He does not require consent. Believing that there is an option in which his physical, emotional, and spiritual privacy would not be violated by the omniscient God transforms the speaker's voluntary forfeiture of privacy not an invasive act; rather, abandoning privacy is an adoration and worship. That is the experience and false equivalence of “Love (III)”, that seeing is knowing, and if one chooses to submit to a gaze impossible to escape, one might be so lucky as to requite the seeing and knowing of Love.

### ***III. The Son: John Donne's Eroticism***

If the Protestant Reformation ushered in a culture of sexual conservatism, the memo never arrived at the home of the foremost metaphysical poet, John Donne. The most famous metaphysical poem is undoubtedly Donne's "The Flea," a poem that features subtle, arguably inadvertent, complications of gender and sexuality frequent in Donne's erotic writing. "The Flea" features a trinity of characters: the seducing male speaker, the seduced female lover, and a voyeuristic flea between the two that "pampered swells with one blood made of [the] two" (line 8). The flea is a literal and metaphorical vessel for premarital sex, a "marriage bed, and marriage temple" that holds the lovers' intertwined bodies and fluids. Because the flea is so small, the speaker argues that it would not be "sacrilege" to kill it, equating the loss of "honor" from the "sin" of killing the flea to the "loss of maidenhead" if the lover would "yield" to her seducer. Between the three, dynamics of submission and bodily privacy are clearly at play; the woman, trapped in the gaze of a male seducer's sexual desire, is pressured into submission while the voyeuristic flea surveils. "The Flea" corrupts the traditional penetrative male role of heterosexual sex, as the flea is the only character who penetrates and "sucks"<sup>4</sup>, an invasive act that happens to both the woman *and* man. When "The Flea" is read acknowledging its homoerotic tone, it seems like the speaker himself is truly the one in submission, and a triple one: submission to his own sexual desires, to the female beloved refusing to yield, and the intrusive, watchful flea. Additionally, Donne's submission can be interchanged with his devotion: a devotion to sexual pleasures, a devotion for his lover, and a devotion for the vessel that holds "three lives in one flea" (line 10). The poem's submission is devotional, and its devotion is submissive. The speaker's submissive status emasculates and feminizes the male body, which for Donne is not a

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Docherty asserts that "suck" in Donne's poetry was originally intended to be "fuck" due to the long "f" translated as a long "s" more commonly used in contemporary typography. The reading of "The Flea" becomes, then, considerably and undeniably queer due to the penetrative status of "fucking" and opposed to a more androgynous act of "sucking".

turnoff, but rather an excitement and expression of “a kind of hermaphroditic erogenous pleasure” (Mansour 2).

If “The Flea” is the beating, or swelling, heart of the metaphysical mode, its vital role proves the metaphysical mode is more than witty conceits and musings on death; Donne confronted gender and sex in ways that subverted the cultural norms of the Reformation era and even other metaphysical poets. According to Renaissance literature scholar Rebecca Ann Bach,

John Dryden argues, in 1693, that Donne is a failed lover of women: “[I]n his Amorous Verses, where Nature only shou'd reign [he] perplexes the Minds of the Fair Sex with nice Speculations of Philosophy, when he shou'd ingage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of Love.” (281).

While readings of sexuality in Donne can vary from misogynistic and aggressive to feminine and homoerotic, “The Flea” troubles the viability of gendered evaluations situated on stagnant binaries between man and woman or heterosexual and homosexual. Donne subverts gender expectations of hetero-normative and -sexual relationships by placing the speaker in a place of submission *and* constructs this subversion in his appropriation of the male-dominated field of devotional poetry.

Spiritual motifs utilized in “The Flea” provide insightful religious context for the Reformation era's sexual and erotic culture. Bach’s analysis of “The Flea” notes that, “Donne's speaker urges the woman to see their potential sex act as not sinful, but his attempt to persuade her only functions if ‘sinne,’ ‘shame,’ and ‘maidenhead’ are the terms through which sex is understood” ( 268). Donne’s exploration of sexuality, gender, and submission is vastly influenced by his religious understanding of sexual and gender roles. While “The Flea” clearly minimizes the “sin” of premarital sex, I suggest that, like spectrums of gender or sexuality, Donne cannot be

placed so strictly on any extreme of religiosity. Donne's sexuality is not an atheist rejection of the Christian God he most certainly believes in; rather, Donne's sexuality is a physical understanding of his devotion, thus readings of Donne cannot (and should not) separate his eroticism from his spirituality. Donne's "Batter my Heart, three-person'd God" is an apt example of his religio-sexual conflation, or his "essential devotion to sexual pleasure" (Bach 267). "Batter my Heart" is Donne's devotional lament for his sexual sins and sacrilegious indulgences, a howling prayer that begs God to guide him back to piety. Donne is so deeply immersed in a life of lust that his sacred restoration must be violent, as he urges, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you/As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;/That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend/Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new" (lines 1-4). Donne locates the poem within his own chest. The heart not only holds his passions, but also his devotions; to batter his heart would be to beat the corrupting lust out of it, and restore pious reason to it. "Batter my Heart" is a dissection, one that grants God complete and utter access to the body, and even consents to His violence upon it. God's brutalization of Donne's body makes his return to religious devotion physically intimate and fuelled by the very passion that led Donne into sin. Donne is drawing parallels between the sexual passion of sin and the violent passion of absolution. "Batter my Heart" uses terms that evoke sexual aggression, as Donne claims he wants to be conquered, "like a usurp'd town," and begs God to "imprison" him (lines 5, 12). Donne submitting to a male God is fervently homoerotic, which turns romantic, as he claims that he is "betroth'd unto [God's] enemy," and pleads with God, "Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,/Take me to you,..." (lines 10-11). Donne is submitting religiously to God, as a pious man such as himself must do, and akin to his feminization of himself in "The Flea", submits sexually as well. The poem ends with a line that stands out in its desperation and sexual

desire for God, as Donne worries that he could never be completely righteous if God does not consume him, “for I,/Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,/Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me” (lines 12-14). Donne feels that he can never be “chaste” unless he replaces the sin of premarital sex with a relationship with God that would “ravish” and “enthrall” him; Donne longs to submit to his devotion, but cannot relinquish his sexual passions. Instead, he brings the devotional down to the domestic, into the marriage bed.

#### ***V. The Father: Sylvia Plath’s Devotion***

Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” is an angry devotion—an ode to the violating, consuming forces Plath suffers at the hands of; in turn, the poem suffers congruently. Plath’s writing of, and personal experiences with, submission, surveillance, and privacy are often tangibly informed by gender. While women and men both understand the language of submission and surveillance, women’s submission is manifold and reaches beyond the submission of their male counterparts. In seventeenth-century England, all men, women, and children were made to kneel to God, but women must kneel doubly—their second time, to a worldly male owner: a father, husband, and/or godhead of patriarchy. While men may understand submission and value privacy akin to women, male religious writers like Herbert and Donne write submission almost solely as vehicles for spiritual empowerment or physical pleasure. Plath did not have this luxury; her submission is degrading because it is constant, involuntary, and necessary to survival. If confessional poetry is the anatomical dissection of the poet, “Daddy” is an autopsy, with her father’s body splayed across the sterile metal table that is the United States, “with one gray toe/Big as a Frisco seal/And a head in the freakish Atlantic/Where it pours bean green over blue/In the waters off beautiful Nauset” (lines 9-13).

Within its eighty lines of verse stretched across sixteen stanzas, Plath's "Daddy" overwhelms the reader geographically. The antagonist of the poem is undeniably male, with an impossibly large physical presence that consumes everything, including Plath. Plath is under his vigilant control, a "black shoe/In which I have lived like a foot/for thirty years,.../barely daring to breathe" (lines 2-5). Geographically, the antagonist cravenly hides in any corner the verse allows and simultaneously possesses a body so physically expansive that it sweepingly hovers over the entirety of the United States. The geography motif travels further than simply stateside, into countries that Plath sees as oppressive and male, like "the Polish town," alluding to where her father was born with a "German tongue," and crosses borders to "the snows of the Tyrol,..Vienna" (lines 16, 36). The geography allows for what makes "Daddy" Plath's most famous (or, infamous) poem— Plath's deeply confessional poem exposes her own traumas, deaths, and experiences of violence, articulated through a Holocaust motif. Plath herself was not Jewish but uses (or, it can be argued, appropriates) the experiences of persecuted and genocided European Jews at the hands of Adolf Hitler's fascist regime, the biggest global conflict in Plath's life, to communicate her own experiences of violence in the domestic space:

I thought every German was you....

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen....

I think I may well be a Jew. (lines 29-35)

Plath's appropriation of Jewish trauma, while heavily and deservedly critiqued, does serve an important function in the poem. Plath uses largeness to express consumption— the scale and influence of World War II, the figurehead of all global fascism, the inhuman size of God, the surveillance of the Patriarchy, the simultaneous love and hatred for a father, and the violent

power of the husband ruling over a domestic home. The poetic largeness is gendered male, leaving the consumed to be oppositionally characterized as feminine. The male antagonist's expanse, reach, power, and inescapability are what makes "Daddy" a devotional poem—the size of the subject matter requires a form that measures up, a screaming ode to the Patriarchy in all its forms:

I have always been scared of you,  
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo....  
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You  
 Not God but a swastika  
 So black no sky could squeak through  
 Every woman adores a Fascist,  
 The boot in the face, the brute  
 Brute heart of a brute like you. (lines 41-42, 45-50)

"Daddy" is a screaming prayer that details Plath's fight against oppression and violation, laments her suffering at the hands of men, and at some points, confesses to her desire for or complacency within submission.

Fiction writer Suzanne Matson argues that the metaphor of God in the poetry of female confessional poets Sharon Olds and Adrienne Rich relates to both biological and political relationships between women and patriarchal forces, writing, "I deliberately blur the distinction between the figure of the domestic patriarchy and that of the theological/historical/social patriarchy because the poets do" (35). Plath's "Daddy" embodies exactly what Matson argues of Olds and Rich, a conflation of personal, religious, and cultural male oppressive forces—the largeness of the poem. Paralleling Plath's metaphorizing the size of her father in "Daddy",

Matzon writes, “Olds also addresses a personal father, but his specter becomes so gargantuan in her own memory—the only available medium for recollecting him—that he becomes mythic” (35). Therein lies the complexity of submission, of submission that is intensely gendered as feminine: desire. “Daddy”, as the title would suggest, is first and foremost a poem that addresses Plath’s father, and that relationship is inherently complex for her. Plath’s biography in the second volume of *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* notes a conversation between the poet and Nancy Hinter Steiner, author of *A Closer Look at Ariel*, where Plath talks about her father: “He was an autocrat. I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him” (Ramanzi et al. 593). Plath, now outside of verse, once again compares her father to a tyrant, yet follows it with an overwhelming ambivalence towards him and his death. It is entirely possible to read “Daddy” in this tone of ambivalence, the same way that Plath uses “adores” and “fascist” in the same breath. “Daddy” reeks of anger *and* guilt— “Daddy, I have had to kill you,” Plath writes violently, but eleven stanzas later, “At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you,” longing for her father ten years after his death (lines 6, 58-59). Biographically, Plath is writing her suicide attempts as grabs to return to her dead father. Akin to the metaphysical mode, Plath is grounding something far larger and abstract, the existence of an afterlife or her grief and shame, with something shockingly physically and submissive: her own suicide *dedicated to* her father. Plath’s “Daddy” is the ultimate form of submission.

#### ***VI. The Daughter: The Devotionally Domestic Poem***

The desire for, or actual proximity to, God is what links the female devotional confessional poem to the male domestic metaphysical one. In a chapter on Herbertian

spirituality, American literary critic Helen Vendler assesses the relationship between poet and God as a “[revision of] the conventional vertical address to God until it approaches the horizontal address to an intimate friend” (page 9). The product of the shift to horizontal address is the poet’s new ability to see God the way God has always seen the poet, causing an equalizing intimacy and understanding between the two. It is within that mutual gaze of God and human where confession thrives. For Herbert, the horizontal address looks across the table at the feast of the Lord, which he gladly partakes in; Donne, confronted with God, falls to his knees and begs to be beaten into shape again, to be *had* by Him. For the female confessionals, the horizontal address places God intimately and pervasively close, who, upon inspection, looks strikingly similar to her father, her husband, or her government. The female poet realizes has known God already. The confessional poem is not an admittance of guilt, but a record of their long history of interaction in His many forms.

Sharon Olds has documented this patriarchal doppelgänger well throughout her oeuvre, but nowhere more searingly and graphically as in her book, *The Father*—appropriately titled, instantly the reader pictures the Father as a supernatural figure that looms over the collection. As Matson argues, Olds’ memory of her father is so physically rife that his largeness and influence translate as a mystic omniscience. Her poem “My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead” is a double confession, aggressively honest in its acquaintance with both her reader and her father, as Olds assumes her father’s voice as the lyric *I*. The Plathian influence is clear from the poem’s start, as Olds’ cremated father rises from the dead and thinks, “I seem to have woken up in a pot-shed,” as he takes the “plug/ of the dead, out of [his] mouth” (lines 5-6). For Plath, Olds, and Sexton, the desire to either resurrect or join a dead father reflects the poet’s guilt caused by their ambivalence towards their fathers; the father-daughter relationship motif in the work of these

poets holds confession in close proximity with personal uncertainty and doubt, the way a Catholic penitent sweats as she admits to her struggle with faith. The confusion of the domestic and the devotional Father continues, as the speaker addresses a lyric *you*, who is supposedly his daughter, Olds herself: “I love your feet. I love your knees,/ I love your our my legs, they are so/ long because they are yours and mine/both” (lines 8-11). The speaker immediately perplexes the ownership of his own and his daughter's body, claiming that her legs are “yours and mine/both,” paradoxically giving equal control to both himself over his daughter’s body *and* his daughter over his. Further bodily images cement the father’s viscerally intimate knowledge of his daughter, both physically and psychologically, as he claims he loves “what can I call it,/ between your legs, we never named it, the/ glint and purity of its curls,” “your rear end,” and “your brain, its halves and silvery/ folds, like a woman’s labia” (lines 10-12, 14, 29-30). The father’s knowledge of Olds’ body is made more penetrative when he likens himself to his daughter's child, thus possessing the knowledge of her breasts, womb, and vagina:

...Of course I love  
 your breasts—did you see me looking up  
 from within your daughter's face, as she nursed? ...  
 I love in you  
 even what comes  
 from deep in your mother—your heart, that hard worker,  
 and your womb, it is a heaven to me,  
 I lie on its soft hills and gaze up  
 at its rosy vault. (lines 22-24, 30-35)

The knowledge the father has of his daughter's body, while explicitly sexual, is not necessarily incestuous. Rather, his understanding is born from a familial intimacy with and control over the body of his daughter—which is amalgamated with his knowledge of the mother of his child's body, the one he had to intimately know in order to create the child. The father-daughter relationship is simultaneously sexual and romantic in its incest. After his death, and through the birth of Olds' daughter, the father lives on, in a God-like omnipresence and omnipotence over his lineage. Because Olds herself is assuming her father's voice and body, while her father simultaneously assumes the "your our my" body of his daughter and his granddaughter, Olds too is horizontally addressing what was previously vertical: the power a father has over his daughter. That power was divine, and the physical manifestation of that power made the father "cross wires with God for a moment" (line 18). Now, her father's death allows Olds to possess his voice, body, and thus, power, the way he did when he lived and loomed over her like a God.

Olds' poetry is profane, casually so, in its sexual father-daughter motif. The reason for her profanity is not a self-indulgent introspection, but rather is the bomb that destroys the domestic and perverts the nuclear family; the result is a combat against the culture that lauded structures that raised the father and husband to Godheadship, and sunk the housewife and mother into the deep waters of submission. Anne Sexton congruently adulterates the facade of pure and pious American domesticity in "How We Danced" from her collection *The Death of the Fathers*. The poem documents the moment the young speaker realizes her father has become sexually aroused while they dance. The cold, spotlit scene depicts the young speaker swaying with her father in silence, while her father's "serpent" instead speaks, "that mocker" who "woke up and pressed against me/like a great god and we bent together/like two lonely swans" (lines 26-28). The poem's incest, akin to "My Father Speaks to Me", is both romantic and sexual, a parallel *and*

a “mock[ery]” of the wedding they dance at. The speaker is upset by her father’s arousal, but has no choice but to submit, “bent together” with her father who is likened to both God in his power and the Serpent in his depravity. In the end, the two will, like “lonely swans,” mate for life— a metaphor paralleling how Plath in “Daddy” as she “made a model of” her dead father, “A man in black with a Meinkampf look/ And a love of the rack and the screw./ And I said I do, I do” (lines 63-67). The sheer power and grasp of her father and his “great god” obliges the speaker herself to be simultaneously silently complicit in and victimized by the sin and shame of incest, allowing for the speaker's continuation of the cycles of abuse and submission so familiar to the American home, but more specifically to the daughter who soon become the housewife. The metaphysical genre had little to no room for female poets within its canon. The confessional, on the other hand, is known for its female poets’ violent and shameless disruptions of the conservative placidity expected of the fairer sex. Bringing the devotional into the domestic meant that female poets were desecrating the privacy and sanctity of the home they were politically and culturally expected to protect. The devotion that destroyed the American domicile was not an ocean away, but already lurking within the home: “not God but a swastika,” the Patriarch.

### ***VII. The Mother: Lady Mary Wroth***

Confessional poetry coincided with the rise of Freudian psychosexual analysis, which allowed for female poets and their confessions to be analyzed congruently. The popularity of Freudianisms can, unfortunately, reduce the artistry, intelligence, and agency of the poets and their poems that sport the confessional father-daughter incest motif; the analysis of “Daddy”, “My Father Speaks to Me”, and “How We Danced” is then minimized the far more simple and colloquial prescription of the poet’s “daddy issues,” which would in turn affect their sexual and

romantic relationships in adulthood, like that of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. These reductive readings of poems concerned with female submission and privacy doubly enlarge and empower the lyric Father, causing the poet to again, retroactively, submit to Him; in this event, even the violent act of confession falls flat in surrender. Rather, for Reformation and Cold War era women, the act of writing proto- and confessional poetry, was deeply feminist and anti-patriarchal. Plath, Sexton, and Olds co-opted male literary spaces to write scathing and brutalizing reviews of the men they have known devotionally *and* domestically. The female confessional poem was a knife in the beating heart of containment culture, a puncture that caused the domicile's innards to seep out onto the streets of suburbia— the secrets, safety, and privacy the home once held, bleeding out, burning red and urgent.

Michel Foucault understood confession differently from the poets who sported the name; Foucault theorized that confession was not an itching urge to— as the father of confessional poetry, Robert Lowell puts it— *breakthrough*<sup>5</sup>, brought on by radically cathartic self-disclosure; rather, confession was a ritualized and meditated act used to process truths held by the penitent: “a ritual in which the expression alone...produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (Foucault 2003). While it is difficult to apply this theory to confessional poetry, which rarely claims to be redemptive, it is far easier to attach the purifying ability of confessional writing to metaphysical poetry. The metaphysical mode was dominated, it is no wonder, by male writers; many of whom were politicians or Anglican clergymen, people who never had to be forgiven, redeemed, and purified by anyone other than God. Men had to

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<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalytic theory of catharsis and the emotional *breakthrough* were appropriated by Lowell in “Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time,” in which the poet called his writing style a “breakthrough into life.” Lowell’s quote was then used in the review that held the inaugural use of the term “confessional poetry”— in M.L. Rosenthal’s evaluation of *Life Studies*.

submit *solely* to God, and, as we see in Herbert's "Love III" and Donne's "Batter my Heart", submission often served as a tool of spiritual empowerment and even proof of God's love and mercy. What's more, male poets have the *choice* to submit to God, and can even, like "The Flea" and other erotic works<sup>6</sup>, write, circulate, and publish sexually explicit poems if they so choose. Female poets did not have the agency needed to subvert the cultural and religious norms of the seventeenth century, the agency male metaphysicals possessed in spades. Worse, while female poets saw no room for themselves in the metaphysical canon, they simultaneously constantly saw themselves inside the verse, imprisoned within the watchful eye of male desire.

Herbert and Donne wrote submission as adoration and pleasure. Their divine submission to God is gendered, as man submitting to a male God; it is a servile act, yet one so righteous it strengthens the poets emotionally and spiritually. It is then no wonder female poets have written submission and privacy violations more violently. Take for example, Lady Mary Wroth's (1587-1652) corona of sonnets, *Pamphilia to Amphilamthus*. While Wroth uses her enamored female and male characters to critique the gendered roles of submission, the poet must submit her writing, and thus herself, to the traditionally male Petrarchan sonnet form in order for her 1621 collection to be respected in literary spheres. Wroth commandeers a poetic form that depends on the objectification of women, but in doing so, she must place Pamphilia in the male gaze as well. *Pamphilia and Amphilamthus* utilizes the same spiritual motifs of vision and gaze as Herbert and Donne to communicate the male gaze as simultaneously corporeal and intangible. The gaze is both devotional and domestic. The result is a collection of poetry that successfully shows the true inescapability of feminine submission to man: the poet herself cannot even break her female characters from the confines of male desire, and subsequent submission to it. The

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<sup>6</sup> See Andrew Marvel's "To His Coy Mistress", Abraham Cowley's "Platonic Love", and *proto*-metaphysical poet Shakespeare's "Sonnet 129".

question still stands: Could Lady Mary Wroth ever truly belong in the male-dominated, metaphysical canon, alongside poets who *chose* again and again to submit to their God? The answer is a no, and why would she want to? The poet and her poem do not have the privilege of agency; they cannot decide to surrender or to resist. Wroth, centuries later, will find a home in the womb of female confession, a genre that similarly complicates agency and submission, confuses privacy and surveillance, and domestically addresses devotion. The fruit of Wroth's inquiry into gendered desire is a collection of feminist poetry concerned with privacy and submission that muddles the physical and abstract figures that dominate women, personally and culturally; this muddling dissolves the boundaries between women's spaces of autonomy and spaces of submission because both spaces are inescapably surveyed by the exact figures that devotionally and domestically dominate the residents, effectively prohibiting both autonomy *and* submission. For Pamphilia or Plath, Sexton, and Olds, it was never a choice to submit—there was simply no other option.

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