Ravish my Heart:
The Negotiation of Queer Liminal Space
in John Donne’s “Batter my heart”

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Is the heart a rectum? In recent years, this question has seemed to dominate criticism of John Donne’s Holy Sonnet “Batter my heart.” The poem is famous among Donne’s works for its deviation from normative gender roles, epitomized in its last three lines:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (12-14)

In these lines, Donne’s speaker presents God with the seeming paradox that, without God ravishing him, he can never achieve purity. Ravishment here is usually taken as rape, especially in recent criticism, and it is the nature of the sexual defilement that is often debated. Is it, as William Kerrigan famously argued in his 1974 essay “The Fearful Accommodations of John Donne,” the ravishment of a heart that "becomes the ravished vagina" (Kerrigan 355)? Or is it, as Richard Rambuss argues in Closet Devotions, a rectum, the site wherein Donne desires to receive the homoerotic force of God’s saving grace in the form of a “trinitarian gang bang” (50)? Is Donne repositioning himself as a woman, or is he claiming a deviant but masculine identity?

These questions are historically situated: contemporary critics of Donne have noted the discomfort that earlier critics encountered when dealing with the sexual nuances of the poem, and those critics themselves speak to their historical moment. It should come as no surprise that the plausibility of Donne-as-woman became a widespread critical possibility as feminism became a significant force in the academy, and it should come as no surprise that the most famous assertion of male homoeroticism in Donne was made

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in the late 1990s. This essay, too, is a product of a historical moment: at a
time when identity politics are experiencing continued decreasing popularity
in the field of literary criticism, it should, once more, come as no surprise
that the guiding preoccupation of this essay is what it might mean to refuse
credence to the question of “which.” What might the reader of “Batter my
heart” gain by refusing such a choice, in this or any of the other prominent
paradoxes and struggles embedded in the poem? What are the stakes of
replacing the “either/or” model with a focus on the liminal space in
between?

Difficult and valuable work has already been done to unsettle the strict
either/or gendered lens that critics have often tried to apply to this sonnet.
In Ideology and Desire in Renaissance Poetry, for example, Ronald Corthell
provocatively suggests that Donne has a strong desire for God but refuses to
yield, “and in this resistance, recorded in the masochistic fantasy of the
conclusion, we sense the possibility of a subjectivity not wholly captured as a
position in the symbolic network of Reformation Christianity” (153).
Corthell calls attention to the fact that Donne is never a fully constituted
subject in “Batter my heart” – he is always in flux, always in a process of
becoming or yearning to become. Employing a theoretical framework
derived from the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, he goes on to
argue that “the desire of the battered subject of Donne’s sonnet is not
regulated by a sex-gender system or hetero- or homosexual regimes. This
polymorphic quality, I suggest, is a consequence of the sadomasochistic
fantasy that inhabits the poem” (154). Corthell’s insight that gender and
sexuality are presented flexibly in “Batter my heart” is powerful, and his turn
to sadomasochism as explanation opens up new questions to explore. At the
same moment that he opens up the poem to multiple possibilities of gender
and sexuality, however, he limits that multiplicity by binding it causally to a
specific form of perversion. For Corthell, gender and sexuality have free play
in the poem because they are undergirded by a largely unconscious, structural
sadomasochistic fantasy that is largely determinant in nature and is based in
the societally normalized dynamics of the Oedipus complex. The conscious
elements of sadomasochistic desire that surface in the poem are enabled by
this structure.

To argue that sadomasochism is the fundamental structure – or, in
Corthell’s terms, regulator - of Donne’s sonnet certainly does not eliminate
the presence of gender or sexual regimes, although it does complicate them.
As elaborated by Freud, sadomasochism is a perversion that occurs when an
individual is unable to fully assimilate normative societal conceptions of
gender; any sadomasochistic desire relies on a continuing relationship to
those norms. The free play of gender that Donne is able to accomplish in his
poem is not free: it is heavily structured, and the normative ideals
undergirding it are only sublimated or repressed. Donne needs orderly
entreaties he makes to his God are an attempt to negotiate limiting
structures, no matter how perverse they might seem. In fact, the emotional
power of the poem depends on the fact that both reader and addressee are
aware of those structures. The intensity of Donne’s desire to undergo anything to achieve union with God can only be felt if the reader is aware of the extent to which he is leaving worldly alliances and self-identity markers behind. The speaker of the poem might well have consigned the presence of normative gender to his unconscious in an attempt to imagine as many ways to get close to God as possible, but, in doing so, he gives his unconscious over to the readers of the sonnet.

Sadomasochism cannot, therefore, be thought of as more fundamental to the poem, because it is, itself, structured by a need to engage normative gender structures. Instead, instances of masochism and gender deviance in Donne’s “Batter my heart” must be conceived as moments of negotiation with a similar set of power dynamics. In his famous essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani asserts that “those effects of power which, as Foucault has argued, are inherent in the relational itself can perhaps most easily be exacerbated, and polarized into relations of mastery and subordination, in sex, and that this potential may be grounded in the shifting potential that every human being has of his or her body’s capacity, or failure, to control and to manipulate the world beyond the self” (23). In other words, any relationship entails power differentials, differentials which are grounded in the negotiation of the relationship between mind and body and between conception of self and the parameters set by those areas which exceed the self. Bersani reminds us that the Oedipus complex, the structure underlying the development of sadomasochistic desire, is itself undergirded by a more primitive set of structural relations: a set disparity in power relations, and the need to develop fantasies by which to negotiate them. Finally, he offers us a bridge to Lacan, who in turn reminds us that the Oedipal father conceived by Freud is not an actual father, but a paternal function that often makes itself felt via the medium of language.

Language brings us back to Donne’s poem and to the intervention that this paper seeks to make. To fully discuss the ways in which Donne negotiates the dynamics of power, difference, and bodily (and therefore, gendered) capability in “Batter my heart,” it is essential to examine the content and the form of the poem in tandem. The multiple possibilities and meanings of gender and sexuality explored in Donne’s sonnet are as enabled and constrained by the structure of language and its figuration as they are by the normative standards present in society, and both structures engage with the complex power effects that inhere in any relationship. Because they share the need to negotiate power, in fact, the boundary between language and societal narratives of normativity often blurs. The liminal space that results opens up the complex intertwining of the literal and figural bodies that pervade Donne’s work and expands the number of subjective possibilities available to his speaker. Such intertwining exceeds the ability to be definitively pinned down; that this paper will trace the role of gender and the body through the figures of metaphor and metonymy should in no way be taken to suggest that these are the only possibilities.
Though not home to the most famous deployment of gendered metaphor in “Batter my heart,” the first four lines of the poem provide extensive material with which to begin. The poem opens:

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.
(1-4)

As Elizabeth M.A. Hodgson notes, “the sexual image in the phrase ‘that I might rise and stand’ is unmistakably phallic” (104). The speaker employs a metaphor of highly-masculinized wholeness: he desires to occupy the place of the fully fulfilled, fully functioning male. This desire is immediately complicated, however, by the fact that, in order to achieve such a state, Donne must be overthrown. He will be able to be(come) erect only when God exerts violent force on him. The gendered possibility expressed by the poem’s speaker is caught up in a paradox wherein a masculinized bodily wholeness can only be achieved through the destruction of the body. It is only the battered, beaten body that can be complete.

The phallic imagery of line 3 is given homoerotic potential by the enjambment that occurs in the movement from line 3 to line 4. “That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me; and bend…” The reader is given a moment’s pause to wonder whether the speaker is going to ask God to bend him in some way, to wonder whether his ability to become erect depends on a rather sexualized submission to God’s overwhelming power. If so, an analogy clearly is being drawn between the heart and the rectum – God must batter both in order for Donne to achieve the masculine potential of erection. At the same time, however, the reader cannot remove the femininity that inheres in the passive sexual position: as Foucault has so convincingly argued, male sexual passivity is not fixed to a homosexual identity in the early modern period, but to an act (110-111). The poem’s speaker might submit to a demasculinizing act strategically, to accomplish a relationship with God that will ultimately enable his own masculinity. If he does so, he maintains a male body, but simultaneously enters into a metonymic relation with the female body by taking on its “natural” role of submission. Such contiguity of function, however temporary, therefore simultaneously evokes the battered vagina. And, of course, the possibility of the speaker as a woman cannot be entirely ruled out, even if Donne did not structure the poem to foreground that potential; and it hardly seems necessary to delve into strict Freudian conceptions of the Oedipus complex to see that a woman might figure sexual submission to God as a way to obtain the kind of wholeness culturally associated with the phallus. In fact, that wholeness might be relatively easily conceived as accessible to women on a spiritual level: after all, the apostle Paul declares that “there is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:18). In attempting to achieve that ideal of physical and spiritual union in the body
of Jesus, a feminine speaker might well use phallic imagery to figure her realization of wholeness in the masculine body of Christ, whether that speaker is anatomically male or female.

The use of phallic imagery in this passage opens up multiple possibilities on the level of language, too. Specifically, it calls forth both metaphor and metonymy, and then elides any possibility of clear and easy distinction between them. In “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan reminds us that, at its most basic level, metaphor serves two related functions: that of replacement, wherein one term is replaced with another, and that of condensation, wherein the logical connections that enable that replacement are effaced (425). Metonymy, on the other hand, involves displacement, the substitution of one term that has a clear, logical relation to the original term, and that does not efface the logical connections between the two (425). In “Batter my heart,” the phallic image works by calling primary attention to the operations of rising and standing, capabilities that both Donne and the phallus share, but that do not necessarily link them in any contiguous relation: the connections that would fully explicate that relationship are buried, the relationship itself is condensed, and the comparison functions as metaphor. Contiguity is present, however, as metonymy: the phallus shares a synecdochal (and therefore metonymic) relationship with Donne by being a physical part of him, a part that is capable of achieving the masculine fulfillment that he would like to achieve for the entirety of his self (in the case of the female speaker, the phallus stands in as the part of the body that is missing, but that she can attain by uniting with God). That metonymic relationship is echoed in the text, physically by the shape of the “I,” which looks like something that rises and stands, and figurally in the transposition of the act of longing for God’s force onto the medium of the page. The poem, embodied as it is in textual form, mimics the body of the poem’s speaker. Poetic body and literal body are joined – we might say they copulate – through the physical object of the pen and the conceptual edifice of language, which transposes relationships across multiple contexts.

This metaphorical and metonymic joining of the figural and the literal reminds us of another joining yearned for in the first half of the first octave of the sonnet: the battering of the heart. Donne implores God to intensify his touch, to move from the gentle asking that inheres in knocking, breathing, shining, and seeking to mend that he has been enacting upon Donne to the forceful demanding that is accompanied by beating and burning. The heart is metaphorically the fortress in which Donne hides from God, but a fortress that, if God is able to enter by means of the battering ram, will become the space where Donne joins with God. And like the phallus, the heart is metonymically related to Donne in that it is a piece of him. If that piece of him can be made to function as it ought, then the rest of the body will function properly in turn: the conquering of the heart stands for the conquering of Donne’s entire self.
The speaker’s heart must be opened by God because he is unable to achieve the perfect openness or fully realized masculinity of the divine no matter how much he yearns for it, but also because the heart is something of a mystery to him, too. As Derrida puts it, the heart is, for Donne, “absolute intimacy of the limitless secret, no external border, absolute inside, crypt for oneself of an untouchable self-interiority, place of the ‘act of faith,’ inmost core of that which symbolizes the origin of life, within the body, by its displacement of it (metabolē of the blood)” (267). The heart keeps Donne from self-knowledge and from unity of self. It is a metaphorical keep that harbors Donne’s will, but that bars Donne as subject from being one with himself, of joining will and desire. Each beat of the heart moves a part of his desire throughout the body in the form of blood, which is itself a metaphor for both spiritual and physical life.

The circulation of desire through the blood at the instigation of the heart returns us to the phallic metaphor embedded in line 3. In purely physical terms, for a person to achieve erection, the heart must divert blood, the substance of life, from the rest of the body. With spiritual fulfillment added to the mix, as in this poem, the erection again suggests a state of completion, of rightness with God. Achieved at the expense of the heart being battered, the erection is the state that the heart’s work strives for but cannot achieve without divine intervention. For spiritual uprightness to occur, God must intercede, not with caresses, but with violence. The heart touches and is touched by love, and it touches and is touched by the life of the body. It bridges the physical and the spiritual, and it breaks down the boundary between self and other. As Jean-Luc Nancy suggests in “Shattered Love,” “The heart does not sublate contradictions…the heart lives – that is to say, it beats – under the regime of exposition,” a regime that is “the condition of that whose essence or destination consists in being presented: given over, offered to the outside, to others, and even to the self” (252-253). The touch of the heart, here – a touch that opens itself to love - is not gentle or non-violent. The heart cannot only be the passive recipient of battering, but is also active - it beats. In the realm of exposition of which Nancy speaks, it is always outside the self, offering the violence of touch to others (in “Batter my heart,” specifically to God), but also back to the self, a self with whom it is not self-same: “Even self touching touches upon the heart of the other. Hearts never belong, at least there where they can be touched. No one should ever be able to say 'my heart,' my own heart, except when he or she might say it to someone else and call him or her this way – and that is love” (Derrida 273). The speaker’s heart cannot be his own, because it is at odds with him. At odds with him and with God, it serves as a copula between the two, a space of being outside the self that joins the self to an other.

That being that is the heart in, and of, Donne’s sonnet does not only give itself or offer itself to the outside. It also needs to be taken. Giving is not sufficient, as is evidenced by the speaker’s frustrated reaction to God’s current level of effort. God has knocked, breathed, shined, and sought to
mend; in other words, God has approached the heart gently, has prodded, and has asked for openness. That openness is extended to the best of the speaker’s ability—he labors to admit God—but it cannot be enough. Instead, he begs God to “break, blow, burn, and make me new.” The heart cannot be enhanced or augmented. It must be broken and wounded. Harm is the vehicle of transformation. Perhaps this illustrates a necessary failure on the speaker’s part: in being crucified, God, too, has had to endure an incredible amount of suffering to bring him into the fold, and being battered may be a requisite step on the path to salvation. Donne’s speaker, however, is incapable of achieving the same openness, and must be opened by God.

Thought in such a way, the metonymic link between heart and phallus is once again underscored: the heart displaces the source of life, in the form of blood, to the phallus, which is the destination that enables life’s fullness and through which the heart offers the possibility of regeneration. The heart directs the blood to the site of reproductive generation, enabling that blood to create new life. Such metonymic possibilities deceive the reader about the trajectory of the poem, however: when Donne asks God to make him able to rise and stand, that rising and standing is itself the state of fulfillment: no reproductive generation is sought. Instead, the fully erect Donne is himself regenerated, because his will and desire have been brought fully in line with the being of God. The figure of the phallic represents fullness in the poem only in a state of arrested functioning. It must be halted at its apex and prevented from dissolving itself. Inasmuch as the phallus stands in for Donne himself, it suggests that Donne achieves fullness not by engaging in the human task of creating offspring, whether spiritual or physical, but in the spiritual and physical task of coupling with God, of returning to a past state of perfect union with Him. Fulfillment in God is not future-oriented, but recursive: to be fully achieved, the cycle of generation must be halted, and the sinner gone astray must find a way to return to God and engage with him without the separation instigated by the Fall. Full coupling with God happens not in a perpetuation of life or of self, but in a return to the origin and source of life. By battering Donne’s heart, God will have been battering a part of himself gone astray.

This intertwining of the heart and phallus brings the speaker into metonymic connection with all others who find themselves suffering for God, yearning to return to oneness with him, including the very Son of God to whom, in part, Donne directs his prayer. In these first few lines of the poem, as he entreats God to violently bring him into complete submission, Donne negotiates a complex tapestry of mastery. In its role as metonymic substitution, the image of the battered heart evokes the battered body of Donne and, by virtue of reference to the “three-person’d God,” the battered body of Jesus. In his influential study The Poetry of Meditation, Louis L. Martz explains that, in the seventeenth century, Catholics and Protestants alike participated in “mediation” or “mental prayer” that often focused itself on the Passion of Christ (392). In the religious context of the time, an image of battering could hardly fail to suggest the beaten, tortured body of Jesus, and
Donne’s placement of himself in submission to God evokes Jesus’s submission to God in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Gethsemane, before Jesus prays, he tells his disciples, “My heart is ready to break with grief” (Matthew 26:38). The exact cause of Jesus’s anguish remains unclear, yet when he prays, he is clearly aware of, and ready to will away, his encroaching suffering: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass by me. Yet not my will but yours” (Matthew 26:39). Grief seems a strange emotion in a situation where one might expect fear, terror, dread or anger instead. Jesus, after all, seems to have little to grieve: he is about to be reunited with his father - to achieve the relation with God for which Donne desperately yearns – and to enhance his relationship with humankind. Of course, he may be grieving his status as human, or his inability to fully align his will with his Father’s. If so, then he and Donne share the same grief: the grief of knowing God’s will, of wanting to follow it, but of being unable to resist, at the very least, the desire to disobey. Both Jesus and Donne’s speaker experience a break in subjectivity - a part of them desires God’s will and a part does not. Donne’s speaker avoids the blasphemy of equating his suffering with Jesus's by appealing to the three-person’d God, and therefore to Jesus as the agent of divine will - Jesus has already gone through the tribulations for which Donne is begging, he has returned to the place of divinity, and he is an equal part of the triune God: he, too, is being implored by Donne to exert violence. But the dimension of shared pain and shared humanity in the face of fulfilling God’s seemingly impossible demands remains apparent and, indeed, offers Donne the possibility of achieving his contested desire. Like Jesus, Donne’s speaker must be battered in order to be pure.

The comparison that Donne draws between himself and Jesus at his moment of tribulation surfaces in the structure of the poem as well:

Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv’d, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain:
But am betroth’d unto your enemy:
(lines 7-10)

In the four lines excerpted above, Donne vacillates quickly between two distinct subject positions: he is helpless, unable to achieve the goal he desires, and he wills that goal and strains hard to achieve it. The quick move back and forth between those positions is accomplished by the lines’ copulae, which come in the form of the conjunctions “but” and “yet.” Linguistically, at the most basic level, copulae join subjects and predicates- the most common copula in English is the verb “to be.” But copulae can also join two complex concepts, and as Roman Jakobson notes, conjunctions can function as copulae in either a “merely” joining relation, or in a causal relation (47). In the above section of the poem, Donne deploys his copular conjunctions in a way that confounds that distinction. The first “but” introduces causality by readying the reader to receive Reason’s reason for defecting. The first “yet,” on the other hand, does not imply causation, but instead suggests that despite
all potential causes to the contrary, the speaker maintains an untenable position. The yet is not “merely” a joining, though: it adds an important level of complexity, reminding the reader that Donne’s will is torn. The introduction of three sequential lines with copulae that change the direction of the poem echoes the constant vacillation of Donne’s will, and also echoes Jesus’ assertion to his Father in the Garden: “yet not my will but yours.” Jesus has just articulated his own will, but he goes on to quickly negate its significance in the face of God’s – and to quickly efface the fact that the triune God shares a split subjectivity and contesting desires. Donne echoes that negation by escalating the passion of his plea for violence, helping the reader to forget that he needs to be forced because he cannot fully bring his will in line with God’s.

Finally, the submission to God for which Jesus and Donne both yearn has a complex gendered component that both underlines and undercuts normative narratives of gender. In Jesus’ prayer to God in the Garden of Gethsemane, God is explicitly addressed “my Father,” and the task that Jesus is undertaking –to become human in order to offer himself as a surrogate sacrifice for all human sin and then to reunite with God in full divinity- is one in which he must constantly negotiate his relation with his Father, to acknowledge the fact that he is separate from his Father, and also that he will, once more, become one with his Father, after having engaged in the rather feminized act of willingly submitting to being broken, beaten, and destroyed. In “Batter my heart,” Donne imagines God not as his Father, but as someone who could possibly fill the role of bridegroom, as made apparent by the first half of the ending sestet of the sonnet:

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain:  
But am betroth’d unto your enemy:  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again (9-11)

Here, Donne’s speaker is unequivocal about his love for God. In fact, his affection for God does not seem to be hampered in any way. Instead, it is his ability to receive God’s affection that is constrained. The speaker desires to be loved but cannot be loved, because he is sworn to another. In this moment, he seems to be sketching out his fallen human state, the state that results from being the victim of original sin. As an always already sinful being, the speaker has been betrothed against his will. He is in an arranged marriage to Satan, trapped in a state that is the inevitable outcome of rejecting God. It is not God the Father to whom Donne appeals – he is not to be forgiven, returned to the fold, or treated like the prodigal son returned. Instead, it is to God the potential lover, the potential sexual partner that Donne speaks.

At this juncture of the poem, Donne once again confounds easy gendered conventions. The first line cited above, “Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,” is, as Hodgson argues, “the familiar plaint of masculine desire from countless Petrarchan love lyrics” (104). She goes on to suggest
that “Donne strengthens rather than counteracts the cultural identity of the sonnet speaker’s gendered voice” (104). Yet in the very next line, as Hodgson acknowledges, Donne uses imagery that clearly places the speaker in the role of a woman: betrothed to God’s enemy, helpless to break the bonds of captivity, in need of a strong, male force to intervene. Donne’s metaphor of belonging to sin is clearly a marriage metaphor, but it is a complicated one that both builds on and troubles convention. The speaker begs God to divorce him, to untie him, or to break that knot again. Marriage is ideally conceived as a lifelong bond, and the speaker is begging God to intervene, to end a commitment that he himself is not free to end. Left to his own devices, the speaker is stuck in his union with sin. Again, we are offered a moment of desperately sought, violent rupture, rupture that must occur at the hands of the other. We are also offered a repetition: the speaker asks God not just to break the knot that ties him to sin, but to break it again. Together, the speaker and God have confronted this situation before, and God has already freed his beloved from the yoke of sin, only to see that beloved return that grace by spurning it. Donne is reminding God that he has absolved him from his marriage bonds previously, but that Donne has always renewed them. To prevent that from happening again, Donne tells God that he must escalate his intervention. He can no longer simply untie knots or “knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.” To really bring Donne to Himself, He needs to make it impossible for him to run back to sin by battering his heart, breaking him, burning him, imprisoning him, and ravishing him. The escalation for which Donne begs in the first four lines is echoed by the escalation for which he begs in the last four. Yet again, the heart and the sexually receptive orifice (be it vagina or rectum) are metonymically linked: both must undergo violence so that Donne might be brought into full relation with God. By using the structure of the poem to pair the battering of the heart and the ravishment of himself as the twin means by which he could achieve spiritual regeneration, Donne complicates the boundary between physical and sexual violation, and between the physical and the spiritual in general.

In fact, it is significant that Donne does not suggest that God break his betrothal from sin in order to marry him himself. As discussed above, Donne does not use phallic imagery to provide an image of reproductive generation: the erect phallus symbolizes copulation with God, but a copulation that is itself the state of fruition. There is no circulation of new life desired; indeed, the circulation that has occurred in the poem has been Donne’s repeated return to his bond with sin, in the form of his betrothal to God’s enemy, Satan. The same is true of the circulation of the heart: Donne’s heart has been leading him away from God, pumping his desire for sin throughout his body. Donne’s heart has kept him from the blood of Jesus’s heart. In asking God to batter his heart, Donne is asking God to arrest the circulation of his own will and desire, to replace it with a fulfillment that negates desire and, as such, no longer flows at all.

Finally, the fact that what Donne wants from God is to be taken, imprisoned, enthralled, and ravished –that Donne wants to be God’s captive,
but not God’s bride -troubles the reader’s ability to define him simply as a woman. He has expressed his love for God using masculine, lyric conventions, has declared that he cannot realize his love because he is betrothed to sin, and has asked God to rip him away from a marriage bond that symbolizes relegation to the normative role of the woman. Donne wants to be removed from an effeminizing position, but due to his weakness, he must rely on the power and force of another to do so. He also wants to abnegate responsibility: marriage implies consent, an active engagement in forming an alliance. Donne, in a marriage that he cannot avoid, does not want to replace that marriage with marriage to his dearest love; instead, he wants the choice to be taken out of his hands. He does not want to submit – that, after all, is the feminine role – he wants to be forced. Such force will allow him union with God, and the ability to rise and stand – an ability he can have only at the cost of self-annihilation. No wonder, then, if Donne is trying to realize a sort of ultimate merger with a masculine God, that he works hard to portray the self being annihilated as corrupted by the feminine. The feminine is a necessary path to the masculine – and no human body can fully rule out both poles – but it is a conduit that must be superseded.

This capacity for the feminine to be present but superseded into the dominant, masculine essence of God is alluded to in Donne’s opening address to the “three-person’d God”: he most feminized member of the trinity, Jesus, is feminized because he allows himself to be embodied, in order to sacrifice himself for humanity. Not only that, but he allows his body to be wounded as he hangs on the cross: “But one of the soldiers thrust a lance into his side, and at once there was a flow of blood and water” (John 19:34). The imagery connecting Jesus’ wound with the vagina is, perhaps, the quintessential example of his willingness to be feminized as part of his sacrifice: a passive body, wounded by a phallic object, spilling life-fluid in the form of blood onto the ground. Jesus submits to being humiliated, and demasculinized, in order to save humankind. He reunites with the Father, of course, but his role as debased sacrifice continues to take primary place in Christian iconography and devotional practice. The specification of God as three-person’d holds open that feminized space.

And, in fact, it is along these lines that Donne evokes another parallel with the experience of Jesus: just as Donne needs God to break the knot that ties him to sin again and again, Jesus must sacrifice himself again and again in the form of the Eucharist. Leading up to his Passion, at the Passover dinner, Jesus consecrates the food he shares with his disciples, saying of the bread, “Take this and eat; this is my body,” and of the wine, “This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28). This sacrifice is celebrated in the ritual of the Eucharist, and, in the Catholic doctrine with which Donne grew up (and contested within the Anglican Church in which he became a member of the clergy), that sacrifice is not only metaphorical, but is also literal: each time the faithful partake of the bread and wine consecrated in the mass, they partake of the actual body and blood of Jesus. As Nancy explains in *Corpus*, that body
always maintains itself in an intimate foreignness in relation to the Christian: “we never get past it, caught in a vast tangle of images stretching from Christ musing over his unleavened bread to Christ tearing open his throbbing, blood-soaked Sacred Heart” (5). Jesus sacrifices himself again and again. His heart, symbol of love and sacrifice to humanity, also breaks the boundary of the symbolic to become strangely physical: it must continue to pump the blood that sanctifies the believer and provides a tangible link between human and divine. Jesus himself is suspended in the interstitial space of ritual that provides a conduit between complete union with God and the solitude of the human condition. United with the Father in a place of mastery, Jesus must always yield that mastery to serve as bridge between God and the faithful. Jesus can never fully reunite with God until all sinners, like Donne, have already done so.

In projecting his sacrifice such that it can never attain closure, Jesus, too, evokes an image of circulation. The source of life and of salvation, he functions as the heart of the Christian relationship to God. As that heart, he sustains the flow of blood, and displaces the source of renewal from within himself, spreading himself throughout the body of the faithful. When Donne asks God to batter his heart he is, at least in part, begging God for a blood transfusion: the only way he will truly be able to rise and stand is if he is engorged with the blood of Jesus. And yet, a single transfusion will not suffice: Donne is bound by the sinfulness of his fleshly nature, and must receive God’s blood again and again. In order to transcend his bodily weakness, understood in feminized terms, he must ask Jesus to continue feminizing himself. Not only are Donne’s gendered and sexual possibilities blurred, but God’s must be as well, in order for the sacrifice that grants salvation to remain viable.

Nancy writes that “the anxiety, the desire to see, touch, and eat the body of God, to be that body and be nothing but that, forms the principle of Western (un)reason” (5). This seems to be the heart of Donne’s poem: the impossible desire to achieve union with the divine, in a connection that transcends the boundaries of the physical and the spiritual. That connection must constantly negotiate a complex tapestry of metaphor and metonymy, of masculinity and femininity, and of the links that join each of these pairings. In closing, in fact, I’d like to pause on the copula, the linking device that tangibly joins two parts of a sentence and that, in “Batter my heart,” often figurally unites two poles which seem opposed, but are more closely related than is first apparent. As mentioned above, the linguistic copula usually joins a subject and predicate by means of the verb “to be” - figurally, a temporary or contested state of being often serves to join seemingly disparate possibilities. For Nancy, the principle of Western (un)reason is formed by the human desire to copulate with God, to become one with him in perfect union. That joining is accomplished in the figure of the Eucharist, in the ingestion of the sacrificed body and blood of Jesus, and in its incorporation into the physical body. It is, however, a joining which always falls short, because it must always be repeated. The ritual needs to be renewed constantly in order to maintain its
potency – in the same way that Donne’s speaker must always be made new in order to surpass his own sinful limitations.

The copula that joins the divine to the human, the physical to the spiritual, the masculine to the feminine – indeed, all the binaries explored in “Batter my heart” – is the queer, liminal space that enables them to be conceptually possible, but never stable. That space itself must be constantly remade: the pattern of circulation that holds God and the sinner together can only be halted if God revokes his gift of free will and forces the sinner to come fully into him. Until God is willing to make that move, both he and the sinner are suspended in interstitial space: the sinner is caught between his desire for sin and his desire for God, his desire to rebel and his desire to submit. He is an uncertainly gendered subject who wants to attain masculine fulfillment but who needs feminine debasement in order to do so. For his part, God must continue to offer salvation to humanity: he must, as Son of the Father, feminize himself, split his own subjectivity, and corrupt his perfection to flow between the poles of God and humanity.

Following French thinker Georges Mounin, I’d like to propose that we think of the interstitial space evoked by “Batter my heart” as a place that enables a relationship of slippage across hierarchies, a relationship we might think of as homeomorphic. Homeomorphism is the “one-to-one mapping between sets such that both the function and its inverse are continuous and that in topology exist for geometric figures which can be transformed one into the other by an elastic deformation.” ("Homeomorphism"). Homeomorphism can be productively transposed into a literary function: in “Batter my heart,” the relationship between the heart and the phallus works because they can constantly move into and through each other by virtue of metaphorical and metonymic links. The heart and the phallus never stand by themselves, but are always transformed by their elasticity, their capacity to transform into the other. The same is true of the vagina and rectum that Kerrigan and Rambuss respectively suggest: both are present in the poem not as standalone entities that differentiate masculinity and femininity, but as figures that unsettle the boundary between such categories, and render their separateness unstable at best. Finally, in Donne’s poem, metaphor and metonymy themselves function homeomorphically: they maintain their roles, but only against the backdrop of the other, against the threat that the other is constantly on the brink of invasion. The liminal space of the poem does not happen so much between masculinity and femininity or between the heart and the phallus, but in the phenomenon of merging that blurs their distinctions.

It is that state of constant flow in and out of merger that Donne’s poem elaborates. The great sacrifice that God has made for humanity is his willingness to continue to forgo, again and again, the perfect circulation of the erect spiritual body in which his creation is united in him. Instead, as humanity fractures itself, creates multiple bodies, and perpetuates the regeneration of sin, God extends himself into those bodies, takes their
corruption into him, and creates them anew. He merges with them, but
temporarily, and must always be willing to again let go. The speaker of
Donne’s poem yearns for God to overcome him, but he yearns for an event
that is held out but is always held off. God does not batter Donne’s heart or
ravish him because he does not have to. He has already allowed himself to be
battered and ravished in his stead. It is this blurring of the boundaries
between them that makes their ultimate merger an object of desire rather
than of fulfillment, and gives the poem its emotional force.
Works Cited


