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"Here you See me, and I am you":

Queerness in the Poetry of John Donne

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Abstract

This thesis examines queerness in the poetry of John Donne by re-examining same-gender desire in his poetry, proposing metaphysical poetry as having points of similarity with queering strategies and queer theory, and exploring contextual and historical tensions within and around Donne's body of works. The thesis closely analyses poems which have previously been discussed as queer, such as "Sapho to Philaenis," and "Batter my heart," as well as less frequently examined poems such as "The Anniversary," and "The Dissolution." Additionally, this thesis studies the scholarship surrounding Donne's authorship, what tendencies there are in terms of queer readings, and how one might approach the discourse today. The argument of this thesis is that Donne's poetry specifically, and metaphysical poetry in general, are rich sources for queer readings. It adds contemporary, updated insights regarding queer readings in the Early Modern period to Donne scholarship, and suggests that the border-breaking, binary-challenging poetics of metaphysical poetry and queer theory have several interesting points of similarity.

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Introduction

This thesis started with a curiosity about the diverse queerness in the works of the metaphysical poet John Donne (1572–1631). Often, there is an uncertainty regarding the gender of addressees in his love poetry, but there is also a queerness to his texts which is simultaneously more subtle and more obvious than same-gender expressions of desire. The queerness concerns the way Donne's poetry interacts with poetics, with language, and with subject matter; the conceits for which metaphysical poetry is famous are like little queer poetical pockets of complexity. My assumption in this thesis is that analysing Donne's poetry by utilising queer theory and the concept of queerness—a theory and a general concept which both embrace fluidity, constructedness, and challenges to borders and oppositional binaries—will yield fascinating new readings.

Approaching something which has been taboo, or which is a fairly new academic field—such as same-gender desire and queerness—in a canonised author's work with around four hundred years of scholarship surrounding him demands taking that history of scholarship itself into consideration. Conducting research into Donne scholarship necessitates research into the history of sexuality, the history of queerness, and unearths a history of academic bias reflecting the prejudices of its surrounding culture. Therefore, this thesis discusses not only Donne's poetry from various queer angles, but also analyses parts of the scholarly discourse around queer themes, mainly same-gender desire present in Donne's texts.

My own approach to queerness is based in queer theory such as Jack Halberstam's, which follows the legacy of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway in many aspects. However, the focus in this thesis is on how queer theory, queerness, and literature interact, which means approaching queerness from the angles of for example Christine Varnado and Carla Freccero, who are experts on how to combine the particulars of Early Modern literature with queer theory. I also utilise Ben Saunders's relatively recent observations which are specifically on the topic of desire in relation to Donne's body of works, and those by George Klawitter, author of the only monograph on same-gender desire in Donne's texts.

In terms of larger-scale examinations of queerness in Donne's poetry, there is a bit of a niche to be filled. There are many scholarly explorations of individual Donne poems, and groups of poems, on the theme of queerness, but in the most recent extensive research into queerness and Early Modern literature—in this thesis represented mainly by Varnado

and Freccero—Donne and other metaphysical poets are not included. In this thesis, I aim to join the ongoing investigations of Early Modern literary queerness, by adding readings of the fascinatingly queer metaphysical poetry of Donne. I will analyse certain poems which have not been extensively looked at with any queer lens, and re-examine other poems which *have* been read in queer contexts, but which still have additional queer readings to yield.

In the Theoretical and Historical Background chapter, the focus is on explaining the historical realities and fundamental methodological problems this thesis will consider and explore. The first part of the chapter examines sexuality and desire in the Early Modern period in general, mainly the possible anachronism of twentieth-century sexual identities, and the historical realities of same-gender desire in Early Modern England.

The second part turns to more Donne-specific discussions of desire and sexuality: the history of his author image, recent challenges to that image, the importance of religion in Donne's writing, and a consideration of Donne's authorship more practically, in how none of the extant versions of his poetry are in his own hand.

The third part proposes that metaphysical poetry, with its border- and binary-challenging conceits, is a queer poetics in itself. The section examines Samuel Johnson's (1709–1784) and John Dryden's (1631–1700) genre-creating criticisms of metaphysical poetry, the possibility of queer anticipation in Early Modern literature, and how queer theory and metaphysical poetry communicate.

In the fourth part, I briefly bring up the ongoing discussion within new historicism discourse about the anticipation mentioned in the previous section, and what form that takes within Donne scholarship. I consider the positives and negatives of new historicism as a method and position this thesis in relation to those aspects.

The fifth part discusses the Early Modern situation of colliding, and coexisting, world views. Early Modern England was a place where Christianity itself was in tumult, with Protestantism relatively new, and Catholicism fluctuating as dominant religious sect next to the newcomer. On top of that, the Early Modern period is, of course, also home to the re-emersion of Classical ideas, which influences Early Modern literature greatly. The collision of Classical and Christian tradition affects Donne's literature specifically, since he was intimate with both traditions through his education, religious personal history as raised Catholic, and later professional life as a Protestant priest.

Lastly, the Theoretical and Historical Background chapter establishes the nomenclature of this thesis in relation to queerness and same-gender desire, as well as my reasons for making those choices, and its relevancy in relation to historical literature.

The analysis chapter of the thesis, "The Tapestry of Queerness in John Donne's Poetry," is divided into four parts. In the first part, I explore Donne's love lyric "The Anniversary," its marked same-gender love, its anxious speaker, and its discussion of equality. I also examine the heteronormativity in Donne scholarship, as well as a proposition by Saunders about similarities across Donne's body of works in relation to same-gender desire, and the queer possibilities of that proposition.

In the second part, I continue my exploration of the queerness of metaphysical conceits and poetics, through analysis of "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" and "The Dissolution." The analyses revolve around the disintegration of borders, and the queer interaction between form and content in Donne's poetry.

The third part studies "Sapho to Philaenis," perhaps the most researched poem of Donne's in relation to same-gender relationships. The poem has a complicated history within Donne scholarship, and its place in his body of works remains unstable. I discuss the academic discourse surrounding the poem in this section, but mainly I investigate the poem's usage of the mirror as a poetic device, the specific interaction with the recurring Donnean theme of similarity and difference discussed throughout this thesis, the connection to Ovidian tradition in the poem, and the inherent queerness of poetic reflection.

The last part of the analysis discusses the infamous "Batter my heart," a sonnet to God with violently sexual language which continues to challenge readers in more ways than one to this day. My analysis of the sonnet presents it as a sonnet of tensions, takes into consideration previous scholarly observations, and adds my own understanding of its queerness to it, partly in the shape of the collision between Christian and Classical tradition.

A Note on Grouping of Donne's texts

This thesis uses certain groupings of Donne's text which have become standardised through the publications of his works. 'Songs and Sonnets' refers to poems which were released under that heading after Donne's death, first in 1633. They are chiefly love poems,

and the group which his most famous poems generally belong to. 'Holy Sonnets' are, as the name suggests, sonnets which concern explicitly religious topics. The Holy Sonnets have also been grouped as 'Divine Meditations,' but in this thesis, I will use Holy Sonnets.

Among the poems which are closely analysed in this thesis "The Anniversary," "The Dissolution," and "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" belong to the group Songs and Sonnets, "Batter my heart" belongs to the Holy Sonnets, and "Sapho to Philaenis," as will be both relevant and obvious, does not fit comfortably into any of the mentioned categories.

Theoretical and Historical Background

Desire and Sexuality in the Early Modern Period

The generally quite difficult task of reading historical literature is arguably even harder in a period like the Early Modern where, as the name suggests, we can see *signs* of modernity, and easily be fooled by superficial similarities. To explain the aspects of desire in the Early Modern period relevant to this thesis, I will first discuss desire in terms of sexuality and, after that, the connection between sexuality and religion. It is important to remember, however, that the *division* of sexuality and religion would not make much sense in Donne's cultural and historical context, which is also the case with many other twentieth-century categories.

The study of historical sexuality is very much an ongoing endeavour. While it is easy to make sweeping statements such as the Foucauldian paraphrase 'homosexuality did not exist before the twentieth century,'[1] such simplifications of history seldom serve much purpose other than solidifying existing discriminatory dynamics between norm and marginalised groups. For one, if one wants to note how homosexuality did not exist in the sixteenth century, one also has to take into consideration that neither did *hetero*sexuality. As Foucault points out, the terminology of sexuality as such has a relatively short history (42–43). The way people have viewed desire and different forms of human relationships has shifted immensely over time, and we are still trying to deconstruct many strict ideas inflicted starting from the eighteenth century, for example the attempt at detaching desire from marriage, where the former is a sinful feeling, and the latter is a legitimate, sin-free institution (Foucault 38–39).

Rebecca Ann Bach explains that there is a fundamental difference in what we call 'sexuality' now and what we might observe in the Early Modern period (264). Early Modern sex and affection fit into "moral categories," whereas sexuality today is something "we understand in terms of psychology" (Bach 264). It is difficult for us to imagine a world without sexual identities, probably most cumbersome for heterosexual people since normative identities are seldom marked as identities to begin with. As Eve

[1]Foucault saying that 'our' definition of homosexuality started in 1870 in *History of Sexuality* (42-43) is often taken out of its context of a much larger examination of the history of homosexuality as pathology. However, there is also the fact that Foucault's claims have been expanded and questioned subsequently. For example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick problematizes Foucault's ideas regarding the history of sexuality in *Epistemology of the Closet* (44).

Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, the gender of our romantic partners has become the sole defining feature of our sexual identities, even though gender is far from the only relationship preference humans have (8). In short, defining sexual identities at all—queer *and* straight—is, essentially, a relatively recent phenomenon.

Not only did sexual identities not exist as we understand them in the Early Modern period, but relationships might be called a certain thing and mean something very different from their twenty-first century definitions. One such relationship is ‘friendship.’ Both Klawitter and Bach, through re-examinations of Alan Bray’s seminal work *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, note how we must be careful in our assumptions when it comes to friendship in Early Modern Europe, specifically between men in this instance (Klawitter 4; Bach 280). ‘Friendship’ between men was in many respects valued higher than ‘romantic love,’ the latter meaning a courting relationship between a man and a woman (Bach 280). The main reason for this hierarchy is period-specific levels of misogyny: it was simply impossible for a woman to be as valuable as a man in all respects (Bach 280).

Many critics laud some of Donne’s poetry for its perceived voicing of equality between men and women, and some even adjust Dryden’s infamous complaint regarding Donne’s poetry being too difficult for women to understand as Donne actually realising that women were able to understand poetry on the same level as men (Klawitter 32). However, Bach observes that such attempts at painting Donne as a proto feminist might be wishful thinking, unlikely to correlate with the values of the times (280). In Early Modern England, equality was something that could only exist between men of the same class and such ‘friendship’ is, therefore, probably closest to what we today call love between spouses, if we understand love between spouses as the strongest of friendships based in equality, with fluctuating sexual elements. In the context of Donne’s poetry, then, what is often called the ‘homosocial’ setting is where the arguably closest analogue to our modern love can be found: the Renaissance ‘friendship’ between men. I will return to the definition of ‘homosocial,’ among other queer terminology, in the last part of this chapter.

One must, in the interest of transparency, definitely not ignore the discrimination and lawful prosecution of certain same-gender behaviour in the Early Modern period. It is *as* anachronistic to understand the period as queerphobic as it is to understand the period as wholly queer accepting. For example, Klawitter, following Alan Bray, says that same-

gender affection between men was "ignored rather than tolerated" in the Early Modern period and that there was a difference between what was seen as deviant, violent sexual practices—many things blanketed under the term 'sodomy'—and romance, sex, and affection between men (18, 25; Bray *Homosexuality* 72, 73, qtd. in Klawitter 25; Bray *Male Friendship* 3). Contrary to the simplified idea that same-gender sexual acts were all severely punished, the cases where the Buggery Act of 1533[2] was called upon were few, for example, and most harshly enforced against pederasty, not same-gender sex (Klawitter 24–25).

It is not only familiar-sounding relationship terminology which can be misleading or difficult to understand when it comes to sexuality in the Early Modern period. The centrality of religion in the period is something that becomes increasingly difficult to understand for both religious and atheistic people today, and also increasingly easy to forget when reading literature from the period. As far as sex goes, desire should have nothing to do with it according to Early Modern ecclesiastical teachings: sex was for reproduction, not pleasure. In relation to the laws on 'sodomy' mentioned above, it is important to remember that ecclesiastic decree was that *any* sex "which could not result in progeny" was directly opposed to Biblical directives (Klawitter 25). Unsurprisingly, desire, sex, and religion were closely knit into a patriarchal hierarchy in the Early Modern period, where the inferiority, and sexual deviance, of women was seen as biologically essential, and where a man's relationship to other men, and to God, would always be of higher value than his relationships to women (Bach 263).

What needs to be taken into consideration when studying desire and queerness in Early Modern literature, then, is basically the new historicism insistence on the pastness of the past: things were generally very different. But it is also important to recognise that, as Foucault points out, many of our ideas of strictness and division into illegitimate and legitimate acts originated in the late eighteenth century and have been reinforced and added onto since then (37). I.e., one has to be careful not to get overly teleological: earlier does not necessarily mean less accepting, or match our ideas of transgression, convention, or orthodoxy. Moreover, the Early Modern period is in some ways jammed *between* the strictness of the Middle Ages and the *different* strictness of the Victorian period. In many

[2]The Buggery Act was an act of parliament passed during Henry VIII's rule, which condemned all 'unnatural' sexual acts, including anal sex between people of any gender.

ways, that makes the Early Modern relationship to desire all the more distant to us, but potentially also all the more close, since Western culture in the twenty-first century generally, though not universally, tends to move away from the strictness of both Medieval and Victorian ideals. Generally, however, looking for direct analogues of queer experiences in the Early Modern period leaves one wanting. Thankfully, such analogues are not the most interesting way of reading Early Modern literature with a queer lens.

Christine Varnado, in the very recently published (2020) *The Shapes of Fancy*, explores queer desire in Early Modern literature in ways outside the ideas of same-gender desire, but still *keeps* to desire, as I find it important to do (and which I discuss in greater detail in the third section of this chapter). Varnado looks for queer desire outside "person[s]," "act[s]," and "identit[ies]," but rather in elements "that are made queer by [...] their strange proliferations, their unaccountable excesses of intensity, their atypical and errant crossings" (4). She lists four "affective modes" in Early Modern literary queerness, modes that touch upon being used, being insatiable, being paranoid, and being melancholic (4). And, while Varnado's affective modes are quite specific in her book, mapped onto distinct genres or literary situations and relationships, her idea of looking at literary queerness outside of same-gender desire is something I will embrace, combine my own observations of queerness with, and build on. The specific understanding of queerness which this thesis utilises will be further explained in all parts of the rest of this chapter.

Desire and Sexuality in Donne's Poetry

This section covers how previous scholarship has approached desire and sexuality in Donne's texts, how that approach can and has been challenged, as well as some technical specificities of interacting with Donne's body of works.

Even though Donne has enjoyed a posthumous reputation as a 'ladies' man,' more recent scholarship has found many holes in that image. For example, Klawitter understands Donne's defiant story-book love for and marriage to Anne More as an idealised construction after the fact (ix, 2). The observation that Donne's relationship with Anne was far from idyllic is also brought up by Bach, who quotes Donne's letters to his friend Sir Henry Goodyer where Donne laments what the life being married to Anne means—a life secluded and away from the company of other men, of friends (264).

Donne's poetry has by many of his critics and editors been seen as a safely 'heterosexual' space, or they have at the very least fought to make it seem so, something Bach notes has forced critics "to argue *against* Donne's poetry and prose to an unjustifiable extent" (262, my emphasis). This thesis does not concern speculations regarding Donne's personal life, but rather what his poetry can be understood as expressions of. That said, the academic debates regarding both Donne's poetry and the scant existing biographical information of his life, show a heterosexual bias which is unsurprising given the history of queerness in general, but impossible to ignore and leave undiscussed in a thesis about historical queerness.

One Donne editor and critic who is often brought up by other scholars as the most obviously heterosexually biased is Helen Gardner (Carey 271; Klawitter 60; Holstun 837; Harvey 117–118). Gardner has earned this critical ire most explicitly over her reading of "Sapho to Philaenis," where she judges Donne's authorship of the poem as dubious mainly based on internal evidence. "I find it difficult to imagine [Donne] wishing to assume the love-sickness of Lesbian Sappho," Gardner says in her notes to "Sapho to Philaenis" and adds that the poem does not 'feel' Donnean in style, without providing further evidence for that claim (xlvi).

Though Gardner's bias is the most referenced such, her criticism is only one reminder of how the history of criticism *itself* must be taken into consideration when examining the history of sexuality in relation to literature. In its position as canonised, Donne's poetry has generated copious amounts of scholarship, its own narrative of literature, sexuality, and Donne himself. To reiterate, when examining literature in relation to an aspect of humanity which has long been taboo, and which has its own complicated history—i.e., same-gender desire and other queerness—it becomes necessary to take into consideration the scholarly sources available to oneself and the *specific* bias they will have infused readings of the literature with.

Furthermore, with historically disapproved of or prohibited aspects one often has to look for evidence of the prohibition *itself* to see the trace of the aspect. Such is the case with, for example, Donne's verse letters. Sir Herbert Grierson, an early twentieth-century editor of Donne's, warns against taking Donne's language in his verse letters to men '"too seriously'" (Grierson 165). These letters, most prominently to a 'Mr. T.W.'—generally accepted to be a Thomas Woodward—go far beyond unromantic friendship (Klawitter 3).

Klawitter lays bare what is observable in Donne's letters to Thomas: he was deeply in love, the feelings were at first reciprocated, and then for whatever reason cooled and left Donne miserably mourning the loss (4–16). Donne's verse letters have not been studied as closely as his songs and sonnets by scholars, "and," Klawitter says, "those who have are careful to avoid letting any taint of affection for male friends tarnish Donne's courtier-turned-priest image" (16). Put differently, the emphatic insistence on ignoring certain elements—the queer ones—is itself evidence of it having been observed in scholarship for a long time.

However, while one might observe same-gender relationships in Donne's body of works which look similar to same-gender relationships today, Klawitter's claim that "I love you still means I love you" (16) might be challenged. Specifically, one can challenge the supposed timelessness of the term 'love' by once again considering the previously mentioned observations regarding the value and definition of friendship by Bach (280). Since 'friendship' could mean a lot of things in the Early Modern period it might not mean today, one should also be wary with the definitions of abstract, immense concepts such as 'love.' Not in the sense of diminishing the romantic and erotic feelings the verse letters express towards Mr. T.W., but rather as problematising and challenging the normative reading of *cross*-gender desire in more of Donne's poetry. In other words, the expressions of desire and love in Donne's poetry are aimed at many objects: men, women, un-gendered humans, and God. Backed by the observations by Foucault and Sedgwick in the previous section, one should be careful about the borders one puts around historical desire and, as such, make sure to favour multitude and fluidity over discretion and rigor. Which, incidentally, is what queer readings generally do.

As indicated by the inclusion of 'God' in the objects of desire listed above, desire in Donne's poetry is not just about relationships between humans, and not only about sexual or romantic desire. Saunders observes desire for "fame, social success, and renown" but, more importantly, *spiritual* desire expressed in Donne's texts (6). And, while Saunders arguably does not approach the word 'desire' as queerly as I do, he does note the difficulty of pinning down a precise sense of the word (6). That impreciseness is one of the reasons desire is such a productive theme to 'queer,' in *more* ways than in how we look back at depictions of romance, sex, and affection.

Saunders notes that there is an "impossibility of [desire's] direct articulation" in Donne's poetry and that it is "extremely hard to generalize in any satisfactory or conclusive way about the progressive or conservative nature of his gender politics" (9, 22). Though that might not be where Saunders takes the argument, I see the impossibility of definition and generalisation, in both the concept of desire and in Donne's poetry generally, as an indication of a fundamentally queer space. This queerness goes beyond same-gender desire, and into many various territories, as will be shown in this thesis. The queerness of metaphysical poetry in both more general and more specific terms will be explored in the next section of this chapter.

Lastly, a point more in relation to Donne's body of works than to desire in particular. The mere *interaction* with Donne's corpus tends to become quite queer—and I will define this slippery term further on in this chapter—in a very practical sense. No manuscript of Donne's texts is by his own hand, and they all differ in order and categorisation of poems, and carry variations in content. Because of the space limitations of this thesis, I will only take the realities of the manuscripts into consideration when it is relevant to my arguments. In practice, this means one general thing: never putting too much emphasis on titles. For this thesis in particular, I have judged that any further interaction with the manuscripts is unnecessary, and I have used modern renditions of Donne's collected poetry as reference, albeit very well-annotated ones when it comes to manuscript details and variations.

The fact that no texts I study are based on Donne's own physical writing—virtually all originals of Donne's texts are copied, i.e., manuscripts written by other people—is both relevant and not. The *irrelevance* comes mostly from the reliance on new historicism in this thesis—the texts are cultural artifacts, and the personage of its authorship is less interesting than the fact that they exist at all; the *relevance* is more of an undercurrent of the project—the queerness of the borderless relationship between author and text, and the disorienting unconventionality of manuscript culture when compared to how authorship generally works today.

The Queerness of Metaphysical Poetry

The term metaphysical poetry famously became attached to Donne, among other poets such as George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, and Andrew Marvell, after

the critic Samuel Johnson described the genre of poetry as such in *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (13). Johnson followed John Dryden in this usage of 'metaphysical' who, about Donne specifically, said that he "affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where Nature only should reign" and also that Donne, contrary to what is proper, tried to court women with "philosophy" instead of "the softnesses of love" (para 5).

'Metaphysical' was thus meant as a derogatory description of the poetry and its extended metaphors that combined elements which commonly did not go together, in what came to be known as the metaphysical 'conceits' (Johnson 15). This is how metaphysical poetry is still defined today—as poetry which uses metaphysical conceits, those elaborate metaphors and images which combine things which ostensibly do not fit. Johnson's criticism of metaphysical poetry is well known, and surprisingly lengthy. However, beyond the most famous quotations from Johnson (e.g., "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (14)) it is also full of astute observations one can separate from Johnson's scathing judgment. Having made that separation, one can notice something completely different than negative critique.

According to Johnson, the "modulation" in metaphysical poetry is "imperfect"; the poets are unwilling to follow Aristotle's diction of poetry as imitative and "cannot be said to have imitated any thing"; metaphysical poetry is unnatural, as in constructed; it ignores the moral duty of poetry, refuses to be general and common; "[it breaks] every image into fragments" and "[produces] combinations of confused magnificence, that not only could not be credited, but could not be imagined" (13–16). Johnson's pages-long critique of the genre comments on how metaphysical poetry manages to be both constructed and entirely original at the same time or—if one wants to give Johnson the benefit of the doubt in his vagueness—that metaphysical poetry constructs an unsatisfactory version of the original. As the continued interest in metaphysical poetry shows, many find beauty in exactly the elements Johnson mark as literary weaknesses, which can probably be explained by a general move away from the sentiments of the Enlightenment in our post-Romantic world. However, much more relevant to this thesis, his remarks often entail exactly what queer theory values and embraces.

One effect conceits have in this unconventional combining of both linguistic elements and subject matter is a focus on, or dissolution of, the perceived borders between

things. In their very form, conceits reject established ideas of binary opposition and static relationships between objects, be those objects words or people; political or religious elements. Metaphysical conceits force the reader to question convention, especially when it comes to relations between things, and can thus be argued to have points of similarity with queering strategies. In short, the bringing together of ostensibly different elements of metaphysical conceits achieves a challenge to binary opposition, and of the borders between things, which is also the concern of theoretic definitions of queerness we interact with today.

However, there are academic positions within queer theory and literary criticism which problematise this idea of the Early Modern period somehow 'anticipating' twentieth century queer theory, a position that Carla Freccero brings up in *Queer/Early/Modern*. I will return to a few of Freccero's concerns in the next section of this chapter, since her problematising of the idea of anticipation mainly concerns an analysis of historicism as such. For now, I will be content with formulating my investigation in this thesis as exploring a certain *kind* of anticipatory relationship between metaphysical poetry and queer theory. For example, as I have briefly mentioned and will explain further in the last section of this chapter, I am conscious of the dangers of suggesting any kind of direct mapping of twentieth century sexual identity, orientation, or gender onto the Early Modern period.

In general, unearthing any kind of 'direct' historical link between Donne's poetry and queer theory is not the goal of this thesis, nor do I think that possible. Ultimately, the connection between Donne's poetry and queer theory is both a way of attempting to undo conventions which have anachronistically been inflicted *after* Donne's authorship, and a way of finding contemporary entryways into complicated, old poetry. I.e., this thesis, as mentioned in the Introduction, is both a queer analysis of Donne's poetry, and of the scholarship surrounding it; part corrective reading and part exploration of what might be further gleaned.

How, then, does queer theory help us in reading metaphysical poetry? Queer theorist Jack Halberstam's style of feminism in *Gaga Feminism* is a "scavenger feminism" which "steals from everywhere"; it is "a feminism made up of stutter steps and hiccups" (30). It is a queer feminism which is not descriptive of all feminism, but rather a specific one which follows in the steps of Judith Butler's deconstruction of gender and Donna

Harraway's cyborgs, and embraces an unknown future where constructedness is not necessarily bad (Halberstam 31–32).

Halberstam's feminism is part of a movement that embraces the hybrid, the unconventional, and the offbeat. Judging by the image Samuel Johnson paints of metaphysical poetry, an image which has generally persisted—of an unruly poetic child that tries to change formal rules—the sheer *form* of metaphysical poetry maps well onto queer theory ideas. With its focus on boundary breaking, scavenging, positive constructedness, and hybridity, it seems that queer theory such as Halberstam's might make a good foundation for a queer reading practice tailored to metaphysical poetry and its strange, unstable position within literary history.

Michael Morgan Holmes, in his text on nature and 'strange desires' in metaphysical poetry notes the attraction between metaphysical poetry and twenty-first century theory on nature, gender and sexuality. "Metaphysical literature is deliberately, strategically, and wonderfully strange," he says, "it often reveals that nature, paradoxically, is what we make it" (2). Holmes uses the famous criticism from Johnson to embrace the strangeness of metaphysical poetry rather than doing what he suggests has been persistent in scholarship on metaphysical poetry since the late Victorian period: attempting a "normalization," blaming Johnson's negativity on a worldview too close to the Enlightenment, and an enshrinement of ideas prevalent in famous scholarship from for example T.S Eliot and Helen Gardner (28). Holmes embraces the strangeness of metaphysical poetry, like Halberstam embraces the unconventional and constructed in queerness. He allows for metaphysical poetry to be strange and, perhaps more importantly, he allows for its expressions of desire to be strange.

I bring the discussion back to desire because there is a possible danger of turning queer into too abstract a reading practice. Part of that danger is strongly connected to life outside of literature, queer lives being lived, and is not particular to metaphysical poetry or literature, but rather to media overall and medial representation. Queerness has a history of censure, and there is a tendency to, whenever there is a chance, remove overt expressions of desire and attraction in queer constellations in order to sanitize it for mass consumption. For example, as a 2018 study of TV/Streaming series shows, displays of affection between same-gender and cross-gender pairs look very different: "hugs, kisses, and sex," for example, are more often showed in cross-gender pairs generally (Cook 25-

26). Handholding, while occurring as often between two people of the same gender and between two people of different genders, is mostly between friends and family in the former case, and most often between romantic partners in the latter (Cook 25–26). Because of this longstanding, and still prevalent, tradition of sanitation, moving queer theory too far away from non-normative desire is potentially problematic.

Additionally, it can be argued that abstracting queer too far from readings of non-normative desire simply absorbs it back into poststructuralism and deconstruction, where part of queer theory and method began. If one simply uses queer theory in literature to note formal boundary breaking as well as expansion beyond and critique of binaries, queer theory loses its focus and, arguably, its usefulness. Poststructuralism has suffered the same critique—if you question everything, do you not simply revert back to questioning nothing?

Just as poststructuralism must emphasise that it still acknowledges material reality, despite its critics claiming it does not, so must queer theory hold fast in its relation to desire, to not fizzle out and become sanitized. As Varnado puts it:

> Queerness uses the materials to hand in surprising and inventive ways to transmit desire (not always successfully); it flouts expected timelines and trajectories of proper development; it spins into backward motion, or stands stubbornly still; it upends expected orders of similitude and difference; it generates weirdness and excess, wallows in the degraded, and emphasizes its own artifice.
> *If queer is these specific, new, oblique things, it is decidedly not, then, "anything" or "everything.*" (9, emphasis in original)

Like Halberstam, Varnado emphasises queerness's embracing of the strange, the unconventional, and the constructed. In this thesis, this is the kind of queerness which will be used, and further explored. Varnado's study is explicitly on Early Modern literature, but it does not examine any metaphysical poetry. This thesis aims to partially follow Varnado's examination, and add to it the queerness of Donne's poetry.

Limiting queerness to desire is still an expansive, allowing demarcation. Desire is itself a vast space with many facets and, like Varnado, I focus on queer desire, but move

beyond the endeavour of identifying depictions of same-gender desire. Varnado's queerness, like Halberstam's, allows for queer desire to be its offbeat, rule-defying self. Its poetically metaphysical self if you will. It focuses, like Halberstam's theory, on the constructedness, the strange, and queerness's ability to tear down or confuse borders. In Varnado and Halberstam's versions of queerness lies great potential to answer the question of what it is that makes Donne's poetry so attractive to queer readings.

To illustrate the point of queerness's potential in the reading of metaphysical poetry, I will use examples of some of Donne's most famous conceits. There are specifically Donnean conceits which mainly showcase the previously mentioned uncommon juxtaposition, i.e., drawing similarities between things that are usually seen as unconnected. The famous eyes on a string, for example, in "The Ecstasy" (5–8), where a quite morbid image is used to depict the closeness of the lovers in the poem. Equally famous for its uncommon morbidity or unpleasantness is the eponymous insect in "The Flea," acting as intermediary between two lovers, and, ultimately, as a tool of coercion in a wooing game. In these two famous examples of metaphysical conceits, the uncommonness is at the forefront, their elaborate images easy to see as fuel for both Johnson's and Dryden's genre-creating criticism.

However, there are many examples of conceits in Donne's poetry where the images are not quite as shocking in their uncommonness. In "A Lecture Upon the Shadow," for example, astronomical and scientific conundrums are the topic of the conceit. Love is likened to the motion of the spheres, and the undulations of a maturing relationship are compared to how shadows are dependent on movement both from celestial bodies and earthly ones (14–18). In "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," the way the souls of the two lovers accompany each other is compared to how the feet of a compass follow each other (21-36).

Additionally, politics and military jargon are often part of Donne's conceits. In "The Anniversary," for example, the lovers are spoken of in terms of royalty and what such a life involves. In "The Sun Rising," the lover is "all states" and the speaker is "all Princes" (1). In the analysis chapter of this thesis, I will mainly use "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" and "The Dissolution" to examine the relationship between queerness and metaphysical conceits. However, since this is a thesis about John Donne,

all poems analysed will need to take conceits into consideration to some degree. In them is where much of metaphysical poetry's queer foundation lies, after all.

Methodology, New Historicism, and the Crux of the Pastness of the Past

This section briefly discusses some aspects of new historicism as a method, new historicism in Donne research, ongoing criticism within new historicist scholarship, and what consequences that has for this thesis in particular.

Donne has, as mentioned earlier, enjoyed a quite stable image as a lovable rogue in Early Modern poetry, an image that has been scrutinised and revalued in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. With the new historicist recontextualization conducted by, for example, Klawitter and Bach, many over-looked aspects of Donne's poetry have been given a chance to surface, and same-gender affection is far from the only one of those aspects. For example, both Klawitter and Bach, and virtually all of Donne's later critics, take note of the misogynistic streak clearly visible in much of the poetry, attaching it both to Donne personally and the social structures of the period (Bach 260; Mueller qtd. in Bach 262).

Not everyone subscribes to the readings of Donne's poetry which new historicism yields, however. Saunders, while also undertaking a kind of recontextualization in *Desiring Donne*, sees problems with what he understands as a 'progressive' Donne and claims that new historicism and post-Foucauldian analyses of power structures might have created an incorrect image of Donne's radicalism (27). Conversely, engagement with new historicist methods potentially gives clearer, more approachable, and less author image-focused results than the more discourse-revolving scholarship that I let Saunders represent here. However, there are other problems with new historicist methods than the ones Saunders addresses, which are more related to the insistence on the pastness of the past.

Carla Freccero's criticism of new historicism comes from a different angle than Saunders's, and queer theory does not escape scot-free. Where new historicism can become too convinced of its ability to shear the insights of modernity in favour of reading history 'correctly,' queer theory too can be willing to apply the same modernity carelessly. Both schools, to Freccero, often suffer from stasis in their convictions, an inflexibility that is unsuitable, especially for queerness as a concept, and suggests caution of too strict

application of either school: “[I]t would be nearly impossible for a Renaissance scholar to read ‘without history.’ But I do argue for the possibility that reading historically may mean reading against what is conventionally referred to as history” (5). Freccero uses the idea of queerness itself to question the linearity of historicity, and to problematise Stephen Greenblatt’s proposal that the psychoanalytic subject did not exist in the Early Modern period (1). Without going too far into the philosophical depths which Freccero visits, it is still crucial to acknowledge the fact that queer time, and queer historicity, can sometimes be at odds with certain elements of new historicism. That said, queer theory and new historicism do not at all have to be at odds when conducting Early Modern literary research, but can instead support and enrich each other.

Following Freccero’s understanding of queer’s potential as a necessarily unconventional tool for reading history, I believe this thesis will produce interesting readings of some of Donne’s more well-read poems, as well as some more overlooked ones. It is my conviction that, when looking for themes that have been actively hidden by history, one has to be unconventional to relocate them. I will treat the subject of what we call queerness today as an aspect of humanity which can be approached and discussed in terms of desire and inter-human relationships. This thesis does not, however, have psychoanalysis and its understanding of the human subject as major parts of its discussion.

The discourse surrounding what can and what cannot be assumed regarding people in the Early Modern period is an ongoing one and, through its reliance on new historicism, this thesis is part of that discourse. For example, new historicism method works to eliminate many of the complications of the academic bias which will be discussed in this thesis. A lot of that bias involves differing ideas of the actual author more than it does readings of the poetry, and the line between subjective and objective is sometimes challengingly blurred in scholarship both older and more recent. Since new historicist method focuses on works and points in culture and history, rather than a recreation of real-life authors’ personal desires and emotions, it is an effective method for examining scholarship specifically.

The complications Freccero brings up remain, however, and this thesis acknowledges the long-standing, ongoing discourse regarding how to approach historical literature, and queerness’s potential role in that discourse. If nothing else, queerness can automatically challenge the *way* in which we ‘do’ historicism since bias and norms exist

at the point in culture and history you are viewing *from* as well. In short, in this thesis I use new historicism methodology, but remain mindful of the potential cruxes of the method.

The Queerness of Christian and Classical Tradition

This section briefly maps the position of religion in the Early Modern period, the importance of Classical tradition, and that tradition's effect on art. The section also touches upon some biographical details of Donne, and how this combination of Christian and Classical tradition might be seen as queer.

In Early Modern England, Christianity was undergoing change in several ways. Starting with the decision of Henry VIII to make the monarch, rather than the pope, head of church, and then continuing through the turbulent swaying between Protestant and Catholic monarchs subsequent to Henry, religion was both fundamentally important and fundamentally unstable.

In terms of religion and philosophy, the Early Modern period is of course also a period when the Classical ideals re-emerged as a shift away from the Middle Ages, a shift the other name for the period suggests—the Renaissance. Relevant to the topics of this thesis, art returned to more mimetic expression, in line with the old Classical masters, and with it an increased focus on the body and human physicality. The Classical ideals presented a celebration of the body, which medieval art—with its symbolism and allegory of things one cannot depict—did not entertain.

However, establishing a clean divide between Early Modern Christianity and Classical tradition quickly turns problematic. Both can be argued to be fundamentally conservative *and* surprisingly permissive in terms of physicality, identity, and various forms of transgression. Classical literature, for example Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is full of bodily transgression, transformation, unorthodox desire, and excess. But so is Christian tradition, especially the Catholic variety, where, for example, communion was said to *actually* transmute wine and bread into blood and body; just one of the things that was hotly debated as blasphemy during the Early Modern transitions back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism as dominant religious sect.

Donne in particular has a famously complicated relationship with the different sects of Christianity in England: he was raised Catholic, but when he later in life became

a priest, he became such as a Protestant. He was educated, which meant that he was intimately familiar with Classical texts. Because of the status of religion in the Early Modern period, and the biographical details of Donne's life, religion has always been a necessary aspect to take into consideration when analysing Donne's poetry. Even though a large part of Donne's body of works is entirely religious, his comparably secular love poems—generally connected to his life as a law student, part of the Inns of Court culture—are still the more popular field of study and the religious aspects of them are often downplayed or ignored (Bach 267). That said, it is not exclusively the, to us, historically distant and culturally different relationship to religion in the Early Modern period which makes Donne's religious poetry less approachable than his love poems. Some of the Holy Sonnets, for example, can be downright shocking to read in terms of eroticism and violence.

Religion is often seen as contradictory to the fluidity of queerness today, because of conservative, intolerant politics enforced in the name of religion. Contrary to that view, what we can observe in queerness *and* in metaphysical conceits—i.e., binary-breaking, border-challenging, questioning the static idea of a body—are not in conflict with religious understandings contemporary with Donne, or even with understandings explicitly expressed by Donne in his sermons and poetry. For example, Ramie Targoff uses her monograph *John Donne: Body and* Soul to examine, as the title might suggest, the relationship between body and soul in Donne's texts and how that relationship is never entirely stable. Regarding Holy Sonnet V—"I am a little world made cunningly"—she says that "Donne's emphasis on the dualism of his 'little world' […] resonates with what may well be the single most consistent principle in his metaphysics [Targoff uses 'metaphysics' here as a twenty-first century dictionary would define it, not in terms of the genre 'metaphysical poetry']: that no aspect of our devotional experience belongs exclusively to body or soul" (115). The fluidity and volatility of both body and soul are cornerstones in Donne's entire corpus, and expressions of this fluidity are numerous, often contradictory, and arguably *never* entirely removed from religion. What is obvious is that neither transgression nor convention are expressed in ways that can be easily explained in twenty-first century terms. In other words, presentism is ever-looming, and one should be careful about anachronisms in one's assumption of intolerance when it comes to religion in the Early Modern period.

Furthermore, the physical, rapturous, ecstatic aspect of religion can feel foreign if one lives in a secular society based on the relative—compared to historical Catholicism, for example—austerity of Protestantism. Often, if expressions of religious physicality and ecstasy are acknowledged, they are done so in a way that tries to entirely separate them from anything sexual—i.e., it is a religious, chaste rapture, as contradictory as that might sound (Targoff 120). That said, many of Donne's Holy Sonnets simply do not allow for religious rapture to be entirely sequestered from sex and desire. Were that the case, they would not have caused such debate. The potency of Holy Sonnets such as "Batter my heart" and "Spit in my face," lies precisely in their physical immediacy, their loud apostrophising, and their brazen sexual language.

The tension between Christianity and Classical tradition, and the tension of religion and sex in the Holy Sonnets, is something I will discuss as a queerness in itself in the last part of the analysis.

A Note on Queer Terminology and Understanding Its History

As a final note before moving on to the analysis of Donne's poetry, I will discuss how certain queer terminology has been used in the past, and how I will proceed using mine, and my reasons for doing so. The section ends with a reflection over what this thesis does and does not aim to do with its queerness.

Addressing queerness in academia is an ongoing effort, and relatively new in its current form. While most contemporary attempts at discussing queer issues, themes, and potential come from an empathic, good-natured place, the rate at which insights and language are refined is difficult to keep up with. More often than not, reading scholarship from only a few years ago makes us cringe in discomfort. Therefore, being as precise as possible, and transparent about the rapidly adjusting landscape, is crucial when discussing sexuality, queerness, and gender.

Firstly, some ground rules regarding terminology. When the differentiation is needed, I will use 'same-gender relationships' for any kind of relationship between people of the same gender; for relationships between people of different genders, I will use 'cross-gender relationships.' Oftentimes, these are the most historically neutral terms, in my view. By historically neutral, I do not mean these terms could have been used in the sixteenth century and mean what they mean today, but rather that we can use them today

without attaching too much historical baggage, as opposed to 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' for example. I use the term 'gender' rather than 'sex' because it is more accurate, based on what we know of sex and gender in the twenty-first century. Sometimes gender, pronouns, and genitals in the poetry I will discuss conform to our notion of normative bodies and psychologies today, but it is unwise to assume that it would in all cases, and that it does so in a direct analogue to our ideas. Additionally, since we are in the middle of important scientific realisations—realisations that are finally beginning to become general knowledge—about the unbinariness not only of gender but of what we have referred to as 'sex' as distinct from 'gender' in the past,[3] I will *not* be using the term 'sex,' since it is currently charged with unnecessary biological essentialism.

Often, in discussions of historical same-gender relationships, the terms 'homosocial,' 'homoerotic,' and 'homosexual,' are used. Klawitter defines the terms as such: "homosocial […] refers to an atmosphere or social condition that makes sexual expression possible between men: prisons, armies, pirate ships, and, in general, societies which delay marriage ten years beyond puberty but frown on pre-marital sex," an "artificially created [atmosphere]" where the Inns of Court where Donne lived as a law student are an example (17). Further:

> A 'homosocial' atmosphere might then lead to 'homoeroticism,' that is, conversation, letters, poetry expressing love between men and sometimes charged with graphic sexual metaphor. There is not physical sexual contact in homoerotic activity. It can be a prelude, however, to the final stage of male exchange, homosexual coupling. We can say that [a historical person] was a 'homosexual,' but we cannot say a poem or play is 'homosexual.' Homosexuality is physical, sexual activity between living human beings: homoeroticism is the mating game played to such climax, both homoeroticism and homosexuality made possible, of course, by homosocial settings. (17)

[3]C.f. Simón(e) Sun's excellently referenced blog post "Stop using Phony Science to Justify Transphobia" https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/stop-using-phony-science-to-justify-transphobia/

Further on the topic, Scott Giantvalley, says "In dealing with pre-twentieth-century literature […] it is generally more accurate to speak of homoerotic feelings rather than actual homosexuality, unless actual intercourse is involved, remembering that the basic desire behind both the feelings and the activity is the same" (9).

Rather than provide a useful taxonomy for historical sexuality, these quotes prove exactly the problem with this terminology both historically and contemporarily. 'Actual intercourse' as a measure of the distinction between homoeroticism and homosexuality is an unnecessary distinction if we are to remember that 'the basic desire' is the same between them, as Giantvalley claims.

Using the term 'homosexuality' for any kind of relationship in the Early Modern period, no matter how differently one tries to define it, only confuses, at best. Klawitter, for example, cannot refrain from using 'homosexual' in the modern sense now and again; a trap I think it impossible not to fall into. And, even if one *could* succeed, the modern connotations are too persistent to be able to use 'homosexuality' effectively as a historically distinct term meaning 'people of the same gender, mainly men, having sex with each other.' Moreover, the sense of hetero- and homosexuality today is *exclusive* attraction to a certain gender, which is an anachronistic mindset to inflict on the Early Modern period. That said, this explanation of what understandings of 'homo-social/erotic/sexual' in earlier scholarship I am aware of, is necessary as I move on to analysis, since the terms are encountered regularly in regarding queerness. As a summation of terminology regarding romantic and erotic relationships between people: it is much more accurate to use 'same-gender' and 'cross-gender,' to actually achieve the divorce from modern constructions of sexuality which is needed when conducting historical research.

However, I am conscious of my quite imprecise use of 'queer.' Risking exasperation in my reader, I will let myself be inspired by the concept of queer itself. In this thesis, queer will have to suffer a topical battering to the heart, being used in every way I see fit. It is a term claiming multiplicity and defiance to definition, a claim I hope to test thoroughly, not only in terms of desire but also as a mode of reading metaphysical poetry. That said, my aim is to avoid the confusion that 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' has caused in earlier discourse and, to reiterate, I hope the usage of 'same-gender' and 'cross-gender' will eliminate unintended confusion of terminology as

far as that is possible. But I think 'queer,' following Varnado, Halberstam, and Freccero, is at its most useful when it is allowed to be fluid and contradictory, celebrating multitude and constructedness. And that is also when queerness is the most interesting in relation to metaphysical poetry.

Lastly, I would like to address that the main aim of this thesis it not to *further* prove neither that Donne expressed romantic feelings for men in his life, nor that there are multiple ways in which his poetry gives voice to such desires. That has already been sufficiently proven by prior scholarship, as this background section has shown. I do, however, expand on *where* and *how* those romantic feelings are expressed, to a certain extent.

In very basic practice, queer theory facilitates, and originates from, a society being more aware of queer people's existence and experiences. That awareness, as all challenge to norm and status quo, comes with varying waves of acceptance and discrimination. However, it is still a fact that more and more queer people live openly, and more readers will approach Donne's poetry with their own—personal or closely related—queer experiences as part of their reading. It is only fitting that scholarship try and keep up with the linguistic and scientific adjustments that increased visibility and awareness requires.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Early Modern period can feel both distant, which it is, and deceptively close. Even with Freccero's criticism of new historicism in mind, this thesis uses the methodology it does—applying queer theory and queer understandings to the poetry of John Donne—as an archaeological endeavour in line with new historicism. It is part of the ongoing corrective readings of much of canonised literature, with the piles of historical bias that canonization entails. Close reading of Donne's poetry with certain aspects of queer theory as the point of departure unlocks readings which, as long as one always keeps the historical distance in mind, do not fall into unhelpful traps of anachronism.

The Tapestry of Queerness in John Donne's Poetry

Same-gender Desire in Donne's Poetry: The Royal Queerness of "The Anniversary"

In the following reading of "The Anniversary," the focus is on the marked same-gender love, equality of power between speaker and addressee, as well as the fretful anxiety of the speaker. I use this poem to exemplify both how same-gender desire can be expressed in Donne's poetry, and to examine a few prevalent tendencies in Donne scholarship when it comes to same-gender desire. I also introduce topics which will be recurring in this thesis and connect them to poetry across Donne's corpus alongside "The Anniversary": similarity and difference, and the problems of equality.

The three stanzas of "The Anniversary" read like fevered convictions which subsequently try to persuade themselves of their own arguments. Each stanza ends on an alexandrine, whose caesura works as a brief pause before the next rush of emotion. In the first stanza, the love between the speaker and the addressee is presented as the only eternal, non-decaying, thing in existence:

> All kings, and all their favourites,
> All glory of honours, beauties, wits,
> The sun itself, which makes time, as they pass,
> Is elder by a year, now, than it was
> When thou and I first one another saw:
> All other things, to their destruction draw,
> Only our love hath no decay;
> This, no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday,
> Running it never runs from us away,
> But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day. (1–10)

This eternal love does not, however, allow superseding of earthly custom. Since these two lovers are not married, death will not allow for a shared grave, as the next stanza's first couplet shows: "Two graves must hide thine and my corse: / If one might, death were no divorce" (11–12).

The speaker in "The Anniversary" notes that death *often* parts 'princes,' not just the two self-proclaimed such in the poem:

> Alas, *as well as other princes,* we,
> (Who prince enough in one another be,)
> Must leave at last in death, these eyes, and ears,
> Oft fed with true oaths, and with sweet-salt tears; (13–16, emphasis added)

These lines can be read as a reflection over how princes are just like everyone else: in death, everyone leaves their bodies behind, no matter social status. Keeping in mind the idea of divine right, i.e., the idea that being royal meant a certain favouritism bestowed by God, one can note that nothing is said about how hierarchies might look in the afterlife, only that the body is something everyone leaves in death. This passage can also be read as other princes, not just these two, having been in the same situation more specifically: having lived a life of love-confessions, and now, in death, they are parted.

After the problem of physical death parting the lovers is presented, however, a balm is swiftly offered:

> But souls where nothing dwells but love
> (All other thoughts being inmates) then shall prove
> This, or a love increased there above,
> When bodies to their graves, souls from their graves remove. (17–20)

It does not matter that death has parted them, because it essentially only means leaving behind the physical, which the ears and eyes in line 15 represent. Since their souls are filled with "nothing […] but love," they will experience ("prove") the non-decaying love of line 7-8, or possibly an even stronger love than that, when their souls reunite in heaven (17-20).

The last stanza begins in a momentary calm, a tranquillity brought by the idea of eternal love the second stanza ended on: "And then we shall be throughly [sic] blessed" (21). But nothing in "The Anniversary" is stable for long; just like the anxiety over parting in death was short-lived in the previous stanza, here the calm proves equally so:

> Here upon earth, we are kings, and none but we
> Can be such kings, nor of such subjects be;
> Who is so safe as we? where none can do
> Treason to us, except one of us two. (23–26)

No sooner has the speaker expressed contentment and joy before they fret over something new. The proclamation that these two lovers live in such harmony that they are simultaneously "kings" and "subjects" in relation to the other—a balance that offers something "safe"—is quickly darkened by the realisation that there is, after all, the possibility of betrayal from the addressee (23–26). It is a subtle anxiety, a paranoid introduction of what could have been a non-problem: here we are virtually safe from treason, unless you betray me.

In the final four lines of the poem, the speaker attempts to cut off the violent pendulum of their emotions and place themselves and the addressee back in the here and now:

> True and false fears let us refrain,
> Let us love nobly, and live, and add again
> Years and years unto years, till we attain
> To write threescore, this is the second of our reign. (27–30)

In these lines, there is an acknowledgment that the expressed "fears" are of varying degree of rationality—"[t]rue *and* false"—but the last two lines still cannot "refrain" entirely from the hyperbole of the rest of the poem (27–30, added emphasis). "Years and years unto years" does not only mirror the desire for life and love lasting "threescore" years but rather slips, yet again, into that feverish tone that weaves in and out throughout the poem (29–30).

In some ways, "The Anniversary" is the most same-gender specific lyric among Donne's songs and sonnets. The terms "kings" and "princes" are specifically gendered male in a twenty-first century reading, for example. However, in the Early Modern period the term king, at least, was sometimes used regardless of gender of a regent (Robbins

196). Possibly more indicative of the genders of speaker and addressee than the gendered terminology, is the desire for shared graves, like spouses would have, which is denied them. As mentioned in the background chapter, Bach, through Bray, notes how the definition of 'friends' in the Early Modern period was very different from our definition of the term (Bach 280). So-called 'homosocial' environments, where closeness between men was encouraged and allowed, created societies where this kind of equality of power, and its effects, could be explored. Addressing the fact that many social environments were 'homosocial' does not render "The Anniversary" 'strictly homosocial,' i.e., lacking eroticism or desire—quite the opposite. Rather, the period-specific social structure available to men would have allowed an author such as Donne, through for example the Inns of Court culture that he was part of, to be familiar with the realities of 'homosocial' environments.

In relation to the gendered desire, John Carey's seminal monograph on Donne from 1981 often mentions Donne's 'girl,' even where there is no hint of any such woman in the poetry, and "The Anniversary" is no exception. The heteronormativity is not a trait of Carey personally, naturally; it can be seen in the vast majority of Donne scholarship. However, many of Carey's readings explicitly show the effect of heteronormativity on Donne's poetry, i.e., the effect of inflicting unnecessary complexities on already complicated poetry. For example, in an attempt at strengthening the cross-gender reading of "The Anniversary," Carey references a line in "The Sun Rising"—"She'is all States, and all Princes, I" (111) but this reference rather weakens a cross-gender reading than strengthens it. In "The Sun Rising," the title of 'Prince' is solely given to the male speaker; in "The Anniversary," the 'we' are Princes and Kings both, explicitly incorporating both the speaker and the addressee, which is something Robbins notes as well (196). Even taking into consideration the previously mentioned fact that 'king' was sometimes used as a gender-neutral term in the Early Modern period, the fact that there is a distinction between a man and a woman as to who is a Prince in "The Sun Rising" somewhat strengthens the same-gender reading of "The Anniversary." In other words, read alongside "The Sun Rising," the same-gender desire in "The Anniversary" becomes even more obvious.

More convincing readings of the theme of princes, kings, and eternity come from both Carey and Targoff but those are not mutually exclusive to a same-gender reading.

For one, both note the paradoxical nature of eternal love in the guise of temporal, earthly princes (Carey 112; Targoff 76), which are elements that add to the general anxiety, and emphatic hyperbole, of the speaker. Furthermore, Carey addresses the turbulent times in which Donne wrote his poetry—societal change was everywhere in Early Modern England and, with it, inevitable instability, an instability reflected in the reflection on afterlife and eternity in "The Anniversary" (167). It might seem that being an earthly king *in heaven* is also a contradiction, but Carey, problematising the idea of temporal and eternal further, draws attention to the fact mentioned earlier: that in the Early Modern period monarchs ruled through divine right (112). Additionally, Donne frames Christianity and monarchy as closely linked in his own sermons. However, in the sermons too, as in "The Anniversary," different ideas surface regarding whether earthly hierarchies persisted in the afterlife, or whether in eternity everyone would "be equally Kings," as he suggested in a sermon of his from 1629 (Carey 112). In short, one can say that much of the inconsistency the speaker expresses in "The Anniversary" reflects the complicated religious and philosophical discussions in the Early Modern period. Again, none of these circumstances contradict the same-gender desire in the poem, but rather strengthen the reading of "The Anniversary" as a simultaneously anxious and hopeful poem.

The same-gender language in "The Anniversary" has not escaped everyone, of course. George Klawitter points it out, and E.E. Duncan-Jones sees the threefold usage of 'King' as a direct reference to Donne's close friend John King, referencing Donne's documented fondness of embracing the pun-friendly aspect of his own name (Klawitter 146; Duncan-Jones para 8). What is decidedly more striking than the fact that some scholars have noticed the same-gender language—though not surprising—is how much leeway is allowed *cross*-gender readings of Donne's poetry, leeway which is not afforded same-gender readings. References to completely invisible women in Donne's poetry are far from exclusive to Carey's criticism, and while those readings are often possible, they are very seldom *more* so than a same-gender reading. In fact, *most* of Donne's poetry has no gendered pronouns at all. I want to stress, yet again, that assuming cross-gender desire is not the result of malice or evil intent from any one critic; it is an *effect* of heteronormativity. Even in studies such as Saunders's, where entire chapters are devoted to possibly loosening the vise grip of heteronormativity in Donne criticism, "The Anniversary" still slips under the radar as a "hetero-amorous" poem (67).

There is little reason to further argue whether or not there is same-gender desire expressed in "The Anniversary." However, the scholarly readings of it serve as an effective example of how norms can obscure, even to the most careful reader, what might seem obvious to others. While the sparse scholarship surrounding "The Anniversary" specifically might mainly offer an example of heteronormativity in criticism, there are other observations about Donne's body of works in general, which can be used to examine the queer aspects of "The Anniversary." In particular, some observations made by Saunders in the monograph *Desiring Donne*.

One of the most interesting propositions of Saunders's is reading Donne's Holy Sonnets as verse letters to a male romantic friend (82). This idea of a queer cross-reading *within* Donne's own body of works is useful beyond Saunders's examples. Saunders's analysis sticks to the Holy Sonnets and the verse letters explicitly; I suggest the cross-reading can be expanded both in terms of which groups of Donne's texts one might compare between, and also that it is possible to compare beyond textual evidence of same-gender desire, into a wider definition of queerness. While I will return to Saunders's explicit linking of verse letters and Holy Sonnets in the last part of this chapter, there are still other ways in which his cross-readings can be utilised to examine "The Anniversary," as well as other poems I will analyse in this thesis.

In both the Holy Sonnets and the verse letters to men, Saunders notes certain similarities: frankness in expression of love and direct pleas to receive love; the comparison of friendship to religion; and an anxiety regarding being abandoned (83). These things are also present in "The Anniversary": "Let us love nobly," says the speaker, a frank imperative which can be read as a request; the lovers are "kings," a word which Carey has noted as possibly religiously charged; and the entire poem is saturated with an anxious tone, possibly wanting to convince an addressee to stay and ignore what might at first glance seem like a lonely, persecuted existence (28; 23–24).

Saunders's idea, then, is that there are certain modes of writing, certain themes, and certain interactions with themes, which Donne reserves for same-gender desire between men. And, again, one might queer that idea further, loosen its shackles to include wider definitions. Since this thesis rather quickly abandons the idea that queer simply means same-gender desire—as will be increasingly obvious as this chapter continues—a quest to find similarities will proceed differently in this thesis than it does in Saunders's

examination. Rather than define too rigidly, I will express my interaction with Saunders's idea that there are modes of writing reserved for romantic interactions with men in Donne's texts as a question which will resonate throughout the thesis: *Are there certain ways in which Donne's poetry interacts with the themes of similarity, difference, borders, and binaries which might be reserved for expressions of queer desire?* As I mentioned in the background chapter, I am aware of queerness's sometimes frustrating lack of specificity, but that lack of specificity is, after all, also what makes it queer at all.

How, then, does "The Anniversary" potentially interact with similarity, difference, borders, and binaries? Similarity, specifically the role similarity—and with it, by default, difference—play in relation to both love and desire, is a common theme in Donne's poetry overall. "The Canonization" strives to combine two lovers into one similar "neutral thing" and also ends on a dramatic conceit of eyes, souls, and mirrors (25, 40–45). "The Ecstasy" compares the souls of the lovers to "equal armies" (13). In "The Good Morrow," the lovers "[l]ove so alike" (21), and in "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" the "two souls" of the lovers "are one," and "twin compasses" following each other's movements (21, 25–28).

Specifically on the theme of *difference*, "Air and Angels" contemplates what difference there is between the love of men and the love of women (27–28). On a more infamously misogynist note, "Love's Alchemy" draws a harsh picture of what to expect from marriage between a man and a woman—the idea that a woman's mind, and not her body, is what you marry her for is presented as preposterous, and that one should not "Hope […] for mind in women," implicitly indicating that women are fundamentally different from men (20–24).

There are some less clear cases of similarity and difference in relation to gender among Donne's poetry as well. For example, the conditional "forget the He and She" in "The Undertaking" which might at first sound like an invitation to consider gender equality (20). However, it is, as mentioned, conditional. The suggestion to forget pronouns depends on the speaker and addressee seeing "Virtue" *at all* in women, something which is presented as uncommon to see, arguably diminishing the idea of actual equality (17–19).

Examples such as the "equal armies" between an explicit 'her' and a speaker in "The Ecstasy" could challenge the ideas in this thesis that equality in Donne's poetry is

mainly expressed as taking place between people of the same gender of equal social standing. However, that would ignore the fact that "The Ecstasy" talks about the *souls* of the lovers. "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" is another example of the focus of the equality being on the souls. No matter the gender of the lovers, the equality of souls is a rather universal theme across Donne's poetry. Important to remember, and connected to the ubiquity of religion in the Early Modern period, is that soul equality is different from the discussions of equality that have to do with earthly life and society. Donne's body of works shows a career-long fretfulness over what will happen to the body at the Christian resurrection of souls, and there are suggestions that he also subscribed, on and off, to the Aristotelean idea of there being different kinds of souls depending on whether one is human, animal, or vegetation (Targoff 9).

The fact of the matter is still that human souls are generally presented as equal in Donne's poetry, no matter what gender the earthly human has, and no matter what philosophical angle the topic is approached from. The triumph over the body is sometimes even presented as overcoming "difference of sex," for example, in "The Relic" (25). The previously mentioned complications of earthly and spiritual hierarchies connected to divine right can seem contradictory to the sentiment in "The Anniversary," and that is entirely congruent with the fluctuating ideas in Donne's texts regarding such matters. And while the triumph of soul over body could most certainly make for a queer discussion in itself, the focus in this thesis in relation to similarity and difference is rather on the much fewer poems in Donne's corpus where those topics are discussed in terms of the physical or societal.

In relation to *physical* similarity, and to return briefly to my ongoing discussion of the scholarship surrounding Donne, there are poems by Donne in which physical, specifically *genital,* language is a lot more explicit than anywhere in "The Anniversary." In terms of double phallic metaphor, there is for example the previously mentioned "stiff twin compasses" in "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," or the "Love so alike" in "The Good Morrow" which does not "slacken" or "die" (i.e., orgasm). The physical similarity expressed in those two poems—i.e., there are two people in the poem, and two phallic metaphors interacting—has still, rather unsurprisingly by this point, been debated as non-existent. Carey, for example, yet again brings in a "girl," and Saunders puts "The Good Morrow" into the same category as "The Anniversary"—"heteroamorous," though, by

contrast, Klawitter *does* note the phallic suggestion of stiff needles (Carey 265; Saunders 67; Klawitter 148–149). In a poem I will discuss later—"Sapho to Philaenis"—similarity is explored in mainly physical terms, and in the explicit context of same-gender attraction between two women. Conversely, in "The Anniversary," the speaker is distinctly *un*concerned with physical traits, which is a more common Donnean omission of conventional elements of courtly poetry.

In "The Anniversary," the theme of similarity is expressed as a spiritual desire, and as a private acknowledgement of equality at odds with societal norms. The understanding of equal souls is presented as a joyful possibility after death, but the main discussion in the poem is the societal circumstances causing the lovers to be separated, not allowed as spouses. The similar societal positions available to speaker and addressee, seemingly through their love for each other, still belongs to their own private reality, "prince enough in one another" as they are (14). Even so, the terms 'kings' and 'princes' are not only gendered male, but the fact that both speaker and addressee are interchangeable in social class in relation to each other, not just placed next to each other in high-ranking ones—princes, kings, *and* subjects—suggests that the speaker sees a universal similarity and equality of power between the two of them. The two of them actually stand above rigid societal hierarchies altogether: they can be either kings or servants to each other and their love does not change. The balance of power in such a seemingly small gesture as being able to use the same term for yourself and your lover, is a potent expression of similarity and its consequences. In the end of the poem, the speaker goes beyond any physical or societal similarity or difference between themselves and their lover, and instead dreams of the world beyond societal norms—a bodyless intimacy in the afterlife and the body-overcoming souls.

The theme of similarity and difference in relation to queerness will be something this thesis returns to often. The way those themes are expressed, interacted with, and dissected in Donne's body of works generally makes for a sometimes frustrating, but thoroughly rewarding, examination. In relation to "The Anniversary," it is interesting to note how the marked same-gender language does not automatically result in an exploration of physical similarity. Perhaps the unwillingness to focus on physicality in "The Anniversary" might be why its queerness has often slipped the radar, since we are

arguably quite used to associating same-gender queerness with discussions of physical similarity.

Despite it being heavily anachronistic, I would still like to address the situation of being refused a shared grave that this poem discusses, in relation to historically later queer realities, and the situation's relevance to readers in the twenty-first century. "The Anniversary" is an Early Modern poem which still manages, despite its age, to express similar worries that a queer person might have today: not being afforded the same societal treatment as normative, cross-gender relationships. The way the poem expresses this anxiety, in its hopeful, desperate, and melancholic fever, carries queer-specific relevance beyond its historical context. 'Timelessness' has started to lose its value as a measure of literary potency, and for good reason, but what "The Anniversary" discusses is not a timeless theme so much as a quite depressing insight into that we still have a quite long ways to go in relation to equality. Remembering the complicated realities of navigating what was allowed and not in intimacy between men in the Early Modern period, the emotions and motions of the lovers in "The Anniversary" would have looked different in some respects at the time of the poem's production, but the sentiment of not being allowed the same rituals of intimacy as cross-gender spouses still rings true.

That said, this section leaves many of these societal issues explicitly related to same-gender experiences behind, with the exception of an examination of scholarly discourse in the section on "Sapho to Philaenis." Going forward, the themes of similarity, difference, and reflection in relation to queer desire will return, and the analysis will mainly concern the border-breaking and binary-challenging aspects in Donne's poetry, metaphysical poetics, and queerness.

Formal or Formless: Conceits, Reflection and Queer Dissolution

In this section, I will examine formal aspects of Donne's poetry and how the different ways in which they challenge borders and binaries can be read as queer, or as being similar to queering strategies today. The section discusses some aspects of metaphysical conceits and also the relation between form and content, as well as meter and rhythm in "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" and "The Dissolution."

There is a certain kind of conceit which recurs often in Donne's poetry or, rather, there is a certain theme for which metaphysical conceits are often utilised. That theme is

reflection and mirroring. For example, one of the most famous of Donne's conceits is the one in "A Valediction: of Weeping," where the speaker's tears mirror the addressee, "stamp[ing]" them as the mintage of coins, giving the tears tangible value through this image of the addressee in them (1–6). The conceit is the combination of tears and coins, and the theme that is expressed is self-worth versus one's worth to others, and how one's reflection is not oneself, but rather simply an image of oneself as presented in another. "of Weeping" concerns the dissolution of, or focus on, borders of bodies and subject, arguably inherent in metaphors or literary images concerning reflection. This interaction with borders and relational opposition carries, as mentioned earlier, points of similarity with queering strategies.

However, in another one of Donne's "Valedictions," the one called "of my Name in the Window," the conceit of reflective surfaces is used in even more elaborate, queerness-friendly, ways. In this stanzaic poem, the speaker scratches their name on a windowpane and views their romantic interest through said windowpane, while also seeing a reflection of themselves in it. As is characteristic of Donne's love poetry, the poem balances between wrenching love-sick despair and crude desire, in its ambiguous usage of the word 'firmness,' a word often used in Donne's poetry to mean both strength of conviction or character, and erection:

> My name engraved herein,
> Doth contribute my firmness to this glass,
> Which, ever since that charm, hath been
> As hard, as that which graved it, was;
> Thine eye will give it price enough to mock
> The diamonds of either rock.
>
> 'Tis much that glass should be
> As all confessing, and through-shine as I,
> 'Tis more, that it shows thee to thee,
> And clear reflects thee to thine eye.
> But all such rules, love's magic can undo,
> Here you see me, and I am you. (1–12)

In the first stanza, the windowpane turns into an area of transaction—it depicts the "engraved" name, which in turn serves to transfer and express the "firmness" of the speaker. There is also the theme of worth; the gaze of the addressee infuses the speaker's name with more value than diamonds. In the second stanza, the glass gains even more abilities: its transparency works as an extension of the speaker's transparency but, more importantly says the speaker, it is simultaneously transparent *and* reflective. Therefore, it works to dissolve the borders between the speaker and the addressee: "Here you see me, and I am you" (12).

Taking into consideration the poetics of metaphysical conceits—their formal challenge to binary opposition and dissolution of borders—it is easy to understand why there are so many conceits involving reflective surfaces in Donne's poetry. The mirror is an effective device for questioning borders, identity, and opposites, especially when placed in a conceit, which in "of My Name" means alongside technicalities of how to engrave glass with diamonds, and the philosophical conundrums of reflection and transaction which Dryden would have disapproved of as efficient love poetry.

Additionally, the mirror in "of my Name" does not only erase borders between bodies. The poem also describes how love, or desire—arguably depending on how you interpret the previously mentioned 'firmness'—is the force which can blur, distort, or erase existing, or perceived borders. The reflective surface allows for the border to be perceived, but "love's magic" can "undo" the "rules" of the bodies on either side of the glass. Not only does the reflective surface itself provide a discussion of borders, "of my Name" also suggests love or desire as a fundamentally border-challenging force.

As mentioned, the dissolving, questioning, and challenging of borders and binary opposition of metaphysical conceits have, on their own, significant overlap with queerness and queering strategies. Additionally, in Donne's poetry specifically, those conceits often overlap with subject matter of desire, bodies, similarity, and difference. The reflection of oneself in the lover's eyes or tears as a discussion of the borders of the self, or as a reflection of one's emotions and desires, is not only present in "of my Name" and "of Weeping" but also in "Witchcraft by a Picture" and "The Good Morrow," for example. Because of the border-challenging combination of metaphysical conceits and

the specific themes they are used for, much of Donne's poetry is a perfect arena for utilizing a queer lens through which to view historical literature.

There are poems in Donne's body of works which complicate the image of the mirror, which will be apparent in the mentioned analysis of "Sapho to Philaenis," later. There are also poems which use *other* literary devices than the mirror to discuss the border of subjects, and the relationship between lovers, still in ways which are interesting to view through a queer lens. In the following analysis of "The Dissolution," I will examine some contextual suggestions made by earlier scholarship, and how the poem interacts with the theme of border-blurring through both its subject matter and its formal aspects.

"The Dissolution" is, like "The Anniversary," fairly sparsely analysed in Donne scholarship. Carey's monograph does not mention it, and Targoff simply notes that it is one of several Donne poems in which the love interest is dead (49). A.J. Smith notes that the death-motif is "[f]ollowing" the tradition of Dante and Petrarch (365). It makes sense to note the presence of death; the very first words of the poem are quite clear on the subject: "She is dead."

Apart from announcing that the person spoken of in the poem is dead, the first line also makes it obvious that the person has the pronoun 'she.' It does, therefore, not have the association of the type of same-gender desire that could be seen in "The Anniversary." However, "The Dissolution" interacts with aspects of queerness that go beyond merely observing explicit same-gender desire. While the dead lover is not an uncommon Early Modern theme, "The Dissolution" contains interesting metaphysical conceits, as well as those philosophical musing which Dryden found unsuitable for love lyrics. Both the conceits and the way Early Modern philosophy is expressed in "The Dissolution" can be read in queer ways.

No sooner than the proclamation of death has been made, the speaker moves on to seek comfort in universality, the idea of us returning to the 'first' elements—fire, water, earth, air—after death:

> She is dead; and all which die
>   To their first elements resolve:
> And we were mutual elements to us,
>   And made of one another.

> My body then doth hers involve,
> And those things whereof I consist, hereby
> In me abundant grow, and burdenous,
> And nourish not, but smother. (1–8)

There is a duality suggested in the involvement between the bodies of speaker and lover in these lines. The departure of the lover and, with her, the elements she consisted of and shared with the speaker are now lost, meaning what is left in the speaker is only themselves. That state of only being oneself, in turn, becomes smothering. One might take this smothering, draining state even further and view it as the speaker having become entirely subject- or identity-less with the departure of the lover. What at first seems like an attempt at comforting oneself in the wake of the lover's death—focusing on the fact that we are all made of the same elements—quickly changes. The loss of the lover's "elements" causes the speaker to talk of their own constituents almost in terms of disease: they "grow," are "burdenous" and "smothers" them. Not only is the death of the lover an emotional tragedy; it changes the very fundament of the speaker and makes them uncomfortable in their own existence.

Smith notes that the first elements are fire, earth, air, and water, but then goes on to suggest that "her first elements" are "him, so that his body now includes her" (366), i.e., a possible reference to Adam and Eve. While the biblical implication of her being made out of him is possible, I would still suggest that there is rather a discussion of physical borders and an emphasis on the lovers' *similarity* in these lines, than a return to rib-shape for the woman. The speaker does, after all, say "we were mutual elements […] made of one another" (3–4) and points out that the two of them were "mutual elements *to us,*" suggesting it might not be a common worldview—that common worldview perhaps being more Biblical, as Smith suggests—but still explicitly how those two saw it (3, added emphasis). Since the Early Modern truth was that women were inequal to men on an essential level, the idea of these two lovers being made of *mutual* elements even in this physical earthly life—assuming the speaker is a man—is potentially rather radical.

Robbins, citing an edition of Donne's poetry by Theodore Redpath, notes a relation to Shakespeare's sonnets 44–5 for lines 9–10 in "The Dissolution"—"My fire of passion, sighs of air, / Water of tears, and earthy sad despair"—in how "elements of body

and mind" are treated, i.e., that the elements are connected to different bodily functions or emotional states (248). However, the explicit dissolution of bodies is nowhere to be found in the relations of elements and body in Shakespeare's sonnets: the struggle in both sonnet 44 and 45 is the fact that a thought can travel vast distances, while the body is stuck temporally and spatially. Robbins also observes similarities to lines 12–13 in Petrarch's sonnet 278 for the "lumpen feeling" in line 6–7 of "The Dissolution" (248). "So, though I whiten momently, my will / Increases, brooding on her house, her doom," are lines 12–13 in Petrarch, continuing with the last line "The lovely flesh she never will resume" (14). As in Shakespeare, what cannot be found in Petrarch's lines is the mingling of bodies and the uncomfortable physicality of one's own bodily constituents, as a result of the death of the lover, which can be found in "The Dissolution." Even though "The Dissolution" engages with similar themes as Shakespeare and Petrarch, the *manner* in which it does so is different from them. Donne's poem is rather anxiously obsessive about figuring out where one lover ends and the other begins.

As mentioned earlier, in Donne's texts there is a general, constant anxiety over where the border between body and soul is, if there is one such border, and what will happen to that division or connection in death. The anxiety regarding body and soul spans many genres in Donne's authorship, most notably in his love lyrics, Holy Sonnets, and sermons, probably since the conundrum of body and soul is as closely related to love as it is to religion in Donne's texts. Keeping in mind the importance of religion in Early Modern society, the specific connection between desire and religion expressed in Donne's poetry is still unique, and one of the things he is most famous for. I will return to said connection more in depth in the last section of this chapter when I discuss a few of the Holy Sonnets. The reason for mentioning the prevalence of the discussion of body and soul in Donne's poetry here is to point out that in "The Dissolution," as a contrast, that discussion is rather distant.

Indeed, in "The Dissolution," the mingling of lovers, the dissolution of the borders, are explicitly bodily. The soul—usually a popular topic in Donne's poetry with or without physicality discussed—is not mentioned beyond emotional states, and the effect the lover's death has on the speaker is wrenchingly physical even in metaphor. In accordance with Early Modern scientific and philosophical ideas mentioned earlier as also present in Shakespeare's sonnets, emotions are connected to physical elements, specifically

emotions which were lulled into "security" by love, and which are once again brought back by the loss of the lover:

> My fire of passion, sighs of air,
> Water of tears, and earthly sad despair,
> Which my materials be,
> But near worn out by love's security,
> She, to my loss, doth by her death repair,
> And I might live long wretched so
> But that my fire doth with my fuel grow. (9–15)

The multitude of conflicting emotions returns in these lines, and those emotions concern the same conflicts as can be found in lines 5–8: yet again an anxiety about where one lover ends and where the other begins. But where, in the beginning of the poem, the dissolution of a border between the speaker and the lover was something safe that turned smothering when the lover died, here it seems the speaker is acting out as a result of the loss. The diffuse border between self and lover has caused a hole to appear now that the other constituent of the whole is dead. Love lulled the elements in the speaker, especially the element of passion—fire—which has reawakened as a result of the elemental imbalance the lover's death has caused. The result is destruction: the possibility of a long, albeit "wretched" life, is incinerated by the fire spread by her death (14–15).

The last nine lines are where the metaphysical conceit is explored in full, mixing love and political jargon in a way that feels familiarly Donnean[4]:

> Now as those active kings
> Whose foreign conquest treasure brings,
> Receive more, and spend more, and soonest break,
> This (which I am amazed that I can speak)
> This death, hath with my store
> My use increased.
> And so my soul more earnestly released,

[4] C.f. "The Anniversary," "The Sun Rising," "The Good Morrow"

> Will outstrip hers; as bullets flown before
> A latter bullet may o'ertake, the powder being more. (16–24)

Robbins observes historical context for the reference to kings who conquer, only to spend more and subsequently bankrupt themselves, specifically the Spanish bankruptcy in 1596 resulting from such conduct (248–249). As Johnson's definition of metaphysical conceits suggests, the contrast between personal emotion and political reference is sudden, in a swift motion from the microcosm of the human to the macrocosm around it. The metaphysical conceit reaches its zenith in the last two lines, intricately explaining that with this overload of fiery passion the speaker's own death might arrive more swiftly, outrunning the lover to the afterlife, like the bullet out of an overcharged gun. In "The Dissolution," the abrupt change in perspective and the conceit of the self as an exploding gun, has a sobering effect, an executive turn, as if distancing itself from the emotional fretting of the previous lines.

However, the strictly political reference quickly loses its border to the emotions of the speaker, dissolving and mixing yet again. The speaker expresses surprise at being able to speak of the situation, and at the fact that the death of a loved one can serve to increase the "store" ("stock") of elements rather than reduce it: an act of simultaneous reduction and addition. In relation to a Holy Sonnet I will return to—"Batter my heart"—Targoff suggests that the abruptness between military and romantic in Donne's conceits is not as jarring as one first experiences (123), that the juxtaposition rather causes the specific border-blurring which I suggest is a kind of queerness in metaphysical conceits. In relation to "The Dissolution," the fact that the military and the romantic do not stay separate has the effect of strengthening the overall theme of dissolution of borders.

Now more explicitly to the queerness in "The Dissolution." To reiterate a few key elements, in this poem love makes the body's borders unclear: the connection and emotion between the speaker and lover are so strong that, if one body in the pair loses life, the loss of the elements of that body causes a disruptive deficiency in the other. Even if there are surface aspects that seem normative—a speaker "I" and an addressed "she," for example—there is no clear border marking the two of them off as part of separate sides of a binary. The poem takes a familiar aspect or trope of grief—feeling as if you've 'lost a limb'—and gives it a metaphysical, and queer, spin. The reason the speaker feels

incomplete is the fact that the borders between speaker and lover were blurred and the explanation of that feeling of incompleteness is Early Modern understandings of the elements and their connection to human emotion. Essentially, the main idea treated in "The Dissolution" is that of love and desire as borderless, volatile experiences.

The volatility of love and desire explored in "The Dissolution" can be read either as an expression of queerness or as an argument to uphold normativity. The unstable state is brought about by the loss of the lover and, in a heteronormative reading, "The Dissolution" can be argued to discuss what happens when the union of a man and a woman is disrupted, the death of one leaving the other spouse out of balance. However, that does not erase the fact that what is described of the two lovers, before the death of one party, is how the two of them were made of the same stuff—"made of one another" (4). In other words, the volatility is brought about because of a loss of *similarity*, not loss of balancing difference. Whichever state the lovers started in, their relationship made them more similar on an elementary level which, in the poem's context, means both emotionally and physically. The various ways in which similarity and queerness collide in Donne's poetry is something that I will explore further in the analysis of "Sapho to Philaenis," but the way it is expressed in "The Dissolution" is still notable and singular.

There is an interesting expression of desire in the second half of the poem, which relates to one of the ways in which Varnado discusses queerness: in desire for excess and insatiability (Varnado 3–4). "This death hath with my store / My use increased" says the speaker in their comparison to the insatiable kings who have succumbed to their own greed (20–21). The likening to *active* kings removes some of the instinctual aspects of the "store" of elements which causes such destruction for the speaker. The conquests are active choices, just as the term "use" ["expenditure"] suggests. Similar to those kings, what started as raw, destructive *reaction* in the speaker has turned into destructive *action*, making the final conceit all the more powerful: the loss of stability leads down a chosen, destructive path of excess. The desire is still within the speaker, but it is not directed at the lover, it is a desire to seek out anything that might fan the destructive fire. Non-alloerotic, i.e., non-partner directed desire, is, incidentally, also something that Varnado includes as relevant to queer readings of Early Modern literature (13).[5]

[5] The desire in "The Dissolution" is, obviously, partially for death itself. Donne's desire for death is the main theme in his treatise *Biathanatos*, which is a defence of suicide, or the possibility of suicide not being sinful. Targoff discusses Donne's desire for death to a certain extent, but I have chosen to not

Varnado's angle on literary queerness in the Early Modern period is refreshing in many ways. Like the term 'queer' itself, a lot of her exploration of desire is a reclamation of what queerness has been negatively accused of entailing. Same-gender desire specifically has been associated with excess, depravity, and melancholia, something that Varnado suggests queer readings instead embrace (3–4). Instead of trying to sanitise yet another aspect of queerness to fit a norm, she asks what happens if one simply accepts those aspects as part of queerness, and part of queer expressions in literature (Varnado 4, 7). In this more wide embracing of what queer desire can mean, "The Dissolution" engages with both excess and melancholia, as well as the perhaps more familiarly queer ideas of desire across binaries, borders, and beyond normative assumptions of the human body.

Yet another way in which "The Dissolution" is queer lies in more poetically formal aspects. Even when considering "the amount of elision in spoken English of the time," Donne's poetry is often quite singular in metricality, even if recent scholarship has showed that it might not be quite so alien as earlier critics make it seem (Robbins 23).

"The Dissolution" is not stanzaic, and its rhyme scheme, even when taking into consideration Early Modern pronunciation variations, is quite uneven. Line 1 rhymes with line 6, line 2 with 5, line 3 with 7, line 4 with 8, in unevenly dispersed feet. In relation to this unevenness, form and content collaborate effectively in a queer reading of "The Dissolution." The subject matter of borderless, unconventional, amorphous, queer desire—of imbalanced elements burning too hotly—matches the jagged rhythm of the poem. By line 9, with the introduction of the reawakening materials, the rhyme scheme tries to balance itself more; there are still stray rhymes, but the irregularity evens out, causing the poem to flow faster, and speed the reader towards the speaker's fiery doom.

Instead of mapping the rhymes and feet out as a new, distinctive meter, one might—in the name of queerness—simply embrace the unevenness as such. Saunders suggests that the tradition of trying to enforce regularity in some cases is simply elitism; that all prominent, regularly quoted, historical critics of Donne's poetry have commented on the irregularity, and regularly been willing to tamper with the texts because of an, often implicit, valorising of regular meter (107). However, if the rhyme scheme and metre

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make it a bigger part of the discussion of queer desire and Donne's poetry in this thesis. Queer desire is often normatively assumed to focus on trauma, suicide, and depression, and those themes risk being seen as intrinsic to queerness.

engage with, and protest against, convention, that too can become part of the queer fabric of "The Dissolution." Remembering the rule-breaking scavenger queerness of Halberstam, and invoking the "form matters as much as the content"–statement of his "Gaga Manifesto" (209) the formal unevenness of "The Dissolution" fits well in the overall queer reading of the poem.

There are many formal aspects of metaphysical poetry generally, and of Donne's poetry specifically, which benefit from queer readings. Metaphysical conceits themselves, as shown here and in the background chapter, have many similarities with what queer theory embrace and examine today. The recurring image of mirrors and reflection—which will be even further explored in the next section—provides a poetic metaphor for the border-blurring and binary-challenging of queerness. Furthermore, as the example of "The Dissolution" shows, the common metaphysical conceit of juxtaposing politics and romance presents another aspect of queer potential in Donne's poetry. As does the engagement with science and philosophy which the poem uses as its explanation for the instability and destruction of the speaker. Not only that, but the fact that Donne's poetry often abandons conventional metre can be seen as a point of similarity with twenty-first century queer theory in its uneven, boundary-breaking endeavour.

Since this thesis is about John Donne, it will never entirely abandon discussion of the metaphysical conceit. However, in the next section, the discussion will revolve around the poetic image of mirrors and Donne's handling of the dissolution of the self, rather than the textbook metaphysical conceit of joining things which usually do not go together in extended metaphors. The next section will also discuss more thoroughly the complicated scholarly realities of discussing queerness, specifically same-gender desire, in relation to a canonised author with over four-hundred years of academic build-up.

Similarity and Difference: The Curious Case of "Sapho to Philaenis"

"Sapho to Philaenis" has been a rather hotly debated poem in Donne's body of works in the twentieth century and onwards. The legitimacy of Donne's authorship of the poem has been, and still is to a certain extent, questioned, mostly on basis of its same-gender expression of desire and love. The poem has also been difficult to place in any of the generally accepted groupings of Donne's poetry; essentially, it sticks out in every conceivable way.

In this section, I start by addressing some of the ways in which “Sapho” has caused trouble in scholarly discourse, before moving on to an analysis where I look at the poem’s fascinating take on the poetic device of mirroring and reflection, its depiction of same-gender desire, and the possibility of thematic and formal parallels with “The Dissolution” and “The Anniversary.” I also note a few connections between “Sapho” and Ovid’s Narcissus myth, and the implications that connection might have for the poem’s theme of similarity, and for its queerness.

First to the struggle of categorisation of the poem. In the collection edited by A.J. Smith, “Sapho” is placed at the very end of the section ‘Elegies.’ The placement follows Helen Gardner’s to a degree, as she put “Sapho” *after* the Elegies in her edition of Donne’s poetry, though as dubia, i.e., as debatable whether it is written by Donne or not. Smith has no dedicated dubia section, but rather includes all texts attributed to Donne in their edition, and leaves doubts to the end notes. In terms of trying to give the poem a genre, Gardner was the first to call “Sapho” a ‘Heroical Epistle,’ making it Ovidian beyond textual reference (Smith 452). The ‘Phao’ referenced in “Sapho” is generally assumed to mean Sappho’s supposed lover Phaon, and Sappho’s relationship to Phaon is the subject of the fifteenth epistle of Ovid’s *Heroides*, or heroical epistles (Harvey 118). Ovid’s heroical epistles “are wittily erotic poems purporting to be letters between famous lovers” (Smith 452). Harvey also notes that the relationship between Ovid’s fifteenth epistle and “Sapho” is not one of direct analogy, but that Donne rather writes *against* the violent and possessive “Ovidian eroticism” (130).

As briefly mentioned in the background chapter, later scholarship—i.e., from the 1980s and onward—has generally challenged Gardner’s 1960s argument for marking “Sapho” as dubia, an argument based on unconvincing internal evidence heavy with moral panic over lesbians. Carey, while not outright condemning Gardner’s dislike for the same-gender subject matter, still sees no reason to doubt Donne’s authorship on account of said subject matter, but rather views it as a case of poetic problem solving, that supposed ‘problem’ being that the lovers in a *cross*-gender relationship must contend with physical dissimilarities (271). Klawitter notes how there is no evidence other than Gardner’s personal feelings on the subject for dubbing the poem dubia (60). James Holstun, as early as 1987, accuses Gardner and critics before her of becoming so wrapped up in their idea of a “scandalous subject matter” that they “lose control of even so familiar

and shopworn a tool of their craft as the concept of a poetic persona" (837). Vitriolic academic spats aside, Diana Treviño Benet, like Holstun, notes that Gardner was not the first to try and sweep "Sapho" under the rug, but that several editors as early as in the nineteenth century have censured and 'corrected' all of Donne's Elegies—a grouping that "Sapho," as mentioned, sometimes has been a part of (Benet 16; Holstun 837).

However, despite a general consensus seemingly being in place over how Gardner's reasoning is subjective and faulty, a surprisingly late anthology of Donne's texts—edited by Robin Robbins in 2014—still puts "Sapho to Philaenis" as dubia without adding convincing evidence as to why. Due to space-limitations, I will not go into my own archaeological investigation of "Sapho to Philaenis" in this thesis, but the lack of satisfactory commentary on how the majority of scholarship before the 2014 anthology has counterproved Gardner's claim of the poem as dubia stands out. Furthermore, the addition of more critique of the poem's supposed "lack of sophistication and sharp-minded wit" (Robbins 1236), is also surprisingly subjective in the context of scholarship surrounding this poem. Robbins' main argument for "Sapho" as dubia, beside Gardner's observations, seems to be intertextual relation to Shakespeare's sonnets which suggest that the author of "Sapho" had read the 1609 publication of those "with its related focus on same-sex love," and that Donne's work more certainly written around 1609 looks nothing like "Sapho" (1236). While certainly possible, there are many uncertainties regarding the production of "Sapho," and the fact remains that it is included in several manuscripts which are relatively trusted sources for other poems: i.e., the reasons for excluding "Sapho" from Donne's corpus are, in the end, not substantial enough (Harvey 118).

With some of the debate around "Sapho" explained, it is high time to actually investigate what it is that has created this doubt and discussion. The poem starts with a complaint about how the "holy fire" of verse has left the speaker in their attempts to describe the addressee, and leads the speaker to wonder whether it is their own tears which have quenched that fire and—if that is the case—why those tears cannot also "quench" the fire "of desire":

> Where is that holy fire, which verse is said
>
> To have? is that enchanting force decayed?

Verse, that draws Nature's works, from Nature's law,
Thee, her best work, to her work cannot draw.
Have my tears quenched my old poetic fire;
Why quench they not as well, that of desire? (1–6)

This meta technique of describing the incapacity to describe is not uncommon in Early Modern poetry, especially in the courtly love genre. Dante Alighieri's poetry of Beatrice, for example, often entails complaining about the speaker's inability to properly describe the object of their love (Kleiner 281).

In "Sapho," poetic inadequacy is far from the only thing plaguing the speaker. No effort to exorcise the thoughts of the lover fully expels them from the speaker, who admits that the situation might be their own fault, because "both to keep, and lose" the memory of the addressee "grieves equally" (7–14). The speaker is trapped in a limbo state where both remembering and forgetting the lover is equally painful. After that follows what seems to be an effort to, despite the lamented inability, still attempt using verse to describe this indescribable, verse-annihilating addressee:

That tells me how fair thou art: though art so fair,
As gods, when gods to thee I do compare,
Are graced thereby; and to make blind men see,
What things gods are, I say they are like to thee. (15–18)

This is one of the most meter-solid parts of the entire poem: strict heroic couplets, no enjambment, and the four lines hold a self-contained argument. This structure completely falls apart in the next six lines, however:

For, if we justly call each silly man
A little world, what shall we call thee then?
Thou art not soft, and clear, and straight, and fair,
As down, as stars, cedars, and lilies are,
But thy right hand, and cheek, and eye, only
Are like the other hand, and cheek, and eye. (19–24)

Enjambments are rare throughout this poem, but just in these lines there are two. In almost every other part of the poem, it rhymes in couplets; in these five lines there are no end-rhymes. The meter is uneven, even given colloquial and historical elision and emphasis. In the overall quite strict form of "Sapho," and especially when contrasted with the four lines directly previous to them, these six lines stand out. The nonconformity of form matches the content: the common practice of comparing the lover to nature is not satisfactory; the only thing that adequately describes them is themselves.

As mentioned, there has been criticism levelled towards "Sapho" for its simplicity, or lack of wit (Robbins 1236). However, as Holstun observes, you can read "Sapho" and appreciate its numerous 'simple' or 'unwitty' metaphors as unsuccessful attempts at poetry, a technique entirely in line with the starting complaint of the poem (838). Holstun argues that "Sapho" actually goes where other Renaissance poetry lamenting the lack of inspiration dares not: following such a lament with "an uninspired poem" (838).

The transition between the two parts of the poem cited above, i.e., lines 15–18 versus lines 19–24, is one of the strongest supports of the intentional uninspiredness in "Sapho." As Holstun observes, the speaker's impotence is obvious in the poem's content—the comparisons are unimaginative stock metaphors (838)—and I would add that formally, the poem supports that argument as well. The speaker first attempts conformity to a strict poetic format, then tries matching the form with the singularity of the lover by loosening that strictness, but ultimately abandons both formats. What the speaker keeps from this exercise in poetic format is only the self-contained perfection in the addressee's similarity to themselves discovered in lines 23–24. Leaving active discussions of verse behind, similarity and reflection serve as the theme for the rest of the poem.

What gets added to the discovery of the similarity of the addressee's own parts to themselves, is the speaker's physical similarity to the addressee. The speaker delivers several reflections on the consequences of lovers being physically similar. "But thy right hand, and cheek, and eye, only / Are like thy other hand, and cheek, and eye" (23–24) and "there wants yet / A mutual feeling" in lines 31-2. Later, it continues:

> My two lips, eyes, thighs, differ from thy two,

> But so, as thine from one another do;
> And, oh, no more; the likeness being such,
> Why should they not alike in all parts touch?
> Hand to strange hand, lip to lip none denies;
> Why should they breast to breast, or thighs to thighs?
> Likeness begets such strange self flattery,
> That touching myself, all seems done to thee.
> Myself I embrace, and mine own hands I kiss,
> And amorously thank myself for this.
> Me, in my glass, I call thee; but alas,
> When I would kiss, tears dim mine eyes and glass. (45–56)

The observations of similarity between addressee and speaker evolve into masturbation, only to end in a melancholic state of inadequacy, yet again. There are several aspects to consider here, on the theme of similarity and difference. The "strange," i.e., differing, limbs which "none denies" are questioned in their supposed sovereignty. The speaker asks what makes the 'strange' touch legitimate, whereas the touches between those "alike in all parts" is something that should not be done. However, when seeking comfort in that supposed similarity, and sexual satisfaction in the likeness of their own body, the speaker still reaches a limit for said similarity. You might have two hands, one of which you can pretend is someone else's, but you have no second mouth to offer a substitute for the intimacy of a kiss, which the speaker realises in a tear-filled moment.

The last eight lines of the poem offer little in terms of consolation or resolution. First, the speaker begs for a cure for "this loving madness," and for the addressee to "restore" the speaker to themselves, only to realise that the addressee is the speaker's "half," "all" and "more" (57–58). The speaker seems trapped in a circulatory argument with themselves, similar to the conundrum at the beginning of the poem: both letting go of the memories and keeping them is torturous. Here, in lines 57-58, the realisation is that with the "madness" would also the desire, and ultimately the self, be destroyed. The speaker asks to be restored to themselves, only to admit that the addressee basically encompasses the speaker's entire existence. The poem nears its end and the borders and subjectivity of the speaker still seem debatable; without the lover, they are simply not

whole. The speaker is stuck in a borderless, ambiguous state which, in a way, is a very queer existence, albeit not a very positive one. This volatility of self due to a loss of similarity can be recognised from the previous analysis of "The Dissolution" as well. There, the speaker suffered a quite physical result, whereas here, the miserable, unfulfilled state is less aggressive, but also less ultimately destructive.

After a last, tired attempt at describing the enormity of the addressee, the speaker seems to simply give up in the end, resign themselves to a wish for an impossible stasis:

> So may thy cheeks' red outwear scarlet dye,
>   And their white, whiteness of the galaxy,
> So may thy mighty, amazing beauty move
>   Envy in all women, and in all men, love,
> And so be change, and sickness, far from thee,
>   As thou by coming near, keep'st them from me. (59–64)

The speaker attempts to immortalise the addressee through poetry more actively here than in any other place in the poem: they speak of moving all women and men, and create a static, immortal image of the incomparable addressee. The result is debatable. Resigning themselves to using vague, uninspired adjectives such as "mighty" and "amazing" only seems to be nails in the coffin of the poetic fire that the speaker complained having been quenched in the beginning of the poem. Like Smith, I acknowledge this as an allusion to the real Sappho, beyond the poem's title: the real Sappho's poetry did, after all, often explicitly strive to make its addressees immortal (453 n59–62). Additionally, like Holstun, I read the speaker's uninspired word use—the mentioned "mighty" and "amazing"—as entirely congruent with the content of the poem (838).

On a thematic and subject matter level, "Sapho to Philaenis," as hinted at throughout this thesis, is borderline obsessed with similarity; to be precise, *physical* similarity. The speaker uses their physical similarity to the addressee as an argument for them being together throughout the poem. They also talk of the positives of the addressee being different than a man. For example, the Early Modern idea that women needed a man to perfect them, that they were incomplete without men, is refuted on the basis of physical perfection in the addressee: "Thy body is a natural paradise, / In whose self,

unmanured, all pleasure lies, / Nor needs perfection; why shouldst thou then / Admit the tillage of a harsh rough man?" (36–39). There is also the argument that men leave traces of their lovemaking, whereas these two women lovers have a love that leaves "no more signs" than "fishes leave in streams, or birds in air" (41–42).

The most potently queer image is the one in lines 50–56, quoted above—the image of the speaker imagining their lover in the mirror and touching themselves—and not only in terms of expressions of same-gender desire. The queerness of a blurring of boundary between speaker and lover is familiar by now, but something new is expressed in relation to the mirror reflection in "Sapho": in this poem, the blurring of boundaries does not work.

In "Sapho," desire does not cause an amalgamation of bodies or of souls, like love does in "of My Name in the Window." It does not adequately depict the doubts regarding self-worth and self-reflection as it does in "of Weeping." Rather, the *limitation* of the reflection is, though first promising, made obvious: "Me, in my glass, I call thee; but alas / When I would kiss, tears dim mine eyes, and glass" (55–56). The repeated use of the word 'likeness' is telling, meaning resemblance, but not identical such: they are similar, but not the same person. In this similarity, in this same-gender paradise, there is still a difference between individuals which is significant, and in fact crucial. As Paula Blank also observes, "Sapho" argues that same-gender desire is not, as some would have it, simply a form of projected narcissism but rather a desire for another, distinct individual, just as cross-gender desire is (358, 359).

What *could* be a relation to narcissism, though, and by building on the many Ovidian connections already observed in the poem, one may engage with Ovid's rendition of the Narcissus myth in relation to "Sapho." Surface-level comparisons are perhaps self-evident: there is someone looking into a mirror, seeing something they desire or love. There are, of course, differences from the Narcissus myth as well—for one, the speaker does not die, and they do *not* fall in love with themselves. The speaker in "Sapho" attempts to follow Narcissus, only to realise their mirror image is not, as it was for him, enough.

In the translation of *Metamorphoses* which most probably would have been available to Donne—Arthur Golding's from 1567—Narcissus's passion towards himself, and death because of it, is marked by its "straungenesse" (Golding 68–9). Strangeness features in Donne's poem as well. While the 'strangeness' of the legitimate hands and lips

in "Sapho" might mark difference, the "strange self flattery" which the speaker experiences does *not* have to do with difference (51). Rather, it might allude to another person who saw attraction in a mirror image—Narcissus and his 'strange' passions. The multiple meanings of strangeness are queerly twisted, simultaneously foreign and familiar in how the situation concerns a 'strange' desire for one's own familiar body, *and* for a 'strange' or *un*familiar body. The situation both questions the societal norms surrounding touch—"Why should they not alike in all things touch?" (48)—and alludes to the Narcissus myth, with its "strange self flattery" (51). With the language connection between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Golding's translation, "Sapho" gains yet another Ovidian allusion and, with it, yet another unconventional, queer angle on desire.

There is yet another aspect of Ovid's Narcissus which is interesting to consider in relation to "Sapho," and that is the other character in the myth: Echo. Echo is cursed to only repeat the speech of others, never to choose words of her own, as punishment for angering Juno. In a poem like "Sapho," so full of repetition, and which starts out with the frustration over the speaker's poetic inadequacy, the undertones of a fate similar to Echo's are not far off, especially considering the poems many other Ovidian allusions. In Ovid's myth, Echo tries to convey her feelings—which are the opposite of what Narcissus tells her—by repeating only parts of his utterances.[6] Holstun notes how the pattern of linguistic repetition throughout "Sapho" is yet another stylistic feature fully congruent with the content (838–839). The theme of similarity and reflection is, if the pun is allowed, reflected in the language.

"Sapho" is full of attempts at successful poetry: by combining different senses of words, different poetic forms, and mirror image with actual lovers. The combination of allusions to both Narcissus and Echo from the Ovidian myth is yet another aspect which can show a failed attempt at poetic ingenuity: the "self flattery" alluding to Narcissus is ineffective, and the repetition of words, similar to Echo's situation, does not create any new poetic truths, senses, or sensations.

[6]While not entirely on subject for this thesis, there is still a point to address here: The character of Echo, and the repetitive frustration of the speaker of "Sapho," have points of similarity with discussions of language in marginalized groups. For example, in the ideas of patriarchal, phallogocentric language of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, where they argue that the language of the dominant culture is automatically a tool of oppression. This is a discussion which is, of course, also part of postcolonial studies. This allusion to Echo's fate in "Sapho" will serve as my acknowledgement of the overlapping theoretical points of queer theory, post-colonialist theory, and feminist theory, in their shared perspective of marginalization.

A last point of interesting queerness in “Sapho” concerns both this image of reflection and my previous analysis of “The Anniversary.” Going back one last time to Gardner’s idea of lesbianism not being something that would ‘interest’ Donne: there might be the tendency to focus too much, even in scholarship subsequent to and in opposition to Gardner, on the *gender* of the lovers in “Sapho.” Even if the idea of men and women as fundamentally different is not something that Donne’s poetry consistently contests, there is arguably an understanding of same-gender desire in Donne’s poetry that transcends the genders of the lovers. In other words, there is a possibility of seeing similarities between Donne’s poetry which concerns lovers who are men, and poetry which concerns lovers who are women.

If we accept “The Anniversary” as a poem about two men, the theme of similarity can efficiently be compared between “Sapho” and “The Anniversary,” specifically regarding the equality which “The Anniversary” is so concerned with. Holstun suggests that there is a dissolution of established hierarchies in “Sapho,” brought about by the image of the inadequate mirror (844). In other poems where Donne utilises the image of mirrors and reflection, the mirror establishes hierarchies, between body and soul, or between “male speaker” and “female listener,” but those mirror poems are “successful” in their imagery, whereas “Sapho” is not, destroying the hierarchy (Holstun 844). In short, the fact that the mirror does not provide what the speaker desires in “Sapho” interacts with the rest of Donne’s extensive catalogue of poems about reflection, and suggests a shattered asymmetrical power dynamic. In Holstun’s reading, we can see yet another example of how same-gender desire offers equality in “Sapho,” similar to the naming of themselves as equal monarchs in “The Anniversary” between the two lovers.

Arguing for equality being present in “Sapho” is not without its problems, however. Even if it is true that the hierarchy of Donne’s other mirror poems is challenged in “Sapho,” there is still the issue of how incredibly subservient the speaker is, and the fact that all the talk of similarity is, as I have stressed, quite physical. “Sapho” might, in fact, complicate the idea of equality beyond what “The Anniversary” was capable of, through this insistence on physical similarity. If societal hierarchies are destroyed, and the speaker of “Sapho” realises the inadequacy of both similarity as a concept, and mimetic art, through their attempt at interaction with their mirror, that does not mean balance or equality between speaker and addressee in all things.

Looking for equality in the shattering of hierarchies in “Sapho” shines light on another thing missing in the poem, but which is present in “The Anniversary”: *reciprocated* love. “Sapho” is not a sonnet, but it shares many similarities with the courtly love genre. Its complaint over poetic impotence is one such similarity; its distance from the lover is yet another one. *In*equality is part of its entire argument: the addressee is incomparable, none their equal. Adding equality to the list of themes which recur as markers of queer modes of writing in Donne’s poetry, then, would be complicated when taking “Sapho” into consideration. However, *similarity*—with its wider definition than equality—remains one such recurring queer theme and survives the many twists and turns of “Sapho.” In “Sapho,” the similarity is both a source of pleasure and of despair, and the poem’s expression of desire is queer both in terms of same-gender reflection, and in its desperate attempt at breaking borders, and failing.

“Sapho to Philaenis” is a fascinatingly queer poem, far beyond its surface of ‘simply’ being about same-gender desire. It utilises a common Donnean conceit of reflection, but questions it; it expresses the suspicion that only same-gender love can be truly equal in the Early Modern period yet complicates it, and it does so while still interacting with Donne’s anti-Petrarchan subversion of the courtly love genre. This unruly poem even dares to present trite poetry to prove its point.

Religion, Sex, and Desire: The Queer Tension of the Holy Sonnets and Beyond

In the background chapter, I discussed how the relationships within different sects of Christianity, and between Christianity and the re-emerging ideals of the Classical tradition, are important areas of tension in the Early Modern period. In this section, largely in the context of Christian and Classical tradition, I will discuss Donne’s Holy Sonnets, mainly the infamous Holy Sonnet XIV—“Batter my heart.” I will look at some of the sonnet’s academic legacy and its queerness in relation to gender and sexuality. Mostly, however, I will examine more abstract queer elements than gender and sexuality, elements which I address as a series of ‘tensions,’ such as the one within religion. This examination will sometimes incorporate other poems previously discussed in this chapter, since the tensions I explore can be observed across many of Donne’s poems. I will also examine the tension between language and religion, between form and content, between

transgression and convention, and how those tensions interact with the border-breaking and binary-challenging of queerness and metaphysical poetics.

The boldness of "Batter my heart" has been thoroughly documented and discussed. The verdict of its shocking use of physicality and violence runs from deplorable, to an "appropriate and unremarkable form of sacred metaphor," and arguing that the sexual "tension" between language and the religious subject matter is the actual strength of the poem (Targoff 120). In terms of queerness, "Batter my heart" is one of the few of Donne's religious poems that is academically discussed in relation to anything queer.

Inability to escape discussing queerness in this sonnet is unsurprising: it is full of sexual language and metaphor, a torrent of pleas to God, ending with the couplet "Except you enthral me, never shall [I] be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (13–14). In its entirety, it reads:

> Batter my heart, three-personed 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.
> I, like an usurped town, to another due,
> Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,
> Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
> But is captive, and proves weak or untrue,
> Yet dearly'I love you, and would be loved fain,
> But am betrothed unto your enemy,
> Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
> Take me to you, imprison me, for I
> Except you enthral me, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The more 'obvious' queer aspect of "Batter my heart" to twenty-first century readers is probably the idea of a speaker addressing the Christian God in this violent, sexual manner. The speaker is not explicitly gendered but historically, they would have been gendered male. As Richard Rambuss points out, there have been unconvincing

attempts at arguing that the speaker is a woman; such contrived attempts often simply emphasise the fact that the queer desire has been observed for as long as the poem has been studied (Rambus 50, qtd. in Saunders 81). The gendering of the speaker as male can also be strengthened by genre: the format of someone addressing God in this manner can be seen in George Herbert's poetry, for example, where the speaker is more explicitly a priest (e.g., Herbert's poetry collection *The Temple*). A priest would, in the Early Modern period, always have been a man.

As an addendum, perhaps a bit of an aside, to the reflection on the violence of the language, a certain aspect of it should be addressed. The consensual violence—comparable to what we call sadomasochism—requested by the speaker in "Batter my heart" could be read as queer itself due to its non-normativity in comparison to conventional sex or desire. However, in terms of border-breaking and binary-challenging, sadomasochism *in itself* does not engage with the topics of such breaking and challenging that are the focus of this thesis. To put it differently, the discussions of sadomasochism as queer and sadomasochism in queerness, are beyond the scope of this thesis. And, arguably, in the case of "Batter my heart," it is not the most interesting aspect of suggested queerness, it is merely *one part* of the tapestry of desire in the poem.

To bring it back to poetics, in a similarity between the two metaphysical poets Donne and Herbert, there is also the combination of sonnet format and God as addressee, which can be found in both poets' explicitly religious works. This combination is a formal queerness, a boundary-blurring between erotic or secular love and chaste or divine love: the love sonnet with God as addressed lover. There is also the formal aspect related to Saunders's observations of similarity between Holy Sonnets and verse letters to men: the fact that both textual groups return to a strict sonnet format otherwise uncommon to Donne's authorship (89). However, familiarly, Saunders's observations narrow queerness down to mainly mean same-gender desire again.

The formal aspects of queerness in "Batter my heart" do not have to depend on the gender of speaker or addressee *or* the previously discussed sadomasochistic dynamic. All aspects of queerness in the sonnet can be discussed as various 'tensions,' which is something that occasionally also interacts with metaphysical poetry's conceits. The tensions visible so far have regarded language and religion, and gender norms. The speaker inhabits a tense gender position: a man, but submissive, which is not the culturally

ordained position of a man; the tension between love sonnet and God as addressee is a tension between the physical and the spiritual; the intertextual relation *within* Donne's body of works between Holy Sonnets and verse letters to men is a tension in itself. Saunders has observed a general tension between transgression and convention both *in* Donne's work, and in *readings* of it, noting that attempting to classify it as either transgressive or conventional in the Early Modern period is complicated (81–82). The more one examines it, the more obvious it becomes that there is something queer going on in "Batter my heart" which does not let itself so easily be categorised as either transgressive *or* conventional.

I have already shown how Saunders's idea can be expanded beyond simply observing same-gender relationships, making it ever queerer. Incorporating some of Varnado's understandings of queerness—desire as excess, as melancholia, and other 'strange' desires—one can argue for the queerness of "Batter my heart" being similar to the one in "The Dissolution," "Sapho to Philaenis," and even "The Anniversary." Without inviting too intense a desire to categorise, there is still an interesting observation to be made here. The anxiety of being left alone, which Saunders observes mainly in Donne's texts to men (82), is also present in "The Anniversary," for example, but that thematic similarity would *still*, yet again, linger in the definition of queerness as mainly same-gender desire.

If one rather defines queerness as desire related to border-blurring, and binary-breaking, we can find such queerness in all the discussed poems in this thesis. There is for example an angle of destruction in all of them, in relation to this desire and border-blurring, but it looks different across the various poems. One could say that there are several versions of queer destruction: in "The Anniversary" the fear of the inevitable destruction of the body is the main focus, but there is also queer *joy* in that destruction, since it will remove the bonds that culture inflicts; in "Sapho to Philaenis" and "of my Name in the Window," the border-blurring is a question of where the self begins and where it ends—the destruction is subtle and arguably not negative but it is driven by desire; in "The Dissolution," there is something more akin to "Batter my heart"—a stormy, decisive desire for destruction of the body. However, what is unique about the destruction in "Batter my heart" is the desire to be rebuilt: after the violence comes the desire for God to "mend" and "make [the speaker] new" (2–4).

The physicality, destruction, and desire for rebuilding in "Batter my heart" can be discussed in relation to Targoff's observations regarding Donne's relation to soul and body. That relation is another tension which, as mentioned, is the subject of Targoff's monograph on Donne, and it is a tension relevant to "Batter my heart." Rather, it is interesting to take note of the *lack* of said tension; the sonnet is, like other poems this thesis has discussed, physical in the extreme. There are requests for being broken down, and reassembled, but the language is consistently physical and, as Targoff puts it, the last lines "demand a physical intimacy that cannot readily be excused as spiritual longing" despite the historical attempts at making it seem so (122–123).

The speaker in "Batter my heart" starts out in a physically static situation, but that physical stasis is devastating. As mentioned, the requests made are for physical destruction, bondage, and rebuilding:

> Batter my heart, three-personed 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.
> I, like an usurped town, to another due,
> Labour to admit you (1–6)

Lines 5-6, as well as the last couplet of the entire sonnet, explicitly speak of being hurt, overtaken, and used.

The border between *soul* and body is not the matter of anxiety in "Batter my heart." There is an overpowering desire to *destroy* the body, break *its* borders, in order to annihilate it completely, and to allow another body to invade one's own as part of the destruction. The conceit is military: the speaker feels like a "usurped town" in their being torn between God and God's "enemy" Satan, which the speaker currently, despairingly, belongs to (10). The speaker is depicting themselves as utterly powerless regarding their fate, resigned to only shouting emphatic imperatives to try and change that fact.

In this relation, this *tension*, between destruction, invasion, and reassembly, and between one's own body and another, one can see additional points of similarity with the previously discussed "The Dissolution" as well as the loss of self in "Sapho to Philaenis."

The relationship to objects of desire—the 'she' in "The Dissolution," 'you' in "Sapho to Philaenis," and 'God' in "Batter my heart"—all relate part of their own blurred borders and volatile subject to the deprivation of their addressee. And while the general theme of 'I am ruined, for I have lost my love' is far from uncommon in Early Modern poetry, or in Donne's poetry, the similarities between these works are more subtle than simply devastation over lost love. The ruin is in direct relation to different destructions of borders between oneself and another, and the poems discuss various outcomes of such queer relationships.

On a formal level, the unconventional, metaphysically poetic juxtapositions are numerous: the genre format, the language, and the imagery. In addition to the previously discussed combination of love sonnet and explicit religion, there is also the fact that the various quatrains of the sonnet seemingly differ so radically in metaphor from one to the next (Targoff 122). As was briefly mentioned in relation to "The Dissolution," Targoff argues that, rather than actually dividing the poem into erotic *or* military metaphor, the shift of focus from the first quatrain to the second instead works as a solvent on the border between the two (123). With the two things this close to each other, one cannot stop oneself from imagining the erotic *as* military, and vice versa (Targoff 123). The juxtaposition of the military and erotic language is a metaphysical conceit, its effect potently queer: borders between things become less distinct and undeniably up for debate. Eroticism, religion, and military usurpation are not divided into oppositional relations in "Batter my heart;" they join in an expression of desire for violence, for loss of self, and for utter subjugation.

While "Batter my heart" is the most discussed of the Holy Sonnets regarding queerness, its language and hyperbolic, submissive speaker is not unique to it. In Holy Sonnet XI—"Spit in my face"—the speaker expresses themselves very similarly to the speaker in "Batter my heart," both in rhythm and language. In "Spit in my face," the speaker inhabits a fantasy of Jesus Christ on Golgotha, asking not God this time but the "Jews" to act in similar ways as God in "Batter my heart": "pierce my side, / Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me, / For I have sinned, and sinned" (1–3). Saunders notes the "familiar psychic economies of prohibition, transgression, abjection, and othering" of sadomasochism in "Spit in my face," as in "Batter my heart" (49).

Other demands in "Batter my heart" also recur in other Holy Sonnets. In "Thou has made me," the speaker asks said maker to "[r]epair" them before their death (2), like the speaker in "Batter my heart" requests god to remake them. In "I am a little world made cunningly," renewal seems like a combination of physical and psychological: "Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might / Drown my world with my weeping earnestly" (7–8)—a request for a deluge which blurs the border between subject (a personal 'world') and emotions (weeping), framed by the violent image of entire seas being poured over someone to drown them.

Even the idea of being usurped by the devil and ravished by God is not isolated to "Batter my heart," even if it is the most effective. In Holy Sonnet II, "As due by many titles," the speaker asks "Why doth the devil then usurp on me? / Why doth he steal, nay ravish that 's [sic] thy right?" (9–10). The constant anxiety to be left by God which Saunders observes as also recurring in Donne's verse letters to men (82) can be observed in "As due my many titles." The speaker seems to almost dare God to abandon them in the final couplet, sounding like a jealous, passive aggressive lover: "That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me, / And Satan hates me, yet is loth to lose me" (13–14). While the erotic language, demands for violent reparation and renewal, and submissive speaker can be found in several of the Holy Sonnets—sometimes in the more ordinary role as devoted supplicant—it is definitely the most pronounced in "Batter my heart."

The elements of queerness in the Holy Sonnets discussed above all carry a tension. In "Spit in my face," the speaker calls Jesus's love "strange" (9), which brings to mind Holmes's focus on the overall strangeness of metaphysical poetry (2) and of course the strange desire expressed by the speaker in "Sapho." As I have shown, relational tensions, sadomasochistic for example, in the Holy Sonnets are by all means often non-normative, but the queer tension is not simply in the subject matter. As in most of Donne's poetry, the formal aspects are an active part of the tension. In "Batter my heart," it is in the blatant *request* for this treatment to be inflicted on the speaker that the shocking tension chiefly lies. It is in the short imperatives—knock, breathe, shine, seek, force, break, blow, burn, make—where one is forced to face a certain queer desire.

Finally, on the topic of tension, it is possible to bring the desire expressed in the Holy Sonnets back to certain aspects of the tension between Christianity and Classical

tradition. One aspect is perhaps quite practical: the line between violence and desire is often transgressed and ignored in for example Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; i.e., it is full of sexual assault. There is also the fact that the pantheon of the Classical world was possible to contact in the way the speaker in the Holy Sonnets desires the Christian God to be. Or rather, the idea that a deity would not only answer, but also interact physically with a supplicant, is arguably more Classical than Christian. An answer, as such, from God is not a general impossibility: it is present in for example Herbert's "The Collar." No matter the intersections with Classical tradition, the explicit terminology used in the Holy Sonnets is, of course, Christian, causing a tension in itself with both allusions to Classical elements, and sexual ones.

Conscious of the risk mentioned in the background chapter—that queerness sometimes risks suffering the same limitless incorporation of 'everything' as poststructuralism—I would still suggest that the tension in the Early Modern period between Christian and Classical tradition is a queer tension *in itself*. Both traditions have elements of physical transgression and of convention, and the two are queerly blurred in the Early Modern period. "Batter my heart" specifically can be used to exemplify how that queer tension might look in poetry.

As such an example, "Batter my heart" shows the tension resulting from the move away from the suggestive art of the medieval period back to the mimetic of the Classical. The sonnet does not present a clean divide between the two traditions, but explicitly the tension between, and the overlapping of, the two. In the corner of medieval Christianity, we have the fact that God does not interact with the speaker, does not show himself—he is a bodyless idea suggested by the speaker; the only descriptive phrases of God are "three-personed" and that his "viceroy" is "Reason" (1; 7). As aspects showing the revival of the Classical tradition, we have, as mentioned, the speaker's direct addressing of God, which desires interaction, and the violent physicality of the wishes, both sexual and not. At first glance, the tension between the two might seem to cause an entirely unproductive, static state. The poem is, after all, 'simply' the speaker begging for things which are very active, though no actual acts are performed outside the speak act. In a way, the tension is 'simply' shocking language and imagery, after all.

However, with Targoff's added reading that *the rebuilding of the self* is the 'actual' wish at the base of "Batter my heart," beyond violence, sex, and intrusion (Targoff 121–

123), the tension between Christian and Classical tradition becomes more fruitful. In such a reading, the speaker in "Batter my heart" might be in a desperate place, succumbing to desperate means, but the end result is still a hope that being put through such things will result in renewal. The speaker's borders are broken through—"usurped" by Satan, and now "labouring to admit [God]" (5–6)—and creates a new self from whatever remains of the body and its desires. The Early Modern period is a tumultuous time for religion, but there is still, despite this battering of belief and devotion, hope for rebirth. The end result is not without its own internal tension, which is unsurprising in such a 'new' (queer) state. In the "imprison[ed]" space the speaker requests, they are in a place of contradiction: thraldom means freedom, and rape means chastity (12–14). There is, however, no doubt after the preceding 12 lines, that this state is the *desire* of the speaker.

"Batter my heart" is a sonnet which continues to affect. Its many tensions, some more historically specific than others, share certain similarities with tensions of twenty first-century queerness. Even in comparison with other Holy Sonnets, "Batter my heart" stands out, beyond the surface of violence and sex. It can be read as an effective expression of the anxieties of Early Modern religion and philosophy, where Christian and Classical tradition clash in a desperate, torn, broken human full of contradictory, border-breaking desire.

Conclusion

Early on in this thesis, I asked whether there are certain ways in which Donne's poetry interacts with the themes of similarity, difference, borders, and binaries which might be reserved for expressions of queer desire. In line with the overall unwillingness to be defined and to define which has saturated this thesis, the answer I propose to the question is yes, and no. Similarity and difference are enormous, almost infinite areas of tension, discussion, and exploration in literature, and the concepts are intrinsically linked to the borders of things. No surprise, then, that those concepts also become entangled with metaphysical poetry and its challenge to borders and binary opposition. Equally unsurprising, perhaps, is the way metaphysical poetry, queerness, and queer theory can communicate and share insights across the ages.

In this thesis, I have attempted a widening of the exploration of queerness in Donne's texts, to incorporate more border-challenging definitions of queer desire in readings of his poetry, than simply those of same-gender relationships. The examination has shown that asking for something that is specifically queer in *certain* texts in Donne's body of works might be asking the wrong question. Since so much of Donne's poetry concerns desire, and so little of it concerns dictating norm or convention, in a way—to infuriate myself as much as anyone else—it is perhaps all queer. The way Donne's metaphysical poetry treats topics such as physicality, transgression, language, and poetics has many points of similarity with queering strategies and queerness itself: it is unconventional, bursting with desire, uneven, beautiful, challenging, melancholic, and excessive.

As far as Early Modern literary queer studies are concerned, metaphysical poetry in general and Donne's poetry specifically are still rather untapped veins of fascinating queerness. In other words, this thesis has shown that on the topic of metaphysical poetry and queerness, there is still much left to be done.

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