

CURRIN, ELIZABETH R., M.A. *Kissing by the Book: Carnal Knowledge and Bookish Metaphor in the Works of John Donne*. (2007)
Directed by Dr. Christopher Hodgkins. 29 pp.

John Donne, England's premier seventeenth-century metaphysical poet, has long intrigued scholars with the inclusion of elements both sacred and profane in much of his oeuvre. The following essay explores Donne's use of reading and writing in sexual—but nonetheless holy—contexts, primarily in his poetry, but also in his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. An analysis of these bodily-textual metaphors, in addition to a comparison with similar work by Donne's contemporaries, reveals a distinct trajectory in Donne's work over time. Brazenly rakish in youth, the aging poet returns his pen to the authorial hand of God, a move that signifies not only Donne's growth as an individual but also his talent for metaphorical flexibility.

CURRIN, ELIZABETH R., M.A. *The Pen, the Sword, and the Prison Key: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Eighteenth-Century Suicide Discourse.* (2007)
Directed by Dr. Jennifer Keith. 32 pp.

In eighteenth-century England, male poets and scholars alike debated the prevalence, relevance, and ethics of suicide. The following essay attempts to place Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in conversation with her contemporaries, drawing primarily upon her 1736 verses on self-murder, “Address’d To—.” Recurring elements of self-destruction and voluntary death in Montagu’s work and life indicate her desire to be a part of this critical discourse. Because she did not take her own life—an event which surely would have broadcast her position—it remains for scholars to revisit Montagu’s works in light of other eighteenth-century suicide tracts in order to recover her message. Doing so reveals Montagu’s ability to surpass the logic of her male contemporaries by demonstrating that suicide can be a rational act of individual liberty, independent of any higher power.

KISSING BY THE BOOK: CARNAL KNOWLEDGE AND BOOKISH
METAPHOR IN THE WORKS OF JOHN DONNE
AND
THE PEN, THE SWORD, AND THE PRISON KEY: LADY MARY
WORTLEY MONTAGU AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
SUICIDE DISCOURSE

by

Elizabeth R. Currin

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2007

Approved by

Christopher Hodgkins
Committee Co-Chair

Jennifer Keith
Committee Co-Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair Christopher Hodgkins

Committee Co-Chair Jennifer Keith

Committee Member Nancy Myers

April 30, 2007
Date of Acceptance by Committee

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KISSING BY THE BOOK: CARNAL KNOWLEDGE AND BOOKISH METAPHOR
IN THE WORKS OF JOHN DONNE

In John Donne's "XVII. Meditation" from his 1624 collection *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, the then Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral displays true metaphysical prowess by describing life and death with an extensive conceit:

all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. (108)

Written in the throes of a violent illness presumed at the time to be fatal—Donne in fact died eight years later—and famous for the lines, “no man is an island” and “never send to know for whom the bell tolls,” Donne's seventeenth meditation emphasizes the passivity of man in the hands of God. The passage above, though little quoted, employs a significantly euphemistic tone to communicate Donne's powerful message. Having spent much of his life with a pen in his hand, Donne now relinquishes the role of author to that ultimate *authority*, God. Even God's “translators” are acts of God personified, rather than human beings. How, then, should one interpret Donne's earlier works—particularly those involving references to writing and reading—in light of this sickbed epiphany? Is Donne's seventeenth meditation a complete reversal of his solipsistic mindset and a convergence with the views of his “less profane” contemporaries?

In Donne's early poetry, the protagonists are anything but inactive. He pens lovers, rogues, fighters, travelers, and rhetoricians, who themselves—as extensions of their creator—often engage in the act of writing. Consider, for example, “The Anniversary,” from Donne's collection of *Songs and Sonnets*. Throughout the poem, the male speaker vibrantly praises the superior strength and longevity of his relationship with his mistress. At the poem's end, he sets a goal for the continuance of their love “till we attain / To write threescore” (29-30).¹ These lines encourage the reader to visualize the speaker as literally putting pen to paper, perhaps in a public record book or the dedicatory page of a family Bible, as Patricia Pinka suggests. Pinka speculates on the significance of writing in the poem, concluding,

The lovers, even in their solitary domain, commemorate the continuation of their union in writing. [...] Perhaps they sign their name or affix the date [...] The lover looks into the future, perhaps glances at the blank page beneath their signatures, and envisions lines of signatures and dates under the first one. (125)

Pinka aptly notes the couple's solitude during their act of textual representation, yet even without an audience, the speaker insists upon putting his love in writing. He is certain that someone someday will discover the record and thus reaffirm the existence and importance of the couple's love. The mortal lovers will of course pass away, but it seems as though the record of their love will not. For Donne, then, the written word plays a crucial role in the preservation of love, in a sense even endowing the lovers' relationship—and Donne's poetic reputation, by extension—with the ability to endure.

¹ All of Donne's poems are cited from *The Completed English Poems*. Ed. A.J. Smith. London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Through the characters he creates, Donne unabashedly challenges the limitations of mortality. In “The Canonization,” for instance, his speaker responds to cynical naysayers with the assertion of his love’s poetic endurance, despite the possibility of broad historical exclusion:

And if unfit for tombs and hearse
 Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
 And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
 We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
 As well a well wrought urn becomes
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
 And by these hymns, all shall approve
 Us canonized for love. (29-36)²

“The Canonization” emphasizes Donne’s exaltation of the concentrated medium of poetry, and it is impossible to read this poem as anything less than autobiographical. Pinka, then, encourages a conflation of poet and persona, arguing that Donne’s entire collection of *Songs and Sonnets* is precisely the “compendium of love” featured in “A Valediction: of the Book” (167). One of four valediction poems by Donne, “Of the Book” mirrors “The Anniversary” in its commemorative, textual representation of a couple’s love. No particular audience appears in the latter poem, although Donne nevertheless implies the necessity of a reader for the couple to achieve true textual immortality. In “A Valediction: of the Book,” however, the presence of a reader is much more explicit, and the establishment of the couple as a paragon thus acts as the poem’s driving force. The couple’s “annals” are to be “Rule and example” to others (10-18). As long as a reader

² I am grateful to my advisor, Chris Hodgkins, for alerting me to the significance of “build in sonnets pretty rooms” and the phrase’s pertinence to my argument, which had heretofore escaped my eye.

exists to examine the lovers' book (as well as Donne's collected works), human immortality remains a possibility. Dennis McKevlin articulates this act of apotheosis on Donne's part by declaring that the lovers' book is "like Scripture, both a history of perfect creative love and a testament to posterity" (67). Following McKevlin's analysis, by inadvertently suggesting that a collection of love letters can achieve the same canonical status and longevity as the word of God, Donne essentially overturns the theory of fallen language, which holds that all human utterance is inadequate as a result of Adam's and Eve's original sin, eating the fruit of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. Like his Edenic predecessors, then, Donne advances towards supreme knowledge and immortality, no matter the cost.

Donne's contemporaries, in contrast, struggle with the moral implications of their craft. George Herbert in particular wrestles with the potential sinfulness involved in writing poetry of wit. John Wall notices a recurrent theme in Herbert's *The Temple* of "God as poet and the speaker as God's poem," so that "the speakers have to release their desire to write their lives and thus control them" (256-57). Exemplifying Wall's conjecture, Herbert's "Perirrhanterium" employs authorial metaphors, likening the sin of lust to a damaging ink stain on the holy volume that is the soul of mankind, a page meant only for the pen of God:

Beware of lust: it doth pollute and foul
 Whom God in Baptism washed with his own blood.
 It blots thy lesson written in thy soul;
 The holy lines cannot be understood.

How dare those eyes upon a Bible look,
 Much less towards God, whose lust is all their book? (7-12)³

This stanza not only highlights Herbert's uneasiness with sexuality—a considerable departure from Donne—but the lines also reveal that for Herbert, God is the only and ultimate author. The human soul is a book, prone to occasional damage and misuse, and mankind himself is a reader of both soul and Bible who must take pains to remain pure and worthy in that discerning capacity. Attempting the pen, then, particularly in an artful way, is in danger of violating the natural, God-given order.

In the landmark text, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*, Stanley Fish argues that Herbert's response to the crisis of authorship is to engage in the "self-diminishing" process of "learning to 'spell'"⁴ that entails a silencing of the poet's voice with a corresponding surrender to God's authorial power (157-58). Fish elaborates on Herbert's dissolution of the boundary between "mine" and "thine," believing that Herbert makes the "experiences of his poems the discovery of their true authorship. [...] Rather than affirming (and therefore denying) that God's word is all, these poems become, literally, God's word" (190). Arguably, Fish's postmodern reading of Herbert is somewhat misleading, as Christopher Hodgkins makes clear in his own treatment of *The Temple*. Hodgkins problematizes Fish by demonstrating the fallacy of

³ All of Herbert's poems are cited from *The Complete English Poems*. Ed. John Tobin. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

⁴ Fish adopts his phrase from Herbert's "The Flower," which reads, "We say amiss, / This or that is: / Thy word is all, if we could spell" (19-21). Richard Strier, however, discredits Fish's insistence that these lines are purely ontological, calling Fish's claim "historically as well as contextually unlikely" (*Love Known* 62). For Strier, "The Flower" illustrates "the realization of a priority of value—of importance, not of being" (64). Despite both critical interpretations, the fact remains that Donne's stance in the *Songs and Sonnets* differs dramatically from the "Thy word is all" attitude of Herbert's speaker.

the assumption that “the corollary of the divine I AM [is] YOU AREN’T” (6). Instead, “for Herbert, the redeemed individual becomes more distinct, not less, and [...] his spiritual ‘empowerment’ is qualitatively different from its courtly counterpart, being tempered by sincerely grateful humility” (6). This “sincerely grateful humility” is precisely what Donne discards in the *Songs and Sonnets*, though it is palpably present in his seventeenth meditation.⁵ Herbert, Hodgkins argues, “loved and created for God because, he believed, God had first loved and re-created him” (6). The young Jack Donne, in contrast, created because he, like God, could, in creating, produce an eternal artifact and an everlasting reputation.

When juxtaposed with Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets*, Herbert’s work reveals the poet’s undeniable struggle with post-lapsarian language. Stanley Fish’s explication of the poems in *The Temple*, though punctuated by doctrinal gaps, recognizes this aspect of Herbert’s work and in so doing resonates among a host of critics. John Wall echoes Fish’s remarks in his analysis of Herbert’s incalculable use of the Bible in *The Temple*. For Wall, Herbert’s poems “constantly affirm the achievement of meaning as contingent on God’s acts and their biblical record, asserting the inadequacy of human language apart from that record to achieve the goals of writing” (239). Wall identifies “Affliction (I)” as an example of writing’s problematic nature for Herbert (241-42). In the poem, Herbert’s speaker describes scholarly work as a distraction from his quest for a divine, literally fruitful purpose, lamenting,

⁵ In fact, Strier’s analysis of “The Flower,” that the poem communicates Herbert’s belief that “everything that happens, whether in the inner or the outer world, is a direct result of a specific—and benevolent—act of divine decision” (*Love Known* 248), also characterizes the mood of Donne’s seventeenth meditation.

what thou wilt do with me
 None of my books will show:
 I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree;
 For sure then I would grow
 To fruit or shade. (55-59)

Because of the post-lapsarian inadequacies of language, learning through experience exceeds traditional book-learning. “Affliction (I)” illustrates what Hodgkins calls Herbert’s ability to “dramatize and realize in lyric form the confusions and resolutions that doctrine often works on the believer” (4). The result of an encounter with God’s creation—one of these resolutions—is far more productive than scholarly confusion, so the outside world in Herbert’s poem is a balm for the speaker’s affliction, brought on by the mystifying world of words.

Anthony Low explains how the natural world, as a “Book of Creatures,” serves as an alternative source of meditation for religious poets in Donne’s and Herbert’s day, nature being “the great complement to Scripture. In it traces of the Creator might everywhere be seen” (*Love’s Architecture* 38). For the speaker in “Affliction (I),” then, the outside world fills in the gaps left by scholarly study. In “Longing,” Herbert’s speaker again engages in the process Low describes: “Indeed the world’s thy book, / Where all things have their leaf assigned” (49-50). The title of the poem, however, suggests painful uncertainty on the speaker’s part; in order to properly “read” the world, he must be fit for the task, a daunting qualification that induces a measure of anxiety. Mary Cole Sloane argues that for Thomas Traherne, one of many heirs to the poetic legacy of Donne and Herbert, the physical senses are “a much more secure means of knowing than they had

been to any of the other metaphysical poets” (21). Traherne opens his collection of meditations with, “An Empty Book is like an Infants Soul, in which any Thing may be Written. It is Capable of all Things, but containeth Nothing” (1). He hopes to fill his volume with truths alone, “*if it be Possible*” (1, italics mine), but a careful reading of Traherne’s passage suggests an underlying intimidation wrought by the “*tabula rasa*” staring back at him. His knowledge is not entirely secure when the moral implications of writing loom over him.

Sloane’s praise of Traherne contrasts her disapproval of Donne’s parallel use of metaphor. She accuses Donne of “indiscriminately ransacking not only nature and art, but also diverse philosophic and scientific concepts for vehicles wherein to contain his wit” (5). In particular, Sloane attacks the microcosmic theory of Idios the poet, a character in Donne’s “Eclogue 1613. December 26” (5-6). Idios’s absence from court prompts a pastoral dialogue with his peer, Allophanes, in which Idios relies on microcosmic epistemology to show that he in fact carried the court with him to the wedding he attended in the country and was therefore not wholly absent: “As man is of the world, the heart of man, / Is an epitome of God’s great book / Of creatures, and man need no farther look” (50-52). The layers of this complex image, of the world as a book and the human heart as a replication of that bookish world, articulate Donne’s belief both in mankind’s microcosmic characteristics and the power of reading,⁶ but Donne presents the alternative view in Allophanes’s reply:

⁶ The image also recalls and expands on Herbert’s connections between humans, books, and the world in “Perirrhaterium” (9-12).

Dreamer, thou art,
 Think'st thou fantastic that thou has a part
 In the East-Indian fleet, because thou hast
 A little spice, or amber in thy taste? (55-58)

However, Idios dismisses his companion's views, contending that the song he presented at the wedding was a crucial part of the ceremony and is vital to his preservation as a poet (99-104). Just as the human heart is a book, so mankind's words are life-giving and life-preserving. By the end of the epithalamion, Idios—presumably coming around to Allophanes's side—offers to burn his poem in order to make it a “perfect sacrifice,” but Allophanes prevents him from destroying his verses (226-35). Allophanes's change of heart and willingness to contribute to Idios's poetic immortality overturns his earlier criticism of the microcosm perspective by supporting the idea that Idios's words do indeed serve as a proxy of their maker.

Donne's poetic work, then, is not a “ransacking,” as Sloane would have it, but rather, a merging of separate spheres and experiences. Sloane's pejorative assessment of Donne connotes violence and ravishment, while Robert Whalen offers a more favorable *entendre*, complimenting Donne's “uniquely alchemical intellect, that penetrating [!] capacity to discern among the world's constituents an intricate web of correspondences” (59). “Merging,” then, suggests a smooth interpenetration, precisely the goal of Donne's microcosmic epistemology. Anthony Low reveals Donne's ability—through this merging—to redefine microcosm as a world of two (*Reinvention of Love* 50). The shift from the social, feudal sphere to the private, modern realm constitutes Donne's role in the “reinvention of love,” what Low calls a “redirection of the communal” (33). The couples

that populate Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* literally embody this theme, as the human form makes microcosmic social, emotional, and spiritual interactions possible.

Drawing on Donne's elevation of privacy and sanctification of intimacy, McKevlin astutely notes, "The central figures of the *Songs and Sonnets* [sic] are never disembodied souls whose fusion occurs without regard for the bodies which make them whole human beings" (45). Even George Herbert realizes the seeming inability of the soul to exist on its own. In "Prayer (I)," he equates the spiritual discipline of prayer to "The soul in paraphrase," indicating that while a complete manifestation of the soul is impossible, the attempt to articulate the soul with the concrete words of prayer is nevertheless a necessary and worthwhile endeavor (3). Donne also recognizes the necessity of attempted textual representation, no matter how futile, but the rakish "Jack" Donne goes one step farther to acknowledge the need for bodily expression of the soul as well. In "A Valediction: of the Book," for example, his speaker thanks deific Love for the opportunity "To make, to keep, to use, *to be* these his records" (18, italics mine). The lovers' very existence, as a communicative measure in its own right, arguably exceeds the ability of the written word to accurately tell their tale. Indeed, Donne is very much aware of the ineffable nature of soulful human love, that "To try to write love is to confront the *muck* of language: that region of hysteria where language is both *too much* and *too little*" (Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* 99). Consequently, Donne's poetry attests to the crucial interplay between body and soul in a world of fallen and inadequate language. The very genre of *meta-physical* poetry in which he would later be classed demands such a tangled and interdependent relationship.

The act of sexual intercourse, then, becomes a significant form of communication and thus a choice metaphor for Donne. In fact, the term “conversation” refers to sexual intimacy as early as 1511 and does not take on the familiar meaning of discourse until 1580, while “intercourse” is first used to describe communication and does not adopt its modern, sexual connotation until 1798 (*OED*). Even today, attorneys commonly refer to adultery as “criminal conversation” and writers like Roland Barthes perpetuate the crossover between word and flesh so abundant in Donne’s work. Barthes theorizes, “Every contact, for the lover, raises the question of an answer: the skin is asked to reply” and “Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words” (*A Lover’s Discourse* 67, 73). The interchangeability of “conversation” and “intercourse” accounts for the thematic strength of Donne’s “Air and Angels,” in which the soul takes on “limbs of flesh” as its solitary means of acting and communicating; it “else could nothing do” (7-8). For Donne’s characters, earthly, human love is inextricably bound to physical consummation, but the couples are by no means limited in this respect. In “The Ecstasy,” one of Donne’s most famous and intense poetic celebrations of mutual love, the souls of the lovers “negotiate,” yet the couple says nothing “all the day,” employing “soul’s language” instead (17-22). The language of their souls is, of course, “the perfection of spiritual and physical entangling” (Pinka 137).

One of the most curious and celebrated phrases in “The Ecstasy” is Donne’s characterization of the couple’s exchange as a “dialogue of one” (74). As Ilona Bell notes, the poem contains no quotation marks, and Donne gives the “dialogue” no verbal

articulation (125). Even the “speaker’s” narration of the event employs the past tense; the lovers’ interchange itself is silent. The dialogue, then, refers to the intermingling of two souls through the act of soulful yet physical intimacy. The poem’s central image essentially defines the genre of metaphysical poetry, and though the “meta-” or spiritual side may be superior, the physical aspect is the crucial catalyst for the union, “Else a great prince in prison lies” (68). The male figure in the poem reminds his lover that bodily attraction enabled their souls to meet in the first place, and their corporeal forms are thus entitled to the lovers’ gratitude:

We owe them thanks, because they thus,
 Did us, to us, at first convey,
 Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
 Nor are dross to us, but allay. (53-56)

The overt repetition of “us” in the lines above heightens the mutuality at work in the scene. A. J. Smith’s gloss of this passage attributes the strengthening “allay” of the lovers’ encounter to the “the new knowledge” of themselves and each other that results from the couple’s ecstasy, “the fusing of their souls” (372).⁷

Anthony Low’s reading of Donne addresses this idea of bodily enlightenment, but Low mistakenly focuses on Donne’s “autopsy” poems like “The Damp,” arguing that “Donne assumes that the way to understand a human mystery is to study it not living but dead [...] For him, the female body can become an object to be dug into, uncovered, and laid bare” (*Reinvention of Love* 44-45). Low’s view is not uncommon; the assertions he

⁷ Smith also elaborates on the wit within the poem, explaining that the word “sense” in line fifty-five, “with its common sixteenth-century overtone ‘sensuality’, or ‘sexual play’, would add to the useful implication that it needs nothing short of full physical intercourse to liberate the joint souls of the lovers” (374).

makes cast Donne in a chauvinistic light, inviting feminist criticism of these and other poems. However, by expanding her critical perspective to a wider range of poems, Carol Marks Sicherman offers a redemptive view:

Each of these poems [the valediction poems and the *Anniversaries*, among others] reflects an inward crisis; each speaker makes discoveries about himself which crucially contribute to his self-understanding. Reading with sympathetic attention, we may perceive the speaker's doubt and fears and his ultimate attainment of deeper knowledge. [...] The self which is understood in these poems is never examined solipsistically but always as it relates to another being, either a woman or God. (78-79).

Charles Mitchell's analysis of "The Ecstasy" adopts a similar perspective. Mitchell notes, "Just as the body cannot know itself until it acts, so the soul cannot know itself until it loves. To know itself, the soul must know another self" (96). Louis Martz, who places Donne in the meditative tradition, similarly argues, "It is the creation of this self that a meditative poem records: a self that is, ideally, one with itself, with other human beings, with created nature, and with the supernatural" (322). For Donne, the key to all of these seemingly paradoxical processes—introspective yet communal, fundamental yet intricate—is a spiritual intercourse born of sexual intercourse.

Still, Low is not the first or only scholar to problematize Donne's poetic belief in the microcosm of two. Thomas Docherty's *John Donne, Undone* dissects the corpus of Donne's works in a plethora of unfavorable ways. His overreaching argument concentrates on *authority* rather than *authorship*. Drawing on the new science of Donne's day, Docherty demonstrates how the "phallic potency" of the telescope—through which the world is controlled and known—"provides Donne with an important ideological

aspect of imagination: knowledge of the Other is dependent upon scopophilic and phallic control over the Other” (56). He bolsters his claims with a discussion of “Elegy 19: To his Mistress Going to Bed,” noting the lack of communication between Donne (that is, Donne’s *speaker*) and the woman in the poem: “not only does the woman not speak or respond, she also quite simply disappears, goes under cover and Donne is left talking to an aspect of himself” (81). Docherty’s autoerotic reading of the elegy ignores the subtle mutuality at work in Donne’s text.⁸ However, Docherty perhaps is correct to conflate poet and speaker here, for the male figure in “Elegy 19” is a scholar like his maker. Sicherman argues that, “Donne has, in writing these poems, ‘become’ his speaker; imitating his action, we discover his discoveries” (88). Docherty, however, misses the importance of the female’s role in the poem as the object of study—and the subsequent object of enlightenment for both speaker and reader.

The speaker in “To his Mistress Going to Bed” disdainfully equates his lady’s clothes to “pictures” or “books’ gay coverings,” while comparing women themselves to “mystic books” (39-41). Continuing the conceit, the speaker pleads, “Then since I may *know*, / As liberally, as to a midwife,⁹ show / Thyself” (43-45, italics mine). In the poem’s concluding couplet, the speaker reassuringly reminds his lover that he has undressed first, indicating his own vulnerability and willingness to be studied (47-48).¹⁰

⁸ Attempting to earn a snicker or two from his readers, Docherty unfairly criticizes Donne’s departure here from the “no man is an island” tenet later expressed in his seventeenth meditation, failing to take into account the drastic difference in medium and the passage of time between the composition of both pieces.

⁹ I am grateful, once again, to Chris Hodgkins for pointing out that the quasi-gynecological language in this line is arguably anti-romantic. However, I choose to read Donne’s midwife reference as further evidence of the speaker’s longing to be initiated into the world of female knowledge that his lover’s body contains.

¹⁰ Docherty is wrong, then, to accuse Donne of hiding the lady under clothes and covers. The entire poem constitutes the speaker’s petition that the woman disrobe, and at the poem’s end, he expressly requests that

In the marriage song “Epithalamion Made at Lincoln’s Inn,” the undressing theme reoccurs; Donne’s speaker comments on the soon-to-disrobe bride, “thou alone, / Like virtue and truth, art best in nakedness” (77-78). The divested virgin awaits her husband, who approaches “tenderly,” like a “priest [...] on his knees” (89-90). The husband’s reverence for the virtue and truth to be gleaned from his wife’s body, counteracted by the sexual initiation he will catalyze for her, indicates that the relationship here is two-sided and mutual, recalling the perfect union and wordless communication of “The Ecstasy.” The key to understanding these poems lies in identifying and fleshing out (pun intended!) the ways in which Donne translates the act of physical intimacy into a devout act of “reading” the body of another human being.

Feminists often bristle at this line of analysis. Framing the female body in textual metaphors invites discussion of the phallic pen. Even Roland Barthes, in his extensive analysis of *A Lover’s Discourse*, admits that amatory writing “smothers the other, who, far from perceiving the gift in it, reads there instead an assertion of mastery, of power of pleasure, of solitude” (78-79). Susan Gubar further explains,

The model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation—a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality. Clearly this tradition excludes woman from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture. (247)

she “cast all [...] this white linen hence” (45). His final rhetorical question, “What needs thou have more covering than a man” indicates not a desire to smother his lover with his masculinity, but rather a wish to align his male knowledge with her female knowledge, to become the “gay covering” of her wisdom-filled book (48).

Gubar's essay constitutes a reclamation project for the page, arguing that women do possess innate creative powers through the process of procreation: "the sisterhood produces the blank sheets needed to accomplish writing [...] no woman is a blank page: every woman is author of the page and author of the page's author" (259-60). Gubar confidently declares, "the shift in metaphors from the primacy of the pen to the primacy of the page is a late nineteenth-century phenomenon" (262). Unfortunately, Gubar's analysis overlooks Donne's seventeenth-century works. By focusing on the act of reading as much as, if not more than, the process of writing, Donne can agree with Gubar that "no woman is a blank page." Donne's female characters are not the empty and mistreated pages in Gubar's essay. Nor are they the blank and innocent leaves, meant only for God's or a God-fearing pen, featured in the poetry of George Herbert and Thomas Traherne. Rather, Donne portrays women as whole volumes, replete with a wealth of information. Sexual intercourse, an act of carnal conversation for Donne, moves beyond the pen ravishing the page to the mutual transference of mystical knowledge from one lover to another. The female, as a receptacle of both seminal and metaphorical ink, balances out the male, who "receives" ink as well, though in an ocular-tactile sense, by "reading" the body of his beloved. The female text, as a living body, actively educates her male companion.

In *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, Fish cautions against viewing any text as a mere "repository of meaning" (388). The subtitle of his work urges readers to treat each text as an *experience*; the text thereby gains agency in the arguably two-way reading process (386). Though Fish is talking about the literal written word, his remarks on literature as a

“kinetic art” inadvertently redeem Donne’s sexual philosophy from any charges of gender inequity:

The objectivity of the text is an illusion, and moreover, a dangerous illusion, because it is so physically convincing. [...] This is, of course, the unspoken assumption behind the word “content.” The line or page or book *contains*—everything. [...] The availability of a book to the hand, its presence on a shelf, its listing in a library catalogue—all of these encourage us to think of it as a stationary object. Somehow when we put a book down, we forget that while we were reading, *it* was moving (pages turning, lines receding into the past) and forget too that *we* were moving with it. (400-401)

Centuries earlier, Donne anticipates Fish’s ideas, translating the act of reading into a dual process, granting both his literal and metaphorical texts agency, and always considering the woman’s or text’s point of view. In her defense of Donne against feminist critiques, Ilona Bell observes that in the *Songs and Sonnets*, “whether he professes indifference or canonizes love, Donne is never able to disregard the woman’s point of view. The lady continues to disturb and check and alter the speaker’s assumptions” (116-17). Whether she speaks through words or actions, the female has an undeniable voice in Donne’s poetry. Thus, even in a poem like “Elegy 16: On his Mistress,” the male speaker’s “words’ masculine persuasive force” is not entirely unilateral, for both man and woman swear oaths “to seal *joint* constancy” before the lady’s departure, echoing the mutuality in Donne’s other poems (4, 9-10, italics mine). Furthermore, Roland Barthes demonstrates that the “discourse of absence” is historically feminine, indicating the ability of Donne’s elegiac speaker to adopt the role of “the other” (*A Lover’s Discourse* 13-14).

“Elegy 16” does, however, allude to the idea of carnal knowledge, expressed through Donne’s repetition in the lines, “Men of France [...] Will quickly know thee, and *know* thee” (33-37, italics mine).¹¹ The male speaker in the poem fears for his lady’s purity in the hands of foreign men, yet he believes intuitively that those rogues in their mere physicality will never attain the metaphysical communication that the speaker shares with his mate, for the couple is “one in th’ other,” even when separated by distance (26). Not all acts of sexual intercourse, but only those in which the soul plays a part, result in the harmoniously edifying interchange and mathematical rule-defying union enjoyed by the speaker and his mistress.

Margaret Miles’s distinction between soulful and secular intimacy contributes to an understanding of Donne’s use of sexual metaphors, though Miles never directly discusses John Donne in her feminist text, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, and might be likely to join the camp that labels Donne an incorrigible rake.¹² While “carnal knowledge” may imply that “embodied knowledge of oneself and another human being can be attained in the intimacy of lovemaking,” Miles notes the negativity and issuance of judgment long associated with the term, which she replaces with the less pejorative “carnal knowing” (8-9). Carnal knowing, Miles argues, describes the dual process of learning and learning from the naked body of another. Donne never uses the phrases “carnal knowledge” or “carnal

¹¹ This use of the verb *know* recalls both “Elegy 19” and “A Valediction: of the Book,” as the speaker of the latter poem believes that his volume of love letters constitutes a sphere in which “Learning were safe,” as opposed to other, more dangerous types of knowledge (26).

¹² Miles echoes Gubar’s argument, condemning the historical trend by which “female bodies, in the societies of the Christian West, have [...] been seen as a blank page on which multiple social meanings could be projected” (169).

knowing,” but both themes permeate his poetry, particularly in his frequent reliance upon bookish metaphors.

Donne’s choice of metaphors undoubtedly results from his lifelong entanglement with religion that constantly informs his artistic endeavors. Readers often view Donne’s writings as either sacred or profane, failing to see the productive and almost ever-present overlap. Louis Martz demonstrates the danger of pigeon-holing Donne’s work along dichotomous lines, contending, “Donne’s poetry, throughout his career, moves along a Great Divide between the sacred and profane, now facing one way, now another, but always remaining intensely aware of both sides” (215-16). “The Ecstasy,” in Martz’s estimation, is a poem of seduction *and* theology, embodying the process of sensual ecstasy *and* the occurrence of mystical extasis (212). Charles Mitchell concurs in his assessment of “The Ecstasy,” arguing that “the modern psychological belief that the proper motion of the self is to love is supported by the traditional Christian view, as well as by the Platonic view which informs this poem” (92). With startling poetic ease, Donne weaves together Christian theology, classical philosophy, and human instinct in the single, powerful image of loving consummation.

In poems like “The Ecstasy,” Donne harmonizes the realms of sacred and profane with which his contemporaries struggle so vehemently, and his clever use of bookish metaphors allows him these liberties. In fact, the Scriptures themselves invite the parallel between word and life, for even God depends on incarnation to deliver His message and accomplish His plans for the human race (Doerkson 27). Drawing on this metaphysical correspondence, Donne’s speaker in “The Ecstasy” hypothesizes that any worthy

bystander, though unable to distinguish the speaker's soul's voice from that of his lover, would be able to learn from the couple as a congregant might learn from a perusal of the Gospel accounts of Jesus:

If any, so by love refined,
 That he soul's language understood,
 And by good love were grown all mind,
 Within convenient distance stood,

 He (though he knew not which soul spake
 Because both meant, both spake the same)
 Might thence a new concoction take,
 And part far purer than he came. (21-28)

Here, as elsewhere for Donne, the physical body becomes a book, in which spiritual truths of the soul find both sexual and textual representation, and the secrets contained therein are available not just for the lovers, but to any bystander—or reader—who possesses the ability to understand “soul's language.”¹³ The poem ends by reemphasizing this central point: “Love's mysteries in souls do grow, / But yet the body is his book,” followed by an additional supposition of a nearby witness, of whom the speaker implores, “Let him still mark us” (71-76). Janel Mueller's feminist critique of the poem lambastes Donne for ruining his ode to perfect mutuality with the crude image of a peeping Tom (145). However, Donne's inclusion of a potential onlooker does not entirely detract from the poem's overall sanctified metaphysicality. With the addition of a witness—or “reader”—the body becomes “love's book wherein he reveals his spiritual mysteries to

¹³ Note that this ability is gained through *experience*, “by love [...] by good love” (21, 23), a process that mirrors the practice of spiritual discipleship. Study alone is not enough, but must be supplemented with practice.

uninitiates” (Smith 375). Like the reader in “A Valediction: of the Book,” the man in the bushes has a lot to learn from so perfect a couple and plays a crucial role in sustaining the couple’s metaphorical immortality.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the voyeurism at work in Donne’s poems has proven to be somewhat of a critical quagmire. Anthony Low, ignoring Louis Martz’s warning against dichotomizing Donne, identifies a contrast between Donne’s “secular” and “sacred” works; in the former, he argues, the reader—like the hypothetical voyeur in “The Ecstasy”—is a mere spectator, while in the latter, the reader is a mutual participant (*Love’s Architecture* 78). William Shullenberger incorporates a similar viewpoint in his assessment of Donne’s poetry. Shullenberger notes Donne’s penchant for triangulation, faulting him for the inclusion of a “potentially disruptive outsider” even in the most “exalted and intimate expressions of love” (46). Failing to acknowledge the full power of Donne’s imagery, Shullenberger attributes the poet’s insertion of outsiders to “an aspect of his realism” (49). Like Low, Shullenberger believes that Donne’s frequent exploration of the limited microcosm results from the modern desire for privacy in a world that rarely affords it. The “erotic spectator,” Shullenberger believes, serves as a “reminder to the reader that the pleasure of the text is a voyeuristic pleasure” (61).

Donne, however, offers readers a positive view of voyeurism, primarily by incorporating theology into his sexual philosophy, and Shullenberger’s analysis momentarily comments on this facet of Donne’s authorial project. Shullenberger’s reading of “The Ecstasy” credits Donne with “making over the potentially pesky intruder

¹⁴ “Of the Book” also places a similar standard of eligibility upon the supposed reader. The speaker remarks that the lovers’ annals will benefit only “all whom love’s subliming fire invades” (13).

into a reverent audience, an initiate, Donne [...] thus derives from the esoteric mystery of love a universal catechism” (51). The link to religion is apropos; not only does Donne employ metaphors of reading and writing in his “secular” poetry to describe the metaphysical union of souls, but he elevates his lovers to sacred status, drawing on the practices of scriptural discernment and the Eucharistic sacrament. Robert Whalen praises this achievement: “No doubt sensitive to the primarily sacred nature of sacrament, Donne forces its engagement with secular topoi to effect a poetic fleshing of the Word, thereby realizing afresh the imaginative power of the incarnation” (24).

Whalen rightly points out that both Donne and Herbert explore the sacrament in order to “understand the place of self and art in relation to the world and to the Word” (60). In his clerical how-to manual, *A Priest to the Temple*, for example, Herbert includes a chapter entitled “The Parson’s Library.” A reader might expect to find a list of reputable theological resources, must-haves for any good parson. Surprisingly, then, the first sentence reads, “The country parson’s library is a holy *life*” (251, italics mine). Richard Strier thus characterizes “The Parson’s Library” as “exclusively devoted to the praise of experience [...] the most radical chapter in *The Country Parson*” (*Love Known* 198).¹⁵ Scholars have speculated on the peculiarity of this seeming misnomer, but one critic defends the manuscript’s integrity, asserting, “Herbert intends, by playing on verbal expectations, to force his audience to revise their intellectual assumptions also. One is to study and master, not precedents and authorities but one’s personal aberrations” (Endicott

¹⁵ Strier notes that “The Parson’s Library” in fact “deprecates books” (198), by pointing to a passage from Herbert’s text that reads: “He that hath considered how to carry himself at table about his appetite, if he tell this to another, preacheth; and much more feelingly, and judiciously, than he writes his rules of temperance out of books” (251). This image recalls the poetic message of “Affliction (I).”

14). As in “Perirrhantierium,” “thy lesson” is in fact “written in thy soul” (9). Chana Bloch adds to the discussion, “Herbert brings to his study of the text that minute attention with which we examine ourselves in the mirror” (29). As in Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets*, bodies and texts—flesh and Word—can be interchangeable, even for what Anthony Low refers to as “Herbert’s orderly pen” (*Love’s Architecture* 107). Like his contemporary, Herbert recognizes the precise suitability of a bookish metaphor, not to mention man’s dependence on physical representations for true intellectual and spiritual comprehension of abstract concepts. In Whalen’s words, “The idealized union of lovers, like that of communicant and God, relies on the sensory dimension apart from which it is in danger of becoming rarefied beyond the limits of human knowledge and experience” (34). Those who seek the pure and metaphysical union of Donne’s lovers must act the peeping Tom before making calculated alterations in their own relationships. Similarly, those who seek the holy and ordered life of the parson must carefully observe his daily routine, meditatively comparing it with their own.

John Wall posits that scriptural reading is second only to the devotional act of communion for Herbert (237). The Eucharist, as a symbol of the incarnation, holds significance for Donne as well. In both observances, and for both poets, the legitimacy of the individual receiving the Word or the bread is undeniably important. Christopher Hodgkins notes that for followers of Calvin, “true feeding” depends less on whether or not Christ is present in the Eucharistic elements and more on “the communicant’s receiving the elements with a ‘lively faith’” (26). Similarly, Bloch maintains Herbert’s belief that “the Bible will yield its truths to the reader who approaches it in the right way”

(28). Both assertions recall the qualification Donne places upon his voyeuristic reader in poems like “The Ecstasy” and “Valediction: of the Book.”

Despite this point of intersection for the poets, the artistic endeavors of Donne and Herbert are for the most part quite divergent. Anthony Low pits Donne’s unflappable comfort with sacro-sexual metaphors against Herbert’s avoidance of sexual imagery “in certain religious contexts” (*Reinvention of Love* 101). Herbert, Low continues, “substitutes for romantic love certain other, equally human, kinds of love, which help make his poems emotionally convincing,” including the love of a servant for his master or a child for his mother (102-103). Similarly, Michael Schoenfeldt alerts readers to Herbert’s emphasis on childhood as a healthy and desirable period of “carnal ignorance” (248-49). Donne, on the other hand, embraces the inevitably sexual process of carnal knowing, spurning the ignorance requisite for innocence, as his speaker in “Elegy 19” casts off the symbolically white linen masking his denuded lover: “Here is no penance, much less innocence,” he exclaims (45-46).

Nevertheless, critics—most notably Schoenfeldt—have made a case for Herbert’s erotic side, allegedly repressed by scholarly discourse. Schoenfeldt firmly believes that “Herbert finds in sexual union and sensual pleasure a compelling model for the intimacy between humanity and God signaled by the incarnation, and celebrated in the Eucharist. For Herbert the body is both the locus of ungodly desires *and* the site of divinity” (262, italics mine). Arguably, Schoenfeldt’s position is a bit extreme; Richard Strier convincingly overturns Schoenfeldt’s analysis in *Resistant Structures: Particularity*,

Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts,¹⁶ yet even Strier cautions against reading Herbert with “presuppositions about piety in mind” (83). Admittedly, Schoenfeldt’s identification of potentially erotic metaphors in *The Temple* possesses some merit, particularly at the level of man’s relation to the Word. Prefiguring Schoenfeldt’s argument, Chana Bloch, perhaps unknowingly, uses erotic language to describe Herbert’s interaction with the Bible; she posits that “Herbert’s faith enables him to enter into the text” and that he enjoys “taking liberties with” or “ravishing” the sacred Word (29-31). For Herbert, then, “Reading the text in the right way means reading oneself into the text,” a process comparable to Donne’s equation of intercourse and conversation (Bloch 32). For instance, in the fourth chapter of Herbert’s *A Priest to the Temple*, “The Parson’s Knowledge,” Herbert says of the country parson in relation to the holy scriptures, “There he sucks and lives” (204). Likewise, in the poem, “The Holy Scriptures (I),” Herbert reiterates the comparison of reading the Bible to sucking its “infinite sweetness,” and he concludes the poem with the image of a proposing suitor: “heav’n lies flat in thee, / Subject to ev’ry mounter’s bended knee” (1-2, 13-14). These instances of suggested nursing or borderline eroticism are charged with the interplay of body and soul found throughout the poetry of John Donne.

Donne, of course, employs a much more blatant tone, but Herbert’s subtly erotic descriptions of scriptural discernment reinforce Donne’s sexually charged yet spiritually sound bookish metaphors. Doerkson praises both Donne and Herbert for finding originality “not in rejecting the standard theology of their time and country but in testing

¹⁶ See “Impossible Transcendence,” the appendix to Strier’s chapter on “Impossible Worldliness” (109-17).

and applying it at the level of experience,” an achievement brought about through the use of textual metaphors (26). Though his emphasis on carnality pales in comparison to Donne’s, Herbert nevertheless strengthens Donne’s metaphors through his own vibrantly scriptural metaphors. The Bible has a great deal of agency for Herbert; the reversal of one of Donne’s bodies-turned-book, it is a living, breathing text. Bloch writes, “The Bible works, [Herbert] claims [...] the Bible is presented as powerfully active” (9). In “Holy Scriptures (II),” Herbert’s speaker reveals “the special, individually directed dynamism of Scripture” (Strier, *Love Known* 151). The poem praises God’s word as an active authority on life, in contrast to what Strier calls the “explicit passivity” of the speaker (152):

Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
 And comments on thee: for in ev’rything
 Thy words do find me out, and parallels bring,
 And in another make me understood. (9-12)

In a process of “reciprocal illumination,” the Bible teaches Herbert how to live, and he fashions his life so that it comments on Biblical virtues and God the author (Bloch 10).

Similarly, John Wall notes that for Anglicans,

the primary experience of the Bible was in terms of the shape given it by the way in which the Prayer Book separated it into individual episodes and brought those episodes into relationship with each other, with the prayers and sacraments of the Prayer Book, and with the ongoing conduct of people’s lives. (238)

This devotional practice appears in Herbert’s chapter on “The Parson’s Knowledge,” which refers to “a diligent collation of Scripture with Scripture” (205). Editor John Tobin glosses this phrase with the definition, “a critical comparison of passages which reveals

the truth by mutual illumination” (Herbert 428). Tobin’s paraphrase “mutual illumination” distinctly reflects the perfect union or two-way traffic of carnal knowledge found in poems like Donne’s “The Ecstasy.” Moreover, both Herbert’s words and Tobin’s gloss brilliantly but unknowingly connect with Donne’s seventeenth meditation.

Recall that in “XVII. Meditation,” Donne describes a paradisiacal, heavenly library, “where every book shall lie open to one another” (108). This powerful image mirrors Herbert’s “diligent collation of Scripture with Scripture,” albeit without the “diligence” and with a subtle measure of carnality. There is no mention of male and female or active and passive. Donne’s heavenly library embodies Roland Barthes’s vision of the ideal text: “there is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object. The text supersedes grammatical attitudes” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 16). No one has to play the role of diligent student or pen-wielding author. No one has to pluck fruit from a forbidden tree or dare to achieve poetic immortality in the face of fallen language. On the contrary, Donne’s conception of the afterlife exudes perfect serenity, derived from an effortless, mutual flow of knowledge. In Barthes’s terms, “the fulfilled lover has no need to write, to transmit, to reproduce” (*A Lover’s Discourse* 56). Heaven, for Donne, means eternal fulfillment, the cessation of desire in the achievement of perfection.

The shift from Donne’s earlier, rakish works to the thorough, mature analysis in the seventeenth meditation is remarkably dramatic. Donne, a writer who has gone so far as to write about writers and writing, now states without hesitation or qualification, “*all* mankind is of *one* author,” and that author is certainly not a frail, disease-ridden human

like Donne (108, italics mine). Aligned with George Herbert's speaker in "The Flower," Donne has come to believe, "Thy word is all" (21). Moreover, in Donne's meditation, all of mankind constitutes only a single volume, more akin to the worldviews of Herbert and Thomas Traherne than an early "Jack" Donne. Donne's altered perspective, no doubt inspired by his life-threatening illness, marks an abandonment of the solipsism—albeit paired—so prevalent in the *Songs and Sonnets*. In Donne's earlier works, human beings are individuals, even to a self-centered fault. One would expect God's translators to gather each person, or "chapter," into one collective anthology of mankind. Of course, as the meditation reads, mankind's one volume, when translated to the heavenly library, miraculously divides into multiple individual books, suggesting the fruitfulness of a supernatural language unencumbered by mortality's shortcomings. The openness of the heavenly books preserves their prior unity on Earth as human beings, just as the image of each frail and scattered leaf/life finding its rightfully designated place in heaven articulates Donne's coping with his illness as a part of God's divine plan. Donne's meditation casts the dying experience into a process of translation; the euphemism undoubtedly soothes Donne's mind, but the significance of the translation "into a better language" should not go unnoticed (108). Heretofore Donne's frequent use of wit and his belief in the possibility of textual immortality brazenly dismiss the theory of fallen language. However, as an invalid facing what he believes to be his final days on Earth, Donne displays a wholehearted willingness to admit the limitations of mortality, including mankind's inability to perfectly express the phenomena of heaven and earth.

Though rife with the flaws of fallen, mortal language, the works of metaphysical mastermind John Donne nevertheless illustrate a rare poetic brilliance. Stepping beyond the devout boundaries of his contemporaries, Donne tackles profound theological dilemmas with courage and precision. The balance of sacred and profane seen in his early poems, as well as his belief in mankind's ability to overcome all mortal limitations, serve as a perfect foil for his somber devotion in later life—a devotion nonetheless tinged with Donne's sexual philosophy. Donne's capacity to employ textual metaphors in both erotic and penitent lights illustrates not only his genius as a poet but also his growth and maturity as a person.

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THE PEN, THE SWORD, AND THE PRISON KEY: LADY MARY WORTLEY
MONTAGU AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SUICIDE DISCOURSE

Jack Kevorkian, Terri Schiavo, euthanasia, and Heaven's Gate—all contemporary buzzwords—evoke the controversial and mystified topic of suicide. Despite medical breakthroughs in psychiatry, advances in social work, and the development of alternative therapies for mental health, the act of suicide is still tinged with mystery and serves as prime fodder for dramatic works of fiction and sensational true-life headlines. The present age is far from anomalous in this respect. In “Suicide and the Rise of the Popular Press in England,” Michael MacDonald analyzes the spread of the printing press in eighteenth-century England, arguing that the period's increase in print journalism fostered—or at least documented—the societal perception that suicide was fast becoming a British epidemic. Suicide permeated eighteenth-century works of literature, Joseph Addison's *Cato* among the most prominent, and the Enlightenment climate as a whole produced a plethora of philosophical and theological treatises, both defending and arguing against self-murderers by appealing to reason, to God, and to current medical discourse. Subsequent analysis of eighteenth-century texts on suicide is equally abundant and wide-ranging, but Lady Mary Wortley Montagu has been grievously omitted from this critical discussion.

Though Lady Mary died in 1762 at the age of seventy-three, presumably of breast cancer and certainly not by her own hand, she crafted an extraordinary poem in 1736, enigmatically titled “Address'd To—,” in which her speaker contemplates suicide as a

means of discovering what—if anything—the afterlife holds. Unique not only in its genesis from a female pen, Montagu’s “Address’d To—” stands apart from other Augustan works on suicide in the poem’s reliance on reason and individual liberty apart from God. More famous tracts like John Donne’s *Biathanatos* (1647) and David Hume’s “On Suicide” (175?) were subject to their authors’ publication anxiety and relegated to posthumous release, but Montagu’s poem appeared in print—albeit anonymously—in 1749. While there is no way to know whether or not Montagu published the poem voluntarily, an in-depth analysis of the context from which the poem emerged and the recurrence of pro-suicide elements in Montagu’s life and works indicate her courageous desire to join the eighteenth-century intellectual conversation on the taboo subject of self-murder. By treating Montagu’s “Address’d To—” as a concise and poetic suicide “treatise,” present-day scholars have the opportunity to redeem the poem from critical oblivion and gain a richer perspective on eighteenth-century societal views of voluntary death, which in turn may shed some light on the ramifications of suicide in the present day and age.

Reflecting a curiosity no less prevalent in current conversations on suicide and death, Montagu frames “Address’d To—” as a series of questions, artfully fashioned more or less in the iambic pentameter couplet form. The speaker opens with a lamentation, but then sets aside individual grievances to inquire about the afterlife in general:

With toilsome steps I pass through Life’s dull Road,
No Pack Horse halfe so weary of his Load;
And when this dirty Journey will conclude,

To what new Realms is then my Way persu'd?
 Say; then does the unbody'd Spirit fly,
 To happier climes and to a better Sky;
 Or sinking, mixes with its kindred clay,
 And sleeps a whole Eternity away?
 Or shall this Form be once again renew'd,
 With all its Frailties, and its Hopes endu'd;
 Acting once more on this detested Stage,
 Passions of Youth, Infirmities of Age? (1-12)¹

The absence of personal pronouns after line four indicates the speaker's awareness that hers is a universal question, and the scope of her imagination is broad as well.² She envisions a heaven-like experience, but never mentions a specific deity and does not even declare the immortality of the soul as an absolute truth (5-8). The evocative "Or" introducing lines seven and nine highlights the speaker's skepticism on the afterlife—rapture, purgatory, reincarnation—anything is possible, but nothing is certain.

In the second stanza, the speaker tries to ground her conjectures with extensive research, but her scholarly quest only leads to deeper uncertainty:

I see in Tully what the Ancients thought
 And read unprejudiced what moderns taught
 But no Conviction from my reading springs,
 Most dubious, on the most important things. (13-16)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Montagu's poems are from *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Essays and Poems, and Simplicity, a Comedy*. Eds. Robert Halsband and Isobel Grundy. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

² Because my argument focuses on Lady Mary's critical neglect due in part to her gender, I have elected to use a feminine pronoun in reference to the poem's speaker. Please note, however, that the pack horse in line two is weary of *his* load. This, I think, adds to the universality of the poem without complicating my reading of a female speaker.

This stanza and the one that follows stand out in brevity, directness, and punctuation, alerting the reader to the crux of the poem. In a single word—“Yet”—Montagu’s speaker dismisses hundreds of years of philosophical speculation:

Yet one short moment would at once explain,
 What all Philosophy has sought in vain,
 Would clear all doubt, and terminate all pain. (17-19)

Again, Montagu’s speaker concludes with a period, instead of the by-now anticipated question mark. Furthermore, Montagu’s subtle rebellion against the couplet form gives the structure of her poem a message of its own. The triplet that constitutes stanza three, a notable shift in the rhyme scheme, acts as a burst of poetic liberty, concomitant with the speaker’s explosion of liberal ideas about voluntary death.

The final stanza returns to couplets and questions instead of declaratives, but the speaker’s courageous tone counteracts the uncertainty from line sixteen, and the feminine rhyme concluding lines twenty and twenty-one heightens the speaker’s claim to a freedom at once real and poetic:

Why then not hasten that decisive Hour,
 Still in my view, and ever in my power?
 Why should I drag along this Life I hate
 Without one thought to mitigate the weight?
 Whence this misterious bearing to exist,
 When every Joy is lost, and every Hope dismiss?
 In chains and darkness wherefore should I stay
 And mourn in Prison while I keep the Key? (20-27)

Here, Montagu ends her poem, despite the reader’s longing for some definitive conclusion. Exercising reason in the face of “vain Philosophy,” Montagu’s speaker asks a

series of questions to which she expects no answer. Any response would constitute a refutation of the speaker's position, an attempt to erode or disprove her reasoning faculties, and an underlying desire to label her as a self-destructive lunatic. Historian Roy Porter believes that the history of madness "properly written" is a story of "freedom and control, knowledge and power" (*Madness* 3). The very questioning in which Montagu's speaker engages constitutes an attempt at power, as she argues for the freedom to contemplate suicide and rid the subject of taboo.

Unfortunately, societal attitudes towards suicide complicate the speaker's compelling stance, evidenced by the "mysterious bearing to exist" mentioned in line twenty-four and powerfully illustrated by the poem's final image of life as a prison. In one sense, Montagu's speaker ends the poem with a declaration of power; she holds the key to her metaphorical cell. On the other hand, if the key in question is in fact a sword with which to take her own life, the speaker's power remains latent as long as she remains a speaker, and once dead, she can no longer offer up arguments against "vain Philosophy." Given a reader, Montagu's poem, however, can. If the speaker in fact commits suicide at the poem's conclusion, the poem remains as a textual body to communicate the same message conveyed by the speaker in life: that every human being possesses the tremendous power to contemplate suicide or take his or her life, whether to escape the injustices and hardships of the world or to go one step beyond the boundaries of human knowledge.

The "vain" philosophers in question—the thinking Ancients evoked in line thirteen who persistently test those boundaries—more than likely include Plato. In

Phaedo, Plato recounts the death of Socrates, who died by his own hand in 399 BCE at the behest of the Athenian state. Through the persona of Phaedo, Plato offers a redemptive view of his friend's politically ordered suicide: "he died nobly and without fear" (49). As Phaedo discusses the conversations prior to Socrates' death, however, Plato's anti-suicide position surfaces. Socrates explains to his companions that the subject of suicide is actually quite "simple," for "it is never [...] better at certain times and for certain people to die than to live" (51). When asked to elaborate, Socrates (at the pen of Plato) explains, "we men are in a kind of prison" and "one must not free oneself or run away. [...] the gods are our guardians and [...] men are one of their possessions" (51-52). Whether or not Montagu read Plato's *Phaedo*, the poet's allusion to a prison in the final line of "Address'd To—" indicates her familiarity with Platonic anti-suicide doctrine; subsequent treatises both defending and condemning self-murder have echoed his prison-guard metaphor and much of his general rhetoric. For example, Marcus Tullius Cicero—the "Tully" in Montagu's second stanza—reiterates Socrates' speech in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, his tract on stoic good and evil, which holds that "When a man's condition is for the most part according to nature, the appropriate action is to stay alive" (63). Cicero's qualification, "for the most part," allows room for loopholes, and the resulting ambiguity prompts Montagu's speaker to criticize ancient philosophy as "Most dubious, on the most important things" (16).

In addition to the voices of Plato and Cicero, Ovid's *Heroides* may have inspired Montagu in the composition of "Address'd To—," because Lady Mary read the *Heroides* as a young girl (Grundy 17). Maynard Mack writes,

Of Ovid's eighteen heroic women [...] all are in one way or other victims of frustrated loves. For eight of them death is near as the poem closes. Six of the eight intend suicide, and at least three of these speak explicitly of the sword. (318)

At the age of twelve, Lady Mary tried her hand at the Ovidian epistolary style and frustrated love motif, composing "Julia to Ovid" about the presumed affair between the emperor's daughter and the Roman poet (Halsband and Grundy 176). On the occasion of her lover's banishment, Montagu's speaker laments her noble status and the restrictions of her gender, wailing that she is "by Forms confin'd" (3). Julia elaborates on her melancholy with a demonstration of religious skepticism, not unlike that of the speaker in "Address'd To—":

When sick with Sighs to absent Ovid given,
I tire with Vows the unrelenting Heaven,
Drown'd in my Tears, and with my Sorrows pale,
What then do all my kindred Gods avail? (9-12)

The speaker concludes her epistle with the declaration that should she become the object of blame for her lover's exile, "Those Eyes which now are weeping for your Woes / The Sleep of Death shall then for ever close" (49-50). Is this an intimation of self-murder? "Julia to Ovid" remained hidden among Lady Mary's juvenilia and was not printed in her lifetime (Halsband and Grundy 176), so one can only speculate as to the context for the poem's inception, but the occurrence of suicide in the *Heroides* confirms that Lady Mary was at the very least reading about voluntary death from an early age.

Furthermore, "Julia to Ovid" foreshadows the tensions Lady Mary would experience upon her marriage to Edward Wortley Montagu in 1712, a mere decade later

than her fictional speaker's lament. The couple eloped; most scholars assume that theirs was a passionate union, but melancholy soon set in for the young bride, particularly when she conceived her first child and feared relegation to the role of wife and mother (Grundy 62). Edward's solution to these "doldrum months" was to include his wife in his intellectual circles by sending her a manuscript of close friend Joseph Addison's forthcoming play, *Cato*, with the request that she write a critique (Halsband, *Life* 32). Addison's tragedy details the life and death—by his own hand—of the stoic Roman statesman in opposition to Julius Caesar. From beginning to end, Addison's characters deify Cato. For example, Juba, prince of Numidia, exclaims:

Where shall we find the man that bears affliction,
Great and majestic in his griefs, like Cato?
Heavens! with what strength, what steadiness of mind,
He triumphs in the midst of all his sufferings! (1.4.77-80)

Cato remains in high esteem even after stabbing himself with his sword in one of the tragedy's final scenes. Senator Lucius then proclaims, "There fled the greatest soul that ever warmed / A Roman breast" (5.4.100-101).

In her assessment of the play, Lady Mary agrees with the characters' high opinions of Cato, admitting, "The Figure that Great Man makes in History is so noble [...] He appears here in all his Beauty; his Sentiments are great, and express'd without affectation; his Language is Sublime [...] and smooth without a misbecoming softnesse" (64). Lady Mary's approval of Roman stoicism—even to the point of self-murder—is readily apparent; her comments on the play's dramatic ending are especially significant, for she complains, "I could only wish the soliloquy of Cato had been longer; the subject

affords many Beautifull Reflections [...] I wish he would Enlarge on the Immortality of the Soul” (67). According to legend, just moments before his suicide, as Caesar’s army approached, Cato had been reading Plato’s *Phaedo*, a text with which Lady Mary was most likely familiar, as is earlier suggested.³ In the final version of Addison’s play, Cato holds the book in one hand while touching his sword with the other, reasoning,

This in a moment brings me to an end;
But this informs me I shall never die.
The soul, secured in her existence, smiles
At the drawn dagger, and defies its point. (5.1.23-26)

The bold tableau invites Lady Mary’s utmost admiration, and she confidently predicts that the play will “renew in the Minds of the Audience the Lost Love of Liberty, and contempt of servitude” (67).⁴

The thematic intersection of suicide and individual liberty fascinates Lady Mary, no doubt because her own liberties are restricted by her gender—or “confin’d” by her “Form” in the words of Julia to Ovid (3). The opportunity to comment on Addison’s play is a chance for Lady Mary to voice her opinions on self-murder, but her audience, unfortunately, is limited. The heading of her critique reads, “Wrote at the Desire of Mr. Wortley, suppress’d at the desire of Mr. Adison,” and her essay ends with the self-deprecating (though perhaps not entirely sincere) address to her husband, “I have now gone through the Task you enjoyn’d me, [...] which I cannot excuse undertakeing (being

³ Despite condemning the act of self-murder, Plato’s dialogue also champions the immortality of the soul, maintaining that death is nothing more than “the separation of the soul from the body” and should not be feared (53). Thus, Socrates can approach his self-execution with calm.

⁴ Montagu’s prediction rings true. In his history of suicide, Georges Minois describes early eighteenth-century London society as a “cult of Cato” (218).

so much above my skill) but by remembering you, that it was by your Command” (62, 68). Richard Halsband puts forth a compelling argument that Addison did in fact incorporate Lady Mary’s suggestions in his final draft of the play, though Halsband admits that her praise of the play is “so strong and her corrections so mild that had [the critique] been published it would have been *drowned* out” by other literary criticism on the text (“Addison’s *Cato*” 1128, italics mine). Unpublished until the twentieth century, Montagu’s critique *was* essentially drowned until scholars initiated a recovery effort. She wrote an epilogue to the play as well, but her cynical couplets met a similar fate; Halsband aptly refers to the piece as “stillborn” (“Addison’s *Cato*” 1128).

Isobel Grundy notes that eighteenth-century epilogues were intended to provide comic relief at the conclusion of a tragedy by scrutinizing the play’s key themes through a humorous lens (63). Montagu’s epilogue excels in this task:

You see in ancient Rome what folly reign’d;
 A folly British men would have disdain’d.
 Here’s none so weak to pity Cato’s case,
 Who might have liv’d, and had a handsome place;
 But rashly vain, and insolently great,
 He perish’d by his fault and not his fate. (1-6)

Read as a reversal of Montagu’s true mindset, “Epilogue To the Tragedy of Cato” reveals her admiration for Roman stoicism, her slight contempt for British vanity and aristocracy, and her belief in an individual’s right to determine his course in life—and death. In lines five and six, instead of decrying Cato’s “rash” action, she is in fact denigrating those among her who believe in leaving everything to the hands of fate; doing so is a relinquishing of individual liberty, the trait in which Lady Mary so vehemently believes.

Of course, the epilogue remained unspoken and even unpublished until 1803. In an arguably political maneuver, Addison chose presumed-Tory Alexander Pope—later to become Lady Mary’s sworn enemy—to write the prologue to *Cato*, counterbalanced by the epilogue of prominent Whig, Dr. Samuel Garth—the physician for whom Lady Mary would later blame her facial scars following a horrific battle with smallpox (Halsband, *Life* 33).

While Pope’s prologue focuses on the unquestionable virtue of Cato, Garth’s conclusion to the play comes through the voice of saccharinely sentimental Lucia, daughter of Lucius, and begins: “What odd fantastic things we women do!” (1). Here, Garth recalls Lucia’s struggle throughout the play over whether or not—and to whom—she should give up her virginity. Addison parallels Lucia’s “dilemma” with Cato’s political and existential quandaries, presumably both to lengthen and to soften his tragedy. In a line befitting the stoic Roman protagonist, Lucia cries, “Why have not I this constancy of mind, / Who have so many griefs to try its force?” (1.6.18-19), but the strength of her speech dissipates when she concludes,

nature formed me of her softest mould,
 Enfeebled all my soul with tender passions,
 And sunk me ev’n below my own weak sex:
 Pity and love, by turns, oppress my heart. (1.6.20-23)

Montagu’s review of the play decries this “melting softnesse” and Lucia’s “sighs and tears” (64-65). Even two decades before composing “Address’d To—,” Montagu would rather tackle the topics of liberty and suicide than wax sentimental in the manner of Garth and Pope.

Both men would continue to shape Lady Mary's life, whether she invited their actions or not. Not long after *Cato* appeared on stage, Lady Mary contracted a horrible case of smallpox, and Samuel Garth served as one of her primary physicians. Halsband writes of Lady Mary's extreme terror, "she expected either death or disfigurement" (*Life* 51). Arguably, the latter threat was a greater source of panic for the young aristocrat. By Grundy's account, "her face became literally unrecognizable" (99). Focusing on brains over beauty, then, Lady Mary added "Saturday, The Small Pox, Flavia." to her cycle of eclogues then in progress. Grundy notes that while concluding poems in traditional pastoral cycles introduce the topic of death, Montagu focuses her clearly autobiographical poem on the aftermath of her disease, thus fashioning her illness as a death of the part of herself that took pride in her beauty and charging the poem with an extremely personal quality (102). While glancing at her portrait, Flavia laments:

Far from my Sight that killing Picture bear,
 The Face disfigure, or the Canvas tear!
 That Picture, which with Pride I us'd to show,
 The lost resemblance but upbraids me now. (43-46)

Tempted to ignite a cycle of self-destruction, Flavia threatens to annihilate the representation of herself that in turn terrorizes her actual self. As the poem continues, the speaker contextualizes her illness in terms of gender politics by linking beauty with female power and mourning her "Empire lost!" (62). Deprived of her potent beauty and made passive both as a woman and a patient, Flavia must submit to the treatments of her physicians, but she calls theirs a "false Art" (67). Montagu creatively inserts a caricature

of Dr. Garth into the poem in order to criticize the deceptive optimism of her patronizing caretakers:

And why (he cry'd) this Greife, and this Dispair?
 You shall again be well, again be fair,
 Believe my Oath (with that an Oath he swore),
 False was his Oath! my Beauty is no more. (79-82)

Montagu concludes her poem with the voice of an abstract observer who encourages Flavia to “Forsake Mankind, and bid the World Adieu,” and Flavia repeats this advice with emphasis in the poem’s final line (84, 96). Again, as in “Julia to Ovid,” Montagu presents the reader with what could be interpreted as a self-destructive theme, although the traditional reading of “Saturday” assumes that Flavia merely enters a life of social isolation. Considering Montagu’s collected works, however, the informed reader should hesitate to gloss over the suicidal elements in “Saturday.”

The poem also prefigures Lady Mary’s voyage to Turkey with her ambassadorial husband, a journey regarded as both an abandonment of England and a metaphorical self-imposed death. Pope initiates this morbid comparison in a letter to Lady Mary in August of 1716, writing, “I never since pass by [your] House, but with the same Sort of Melancholy that we feel upon Seeing the Tomb of a Friend; which only serves to put us in mind of What we have lost” (*Correspondence* 354). Pope’s biographer notes the poet’s fear that death “might be the price of [Lady Mary’s] not-less-than-Roman fortitude [...] in undertaking the perilous long trek across Europe to Istanbul” (Mack 318). Embracing the adventure of her exotic journey, Lady Mary embodies characteristics primarily reserved for brave men of old, while Pope engages in the “home fire” rhetoric traditional to

women with traveling husbands. In another letter from the summer of 1716, he explains, “I attend you in Spirit thro all your Ways, I follow in Books of Travells thro’ every Stage, I wish for you and fear for you thro whole Folio’s” (*Correspondence* 356). Pope appears as an armchair traveler; Donna Landry calls him a “suburban intellectual” in contrast to Lady Mary, the “expatriate adventurer” (307-308). Pope cannot rival Lady Mary’s travel experience, but his gender affords him a more prolific and enduring literary career; Montagu’s literary merit, on the other hand, is often discussed only in conjunction with Pope. In the literary realm, the gender roles are reversed once more; Pope becomes the adventurous traveler, his textual bodies transcending centuries of literary study, while Montagu and her works are prisoners—like the speaker in “Address’d To—” —confined within the borders of the female gender and, until recently, chained to Pope in regards to scholarship.

Despite an unfortunately limited poetic legacy, Lady Mary crosses certain ideological boundaries in life from which Pope shies away.⁵ As in her poetry, she is unafraid to address the subject of self-murder with the utmost seriousness; her letters to Pope embrace the conflation of traveling and voluntary death and rejoice at the potential for untold adventures. In January 1717, she writes to him from Vienna, palpably excited about her impending southward journey:

I think I ought to bid Adieu to my freinds [sic] with the same Solemnity as if I was going to mount a breach [...] I am threaten’d at the same time with being froze to death, bury’d in the snow, and taken by the Tartars who ravage that part

⁵ Oswald Doughty notes that Pope has a tendency to satirize or otherwise obscure taboo-prone topics like death, melancholy, and splenetic affliction (264).

of Hungary I am to passe. [...] How my Adventures will conclude I leave entirely to Providence. (*Complete Letters* 296-97)

In June of that year, after assuring her pen pal that she is not in fact “dead and bury’d,” Lady Mary compares Belgrade Village and the shores of the Bosphorus to “the Elysian fields,” admitting, “I look upon my present Circumstances to be exactly the Same with those of departed Spirits” and confessing a desire to live in the remembrances of her closest friends, “thô dead to all the World beside” (365, 367).

Pope obeys Lady Mary’s wish for commemoration and copes with his own “shock of loss” by drawing on her for poetic inspiration (Mack 319). Geoffrey Tillotson writes that her absence “seems to have affected him profoundly,” her travels frequently appearing to him “as a kind of death” (406-407). Pope articulates his anxiety over Lady Mary’s self-imposed danger in “Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady” (1717), a “suicide poem” that has achieved greater fame than Montagu’s “Address’d To—,” though Pope’s speaker fails to exhibit even a fraction of the audacity of Montagu’s bold examiner.⁶ The euphemistic title of Pope’s work avoids an explicit mention of suicide or the lady’s responsibility for her death. Moreover, the speaker eyes the lady’s “bleeding bosom gor’d” and “visionary sword,” yet blames her death on the “powers” that compelled her suicidal act by enticing her to rise above other humans, “Dull, sullen pris’ners in the body’s cage” (3-4, 11-12, 18). Mack notes that the woman’s “wandering on earth” intimates an exclusion from heaven, but he questions the coherence of Pope’s

⁶ Mack asserts that Pope’s elegiac lines have “evoked from their readers over the past two and a half centuries irreconcilable contrarities of interpretation and evaluation,” and his biography of Pope includes an image from a mid-century broadside of the musical adaptation of the poem composed in 1729 by Matthew Greene (312, 316). The existence of a musical score attests to the poem’s contemporary popularity.

poem, because of the poet's "central effort to mix the 'hard' psychology of a great-souled Roman suicide with the 'soft' psychology of a Christian burial" (312, 317). Montagu's suicide poem, in contrast, maintains thematic consistency by forgoing Christianity altogether, but the speaker's lament in "Address'd To—" echoes Pope's reference to bodily prisons. As a woman in the eighteenth century, Montagu is in fact imprisoned by her body, despite the exaltation she receives in Pope's elegy.

Pope concludes his poem with the lament that the unfortunate lady's unquestionable worth will disappear in death, crying,

Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung;
Deaf the prais'd ear, and mute the tuneful tongue.
Ev'n he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays,
Shall shortly want the gen'rous tear he pays. (75-78)

Rather than praising her worth as a poet, however, Pope lauds Lady Mary's role as his muse. He, on the other hand, may "fall," but his works and his reputation endure, and his choice of the ambiguous word "want" in line seventy-eight indicates an awareness on his part that this will be the case. Once dead, Pope will not want—that is, *lack*—an elegy to himself, but rather he wants—or *desires*—due admiration and rests assured that it will come.

Aside from addressing issues of gender and canonicity, Pope's elegy also begs the question of gender and self-murder. From the same pen spring praises for Cato's stoic, masculine action and grief for a woman who is helpless against some supernatural, destructive force. Aware of this and other double standards, Montagu writes a poem in 1724 called "Epistle from Mrs. Y[onge] to her Husband," which Grundy hails as the

poet's "strongest social protest" (240).⁷ Inspired by the public divorce proceedings in which a known rake wins an infidelity suit against his wife, Montagu's "Epistle" acts as a retrial, casting Mrs. Yonge as a mouthpiece for all who are marginalized. The mistreated wife proclaims, "Th'Oppressed and Injur'd allways may complain" (8). The power of speech is crucial towards the alleviation of pain in a marriage that has become a sort of death for her, a "fatal Tye" (13) likened to torturous imprisonment:

Defrauded Servants are from Service free,
A wounded Slave regains his Liberty.
For Wives ill us'd no remedy remains,
To daily Racks condemn'd, and to eternal Chains. (21-24)

In emancipatory language reminiscent of Montagu's comments on *Cato* and foreshadowing "Address'd To—," Montagu offers a convincing argument for Mrs. Yonge's right to extramarital activity, but she does so by subtly likening adultery to self-murder. Suicide and infidelity both provide an outlet for "Wives ill us'd," but the social norms of eighteenth-century England bar women from either alternative, as Montagu's allusion to Addison's tragic hero illustrates. Suggesting that *Cato* wrongfully serves as a role model for men alone, Mrs. Yonge writes,

Our Sexes Weakness you expose and blame
(Of every Prattling Fop the common Theme),
Yet from this Weakness you suppose is due
Sublimier Virtu than your *Cato* knew. (32-35)

⁷ Unfortunately, "Epistle from Mrs. Y[ong]e to her Husband" does not appear in print until 1972, another staggering example of Montagu's poetic oblivion (Grundy 240).

As the poem continues, Montagu's speaker admits to "hazarding" her life—i.e. having a secret affair—for the sake of preserving her public image without submitting to "vile dependence" on her husband (48-51). Montagu essentially asks the reader (and Mr. Yonge) to suspend judgment of Mrs. Yonge for the affair, as the wife pleads,

My hapless Case will surely Pity find
From every Just and *reasonable* Mind,
When to the final Sentence I submit,
The Lips condemn me, but their Souls acquit. (65-68, italics mine)

These lines proclaim Lady Mary's belief in the rational pursuit of liberty in addition to commenting on the definitive power of the "jury" (in this case, Mr. Yonge) or the reader—a crucial aspect of the eighteenth-century suicide debate that lends credence to the subtle suicidal elements at work in the poem.

Though suicide is usually a solitary act—the ultimate demonstration of solipsism—as a "crime," the act of suicide is meaningless without an audience in the form of a jury. The self-murderer, as an object of governmental scorn and oppression, unable to speak from the grave on his or her behalf, depends upon a jury to voice the final verdict as to whether or not the suicide is in fact criminal. Michael MacDonald's thorough historiography credits juries with the gradual secularization of suicide in eighteenth-century English society ("Secularization" 80). Theretofore, the crown reserved the right to seize the goods of any self-murderer unless the individual was deemed *non*

compos mentis;⁸ the dramatic increase of this “insanity verdict” during the eighteenth century—particularly in cases that exhibited little evidence of “lunacy”—thus indicates a strategic societal attempt to decriminalize the act of self-murder.⁹

MacDonald accounts for the change not only by researching the rise of print journalism in eighteenth-century England, but also by appealing to the scientific progress heralded by works like George Cheyne’s *The English Malady*, a tract in the opposite camp from Montagu’s pro-suicide “Address’d To—.” At the forefront of eighteenth-century medical discourse, *The English Malady* constitutes an extensive treatise on melancholy, which was thought at the time to be a curiously British affliction and the leading cause of self-murder. Alarmed by the seeming increase in the suicide rate, Cheyne arranged for his text to be published ahead of schedule—in 1733—as a potential preventative measure (Bartel 147). In the preface to his work, Cheyne refers to “wanton” self-murder and holds that “just and solid Philosophy” has the power to “put a Stop to so universal a Lunacy and Madness” (ii). *The English Malady* thus attempts to apply rigorous, objective analysis to a fluid, cultural phenomenon in hopes of isolating and eradicating a perceived societal contamination. However, Cheyne’s methodology is somewhat self-defeating. He admits,

⁸ The traditional verdict was *felo de se*—felon of self. The phrase *non compos mentis*—not of sound mind—traditionally applied to “idiots and lunatics” prior to the eighteenth-century shift in societal attitudes towards suicide (MacDonald, “Secularization” 53).

⁹ Emile Durkheim’s 1897 study of suicide, lauded for being both comprehensive and cross-sectional, calls for a revival of post-mortem censure. Durkheim believes that suicide is “normal,” because it occurs in all cultures and eras, but he yokes self-murder with homicide, claiming, “If it is normal that there should be crimes, it is normal that they should be punished” (362). Moreover, Durkheim calls for “moral penalties,” since suicide, for him, is a crime against a higher power. Even at the fin de siècle, suicide discourse cannot escape the topic of God.

There are some Persons, who, being far advanced in Age, have not sufficient Time remaining for a perfect Cure; and others, in whom the Disease is so deeply rooted, by a bad Constitution, derived to them from their Parents, that they are not capable of a total Cure; and both these must be contented to submit to the *Orders of Providence*, and make the best of their Misfortunes, resting satisfied with a *Partial or Palliative Cure*, and relieving the Symptoms as they arise. (77)

By acknowledging the helplessness of those stricken with “the English malady,” Cheyne objectifies melancholics; they are thus more likely to garner the sympathy of onlookers, particularly if the individuals in question commit suicide. Victims of untreatable conditions and their surviving family members certainly should not be penalized for actions beyond their control. The passage above also amounts to a drastic loophole in an otherwise self-assured, scientific theory. Cheyne’s wavering recalls the “most dubious” ancients that so deeply frustrate Montagu’s speaker in “Address’d To—.”

Similarly, Robert Burton’s famous *Anatomy of Melancholy*, written in 1620 and published in 1621, constitutes another such dubious treatise. Burton’s text prefigures Cheyne’s *The English Malady* in the work’s attempt to eradicate melancholy, of which “many lamentable examples are daily seene amongst us” (Burton 432). *The Anatomy of Melancholy* overturns common suspicion that mental illness is linked with demoniac possession, turning instead to hard and fast, rational, scientific measures for the explanation of lunacy (Minois 101). Because Burton fashions suicidal tendencies as signs of illness, rather than satanic sins, his encyclopedic work has been called “the climax of the humoral approach to mental disorder” (Porter, *Madness* 52). Still, like Cheyne’s *The English Malady*, Burton’s text is not impervious to the uncertainty Montagu’s speaker criticizes. Adam Kitzes notes that Burton’s voluminous text attempts a “post mortem

examination” of melancholy, just as the title suggests, though Burton admits as he writes that pure objectivism is impossible (Kitzes 124). He decries suicide as “the greatest, most grievous calamity, and the misery of all miseries,” yet concedes, “they know not what they doe, deprived of reason, judgement, all, as a ship that is void of a Pilot, must needs impinge upon the next rocke or sands, and suffer shipwrack” (430, 438).

Here, Burton foreshadows the Lockian stance on self-murder. In Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, he adopts a clear position against suicide, asserting that self-preservation¹⁰ is “the first and strongest desire God planted in men, and wrought into the very principles of their nature” and evoking the classical Platonic example that man should not “quit his station wilfully” and thereby disrespect his Master and Maker (56-57, 102). Liberty and license, he argues, are two entirely different concepts. Self-preservation, for Locke, intertwines with man’s ability to reason between the two; he therefore accounts for self-murderers by arguing in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that madness is “opposition to reason” or a “wrong connection of ideas” (173).¹¹ Locke’s solution to this “taint which so universally infects mankind” is a process akin to dissection, to “lay it open under its due name, thereby to excite the greater care in its prevention and cure” (*Essay* 173). In line with Burton and Cheyne, Locke wants to expose melancholy and mental illness to meticulous analysis in order to eradicate madness altogether.

¹⁰ Oddly enough, the first known use of the noun *self-preservation* is in John Donne’s *Biathanatos*, a text in *defense* of the right to commit suicide (Daube 419).

¹¹ As Georges Minois’ recent study reveals, “Animal ‘suicides’ are in the realm of myth; humankind alone is capable of reflecting on its own existence and deciding to prolong life or put an end to it” (2). Montagu would undoubtedly agree.

Seventeenth-century scientific models of madness, of which Cheyne's text is a vestige, thus promote the rational self as a guarantee of sanity (Porter, *Madness* 60). In contrast, many eighteenth-century opponents of suicide targeted reason as one of the primary *causes* of self-murder, because advocates of self-murderers often appealed to logic (Bartel 149). The speaker in Montagu's "Address'd To—," by systematically questioning the possibilities of the afterlife to the point of considering suicide, substantiates this claim and indicates Lady Mary's awareness of and involvement in the philosophical currents of her day and age. Unfortunately, the climate in which Lady Mary lived held that reason was specific to—or at least superior among—males. Cheyne's text, for instance, highlights the assumption that "Nervous Distempers"—a root cause of self-murder—are especially frequent among "the fair Sex" and aristocratic women in particular (34). He blames wealth, luxury, and excess for the irrationality and abundance of melancholy among the "sensitive" gender.

On the opposite side of the debate, John Donne's *Biathanatos*, an extensive tract in defense of suicide, purports, "This primary reason, against which nobody can plead license, law, custom, or pardon, has in us a sovereign and *masculine* force" (31, italics mine). Donne's 1647 treatise, released again in 1700, serves both advocates and opponents of self-murder in the eighteenth century. Donne's supporters point to his thorough methodological practices; he appeals to theology, natural law, and history in his defense.¹² Viewed as a "manifesto of libertine suicide," however, *Biathanatos*

¹² See Douglas Trevor's treatment of *Biathanatos* in *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England*. Trevor argues that composing an exhaustive treatise in defense of self-murder, as a form of "self-therapy," actually prevents Donne from taking his own life (115). The same could be said of Montagu's "Address'd To—," when read through the lens of her affair with Algarotti.

perpetuates the opposing notion that excessive reason has the potential to result in suicide (Timmons 264). Donne embodies this split reaction to his own work. He refused to publish the tract during his lifetime, and he made his closest confidantes explicitly aware that the treatise was from the pen of the rakish *Jack* Donne, rather than *Dr.* Donne, the pious dean of St. Paul's Cathedral (MacDonald, "Secularization" 57).

Donne prefaces his text with the admission that he is prone to melancholy himself, claiming, "I think I have the keys of my prison in my own hand, and no remedy presents itself so quickly to my heart as my own sword" (3). This image, of course, hearkens back to Plato's famous prison metaphor, and Donne's text may be the source from which Montagu drew for "Address'd To—." Ignoring the phallic implications of the prison key and the sword, then, not to mention Donne's designation of reason as a masculine force, Montagu boldly appropriates the metaphor in her poetic contemplation of suicide. She may have also been attracted to Donne's discussion of liberty, especially his declaration that "liberty, which is a faculty of doing what I would, is as much of the law of nature as preservation is" (18). Here, Donne makes a case for the "death-wish" being just as substantial as the will to live, and his reasoning allows him to conjecture that God may in fact impel individuals to self-murder as a part of His master plan. Indeed, Donne concludes *Biathanatos* with the caveat,

This is as far as I allowed my discourse to progress in this way, forbidding it earnestly all dark and dangerous withdrawals and diversions into points of our free will and God's destiny. [...] it may seem reasonable that our main periods—of birth, death, and major alterations—in this life are more immediately worked upon by God's determination. (95)

By contrast, Montagu's speaker focuses heavily on free will and excises God from the discussion of suicide altogether.¹³

Even David Hume, the reigning eighteenth-century skeptic, cannot avoid the subject of God in his argument in favor of the right to commit suicide. "Of Suicide," written sometime between 1755 and 1757 but unpublished until the end of the century, acts as the latter bookend to eighteenth-century works in defense of self-murderers. Hume's essay is a concise account of the ways in which he believes that "true" philosophy reverses the notion held by "false" religion that committing suicide is an inherently criminal act. However, Hume's argument bears a number of similarities to Donne's God-centered treatise. One example by which Hume endeavors to "restore men to their native liberty" is that of natural disaster. He explains,

A house which falls by its own weight is not brought to ruin by [God's] providence more than one destroyed by the hands of men; [...] When the passions play, when the judgment dictates, when the limbs obey; this is all the operation of God. (98-99)

Hume continues his argument with a strong indictment of "blasphemers" who suppose that self-murderers are superior to God in their perceived ability to rise against providence (103). Nevertheless, Hume's real-life skepticism belies his certainty within the text. Trying desperately to maintain control over his association with the essay, Hume refused to acknowledge it as his own until shortly before he died. A proof copy reached

¹³ Roy Porter demonstrates how the rise of preventative measures during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reveals that "death was beginning to be taken out of the hands of God" (*Flesh* 213-14). Though he cites hostility to the new trend of smallpox vaccination as a prime example of society's reluctance to tamper with fate, Porter fails to mention Lady Mary in his discussion. She is credited with the vaccine's introduction to England.

France, where it was translated and published anonymously in 1770, and an anonymous English version came out in 1777, a year after Hume's death (Minois 252). His name was not directly connected with the text until its official publication in 1783, and Jeffrey Timmons thus calls "Of Suicide" a text with "agency"—centered on the liberty of the human body, Hume's textual body defied regulation (268-69). The same can be said for John Donne's *Biathanatos*, because of Donne's analogous publication anxiety and his text's subsequent popularity.

Georges Minois speculates that the conflation of defending a right to suicide with the act of explicitly advocating suicide accounts for both Donne's and Hume's trepidation to publish (191). He explains that on the whole,

authors of treatises on suicide did not commit suicide. Their works were not apologies for voluntary death; what they wanted to demonstrate was that when life becomes physically or mentally too burdensome, suicide is a legitimate option. (253)

Montagu, by contrast, seems to understand this crucial difference, going one step further, in fact, to argue that curiosity about the afterlife and the need to outdo the dubious philosophers of old is just as good a reason to commit suicide as an unbearable physical or mental burden. That she did not take her own life should in no way detract from the strength of her argument, though her gender has until now precluded her "treatise-poem" from the proper recognition it deserves.

Scholar Jeffrey Timmons is the only critic of note to mention Montagu in conjunction with eighteenth-century suicide discourse, though he does so in unfavorable terms. Timmons contrasts self-murder that represents a "stoic masculinity resisting a

stronger power” to “pathetic or sentimental suicide” (283-284, note 42). He attributes the latter label to “The Fair Suicide: Being an Epistle from a Young Lady, to the Person who was the Cause of her Death,” an anonymous poem published in 1733, the year of *The English Malady*. Timmons speculates that Montagu is the author of “The Fair Suicide,” but Isobel Grundy does not substantiate his claim (Timmons 283, note 41). To be sure, “The Fair Suicide” shares some commonalities with Montagu’s “Address’d To—,” composed only three years later. Like Montagu, the poet begins with an ambiguous address, “To Thee, O—, my greatest, cruell’st Foe, / Cause of my Death, and Author of my Woe” (1-2). The speaker in “The Fair Suicide,” then, attributes the cause of her suicide to a specific person. As Roland Barthes explains, “In the amorous realm, the desire for suicide is frequent: a trifle provokes it” (218). Montagu’s speaker, however, confesses that her steps are “toilsome” but makes no explicit mention of heartbreak or heartbreaker; rather, her motivation for contemplating self-murder is a burning curiosity about the afterlife and whether or not it is equally toilsome—certainly not a trifle. The ability to possess and act upon this curiosity is a source of power for Montagu’s speaker, while the unknown speaker of “The Fair Suicide” laments mankind’s power to reason, longing instead for ignorance:

Why were we then Lords o’er the rest proclaim’d?
 With Reason honour’d, and with Beauty fram’d?
 Was’t to no other Purpose but to know
 Ourselves superior to the rest in Woe?
 Oh, then for ever let me ign’rant be,
 And share the Brute’s unthinking Poverty! (49-54)

Suicide for Montagu's speaker is a rational declaration of liberty, while self-murder for the unknown speaker is a way to relinquish the human attribute of thought along with human life.

"The Fair Suicide" concludes with an allusion to Cato and praise for his "manly Soul," a passage that might lend credence to the supposition that Montagu composed the poem, if not for the fact that the Cato reference in this case detracts from the female in question and the boldness of her suicidal act (140-48). The response that follows "The Fair Suicide," "Verses occasion'd by the foregoing Epistle," makes it clear that the woman cannot speak for herself. The speaker in this companion poem incredulously asks, "can there then reside / In female Bosoms, such heroick Pride?" (1-2). The woman's intercessor turns his sights on the man who jilted her, not believing that she could take her own life without a male catalyst: "Oh say who first inspir'd the glorious Thought? / Who first thy Mind to Resolution brought?" (12-13). The speaker seeks to redeem the poor, helpless maiden by cursing the man at fault for her death:

But for the Cause of thy untimely Fate,
Eternal Horrors on the Villain wait.
May Curses light on his devoted Head
And Furies haunt his inauspicious Bed! (49-52)

The vindictive language here recalls Alexander Pope's verbal assault on the compelling powers presumably at fault in the paean to his "unfortunate lady."

Montagu's speaker, by contrast, speaks for herself, champions reason, and does so without mentioning God or heartbreak. Nevertheless, "Address'd To—" is presumed to be attributed to Francesco Algarotti, Lady Mary's lover, because the poem's 1736

inception coincides with Algarotti's departure from England, an event that "plunged Lady Mary into emotional turmoil and despair" (Grundy 356). Halsband notes Lady Mary's double-sided nature: "As a political and moral reformer she insisted that [...] in short, plain common sense is the best guide for belief and conduct. As a woman, however, in her friendship with Algarotti, she allowed herself to be guided by her heart" (*Life* 171-72). In September of 1736, she writes to Algarotti,

Qu'on est timide quand on aime! [...] je suis si folle en tout ce que vous regarde que je ne suis pas seure de mes propres pensées. Ma raison murmure tout bas de sottises de mon cœur sans avoir la force de les detruire.¹⁴ (Montagu, *Complete Letters* 103-104)

A few days later, her despair worsens to the point of contemplating suicide: "Je suis mille fois plus a plaindre que la triste Didon, et j'ai mille fois plus de raisons de me donner la mort" (104).¹⁵ Lady Mary believes that the only way she will survive her self-destructive thoughts is by cowardice or strength of character. Arguably, she begins to exhibit both qualities.

In what could be deemed a "cowardly" move, Lady Mary retires to her country house, confessing to Algarotti, "I intend to bury my selfe for at least 3 months" (*Complete Letters* 108). As a poet, however, Montagu demonstrates strength of character, drawing upon her heartbreak to fashion a remarkable poem that in Grundy's words, "combines philosophy with sensibility" (364). Reading "Address'd To—" merely as a

¹⁴ Halsband's translation: "How timid one is when one loves! [...] I am so foolish about everything that concerns you that I am not sure of my own thoughts. My reason complains very softly of the stupidities of my heart without having the strength to destroy them" (Montagu, *Complete Letters* 501).

¹⁵ Halsband: "I am a thousand times more to be pitied than the sad Dido, and I have a thousand more reasons to kill myself" (Montagu, *Complete Letters* 501).

display of sentimentality and “feminine” feeling would be a grave mistake. The poem stands as a skeptical questioning of philosophy and human wisdom, demonstrating a depth far beyond rudimentary heartbreak. As a person writing to Algarotti, Lady Mary cries, “Foible Raison! qui choque ma passion et ne le détruit pas, et qui me fait voir inutilement toute la folie d’aimer au point que j’aime sans esperance de retour. [...] j’enrage d’avoir été fait pour porter des jupes” (*Complete Letters* 105-106).¹⁶

Conversely, the persona in “Address’d To—” demonstrates the ability of women to possess power through reason, thereby overcoming the obstacles stereotypically associated with their gender.

Despite being an enraged “skirt-wearer,” Lady Mary shuns traditional gender roles and attempts bravado in her affair with Algarotti. Deciding to leave England forever to pursue her lover on the continent, she writes to him in July of 1739,

Enfin je pars demain avec la Resolution d’un homme bien persuadé de sa Religion et contente de sa conscience, rempli de foye et d’esperance. Je laisse mes amis pleurant ma perte et franche le pas hardiment pour un autre monde. Si je vous trouve tel que vous m’avez juré, je trouve les champs élysée et la Felicité au de la de l’imagination; si—Mais je ne veux plus douter, et du moins je veux jouïr de mes esperances.¹⁷ (*Complete Letters* 140)

The complex metaphor Lady Mary chooses to communicate her departure to Algarotti—a religious man taking a leap—begs the question, “Is this a leap of faith or a suicidal

¹⁶ Halsband: “Feeble Reason! which battles with my passion and does not destroy it, and which vainly makes me see all the folly of loving to the degree that I love without hope of return. [...] I am enraged at having been formed to wear skirts” (Montagu, *Complete Letters* 502).

¹⁷ Halsband: “At last I depart tomorrow with the Resolution of a man well persuaded of his Religion and happy in his conscience, filled with faith and hope. I leave my friends weeping for my loss and bravely take the leap for another world. If I find you such as you have sworn to me, I find the Elysian Fields, and Happiness beyond imagining; if—But I wish to doubt no more, and at least I wish to enjoy my hopes” (Montagu, *Complete Letters* 508).

jump?” The allusion to “Elysian Fields” fails to disambiguate the image, but Lady Mary’s vow to “doubt no more”—to abandon her former skepticism—indicates that any step taken on the basis of rational thought and individual liberty is a positive and progressive undertaking.

As for the fate of her textual body, “Address’d To—” was published as “Verses on Self-Murder, address’d to— by a Lady” in the June 1749 issue of *The London Magazine or Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer*, accompanied by the following disapproving editor’s commentary:

As it is to be suppos’d that we often differ from the sentiments of our correspondents, and sometimes disapprove them; so here we think this lady has suggested very immoral and pernicious advice; that she has not [...] weigh’d that inimitable soliloquy of *Hamlet*, *To be, or not to be*,—nor the many excellent Tracts that have been publish’d against *Self-Murder*; and, what is worse, seems to have forgot her Maker and her Christianity. (284)

Though the publication of a suicide poem written by a woman in the “Poetical Essays” section of a “gentleman’s” magazine is somewhat of a breakthrough, it is unthinkable for the poem to appear under Montagu’s real name and without a nullifying editorial disclaimer. (Hers is the only poem in the issue to have such an introduction.) The critical suppression of Montagu’s poem mirrors the subjugation faced by Lady Mary herself, establishing a distinct boundary between Montagu and her fellow suicide-advocates, John Donne and David Hume.¹⁸

¹⁸ The editor’s emphasis on Montagu’s omission of God as “what is worse” also addresses her divergence from typical pro-suicide works.

Whether or not Montagu submitted the poem herself is unknown, but “Address’d To—” appears opposite “A Ballad, To the Tune of, *The Irish Howl*, By Lady *Mary Wortley Montagu*,” so there is a good chance that she was aware of the impending publication or at the very least, was presented with a copy after it went to press.¹⁹ The version of “Address’d To—” featured in the *London Magazine* differs slightly from Montagu’s 1736 manuscript copy. Some changes are slight: “will” becomes “shall” in line three, for example. Other changes exhibit intense calculation: “mixes” in line seven becomes “mix with dust,” emphasizing mortality’s limitations and playing on the biblical implications of dust. Finally, instead of lamenting a “misterious bearing to exist,” the speaker now decries a “mysterious being force t’exist,” stressing the unfairness of living against one’s will, and she ends her speech with a period, instead of the powerful question mark from the manuscript version (24, 27). Whether these changes were the editor’s or Montagu’s herself is a mystery, but both versions of the poem reveal the remarkable talent of a woman unafraid to ask what Albert Camus calls, “the fundamental question of philosophy” (3). Montagu was both innovative enough to distill her personal sorrow into a universally accessible medium and bold enough to do so without appealing to the sentimentalism expected of her gender or the moral norms so pervasive for her culture as a whole.

Lester Crocker refers to the eighteenth century as “the greatest battleground since ancient times over the inherent meaning of the act of self-destruction” (50). As a woman, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu has been barred from the troops and forbidden to lift a

¹⁹ Montagu’s ballad comes from the voice of a lady, jealous of the nymph who stole her swain. Quaint and pastoral, yet subtly acerbic, the freethinking elements of this poem elude the disapproving editor’s eye.

sword, though she found every possible way to lift her pen instead. Had Lady Mary acted upon her speaker's impulse and used her "prison key," "Address'd To—" might have achieved the status it deserves, in much the same way that Sylvia Plath's poetic fame interweaves with her psychiatric history, culminating in her suicide in 1963. The last poem Plath ever wrote, entitled "Edge," declares, "The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears the smile of accomplishment" (1-3). Plath believes that the suicidal body can communicate a message, just as eighteenth-century juries "read" and interpreted suicide cases. Contemporary readers have a comparable task—to exhume Montagu's textual body and deliver a favorable verdict. In a world where the shockwaves of suicide bombers and campus massacres indicate a persistent discomfort with, fascination with, and misunderstanding of suicide, self-murder is still a highly communicative act. A richer perspective of the "great suicide battleground" of the eighteenth century, made possible through the analysis of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's life and works, stands to contribute to current perceptions of suicide, that most universal and enigmatic taboo.

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