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***Corps Morcelé: Spectacular Anatomy, Anatomy Theatres, and  
The Fragmented Body of John Donne***

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in English at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Fall 2016

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*Anatomy*, derived from the Greek, *temnien* “to cut,” and *ana* “up,” an inherently violent concept, greatly appealed to the masses of seventeenth century England. From this violent punitive dismemberment stems knowledge and scholarly pursuit; something so aggressive as murder led to the even more aggressive act of dissection to help better understand the inner workings of mankind. With the hope of cutting something up to understand the whole, “We murder to dissect.”<sup>1</sup> The search inside the human form continued in an effort to discover the tangible soul, and with it, the rest of the world. However, sicknesses, death, decay, and fragmentation was necessary to achieve the end goal of anatomical knowledge. The revival of anatomical discussion in seventeenth century was like an infection spreading through the body of the Renaissance, providing many scholars, philosophers, and writers, such as John Donne, with theories of origin, discovery, the physical and its intermingled soul. Even by dissecting the word “anatomy,” what is left is “atomy” or “atom,” the smallest piece of matter in the universe. Through this, Donne crystallizes his body of work, not only in discussing particles, but also the process by which things are divided. An anatomically inclined thinker from the start of his career, Donne has embedded anatomical references into most of his work, ranging from the obviously titled “Anatomy of the World” to the more subtle “Holy Sonnets.” As the body is laid out on the dissection table for the physician to deconstruct, Donne dissects the world and all of its inhabitants, finding meaning through the process of anatomizing the chaos that is created through separation.

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<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, William. *The Complete Poetical Works*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1888, Bartleby.com, 1999. [www.bartleby.com/145/](http://www.bartleby.com/145/).

Recently, scholars have shown how John Donne's poetry was influenced and energized by the discourse of anatomy in seventeenth century-England, which provided the poet with a theoretical framework to engage the relationship between the physical body and its intermingled soul. The figurative anatomies Donne employed in his poems touch upon the concept of the spectacular, vision, and witness to his paradoxical methods-paradoxical insofar as cutting up an entity to understand its meaning as a whole. This project participates in this larger trend by investigating Donne's anatomical focus in "The Ecstasy" and "A Valediction of My Name in The Window," two poems that have not been sufficiently examined in these terms. This project will discuss the uses and implications of anatomy in the period, paying specific attention to the role of anatomy theatres in early modern medicine and their spectacle of the body's fragmentation. Reading Donne's poetry through the lens of early modern English medicine reveals the subtle relations between physical and intangible phenomena in his work, as well as his didactic method of explaining erotic, sexual, and physical death in relation to the universe.

Used as a technique in the projection of natural philosophy, the word "anatomy" first appeared in English medical texts during the first half of the sixteenth century, due to the rediscovery of ancient anatomical studies and the new influx of experimentation of the body itself. Because there was no traditional study of "anatomy" as there is today, it was relatively undiscovered territory.<sup>2</sup> Ancient and medieval practitioners of medicine held the view that anatomical knowledge only held ancillary value; physicians were

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<sup>2</sup> Spicci, Mauro. "'After an Unwonted Manner': Anatomy and Poetical Organization in Early Modern England" in *Anatomy and the Organization of Knowledge, 1500-1850*, ed. Brian Muñoz et al. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 53.

expected to know the basic internal structures of the body for diagnostic and treatment purposes, so the idea of having a thorough systematic understanding of the interior workings of the body was considered unnecessary and even excessive.<sup>3</sup> Traditional medical theory even rejected the idea that perfect knowledge of internal structures could be obtained, citing that after death, the body began to change structurally in the state of decay. As such, Galen and his peers approached the act of dissection with great hesitation, weighing the therapeutic benefits with the social drawbacks of this extreme experiment. If the main purpose of practicing medicine was the treatment of diseases, the religious, social, and moral implications against dissection and dismemberment created a powerful argument against such an act.<sup>4</sup> In part, the surge of anatomical texts in the 1500 and 1600's was a result of Henry VIII's approval of human dissection for the advancement of medical knowledge. As the king is head of church and state, "the act of legislation laid many religious and social objections to rest."<sup>5</sup>

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "anatomy" was found on the façade of English texts, both medical and non. Many of these texts were discussions of dissection, such as Thomas Vicary's *The Anatomie of Man's Bodie* (1543), considered the first textbook of anatomy published in English; the anonymous *Anatomy of a Hande in the Manner of a Dyall* (1554); and Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island* (1633), an

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<sup>3</sup> Landers, Matthew. "Early Modern Dissection As A Model of Organization" in *Anatomy and the Organization of Knowledge, 1500-1850*, ed. Brian Muñoz et al. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Wear, A. *Knowledge and practice in early modern English medicine, 1550-1680*. (New York: Cambridge University Press. 2000), 15.

<sup>5</sup> C. Singer. *A Short History of Anatomy From the Greeks to Harvey* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1957), 171.

allegorical poem connecting the physiological structure of the human body to the mind of man. It is no wonder then that the majority of these texts were related to philosophy and religion, as these concepts more strongly pertained to the general masses, as opposed to just simple bodily structures. Spicci's "After and Unwonted Manner" elaborates:

Between 1545 and 1633... more than seventy texts entitled 'Anatomy of...' were printed in England. Only 25 per cent of them have a strict medical vocation; the remaining 75 per cent are non-medical texts that deal with many different subjects such as religion, satire, moral philosophy, and literature. (2012, p. 211)

As such, the number of non-medical printed anatomies greatly outweighed the number of medical anatomies, reconstructing and denouncing the more modern notion that anatomies are only an extension of medicine or limited to medical-related use.

Many of the anatomical texts published in 1576 and after unsurprisingly related religious-moral rhetoric of one Christian community/body to the singular human body, "Christians....by notable examples of others... may knowe them selves."<sup>6</sup> The body of the Church became another topic to dissect, as the "mystical" body of Christ is continuously up to interpretation; scholars and followers alike aim at translating and interpreting the word of Christ, taking in his body metaphor. In Christian theology, the term 'Body of Christ' has two separate connotations: it refers to Jesus' statement about the Eucharist at the Last Supper that "This is my body" in Luke 22:19-20, or the explicit usage of the term by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians in reference to the Christian Church. Alongside this metaphorical body is the body politic of England-as church and state were seldom separated- infected with the urge to cleanse, purify, and cure the public of more social diseases, as physicians do. Also widely read and re-published were more

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<sup>6</sup> J. Woolton, *A New Anatomie of Whole Man* (London: Thomas Purfoote, 1576), unpaginated.

morally inclined treatises such as *A New Anatomie of Whole Man* by John Woolton, an anatomy “of the mind” of sorts. As this became a popular genre, the demand for similar texts rose and the alliance between physical anatomy and moral reflection became prolific to the public and writers alike. Therefore, many non-medical texts titled “the anatomy of” aspired to imitate the study of anatomy without confining themselves to the boundaries such a study created.

The task of systematizing these studies was necessary to understand the information presented. This criteria of anatomies serves a three-fold purpose: the division of an entity into parts, the systemic use of organization to bring said parts together, and the resulting analysis of this subject within the created boundaries. Much greater than the urge “to include ‘everything’ is the recognition that the constituent parts of ‘everything’ must bear a recognizable relation to each other, in terms of structure, action, and use.”<sup>7</sup> Such trends are shared amongst writers, like Donne, who express the nature of the bond between the human microcosm and the universe macrocosm through organizational tools, like “the book.” To see, analyze, and connect this science with literature and philosophy, the body must be separated and then again separated ten-fold.

Though writing about anatomy through a focus on literature could dilute the traditional medical sense of anatomy, the philosophical concepts of the body, specifically those pertaining to literature, remain intact.<sup>8</sup> The link between the body and the mind as a

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<sup>7</sup> Landers, Matthew. “Early Modern Dissection As A Model of Organization” in *Anatomy and the Organization of Knowledge, 1500-1850*, ed. Brian Muñoz et al. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, Thomas, and William Webster Newbold. *The Passions of the Mind in General*. (New York: Garland Pub., 1986.), 115.

process of “cognitive discovery” is the nexus of seventeenth century style of thought; this inherently implies that the mind and body can be analyzed, deconstructed, and evaluated into a coherent cognitive process and applied to various areas of study.<sup>9</sup> The notion that physical anatomy is a didactic experience begins to formulate here, with the discovery of a link between the tangible and incorporeal in the form of literature, philosophy, and medicine.

The actual process of deciphering anatomy starts at the basic level, with literally taking apart the skeletal structure of man, creating an incoherent, almost chaotic, disarrangement to find meaning. This process in England began with anatomy theatres. An anatomy theatre was an institution used to teach anatomies at universities, yet they quickly became theatrical venues, where all types of people paid to come and see a body’s dissection. The visual aspect of knowledge is tested and practiced with these theatres, allowing individuals of all classes to come and witness a body being divided for examination. Although this is a neutral exploration into structure and medicine, the implications of taking apart a structure piece by piece is nearing violence, similar to politically dismantling a ruling government for one’s own benefit. It is dismembering of “people, things, or ideas.”<sup>10</sup> Sawday expands this violence, explaining that the politics of the body, “a politics which involve a form of self-reflexive violence,” emerged; with a mastery over a body of knowledge, such as the political sphere, comes a control over its

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<sup>9</sup> Spicci, Mauro. “‘After an Unwonted Manner’: Anatomy and Poetical Organization in Early Modern England,” in *Anatomy and the Organization of Knowledge, 1500-1850*, ed. Brian Muñoz et al. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 55.

<sup>10</sup> Sawday, J. *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the human Body in Renaissance Culture*. (London: Routledge. 1996), 17.

internal operation.<sup>11</sup> This self-reflexivity is later discussed in reference to Donne's "A Valediction of my Name in the Window," and the speaker's use of glass. Alongside the sense of self discovery, these theatres employed a darker side of humanity, mainly of punishment. This is further explained through Edward Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist*, where the drama shows that human beings are the ones dissecting other human beings, and they ultimately deserve "to be punished, and that is the secondary purpose of the anatomy lesson."<sup>12</sup> Public dissection, in this case, has become a court room, the audience serving as the jury, and the anatomist is the judge and executioner.

During this time in England, there was no "science" of a human body, so the organization of knowledge was done by observation, generally as a cultural phenomenon. To further analyze this, the scientific culture of the time must be anatomized. One human body is taken apart to then create a new body of knowledge, illustrated by Donne writing an "Anatomy of The World," to explain unseen phenomena. We as humans can see reflections of ourselves through mirrors, and we can also observe other human beings, yet we cannot see inside of ourselves, or organs, our make-up, or our most basic elements. These theatres were a means to see inside of us, as to provide both a sense of physical reflection and spiritual reflection.

So we begin our discussion at the dissection table in the center of the theatre. The fascination and cultural practice of performance weaves its way into the scientific world with the anatomy theatre, another example of the attempt at homogenizing science and art. The air of the dramatic is not lost in this new-age play, as the body lain before you is

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 47.



simultaneously dehumanized as it is resurrected. A deeply erotic desire fuels these theatres, with the body open and vulnerable for everyone to see, it has become a culturally acceptable form of nudity, pleasure, and flesh. The helpless body is at the mercy of not only its anatomizer but also of the audience. The power that lies in the act of dissection—an open and vulnerable body waiting for the harm that is to come—illustrates the inherently sexual aspects of these theatres. The body is almost calling out to its witnesses, inviting it in to all of the experiences it can offer. Many of the anatomical illustrations during this time, mainly by Vesalius, display a body that is technically still alive, standing, literally opening its flesh to the audience, its own eyes still open, creating a strangely inviting scene where one can sit down and learn about humanity’s best kept and covered secrets. The bodies in these illustrations are open to an extent, showing the viewer some of itself and its secrets, and keeping some still hidden. Anatomist Andreas Vesalius’s *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* illustrates this (Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> This act contributes to the eroticism of anatomy theatres as well, alluding to the Biblical meaning of “to know.” The “knowledge” procured from both the theatres and illustrations are both erotic and intellectual in nature. A small sense of agency from either side of the stage is displayed through this, as is the case with anatomy theatres. Through vision is obtained subjectivity and agency, as the individual is creating pictorial isolation of themselves and the body as a whole. By focusing on parts of a whole, importance and privilege is given to specific body part, creating purpose for that small section. In turn, that body part applies its purpose into the larger body, which in and of itself, is a part of the whole universe. The body holds its own power over the individual, and the anatomist and

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<sup>13</sup> Wellcome Library, London VESALIUS, Andreas (15145-1564) Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, Lib. II, p. 170, fig. 1, 'Prima musculorum tabula' (ekt)

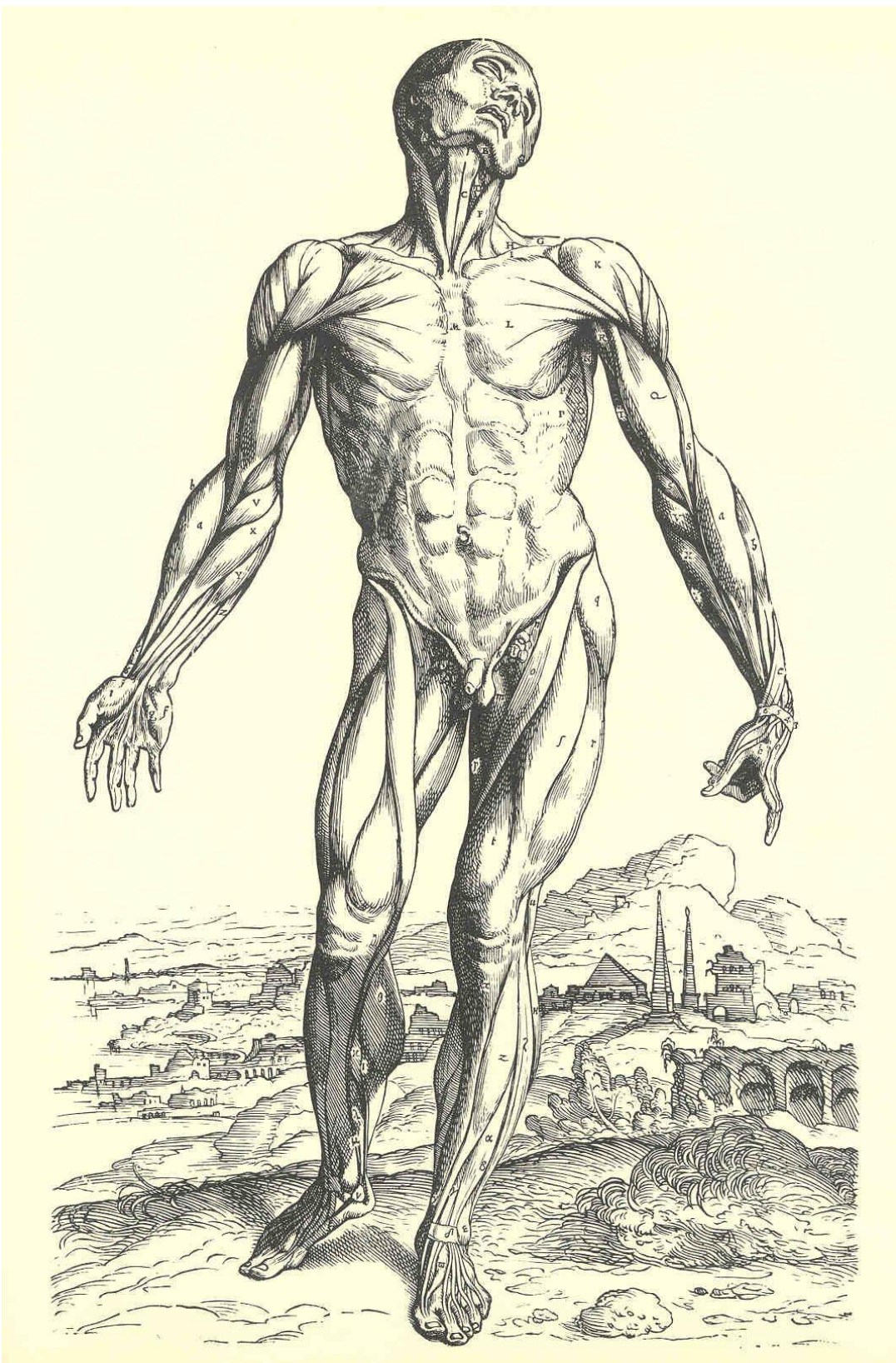


Figure 1. Dissected figure from Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543).

audience hold their own powers over the body. This power and spectacle is shown and discussed in Donne's "The Ecstasy."

The ultimate goal these anatomists and witnesses had was finding the tangible soul; the eyes were seen as being windows of the soul, and to find the physical soul, they had to search the body with their eyes, even looking into the physical heart. James Howell references the heart in an autopsy, in a letter to Sir Kenelm Digby:

...there was a kind of serpent with divers tails found in the left ventricle of his heart, which you know is the most defended part, being thrice thicker than the right, and in the cell which holds the purest and most illustrious liquor, the arterial blood, and the vital spirit... (Sugg, p. 91)

The heart here is seen to contain the seed of the soul, "the purest... blood," and "spirit."<sup>14</sup> The religious and philosophical importance of anatomy here is apparent, as authors and scientists are both attempting at explaining the intangible by pulling it apart and assigning it a physical counterpart. The anatomist may be dissecting a corpse on the table, yet they are truly dissecting themselves and all of humanity. With this, the lines ultimately become blurred between corpse, audience, and anatomist; the theatre instantly becomes much more intimate and "sacred."<sup>15</sup> Similar to the open-eyed and much-alive invitation of anatomical illustrations, the audience/anatomists can also become corpses, being dissected to discover meaning in truth. In many of Donne's poems, he pulls the audience into the world, or introduces a new character that is looking onto the action. This leaves us all subject to dissection.

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<sup>14</sup> Sugg, R. P. *Murder After Death: Literature and Anatomy in Early Modern England*. (United States: Cornell University Press. 2007), 91.

<sup>15</sup> Sawday, J. *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the human Body in Renaissance Culture*. (London: Routledge. 1996), 86.

Just as in the early anatomy theatre, Donne is constantly blurring the lines between the material and the spiritual. In “The Ecstasy,” he famously explores the body’s amatory powers when fused with another, “culminating in not only in a broad joining of souls but in a physiological fusion of bodily spirits.”<sup>16</sup> Donne seeks a more refined and purified body in his poetry, much like the anatomists of the seventeenth century, and he does this through synecdoche of the human form. The word “ecstasy” is derived from the Greek word, *ekstasis*, meaning “to stand outside,” or “to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere.”<sup>17</sup> The title itself embodies the main subject of the poem, as the lover’s souls stand outside of their bodies and fuse together in a passionate embrace. The ecstasy of the title does not suggest only the primacy of physical rapture, but refers to that Platonic state in which the soul has left the body and found identification with the absolute.<sup>18</sup> It’s quite apparent in this poem that the earlier notion of creating a body of knowledge as something erotic is depicted in line 72, where Donne writes, “the body is his book.” To analyze that book, to look into it seeking answers, there must be a desire ‘to know’; just as a book is opened and read, the body is a frame and it too must be opened as intently and intimately. The “book” is now the “body.”

To hold this book and to explore the body an anatomist and reader must use their hands. Donne writes, “our hands were firmly cemented” (5) immediately creating that

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<sup>16</sup> Sugg, R. P. *Murder After Death: Literature and Anatomy in Early Modern England*. (United States: Cornell University Press. 2007), 149.

<sup>17</sup> Barnhart, Robert K., ed., *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, (H.W. Wilson Co., 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, G. R. "The Interplay of Perception and Reflection: Mirror Imagery in Donne's Poetry." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* (Rice University, 1969) 108.

physical connection between the lovers, and even further, the connection that will be used ‘to know’ one another. Grasping at information, literally holding it in your hands and seeking a connection with it is what is done while holding a book and holding onto a lover. Although in “The Ecstasy,” the bodies are not converging as the souls do in the sky, the ‘cementation’ Donne alludes to is more of a means of that convergence, or a representation of the way the lover’s souls can begin to connect. When thinking of touching something or the act ‘to touch,’ it is always with one’s hands, although there are nerve endings everywhere on the body. To understand, we touch. Here lies the transference of the body metaphor, with the hands connecting to the body and the body to the soul. Donne has clearly anatomized the couple’s hands, fragmenting them to represent much more in their figurative form than in their physical one, and he also atomizing them, seeking their ultimate and basic purpose. The speaker’s hands connect with his lover’s and create a “balm,” which is a term that evolved from alchemy, explaining the compounding and transformation into the supremely precious, as is described in the poem itself.<sup>19</sup> The conversion of something crude and basic such as the body into something superior such as the soul, is both the purpose of alchemy and of Donne illustrated by the way he uses this image. In this image, the lovers are also compounding with one another, creating a larger entity from two smaller parts, and in a sense, becoming something more precious and powerful.

Although the compositions of souls that the speaker and his lover are made from were originally diverse parts, un-joined, this new entity is indivisible. Bodies are created

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<sup>19</sup> Robbins, Robin. *The Complete Poems of John Donne*. (Harlow, England: Longman Pub. Group, 2010.), 172.

by atoms of the universe, each section of an individual constructed by initially separate pieces that are now unable to separate. Such is the case with the speaker's soul and of his beloved's; implying that now the fusing together is done and nothing can fluctuate they have become part of the universe. A tone of finality rings through this last half of the poem, mirroring a type of death that is achieved through this ecstasy.

The treatment of death in this poem is alluding to sexual love and ecstasy, in which death was often referred to as the climax of intercourse, or orgasm. Ecstatic death, dying as expiration or ecstatic expiration embodied senses of vital spirits being expelled during orgasm, thus making the individual die a little every time they have sex. Donne however, does not condemn this bodily desire, when the speaker asks, "Our bodies why do we forbear?" in line 50. He sees the necessity of this coupling as the creation of literal and figurative life, the need of the body to be involved in transcendence through sex. That is to say, this work speaks of the strength of the body to be able to transcend to the soul, rather than an actual death to the body and ultimate decay. Instead of an end, this sexual encounter leads to a beginning, as creating offspring is usually a result. The children born of this coupling serve a synecdochal function, carrying parts of their parents inside of them, and also physically being parts of their parents, who themselves serve as 'the whole.'

Continuing on with the idea of expelling spirits through the physical act of orgasm, blood was often a word used to refer to ejaculation, as the "bloods mingle" during intercourse. According to Galen, during sex the male heats up to the point at which blood is "frothed" and transformed into semen; today, we view this as orgasmic ejaculation. The blood that flowed through the body during this mingling and ultimately

through the soul was thought to contain spirits in this time, and as it is a pure substance that literally runs through living things to give them life. The use of it here is consistent with the overarching subject of the poem, blurring the lines between tangible and figurative:

As our blood labors to beget  
Spirits, as like souls as it can,  
Because such fingers need to knit  
That subtle knot which makes us man (61-64)

Fingers and hands are again illustrated here to describe a mundane action linked with an ethereal phenomenon. That “which makes us man” connects the sacred and sexual, due to its religious connotation and physical one, inferring that God may make us man, but so does the act of sex being pleasurable. Yes, the souls leave the body in this initially physical act of love, yet what they experience is akin to the divine. Donne aims at answering the questions of what happens when those souls leave and come back, and how that is related to a completion (or death) and what follows shortly thereafter.

The body being equated to a host and a prison is demonstrated quite literally as Donne writes:

So must pure lovers' souls descend  
T' affections, and to faculties,  
Which sense may reach and apprehend,  
Else a great prince in prison lies. (65-68)

The soul is being treated as something valuable in this line and the body is its encasement. Here, the souls are being returned back to their homes and the ecstasy is coming to an end. Grazini explains that the coalescence of “sense” and “affections,” further drives the point of this ethereal ecstasy which is only truly experienced by “pure

lovers” and it does not only rely on the physical affections of lust, but also of the mind.<sup>20</sup> “Sense” here can represent the soul and mind, while “affections” and “faculties” symbolize the body. As always, one cannot exist without the other, they are equally vital to each other.

Staying true to the organization of thoughts of the time, Donne has organized his body into parts, each part with a purpose that affects another part. The poet has set as his goal the considerable task of showing how the outward union of man and woman affects the union of body and soul within man. This connection is intimated at the technical level by an imagistic parallel wherein a form of inner conjunction, “Because such fingers need to knit / That subtle knot, which makes us man,” is matched by a form of outer union, with “Our hands were firmly cemented / With a fast balm, which thence did spring.” Donne is not only obscurely implying through metaphor that a kind of inner union is inherent in outer union “but also sets out to anatomize the process whereby man becomes man.”<sup>21</sup>

The inclusion of an onlooker or spectator in this poem is most intriguing, as this was similar to the practice of the time in anatomy theatres. This spectator plays many roles, one of which is the realization of mortality; Sawday writes, “the corpse, in all its whitened other-worldiness, reminds the onlooker of human mortality which will, eventually, triumph... For the moment, however, even if their power is provincial, they

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<sup>20</sup> Graziani, René. "John Donne's 'The Extasie' And Ecstasy." *Review of English Studies The Review of English Studies* XIX. (Oxford University Press, 1968.), 134.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, Charles. “Donne’s “The Extasie”: Love’s Sublime Knot.” (John’s Hopkin’s University Press, 1968.), 92.



have triumphed over death.”<sup>22</sup> Just as the voyeur is watching the coupling of these lovers to gain knowledge of what it is to be human and alive, the lovers themselves gain fuller knowledge and consciousness of self and death, and the audiences seated at the anatomy theatres witness much of the same; they seek knowledge of what is inside of them, the process and aftermath of death, and its subtle relationship to consciousness of self. This holds true even if the lovers-and Donne himself- are not absolutely clear about what they know of themselves and their composition, illustrated when the speaker says earlier that each is a mixture:

But, as all several souls contain  
Mixture of things, they know not what,  
Love, these mixed souls, doth mix again,  
And makes both one, each this and that. (33-36)

Even though in this particular poem, Donne does not speak of bodily death and decay but rather orgasmic death, there is still a witness watching over a truly human act. The speaker is inviting the voyeur into this intimate setting, much like Vesalius’ illustrations and much like the body lain out on the dissection table. The theatre in this instance is a “pregnant bank,” a mundane setting, calm, quiet, and natural in that it is outside in nature, playing upon the primal and almost animalistic urges of mankind. It may be primal, yet the use of this setting is similar to the use of a theatre for the act of dissection: unorthodox.

It was Samuel Johnson who once wrote about Donne’s fascination with the dichotomy between idea and image, explaining it as "The most heterogeneous ideas . . .

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 129.

yoked by violence together."<sup>23</sup> Again, the grotesque image of violently pulling apart and putting back together is evident here. Other scholars have also commented on this characteristic of Donne's poetry, and as he was considered to be a prominent figure in the "Metaphysical Poets," Earl Miner states:

[These poets] were more interested in the vehicles than in the tenors of their metaphors... Or, in terms of ideas as well as metaphor, definition often becomes dialectic because of the poet's exploration of the gap between that which is defined and that which defines it, with most attention being given to the latter.<sup>24</sup>

Most critics, too, concentrate attention on "that which defines," since that is one of the most striking elements of metaphysical poetry. This gap between what *creates* something and the *definition* of that thing is important, as this relationship is what our perception of any ultimate reality will depend on. Donne heavily plays upon this relationship in his poetry.

As Roberts further postulates, "We can distinguish at least three distinct types of relationship based on the degree of identity between the real and the representation in John Donne's poetry," the first type, shown in "A Valediction of My Name in the Window," is an ultimate denial of identification, reached after an exploration of the possibilities of identification.<sup>25</sup> The second category in which a partial identity is established is an imagistic or corresponding relationship. The final category is an affirmation of identity in which the representation is so closely akin to the real that any distinction is lost. The first type of relationship, an ultimate denial of identification, is

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<sup>23</sup> Roberts, D. H. "'Just Such Disparities': The Real and the Representation in Donne's Poetry." (South Atlantic Modern Language Association, 1976), 100.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

best exemplified in “A Valediction: of my Name, in the Window,” while the speaker of the poem is discovering a type of nonidentity for himself.<sup>26</sup> So the poet-lovers of Donne's poems claim to possess or to want to possess the beloved “you” they address. The desire to know, incorporate, and control lies behind both of the poems in this paper, and that is why anatomy theatres play so central a role in Donne's writing. In “A Valediction,” the speaker claims his lover's selfhood in “I am you” in second stanza, but fails fully to become what he says he is. Both spirits and bodies must mingle simultaneously to become the “you” they are searching for. Hanging on to his muddled identity, he dwindles into the lethargy of “near death.” Using a window or glass as his painterly medium, Donne combines its threefold possibilities; Albert Cook defines those three functions in an article on Renaissance art: the window, “which tends to open up on a world beyond the frame of the organized scene foregrounded in the painting,” the etching which “segments the world into separate ordered scenes,” and the mirror, which “presents an assumed self-referentiality.”<sup>27</sup> Aware of those three dimensions, Donne's speaker incorporates them to ensure that his image is engraved as securely in the lady's bosom as it is in the window. Although the speaker is addressing his love in a need to create a concrete identity on consciousness of self, he looks through the window searching for him inside of her. Similarly, the audience searches for themselves in the corpse in front of them in the theatre, knowing there is a connection, and even further, knowing that they are one and the same as the corpse.

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<sup>26</sup> Novarr, David. ““Amor Vincit Omnia”: Donne and the Limits of Ambiguity.” *The Modern Language Review*. (Modern Humanities Research Association. 1987), 286.

<sup>27</sup> Estrin, Barbara L. “Framing and Imagining the “You”: Donne's “A Valediction of My Name in the Window.” (University of Texas Press, 1988), 346.

The poem begins ostensibly as do Donne's other *Valedictions* as an effort to comfort his mistress at his departure and to reassure her that he will return. But it quickly becomes much more than that as he explores his metaphor and pursues its ramifications to the last possible degree. The speaker of the poem passes through three distinct stages of consciousness in the poem, and each stage is marked by a growing awareness of the possibilities for nonidentity between the idea of the poem, the constancy of their love, and the image in which he has attempted to embody it, the name engraved on the window. The first stage, stanzas one to three, is that in which he postulates a unity between the signified and the sign. A merging takes place between himself, his name, his love, and the qualities of the glass, similar to the convergence of souls in "The Ecstasy." This initial, absolute identification represents his initial consciousness of self and his love, a unitary consciousness that encompasses only one attitude toward experience. Thus we get a series of correspondences that define love in terms of equality with certain aspects of the name engraved on the glass. Like glass, he is open and honest, "all confessing, and through- shine" (8). Like an open body being peered into, all of its secrets and inner workings are clearly visible to anyone who is looking. Like the name engraved on the glass, the speaker will be unchanging.

However, the truth of this false sense of immortality washes over the speaker in the last two stanzas: "But glass and lines must be/ No means our firm, substantial lines to keep" (61-62). This realization forces him to consider other possible ramifications of his metaphor, leading to a conclusion that the real and the representation cannot be equated, as the last two stages of the poem exhibit a growing gap between the two. In lines 41-42, Donne continues to explore the complementary relationship of spectator/body and

speaker/lover when he states, “thou shouldst, til I return,/ Since I die daily, daily mourne.” With the dual implication of the words, “die daily,” Donne has encompassed both poles of experience: absolute unity and absolute dichotomy.<sup>28</sup> With this contradiction their love, then, does not depend on the relationship between the real and the representation: “But glass, and lines must be,/ No means our firm, substantial love to keep.” It is true that he has failed to define love adequately in terms of the concrete objects of glass and lines, but we have seen that glass and lines can be ambivalent; the lovers' love cannot. This is the comfort he finally offers her: their love does not depend on and cannot be defined in terms of externals. Thus we have a final denial of identification between the real and the representation with Donne seeming to conclude that the mind can find no single image that corresponds exactly to any universal concept.

In stanzas four through seven, he is no longer considering himself as one with his name; instead it represents only a part of himself, his “ruinous anatomy” (24). Effectively, the speaker has trichotomized himself, leaving his skeleton on the window, his souls “Imparadised” in her, and retaining only “the muscle, sinew, and vein” (29), depicting a body torn apart by his love and merely representing what once was.<sup>29</sup> Although in this Valediction Donne is speaking of leaving his mistress who may or may not be faithful, the theme of resurrection and bodily decay is especially evident in lines 25-36, stating that his body, “Which [tiles] this house, will come again.” At this point, Donne could be talking to higher powers to “repair/ And recompact my scattered body

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<sup>28</sup> Roberts, D. H. ““Just Such Disparities”: The Real and the Representation in Donne's Poetry.” (South Atlantic Modern Language Association, 1976), 102.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

so,” instead of his lover. He has been reduced – ruined – down to his most basic elements, perhaps even the smallest part of his anatomy, his atoms.

Donne's attraction to the concept of the atom is motivated by the permanence of physicality that such a concept offers.<sup>30</sup> To have a part, you must have the whole. As John Carey has stated, “Even if death meant only the separation of soul and body, it was still repugnant. The thought of the body helplessly moldering through its long years of dissolution preyed on his mind.”<sup>31</sup> Carey suggests that Donne's obsessive fascination with resurrection is “not in any distinctive sense religious. It is a corollary of his preoccupation with changing states of matter. The dissolving and recompacting of deceased bodies . . . , the conjuring trick by which God turned dust into instant bodies appealed to Donne because it satisfied in a final and definitive way his desire for integration.”<sup>32</sup> It is precisely this preoccupation with disintegration and re-integration, with finding both the limit to destruction and the atom of creation, which makes the atom so attractive to Donne. Donne being the religious man he was through most of his life, Carey's severing of religious and material concerns is questionable, as Donne's concept of selfhood is never purely materialistic, and the fate of the body is inextricably coupled with that of the soul.

“A Valediction of my Name, in the Window” marks this permanent coupling quite clearly. If the body is like a name, as the poem suggests, then the proper

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<sup>30</sup> David A. Hedrich Hirsch. "Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the Resurrection of Atomic Theory." *Studies in English Literature*, (Rice University Press, 1991.), 79.

<sup>31</sup> Carey, John. *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*. (Oxford University, 1981.), 101.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

interpretation of such a poem must take into account both the name of the speaker and the spirit of the title. The “Valediction” of the poem's title signifies a separation, and although the expressed conceit is the departure of the speaker from his lover, “A Valediction of my name” also suggests a separation of a different sort.<sup>33</sup> Donne likens the speaker's separation from his beloved to the soul's departure from the body, or rather, the signifier's separation from the signifying name. The name etched onto glass can be read as a representation of the speaker's essence, the flesh made word. “My name engraved herein” of the first line prescribes “such characters, as graved bee” in line 35, calling attention to the two possible definitions of both “engraved” and “character.” What aspect of identity is a “name engraved”? It is an elusive definition of self, concreted by its conversion to written words etched permanently onto a mirroring glass.

The characters of one's name, a collection of those specific letters which in their proper ordering constitute one's defining appellation, are analogous to the smallest basic components of one's physical body. We are each defined by our names. As such the engraving of one's name in a mirror preserves a physical representation of the self just as a coffin locks up and preserves the bodies of “such characters, as graved be.” The implied conceit of the Valediction concerns the departure of the “firmness” of the speaker's physical presence from the integrated living union of his body and soul. Absence is rigorously denied by representation.<sup>34</sup> The speaker's body may not be immortal, but the representation of his body, his name, and the extension of his body, his soul, is. The spectator in this case is arguably the speaker himself, looking at his own mortality

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<sup>33</sup> David A. Hedrich Hirsch. "Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the Resurrection of Atomic Theory." *Studies in English Literature*. (Rice University Press 1991.), 78.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 79

through the glass in hopes it would make him immortal. He must come to terms with the fact that our earthly bodies die and decay, but our spiritual bodies, or soul, continue to live on. Through his etching onto the window, his name has immortalized himself. The flocks of people waiting to enter into the anatomy theatre attend such a display also in hopes of discovering their own immortality, no matter how fragile. “Soul” has almost become synonymous with “immortal” through this study of medicine, and we as a people are constantly searching for the physical representation of everlasting survival. Ironically enough, anatomy has achieved a type of immortality, as the body has died, it lives on for other purposes: the pursuit of knowledge. Through these theatres, mankind is immortalized.

A changeless “point” suggests the speaker’s concern for a physical preservation of identity:

As no one point, nor dash,  
Which are but accessory to this name,  
The showers and tempests can outwash,  
So shall all times find me the same. (13-16)

To clarify what this “point” might be, the speaker adds that it is an illustration from “hard and deep” learning. This “hard” “point” can be discovered only through a “deep” “Anatomy” a progressive cutting up and dividing of the mortal body until one finds an immortal element still intact despite the scattering of bodily parts. The permanence of such points will make it possible to “recompact my scattered body.” Just as the firmness of a name depends upon the integrity of its component letters, there can be hope for a resurrection of that scattered body only if one can find some permanent aspect uncorrupted by bodily decay. This preservation of the body is seen as absolutely necessary for the proper functioning of the soul. The reflective inversion of selves of



stanza two, “Here you see me, and I am you,” posits the “you” of stanza five as both the intact body of the speaker’s lover and the image of the speaker's own body, “Then, as all my souls be, /Imparadised in you-in whom alone /I understand, and grow and see-” (25-27). This mirror transcription of selves will allow the soul, which during life could function only in the speaker's body, to function after his departure in the substitute body of his name etched on the glass, and in the body of his lover, whose reading of the name will cause her to “reflect” upon the disembodied speaker.<sup>35</sup> Effectively, he will become immortalized through this act, displaying the permanence of language and the written word.

To be a body dissected in such a public way, immortalizes it to everyone watching. The audience in attendance will not be likely to forget this, especially if that body has helped them understand more about themselves. The mirror or glass that the speaker sees himself through in “A Valediction” takes on the role of the spectator in this poem, as the audience looking through the glass at the body deconstructed, the body is also a mirror used to see into themselves. Donne proposes the question, “how can we strive to become immortalized?” in the beginning of both “The Ecstasy,” and “A Valediction.” Even anatomists must have questioned their mortality, wondering how by this twist of fate they ended up being the ones to cut open a body, rather than being the body cut open. Through their scientific and philosophical findings, they knew that somehow the key to overcoming mortality would be discovered. With their pursuit of medical knowledge, alongside Donne’s pursuit at connecting this knowledge to the world outside, more and more secrets became uncovered. The mirror, the glass, and witnessing

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 79.

transcendence through sex, the body is once more alive after death. Here, death is both the beginning and the end. Here, it serves a purpose as the spectator, the corpse, and the anatomist, once again blurring the lines between the three. And, once again, leaving us all subject to dissection.

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