

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## **‘High Delights that satisfy all Appetites’: Thomas Traherne and Gender**

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The poetry of Thomas Traherne (written sometime before his death in 1674) has often seemed purely and innocently devotional in comparison with that of George Herbert, John Donne, or Richard Crashaw, poets whose religious work, at least occasionally, is sexually explicit. ‘Until recently’, Denise Inge comments in her work on Traherne’s prose, *Wanting Like a God* (2009), ‘there has been so little sex in Traherne that, although some scholars have noted sensuous imagery of feasting and treasure, discussing desire in terms of sexuality has not been an issue for Traherne scholars’.<sup>1</sup> The poem ‘Love’ is a notable exception, expressing erotic pleasure in a relationship between a human speaker who is figured both as a ‘boy’ and as a ‘bride’ and a masculine deity who possesses that speaker’s womb and brings forth fruit from it. The few scholars who mention the sexual references in ‘Love’ include Inge; Richard Rambuss in *Closet Devotions* (1998), his exploration of the complex sexuality of metaphysical poetry; and Randolph Trumbach, who in a 2012 article on the history of sodomy mentions Traherne’s use of the Ganymede myth.<sup>2</sup> Yet although it was twenty years ago that Rambuss complained of ‘the ways in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Denise Inge, *Wanting Like a God: Desire and Freedom in Thomas Traherne* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 31. Cf. Gary Kuchar, ‘Traherne’s Specters: Self-Consciousness and Its Others’, in *Re-Reading Thomas Traherne: A Collection of New Critical Essays*, ed. by Jacob Blevins (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), pp. 173-99: ‘Traherne is generally thought of as a writer who is notable precisely because he appears to lack the kinds of anxieties that characterize a near-contemporary such as John Donne’ (p. 176).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998); Randolph Trumbach, ‘The Transformation of Sodomy from the Renaissance to the Modern World and Its General Sexual Consequences’, *Signs*, 37 (2012), 832-48 (p. 835). Inge acknowledges a debt to L. William Countryman’s earlier reflections on the poem; see *Love Human and Divine: Reflections on Love, Sexuality, and Friendship* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005). Countryman’s work is not literary criticism but a series of meditations on love, using passages from Traherne as starting points.

pioneering and still prevailing scholarship on devotion has too readily circumscribed both the libidinal and the transgressive potentialities of the sacred body', subsequent interpretations of Traherne have continued to overlook the undertones of eroticism, sexual possession, and sexual violence in Traherne's poetry.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, although Rambuss, Trumbach, and Inge provide brief commentary on 'Love', none extends the analysis to include other lyric poems by Traherne. Thus, the implications of 'Love' for the body of Traherne's sacred poetry have not been developed to date. This essay's argument is two-fold: to provide a more in-depth evaluation of 'Love', and to demonstrate that the poem's sexually transgressive implications are reflected throughout Traherne's Dobell and Burney poems.

Like Traherne's poetry in general, 'Love' (Ross 6.61-62) describes the speaker's soul combining in mystical union with God.<sup>4</sup> As a lyric poem, 'Love' invites a biographical reading, an equation of the speaker with Traherne himself; thus, readers tend to assume that the speaker is male unless otherwise specified by the poem itself.<sup>5</sup> In this poem, the speaker initially positions himself as an observer of the spiritual love – described as a 'Nectar', a 'Delicious Stream', and a 'ravishing and only Pleasure' (1-2) – between God (a monarch) and his Church, a bride/queen who is also valuable property, a 'Mine' and a 'Kingdom':

[. . .] Queen of Sights!  
O Mine of Rarities! O Kingdom Wide!  
O more! O Caus of all! O Glorious Bride!

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<sup>3</sup> Rambuss, p. 4. Blevins comments in his introduction to *Re-Reading Thomas Traherne* (pp. ix-xviii): 'because criticism has for so long been primarily concerned with tracing influences and identifying a philosophic structure in Traherne, modern theory has been to this point limited in its applicability for many critics, and unless Traherne is viewed in light of modern critical trends his longevity is probably threatened' (p. xv). Both *Re-Reading Thomas Traherne* and *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought*, ed. by Elizabeth S. Dodd and Cassandra Gorman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016), attempt to remedy this oversight, but without including any work on Traherne and gender.

<sup>4</sup> All references to Traherne's poetry and prose are from *The Works of Thomas Traherne*, ed. by Jan Ross (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2005- ). Where the same poem appears in both the Dobell and Burney (Poems of Felicity) manuscripts, I quote from the Dobell poem; the differences between the two versions do not alter my interpretation of the poem.

<sup>5</sup> As Rebecca Yearling argues about the homoeroticism of Richard Barnfield's *Affectionate Shepherd* and Shakespeare's sonnets, '[I]yric verse is an intense, personal literary form – a first-person, present-tense take on the world, which gives the impression that the speaker is directly recounting his own emotions and sensations. Lyric verse may not be confessional, but it often gives that impression; it is intimate, immediate, and emotional'; see 'Homoerotic Desire and Renaissance Lyric Verse', *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 53 (2013), 53-71 (p. 59).

O God! O Bride of God! O King!  
O Soul and Crown of evry Thing! (7-11)

As the poem quickly vacillates between God's bride and God himself (who is presumably the 'Caus of all'), suggesting a union or (con)fusion of the two figures, the speaker acknowledges his poetic function as a recorder of this union, exclaiming:

[. . .] Where  
Shall such another Theme  
Inspire my Tongue with Joys, or pleas mine Ear! (3-5)

The singular 'Theme' evidently refers to the spiritual marriage, but the speaker also 'covet[s] to behold' a deity associated with 'Palaces of Gold' and material benefits he is willing to distribute:

Did not I covet to behold  
Som Endless Monarch, that did always live  
In Palaces of Gold  
Willing all Kingdoms Realms and Crowns to give  
Unto my Soul! (13-17)

As the king transforms from the inhabitant of palaces to one who bestows 'Kingdoms Realms and Crowns', the 'Glorious Bride' changes from the 'Kingdom Wide' into the speaker's soul, which is the recipient of 'Kingdoms Realms' and other gifts given by and shared with her husband. In the early modern period, the soul – a word that is feminine in Greek – was traditionally although not inevitably seen as female, as Rambuss points out regarding Donne's sonnets.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Traherne also identifies the individual soul as God's bride. 'Fullnesse' (Ross 6.30-31), for instance, appears to describe the soul as God's 'Virgin Wife'; this 'Wife' represents the entirety of God's creation enclosed in the skin of one person, perhaps the skin of the (presumably male) speaker:

The Shadow of a Virgin Wife,  
A Spiritual World Standing within,  
An Univers enclosd in Skin (7-9).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rambuss, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Commentaries of Heaven*: 'Thy Love the Motive, and my Soul the Bride' (Ross 2.272), 'evry Soul a Bride, or Glorious Queen' (Ross 2.206, l. 293), 'My Soul believs her self a Bride to thee' (Ross 3.315, l. 457), and 'Yet he is pleasd to make my Soul his friend. / Nay more, his Bride!' (Ross 3.368, ll. 222-23).

Thus the metaphorical relationship of God and the soul in 'Love' initially appears conventional, except for the chaos in the speaker's rapid exclamations about God and God's bride, as if the poet sees the two figures as almost too closely associated to distinguish. Then, however, this union of human soul and divine 'Power' becomes an experience which repeats – 'beyond the Fiction' – Jove's rape of Danaë:

Did my Ambition ever Dream  
Of such a Lord, of such a Love? Did I  
Expect so Sweet a Stream  
As this at any time! Could any Ey  
Believ it? Why all Power  
Is used here  
Joys down from Heaven on my Head to shower  
And Jove beyond the Fiction doth appear  
Once more in Golden Rain to come  
To Danae's Pleasing Fruitfull Womb. (24-33)

The abstractions of 'Power' and 'Joys' are accompanied by language which is concrete and sensual: 'Stream' and 'Rain', 'Head' and 'Womb'.<sup>8</sup> The subject's 'Head' is the first to experience the stream of divine power; the next body part touched by the deity's 'Golden Rain' is 'Danae's [. . .] Womb': not the female sexual partner of the deity but the distinctively female organ itself, which is 'Fruitfull' and thus 'Pleasing'. At least three readings are possible at this point. One is that the rain has skipped from one person to another, from the speaker to Danaë. Another is that the speaker has transformed into a woman, gaining a womb, a Tiresian metamorphosis that complements the deity's self-transformation into gold. The third is that the speaker is spiritually hermaphroditic, combining a male body and a female soul, possessing both a head and a womb which are penetrated by the divine shower.

In the fourth and final stanza, the speaker becomes a boy, or is now revealed to have been male all along (albeit a boy with a womb):

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Traherne also sometimes identifies the bride as mankind in general (e.g., '[t]he Bride is Man', in *The Kingdom of God* [Ross 1.492]) or as the Church: for instance, in 'Felicity' (Ross 6.106): 'the Bride / Of God His Church' (13-14).

<sup>8</sup> As Kathryn Murphy points out, the concrete nouns are not particular and 'Traherne invites the reader to see while giving them nothing – no thing – to visualise', but the things are nevertheless 'thingly'; see 'No Things But in Thoughts: Traherne's Poetic Realism' in *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought*, pp. 48-58 (pp. 52, 58).

His Ganymede! His Life! His Joy!  
Or he comes down to me, or takes me up  
That I might be his Boy,  
And fill, and taste, and give, and Drink the Cup. (35-8)

Ganymede, the Trojan prince who served as Jove's cupbearer and sexual partner, plays multiple roles here. On the one hand, in religious literature, the sexual meaning of this figure was typically ignored or explicitly rejected: in the early modern period, as Leonard Barkan writes, 'Ganymede's flight to heaven [. . .] becomes the perfect type of transcendent divine love'.<sup>9</sup> Rambuss describes this version of Ganymede as 'an emblem of the soul's ecstatic ascent to God and its triumph over the temptations of the world', citing as an example the 1643 poem 'Ganimedes' by the Scottish clergyman Alexander Ross.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, 'Ganimedes' is a telling example of one of the metaphorical options available to Traherne, one in which Jesus represents a 'pure' Ganymede:

[Jesus] is the fairest Ganymede, whose minde  
Is pure and fair, whose heart is white as snow,  
Whose thoughts in whitenesse doth the Swans out-go  
[...]  
He was a harmlesse spotlesse Dove [...].<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, two emblem-book poems use Ganymede to signify the ideal Christian. Francis Thynne's 'Ganymede' (1600) argues against 'impure minds whom vnclene lusts defile / against the rightfull course of natures kinde', minds which 'peruerselie [...] beguile' themselves with the image of Ganymede; rather, Thynne asserts, the Trojan boy represents "a prudent mann [...] who doth his minde to Heavenlie things addresse, / and flies to Heaven by living vertuouslie".<sup>12</sup> Similarly, George Wither's 1635 poem spells out the sacred symbolism of each element of the myth: Ganymede himself represents a soul 'That's washed in the *Purifying flood* / Of sacred *Baptisme*', so that baptism 'doth make

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<sup>9</sup> Leonard Barkan, *Transuming Passion: Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Rambuss, pp. 54, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Ross, 'Ganimedes', in *Mel Heliconium: or, Poeticall Honey* (London: William Leak, 1643), pp. 154-55, in *Early English Books Online* [accessed 11 September 2012].

<sup>12</sup> Francis Thynne, 'Ganymede', *Emblemes and Epigrammes*, ed. by F. J. Furnivall, *Literature Online* [accessed 5 April 2017].

her seeme / Both pure and beautifull, in *God's esteeme*'.<sup>13</sup> The spiritualized version of the myth is present in Traherne's poem both in the association of Ganymede with the soul and in the Eucharistic imagery of the cup.

On the other hand, Ganymede was also synonymous with the passive, juvenile partner/victim of 'vncleane lusts', a meaning which was sufficiently common that Thynne felt the need to explicitly reject it. The word 'catamite', a corruption of the name 'Ganymede', was used throughout the early modern period for 'any Boy, loved for carnal abuse, or hired to be used contrary to Nature, to commit the detestable sin of *Sodomy*', as Thomas Blount put it in his 1670 *Glossographia*.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in 1659 John Florio defined the Italian word 'catamito' as 'one hired to sin against nature, an Ingle, a Ganimede'.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to 'catamite', 'ingle', and 'sodomite', which were wholly derogatory, 'Ganymede' had at least the possibility of being perceived as neutral or even positive, since (as John Boswell notes) the name suggested both 'the archetype of a beautiful male' and 'connotations of mythological sanctions, cultural superiority, and personal refinement'.<sup>16</sup> This corrupted yet possibly refined Ganymede figured in secular literature such as Richard Barnfield's sonnet sequence *Cynthia* (1595) and Christopher Marlowe's play *Dido Queene of Carthage* (1594). Ross's poem (although neither Thynne's nor Wither's) contains hints of the sexuality in the Ganymede myth, even while repressing them. One such suggestion is the mixed metaphor of 'Receive the Nectar of my tears, / And drink them with thy gracious ears'; drinking tears through one's ears is erotic if it suggests listening to illicit wooing, for, as I have noted elsewhere, when 'discreet women have neither ears nor eyes' was proverbial, 'a woman who listened to male transgressive speech was [. . .] sometimes presumed unchaste'.<sup>17</sup> Another hint lies in Ross's reference to the Eucharist:

And as the Eagles do repair  
To places where dead bodies are;

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<sup>13</sup> George Wither, '[When Ganymed, himself was purifying]', *A Collection of Emblemes. Literature Online* [accessed 5 April 2017].

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Blount, *Glossographia, or a Dictionary, Interpreting the Hard Words* (London: Thomas Newcomb, 1681), p. 280, in *Early English Books Online* [accessed 11 September 2012].

<sup>15</sup> John Florio, *Vocabolario Italiano and Inglese, a Dictionary Italian and English* (London: T. Warren, 1659), in *Early English Books Online* [accessed 11 September 2012].

<sup>16</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 251.

<sup>17</sup> *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman: A Reader*, ed. by N. H. Keeble (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 76; Jean E. Graham, 'Virgin Ears: Silence, Deafness, and Chastity in Milton's *Maske*', *Milton Studies* 36 (1998), 1-17 (p. 1).

So where thy flesh is, Lord let me  
Resort, that I may feed on thee.

Consumption suggests sexual intercourse, and the eagle is the symbol of Jove, even though in this context, the eroticism is undermined by the gruesome scale of the analogy: multiple birds of prey flocking to ‘places where dead bodies are’ clearly depicts a battlefield rather than any form of intimacy.<sup>18</sup> Thus Rambuss oversimplifies when he describes ‘Love’ but not ‘Ganimeses’ as an ‘amorous lyric’ and a ‘devotional appropriation of this mythical figure [which] hardly entailed a corresponding evacuation of all his original (homo-)erotic significance’.<sup>19</sup> Ross’s poem has ‘amorous’ elements even if Traherne’s poem is more erotic. Yet a comparison between ‘Ganimeses’ and ‘Love’ underscores the sexual implications of the latter. In Traherne’s poem, ‘His Ganimede! His Life! His Joy!’ echoes the ‘Joys’ of Danaë’s experience, while the repetition of ‘his’ makes obvious the possession that was implied concerning Danaë. ‘Love’ suggests a mutually-pleasurable sexual relationship between this ‘Boy’ and the deity: the boy ‘fill[s]’ and ‘give[s]’ to the one who has ‘come [...] down to’ and ‘takes [...] up’ the speaker; but the boy also ‘taste[s]’ and ‘Drink[s]’ from the same ‘Cup’. Both Inge and L. William Countryman err by downplaying the sexuality of ‘Love’, with the former writing that the poem ‘is clearly charged with erotic energy’ but that it is ‘above all about intimacy, in which the poet is, in the end, gendered and non-gendered’, and the latter asserting that ‘[t]he eros that informs and animates this vision is not narrowly heterosexual or homosexual. It is not exclusively sexual at all [...] [although] it is definitely erotic in its passionate celebration of communion and transcendence’.<sup>20</sup> It is on the basis of the poem’s sexual implications that Trumbach cites ‘Love’ as support for the assertion that ‘the Puritans did not deny that men desired boys, since on the basis of that desire Puritan men conceived of themselves as the brides of Christ and Christ’s Ganymedes’.<sup>21</sup> (Trumbach does not support the assertion that Traherne was a Puritan, and Traherne has been identified both as a conservative Anglican and as sympathetic to radical sectarianism.)<sup>22</sup> But Trumbach and Rambuss also oversimplify the poem when

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<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Ross describes a lovely human body (‘a velvet skin’, ‘tresses gold’, and breath ‘like fragrant gardens’) only to explicitly reject it as a ‘painted Sepulchre’ because of a sinful spirit. He denies the poem’s only ravishment – ‘streams of sweetest Eloquence, / Which ravisheth the heart, and charms the sence’ – on the same grounds.

<sup>19</sup> Rambuss, pp. 54, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Inge, p. 31; Countryman, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Randolph Trumbach, ‘The Transformation of Sodomy from the Renaissance to the Modern World and its General Sexual Consequences’, *Signs*, 37 (2012), 832-48 (p. 835).

<sup>22</sup> The latter (countering the former, traditional view) by Carol Ann Johnston, ‘Sectarianism in *The Ceremonial Law*’, in *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought*, pp. 130-53.

they overlook Traherne's spiritualization of Ganymede. 'Love' relies equally on the sexual and on the religious associations of the Ganymede myth, holding in tension two traditions usually thought to be incompatible.

Traherne immediately rejects the Ganymede metaphor, with that of Danaë, as ultimately inadequate:

But these (tho great) are all  
Too short and small,  
Too Weak and feeble Pictures to Express  
The true Mysterious Depths of Blessedness.  
I am his *Image*, and his Friend.  
His Son, Bride, Glory, Temple, End. (39-44)<sup>23</sup>

The phrase 'Too Weak and feeble' differs strikingly from Thynne's rant against 'impure minds whom vncleane lusts defile': Traherne rejects neither heteroeroticism nor homoeroticism as 'vncleane'. The reality, the 'true Mysterious Depths of Blessedness', is simply a deeper, more passionate union between human and divine. Traherne's denial, moreover, serves to build to the speaker's conclusion, which blends male and female images for the speaker within a single couplet: 'his Image', 'Son', 'Bride'. Even if we set aside the 'Image' of a male deity as possibly gender-neutral, we cannot similarly ignore the gender implications of 'Son' and 'Bride'. Thus, two metaphors of God in a heteronormative relationship with the speaker as Danaë and as 'Bride' – made conventional only by associating the male speaker with his female soul – bracket both a distinctly homoerotic allusion to Jove's cupbearer and a reference to the speaker as 'Son'. The result is a sense that the gender of the beloved is fluid (the bride/son), and that the poem is gliding smoothly between hetero- and homoerotic (the bride/Ganymede). Rambuss asserts, 'Traherne's devotional ecstasies traverse complementary, not opposed, erotic identifications with both a ravished maiden and a too beautiful boy swept up to serve at bed and board in heaven'.<sup>24</sup> Uniquely among early modern writers, Traherne seems to see no essential difference between Danaë and Ganymede, or between the bride

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. 'Thine {Image, Friend, / Son, Bride}' ('Thanksgivings for the Soul' (335-48, p. 342, ll. 23-24, in *A serious and pathetic Contemplation* (Ross 4.313-34); 'Thy Son, thy Friend / Thy Bride, thine Image', in 'Thanksgivings for the Blessedness of his LAWS' (375-85, p. 376, ll. 11-12); and 'His Image, Servant, Son, Friend and Bride' in *Commentaries of Heaven* (Ross 2.14).

<sup>24</sup> Rambuss, p. 57.



and the son, and it is this lack of distinction – or, rather, a deliberate withholding of an expected distinction – that marks the transgressive nature of ‘Love.’<sup>25</sup>

Although the speaker’s gender is fluid, Traherne’s God is definitely masculine rather than transcending (or eluding) gender: God is represented as Jove in this poem, and by the masculine pronoun not only here but also throughout Traherne’s poetry. At the same time, in the Dobell and Burney poems Traherne’s God is never named as the incarnate Christ, and rarely has the physical body of a man. He becomes tangible in ‘Love’ not through incarnation but through metamorphosis; his physical form is not anthropomorphic but aureate. Since part of Rambuss’s argument is that metaphysical poetry (like Renaissance art) often focuses on “courting” a profoundly desirable Christ, a beautiful Lord and Savior’, his use of ‘Love’ as an example invites a misinterpretation of Traherne’s poem, which is specific about the human body – the ‘Head’ and the ‘Womb’ – rather than the divine body.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Rambuss explicitly identifies the deity of ‘Love’ as Jesus Christ, who is named nowhere in the poem.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, the body of Christ is implied in the opening lines of ‘The Person’ (Ross 6.39-41):

Ye Sacred Lims,  
A richer Blazon I will lay  
On you, then first I found:  
[ . . . ]  
With Gold Ile Crown your Head,  
Which like the Sun shall Ray.  
With Robes of Glory and Delight  
Ile make you Bright. (1-3, 10-13)

This ‘Bright’ figure is Jesus transfigured and in glory, not anatomized. At the same time, however, Traherne’s juxtaposition of the true beauty of the human anatomy (also

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<sup>25</sup> Sharon Cadman Seelig comments that “‘Son’ and ‘Bride’ [ . . . ] are contradictory’, but resolves the problem too easily by explaining that the terms ‘are here united in the context of the Bible, [ . . . ] which uses both concepts to express man’s intimacy with God’; see *The Shadow of Eternity: Belief and Structure in Herbert, Vaughan, and Traherne* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), p. 137. In contrast, see Stephen Orgel’s assertion that the love between Jove and Ganymede ‘remains a perpetual affront to women and to marriage’; see ‘Ganymede Agonistes’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10 (2004), 485-501 (p. 490).

<sup>26</sup> Rambuss, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Ironically, Rambuss later writes of Milton that in his ‘devotional corpus Christ appears hardly to have a body at all’, but he fails to notice that this is also true of ‘Love’ (p. 134).

described in the poem) with the false beauty of its outward ornamentation serves to strip Jesus to his essential self, which does not consist of literal garments or crown:

Mistake me not, I do not mean to bring  
New Robes, but to Display the Thing:  
Nor Paint, nor Cloath, nor Crown, nor add a Ray,  
But Glorify by taking all away. (14-17)

‘Taking all away’ reveals the figurative golden crown, which is the literal glory within. In a way, Jesus in ‘The Person’ is the Jesus not of the Transfiguration but of the Crucifixion, naked in both the sense of lacking clothing and also in that of being (in Rambuss’s words) ‘opened and porous’, its violently-created orifices offering a glimpse of the body’s interior.<sup>28</sup> Thus a comparison might be made – although Rambuss does not, in fact, make it, or even mention ‘The Person’ – between Traherne’s poem and poems such as George Herbert’s ‘The Sacrifice’, which describes the Crucifixion and (as Rambuss writes of Herbert’s poem) ‘Christ’s spectacularly exposed and traumatically violated physical body’.<sup>29</sup> Poems such as ‘The Sacrifice’ and Richard Crashaw’s ‘Upon the Body of our Blessed Lord, Naked and Bloody’ are more detailed about the Crucifixion’s violence to Christ’s body and spirit, but ‘The Person’ focuses with more intensity on the contrast between the clothed and the unclothed body.<sup>30</sup> At any rate, in ‘The Person’ the body of Christ is both specifically gendered male and contrasted with the female wearer of jewelry, as the poet wonders at the ‘[t]he Muscles, Fibres, Arteries and Bones’ which are ‘Sacred Treasures’ and ‘Far Braver then the Pearl and Gold / That glitter on a Ladies Neck!’ (32, 37, 42-43).<sup>31</sup>

Complementing the theme of redemptive or beautiful suffering seen in ‘The Person’ is the theme in ‘Love’ of the willing rape victim. This lack of choice concerning a sexual relationship is seen in two of Traherne’s metaphors in ‘Love’, the two singled out by Rambuss in his phrase ‘a ravished maiden and a too beautiful boy swept up to serve at bed and board’. In theological terms, God taking all the initiative in ‘courtship’ is sound, but the literal sense is disturbing. Even more disturbing is the suggestion, reinforced by

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<sup>28</sup> Rambuss, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Centuries*: ‘I Admire to see thy Crosse in evry Understanding, thy Passion in evry Memory, thy Crown of Thornes in evry Eye, and thy Bleeding, Naked Wounded Body in evry Soul’ (Ross 5.42).

<sup>31</sup> On ‘The Person’ and the body, see Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 256-66; and the response by Gary Kuchar, “‘Organs of Thy Praise’: The Function and Rhetoric of the Body in Thomas Traherne”, *Symbolism*, 4 (2004), 63-97.

the inclusion of the 'Bride' image, that the speaker sees no significant difference between consensual and nonconsensual relationships. The boy/bride offers no resistance, but Traherne nevertheless specifies that the deity employs force. Not only is 'all Power / [. . .] used', but also the speaker finds 'Pleasure' and 'Joys' in this sexual violence, just as the deity is said to view Danaë's 'Fruitfull Womb' as 'Pleasing' and Ganymede as 'His Joy'. It would be more accurate to describe this encounter as one of erotic violence – in fact, sadomasochism, since it is mutually pleasurable – than as sexual violence. Indeed, that the womb is 'Fruitfull' confirms that the 'Pleasure' was mutual, since 'it was generally accepted that women emitted some sort of seed at the time of orgasm', Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth asserts, adding that 'it was argued that in order to conceive a woman had to emit this same seed, and that emission was predicated on her experience of pleasure in intercourse'.<sup>32</sup>

Although Rambuss, Inge, and Trumbach single out 'Love' for attention, the eroticism, sexual dominance, and erotic violence of this poem are not isolated, and, in fact, appear frequently in Traherne's lyric poetry. Moreover, although 'Love' appears only in the Dobell manuscript, these themes are found in both the Dobell and the Burney manuscripts. Firstly, the theme of an erotic spiritual union threads throughout Traherne's poetry, even when not specifically termed matrimonial, as it is in the 'Bride' figure of 'Love'. 'Desire' (Ross 6.71-72), for instance, expresses gratitude for the yearnings of youth toward the divine:

An Eager Thirst, a burning Ardent fire,  
 A virgin Infant Flame,  
 A Love with which into the World I came,  
 An Inward Hidden Heavenly Love,  
 Which in my Soul did Work and move,  
 And ever ever me Enflame,  
 With restlesse longing Heavenly Avarice,  
 That never could be satisfied [. . .]. (2-10)

The speaker's boyhood 'flesh [was] like Hungry Thirsty Ground', he reports; and he longed for 'Bridal Joys': 'Ye Bridal Joys! Ye High Delights; / That satisfy all Appetites!'

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<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4; cf. Audrey Eccles, *Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1982), p. 33.

(23, 48-49).<sup>33</sup> The child's yearning is innocent because it does not involve bodies. In fact, it does not even involve two humans but, rather, a spiritual being (not, at this point, an incarnate deity) and a human soul. At the same time, the yearning is erotic, an eroticism that cannot be pinned down as either homo- or heterosexual because the human lover is both male and 'bride'. Thus, the 'Bridal Joys' will 'satisfy all Appetites', both spiritual and physical, heteronormative and transgressive.

The phrase 'Bridal Joys' equates the erotic desire of Traherne's speaker with the state of the bride waiting for the wedding night. Whether male or female, the speaker is a virginal and willing sexual partner, waiting to be deflowered by the more powerful husband. The boy/bride is God's exclusive property, unavailable to other would-be seducers and immune to their blandishments. For instance, in contrast to his praise of the senses elsewhere, Traherne limits them when in 'Dumnesse' (Ross 6.23-24) he praises the failure of hearing and speech. As a pre-verbal child, the poet was able to hear the natural world, which – in contrast to the people around him, whose speech he cannot understand – exhibits qualities that can lead him to experience God:

[...] No Ear,  
But Eys them selvs were all the Hearers there.  
And evry Stone, and Evry Star a Tongue,  
And evry Gale of Wind a Curious Song.  
The Heavens were an Oracle, and spake  
Divinity: The Earth did undertake  
The Office of a Priest; And I being Dum  
(Nothing besides was dum;) All things did com  
With Voices and Instructions [...]. (60-8)

Thus all the senses contribute to the divine wooing of the child's soul through the delights of the natural world: 'He did Approach, he me did Woo'; and now the speaker is 'enveloped in more then Gold; / In deep Abysses of Delights' ('The Approach,' Ross 6.20-21, ll. 34, 40-41). The wooing results in a monogamous relationship with God, a relationship in which the human subject loves nothing and no one other than the deity. In

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Seeds*: 'For the Pleasure of Satisfaction riseth naturally from the Strength of Longing. And therefore did God make our Desires severe and insatiable, bec. he meant our Eternal Satisfaction' (Ross 1.235). Also cf. *Centuries*: 'You must Want like a GOD' (Ross 5.22); and Belden C. Lane's reflections on Traherne's 'Hebraic notion of a God consumed by longing' in 'Thomas Traherne and the Awakening of Want', *Anglican Theological Review*, 81.4 (1999), 651-64.

many of his poems, such as ‘Silence’ (Ross 6.24-26), Traherne recalls such an exclusive and delightful relationship between God and his boyhood self:

He mine, and I the Ocean of his Pleasures.  
He was an Ocean of Delights from Whom  
The Living Springs and Golden Streams did com.  
My Bosom was an Ocean into which  
They all did run. (70-4)

It is true, as Susannah H. Mintz points out, that in ‘Dumnesse’ and ‘Silence’ Traherne plays with disability:

The deaf and mute subject seems to epitomize for Traherne a vehement individuality, one that is produced not so much by purity from sin but rather by wholesale rupture of any interaction with other people. [...] [The speaker] is a hermetically sealed system, entirely self-sufficient and self-regenerating. Penetration is now considered tolerable only because it occurs within the self, because it is governed from within. The heart’s porousness – its openness to ‘Things’ that can take root, such as the ‘first Words’ that ‘penetrat’ it (88) – is a sign of receptiveness to God, whereas the vulnerable ear can neither govern itself nor discern between the good and the bad.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Jennifer Nelson and Bradley Berens write of ‘Dumnesse’ and ‘Silence’ that ‘the attributes of deafness – but [...] only elective deafness – are conducive to [...] mystical experience. For Traherne, to be deaf is to move inward more easily, away from problematic voices and penetrable ears’.<sup>35</sup> But more than this, by creating in ‘Dumnesse’ the image of one who hears God alone, Traherne draws on early modern stereotypes about women, speech, hearing, and chastity – stereotypes which were an inescapable part of his culture. Spiritually, Traherne’s speaker is a ‘Good Woman’, one whose ears shield her virtue, according to the definition of Sir Thomas Overbury in *A Wife* (1614): ‘Dishonestie never comes neerer than her eares, and then wonder stops it out, and saves vertue the

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<sup>34</sup> Susannah H. Mintz, ‘Strange Bodies: Thomas Traherne’s Disabled Subject’, in *Re-Reading Thomas Traherne*, pp. 1-20 (pp. 7, 13).

<sup>35</sup> Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens, ‘Spoken Daggers, Deaf Ears, and Silent Mouths: Fantasies of Deafness in Early Modern England’, in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 52-74 (p. 61).

labour'.<sup>36</sup> The 'unchaste woman', in contrast, 'delights to heare the vaine words of men', according to Dorothy Leigh in her 1616 *The Mothers Blessing*.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the matrimonial theme, the images of womb and cup reappear elsewhere. 'Right Apprehension' (Ross 6.155-8) is an overt complaint against materialism which asserts that 'We're sold / For worthless Gold' (13-14), and expresses greater esteem for a 'Globe of Earth' than a 'Globe of Gold', since the latter 'must Barren be': 'No Fruitfulness it can produce; / A Golden World can't be of any Use' (25-26, 41, 47-48).<sup>38</sup> When people esteem gold more than the fertility of 'Earth's rare ductile Soil', they inevitably become as '[s]tiff, barren, and impen'trable' as gold, and as lacking in fruitfulness (57, 74). Thus Traherne returns to Danaë's womb with a difference; since stiffness and impenetrability are characteristics of early modern masculinity rather than femininity, the god may properly be characterized as gold, but the female figure may not: Jove's golden showers have the power to impregnate, but only when the womb is not also made of gold.<sup>39</sup> The responsibility of the human subject is to be open to divine impregnation, to be sexually available and thus desirable to the deity. While neither Danaë nor Ganymede appears in Traherne's poetry beyond 'Love', a connection with Ganymede occurs in 'Ye hidden Nectars' (Ross 6.67-8). In this poem the deity consumes the human subject in 'hidden Nectars, which my GOD doth drink' (1), evoking the image of Jove's cup, carried to him by Ganymede and at the same time a representation of Ganymede.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Overbury, *Sir Thomas Overbury his Wife* (London: Edward Griffin, 1618), in *Early English Books Online* [accessed 11 September 2012].

<sup>37</sup> Dorothy Leigh, *The Mothers Blessing* (London: John Budge, 1616), p. 31, in *Defining Gender, 1450-1910* [accessed 11 September 2012]. The only positively-portrayed unchaste woman in Traherne's Dobell and Burney poems appears in 'Thoughts III' (Ross 6.69-70), in which the wife is a thought, which is 'its Makers Wife' (66); at the same time, however, '[i]t shall be Married ever unto all: / And all Embrace' (73-74). This poem resembles, and may have been influenced by, the Donne sonnet 'Show me deare Christ, thy Spouse', in which the speaker announces that the Church 'is most trew, and pleasing' to her spiritual husband and Lord '[w]hen She'is embrac'd and open to most Men'; see *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. by Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995- ), Volume 7, Part 1, p. 19 (ll. 13-14). Successive quotations from Donne also come from this edition. Cf. Traherne's *Commentaries*, in which Wisdom is described as 'a Bride / For God Himself yet not to Men denied', and again 'She is not common, yet she is the Bride / Of all' (Ross 2.334, ll. 818-19, 824-5). In neither instance, though, does the figurative promiscuity represent apostasy, infidelity to God.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Centuries*: '[F]irm Land [...] is a Treasure [...] of far Greater valu to a Noble Spirit, then if the Globe of the Earth were all Gold' (Ross 5.54).

<sup>39</sup> On the belief in male impenetrability, see Diane Purkiss, 'Dismembering and Remembering: The English Civil War and Male Identity', in *The English Civil Wars in the Literary Imagination*, ed. by Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), pp. 220-41.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the angelic desire to kiss humans – that is, to 'sip / Ambrosia from a Mortal Lip' – in 'Admiration' (Ross 6.141-43, ll. 2-3).

Elsewhere, Traherne tastes God in the natural world as Ganymede sips from Jove's cup; for instance, in 'The Estate' (Ross 6.41-3) the speaker celebrates all his senses:

My Palate ought to be a Stone  
To trie thy Joys upon  
And evry Member ought to be  
A Tongue, to Sing to Thee. (16-19)

Whether 'Palate' is defined more narrowly (as is suggested by the proximity of 'Tongue') or more broadly, here also, the physical senses are the means to a union with the divine.

Finally, while the yearning for union is mutual, it is unequal: the boy and the bride are vulnerable, passive figures, figures that are by (early modern) definition necessarily subordinate to an adult male. Trumbach comments:

The period of sexual passivity through which all European males passed before 1700 made [. . .] Traherne's poem ['Love'] possible. Adult men could conceive of themselves as brides of Christ because as boys they had been temporarily passive, but women, of course, remained passive throughout their lives.<sup>41</sup>

Because of the difference in status and power between the divine or adult male human figure on the one hand and the boy/bride figure on the other, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most frequent words in Traherne's poetry can reflect sexual violence: 'ravish', all senses of which (to kidnap, to rape, to 'fill with ecstasy') were current in early modern England.<sup>42</sup> Most instances in Traherne refer to ecstasy; for instance, when in 'Christendom' (Ross 6.123-6) the speaker experiences an imaginative vision of heaven, he declares that '[i]t ravished my wondring Eys / To see the Sun so Brightly shine' and again, that '[t]his happy Place, / [...] / Did ravish me' (67-8, 101, 104).<sup>43</sup> Experience for

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<sup>41</sup> Trumbach, p. 836. Cf. Barkan:

There is no doubt that the social structures of 'love' in antiquity depended on the power of males over females, men over boys, free men over slaves, Greeks (or Romans) over foreigners, the active penetrator who takes pleasure from the passive penetrated who is forced to give it [even though] Greek culture also created erotic images and narratives in which there were no such inequalities. (p. 23)

<sup>42</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the description in 'The Vision' (Ross 6.14-16): 'Lift up thy pleas'd and ravish Eys, / Admire the Glory of the Heavenly place, / And all its Blessings prize' (23-25). The word also permeates Traherne's prose; e.g., *Kingdom*: The goodness of Creation should 'fill it [the mind] with Magnificence and pleasure and Ravish it with Joy and Beauty' (Ross 1.363); *Centuries*: 'we need nothing but open Eys, to be Ravished like the Cherubims' (19); *Commentaries*: 'the Soul is transported with the Contemplation of Heavenly

Traherne constantly returns to the speaker's intense pleasure in encountering the divine. Yet the reference in 'Love' to the rape of Danaë is far from the only instance of Traherne using 'ravish' in one of the more violent senses. *Centuries* describes David as Ganymede, his psalms as inspired by a spiritual kidnapping:

All Arts He then did Exercise  
And as His GOD He did Adore  
By Secret Ravishments abov the Skies  
He carried was, before  
He died. (Ross 5.128)

In 'The Demonstration' (Ross 6.49-52), Traherne pairs 'ravish' with 'invade' to describe the effects of the sun:

Its very Brightness makes it neer the Ey,  
Tho many thousand Leagues beyond the Skie.  
Its Beams by Violence  
Invade, and ravish distant Sence. (13-16)

God's 'Excellence, / In all his Works, must needs exceed all Sence' (21-2), must result in sensory overload, an experience of forceful invasion of the senses. Just as the sun violently penetrates the eye, in 'Ye hidden nectars' God penetrates the soul through the eye, so that the speaker is 'ravished with Joy':

I never Glorious Great and Rich am found,  
Am never ravished with Joy,  
Till ye my Soul Surround,  
Till ye my Blessedness display.  
No Soul but Stone, no Man but Clay am I,  
No flesh, but Dust; till ye  
Delight, invade to move my Ey,  
And do replenish me. (24-31)

Another spiritual rape occurs in *Commentaries of Heaven* (Ross 3.446), this time without the word 'invade':

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Objects, and being ravished with Delight is all Obedience to her Maker' (Ross 3.153) and 'fill and Ravish, sanctify Inspire / And quicken Souls' (Ross 3.393, ll. 301-02).



Come Holy Ghost, Eternal GOD, inspire  
My Heart and Soul, with thy Celestial Fire.  
O Sanctifie! O burn! O ravish me!  
Compell me always to abide with thee. (87-90)<sup>44</sup>

In these poems, Traherne again reminds readers of Donne, this time the earlier poet's 'Batter my hart, three-persond God,' which like Traherne's 'Love' plays with our sense of the speaker as comprised of a (possibly) female soul and a (probably) male body, either or both of which could be God's love interest.<sup>45</sup> The speaker of Donne's sonnet is often assumed to be the soul, as Michael Schoenfeldt notes: 'the poem has traditionally been read as Donne's assumption of a feminine persona, as if the experience of and desire for submission were intrinsically feminine, and as if desire were essentially heterosexual'.<sup>46</sup> The language of the poem, however, is deliberately gender-neutral: 'Donne seems deliberately to reject the topos of the female soul, which would at least allow him to exclude the disturbing prospect of same-sex rape as the consummation the poem devoutly seeks'.<sup>47</sup> Donne concludes his sonnet:

Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I,  
Except you inthrall mee, neuer shall bee free  
Nor euer chast, except you rauish mee (p. 25, lines 12-14).

These lines draw on the same convention of female chastity, but (again) for a metaphorical and spiritual purpose. Likewise, Traherne is gender-neutral at times, while at others – giving Danaë's womb to Ganymede, for instance – he deliberately provides

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Year-Book* (Ross 4.98-9):

[G]iv me that Lov, that Bleeding, Violent, flaming Lov, wherewith I may Honor and Delight Thee,  
Resign my self to Thee, be wholly Subject unto, Rejoyce in, and Exalt Thee for ever more. [. . .] I  
offer up my self with all my Heart, [. . .] Beholding thy Joys and being Ravished with thy Glory.

<sup>45</sup> Seelig notes the similarity between 'The Demonstration' and 'Batter my h[e]art': 'Traherne's language, as violent but not so explicit as that of Donne's "Batter my heart", or of Crashaw's description of the divine ravishment of Saint Teresa, celebrates the deity who overwhelms man through the excess of his glory' (p. 133).

<sup>46</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt, 'The Gender of Religious Devotion: Amelia Lanyer and John Donne', in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. by Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 222.

<sup>47</sup> Schoenfeldt, p. 222. Cf. George Klawitter, who deals only with Donne's secular love poetry, but notes that more of it is gender-neutral than the poetry of many other writers of the period; see *The Enigmatic Narrator: The Voicing of Same-Sex Love in the Poetry of John Donne* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 1270.

hermaphroditic imagery, foiling the reader's attempt to 'read' his speaker as male or female.

Even more than Donne, Traherne dwells on the erotic pleasure of violence. To return once more to Danaë, Traherne's commentary in *The Kingdom of God* is instructive: 'That Crowns, and Scepters should fall from Heaven into our Laps! That Jupiter Should com down in a Golden Showre! That some Beggarly Woman should be made the Bride of a Monarch in her Sleep! Infinit Lov!' (Ross 1.313). Ultimately, divine violence is in the best interest of any 'Beggarly Woman', and the most compelling demonstration of God's 'Infinit Lov'. It is true that in *Commentaries of Heaven* Traherne explicitly rejects such violence: 'Consent He Desires, becaus He would not be a Ravisher. For all Force is a Rape, wherin the Principal Delight and Consent are Wanting' (Ross 2.100). Yet he immediately continues:

Tho som times He breaketh in upon Unwilling Souls, but then it is by Invading a Difficulty, with Willingness, which is the greatest Pleasure and Delight of all: could it be in a Soul. but it can Scarcely be there. A Willingness in the midst of Resistance, where it is Possible, is pleasing, to Mixt Natures: but the Greatest Difficulty is to Creat a Willingness. (Ross 2.100)

The rejection of violence is not whole-hearted, with its use once more of the word 'invade', and its hypothesizing about 'Willingness in the midst of Resistance'. Traherne appears to imagine a soul whose 'Mixt Nature' says 'no' but means 'yes', and its coy behavior produces 'the greatest Pleasure and Delight of all'. The rape fantasy is made even more clear elsewhere in the same work:

But if any Creatures should be made to see, and constraind and forcd to see whether they would or no: they might stare upon the Deitie, but could not behold him, at least not with Delight, for that is opposite to Constraint and force; or if with Delight, yet is the Pleasure like that of a Ravishment, wherin the Person suffers Pleasure without her Consent. (Ross 3.72)

God's bride withholds consent, yet 'suffers Pleasure' in the 'Ravishment'.

To return to 'Love', Rambuss refers to both 'Batter my hart' and 'Love' as 'divine rape/rapture fantasy'.<sup>48</sup> Yet Traherne poems such as 'Ye hidden nectars' also merit that label. Traherne's 'Love' is not unique among his lyrical poems in its transgressive

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<sup>48</sup> Rambuss, p. 54.

aspects: fluidity in gender identity and in the object of sexual desire, desire which is simultaneously mutual and hierarchical; the helplessness and submission of the human before a display of divine power; and the mutual pleasure in sexual domination and violence. Traherne casts his spiritual and philosophical ideas in terms of a personal relationship between himself and God, a relationship that is mediated through eroticism. Such a relationship depends on a characterization of the divine as overpowering and male, even when not incarnate as a man but revealing itself through the sensuality of the natural world, with a complementary characterization of the poet as submissively female and/or boyish. It is a relationship that is too complex, too fluid in its gender imagery, to be conceived as heteroerotic or homoerotic; the sexuality of the poems, like thoughts in 'Thoughts III' (Ross 6.69-70), is 'Nimble and Volatile, unconfined, / Illimited' (33-4), ready to appeal to a variety of appetites.