

“SO TO ONE NEUTRAL THING BOTH SEXES FIT”

Trans\* Theory and 17<sup>th</sup> Century English

Metaphysical Poetry

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

September 2015

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Dean Dier for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English to be taken June 2015.

Title: "SO TO ONE NEUTRAL THING BOTH SEXES FIT": Trans\* Theory and 17<sup>th</sup>  
Century English Metaphysical Poetry

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_



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In this paper, I utilize an experimental format of incorporating autobiographical narratives of my life as a genderqueer person to segue readers into questions of identity and trans\* theory. I then use the tenets of trans\* theory to analyze several poems by John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and Richard Crashaw. I expect trans\* theory to help shape our collective understanding of gender and selfhood when utilized beyond the reach of this paper and incorporated into the analysis of a multitude of different literary genres.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the three professors who graciously offered their time and wisdom to this process: Professor Miller for steering me into more focused avenues of queer and gender theories; Professor Mossberg for her unfailing positivity, vigor, zeal, pizzazz, vitality, and verivitude in the face of any circumstance; and most certainly Professor Saunders, for his passion for literature, his dedication to both scholarship and wit, and his ability to inspire transcendence beyond the confines of time and place towards a place of appreciation and connection. I was incredibly lucky to have this misfit team of scholars pulling me along. All fledglings should be so fortunate.

I would also like to thank my husband, B.W., who has weathered thousands of ridiculous ideas, connections, and utterances of poetry fragments throughout this process, and who has likely suffered permanent damage from his exposure to an excessive quantity of Donne puns.

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To S.D., 1983-2012

*Only for him no cure is found,*

*Whom Juliana's eyes do wound.*

*'Tis Death alone that this must do:*

*For Death thou art a mower too.*

*-Andrew Marvell, "Damon the Mower"*

## Introduction

As a student writer, I often find myself questioning the necessity of what I am researching and writing about: Will anything I write “mean something” in the world? Outside of a classroom setting, will my work ever be read and have relevance? I asked myself these questions repeatedly during the research phase of this project, until the early weeks of 2015, when the media was awash with trans\* tragedies.<sup>1</sup> Media attention was given to Leelah Alcorn, a teen who committed suicide at the end of 2014 because her religious parents would never allow her to complete a medical transition. Within the first few weeks of January, at least three women had been fatally shot, presumably because of their gender identity, or rather, because someone with a gun took issue with their gender identities; by February, the number of media-reported deaths was up to seven; by March, at least six more trans\*-identified youth had been documented as having committed suicide, including Blake Brockington, 18; Taylor Wells, 18; Aubrey Mariko Shine, 22; Zander Mahaffey, 15; Melonie Rose, 19; and Ash Haffner, 16.<sup>2</sup> One publicized murder or suicide in a year from such a relatively small minority group might be horrifying to read about, but to have so many at once has become a personal call to action.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “trans\*” is used throughout this thesis as an all-encompassing term for members of the transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, and gender fluid spectrum. As of 2015, this term remains somewhat controversial – some members of the community favor it as inclusive, others find it to be too generic and would prefer more specific designations based on medical or legal statuses. My choice to use the term reflects my personal identification and is not meant to offend anyone within or outside the community, nor to ignore the continuing conversation about gender and terminology that must continue to take place between all of us, regardless of identification or affiliation.

<sup>2</sup> Mitch Kellaway. “Trans Teen Activist, Former Homecoming King, Dies in Charlotte, N.C.” *The Advocate Online*. 24 March 2015. Here Media, Inc. Web. 26 April 2015.

Death and horror are not the only trans\* experiences that have been shown on major American media lately. On the other end of the spectrum, actress Laverne Cox was hailed as the first trans\* person to receive an Emmy nomination, and a former athlete and reality TV personality announced in a televised interview her official transition from Bruce to Caitlyn Jenner. This swing between the dichotomy of entertainment (often comedy) and tragedy in the media reflects some of the confusion surrounding who and what transgender people are and what place we have in heteronormative society. Hopefully the near future includes enough societal acceptance of differently-gendered people so that a trans\* person could act in a television show as a character whose gender is not a major plot point, or that a celebrity could publically transition without a humorous Halloween costume of them sold in stores so people can laugh and point.

One of the largest roadblocks to global acknowledgement and acceptance of trans\* people is the lack of community visibility, confusion or lack of understanding of who trans\* people are, and the need for discussion and connection around decidedly trans\* themes in all aspects of culture. While this paper does not have the media or social power of, say, sex advice columnist Dan Savage's "it gets better" campaign, I do hope to foster a message of hope and continue the conversation of kinship between art, social experiences, and all people, regardless (or in celebration) of cultural difference. Let this thesis be a beacon of kinship. It does not promise that life will get better in the future, nor alter an instruction manual on how to dismantle or fix the existing gender constructions of society. Instead, it argues for something unexpected in the past – by discovering a flicker of queer recognition, a pulse of gender fluctuation and fluidity in

the poetry of those who are long-dead. My hope is to illuminate some interesting and often unexpected questions of gender and sex that are found in certain poems in order to invite readers to the discussion around being a transgender person in the United States.

The format of this thesis combines autobiographical narrative sections that lead each chapter, theoretical discussion, and applications of trans\* theory to analyze certain 17<sup>th</sup> century (“metaphysical”) poems.<sup>3</sup> Many of the poems in these chapters have already been subjected to detailed analysis. Recently, they have been examined through the lenses of feminist and queer theories; however, a specific trans\* theory has not yet been used to evaluate them. Trans\* theory is an emerging tool in the realm of critical theory, and its treatment of both gender and bodily sex as constructed, malleable, and transitional mark it as both distinct from and necessary adjunct to the current methodologies of literary criticism. The narrative sections are experimental; they are an attempt to connect with you on a personal level, regardless of your previous knowledge or experiences with trans\* people. This work is meant to garner empathy instead of shock, and illuminate connections between my own life experiences, critical theory, literature, and you – the reader.

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<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that the autobiographical sections of this work represent only a single buzz in a bee hive’s swarm of vibrating communications. The fact that I am white, lower-middle class, somewhere on the trans\* and queer spectrums, and am of a larger physical size hopefully does not detract from the content of this thesis, but should rather give context to me as the author, and serve as a reminder that I do not speak for everyone within any of the communities I am connected to by choice or happenstance.

## Chapter I: The Outsiders Within

### Narrative: Luckily, I Was Raised in California

It's the annual Gay Pride weekend in San Francisco, 1998, and I am 18 years old. I have on my ripped-up, grease-stained jeans, thrift store Carolina boots, lucky red baseball cap, and my usual faded black hoodie. We're Sacramento kids, but my friends and I escape every year, for a week in late June, to revel in a blissful utopia of queerness. Typically we spend the weekend trying to score things like alcohol, invites to parties, and casual sex, but this year I have wandered away from the festivities in the Castro and into a small theatre in the Mission District for a transgender film festival. I slip in the door and sit in a hidden seat near a pillar in the back. The lights dim, the boisterous crowd becomes silent, and a local, low-budget documentary starts rolling on the screen. Watching the movie, a heavy, leaden feeling of familiarity, recognition, and confusion begins to grow inside my intestines.

I have always been a bit of a tomboy, and have been "out" as a bisexual-butch-genderqueer since I was about 15. The person in this documentary, the one currently on the screen, looks like a thinner, slightly older version of me. *I used to dress up in my dad's clothes when no one was home.* I sink a little bit further down in the unpadded wooded theatre seat. *I was beaten up my whole life for being queer.* Is it normally this hot in movie theatres? *I wanted to just be one of the guys, so I started shaving my face as a teenager even though I didn't need to, started going by a male nickname, and started thinking maybe I'd grow a penis, that maybe my boobs would wither away.* I'm going to puke if I don't get out of here. He basically just described scenes from my life,

and now he's talking about injecting himself with testosterone, and how his family shuns him. Here during this most high-holy of queer holidays, Gay Pride, a place where I normally feel like I am with "my people" for one meager week, I now felt completely alone. Even with a guy on the screen telling familiar stories, even with a theatre full of reverent nodding, it's still a sea of strangeness. Who are these people, and what is this unfamiliar community in front of me, this place where I feel like an outsider yet feel like I have always belonged here? I need to call my girlfriend – will she leave me? I need to tell my friends, my family – oh god, my family – they'll never understand! This life portrayed on the screen is going to be my life, this journey my journey.

The lights come up, the crowd is clapping and cheering – they all know each other. Then one of the people featured in the documentary comes to the front of the stage and announces, "If you have any questions about the film, or want more information about services available here in the city, come see me at the booth in the lobby!" I remain frozen in my seat in the back of the theatre until the next film begins, then I sneak out, hurry to the bathroom to vomit, and approach the table in the lobby.

Over 15 years later, I have broken up with that girlfriend, worked multiple jobs, moved to Oakland, married my husband, moved to Oregon, and finally, in my 30's now, decided to attend college. After a tumultuous start (in my teen years, right after that film festival) to my transition from bodily female to bodily male, I had decided to "go stealth," - that is, to never tell people that I was born with female parts. I did it for my own safety after years of harassment, difficulty with acceptance among previously loving friends, and the physical difficulty of the second puberty I experienced with hormone therapy. Now I find myself stunned as I sit in a lecture hall, surrounded by my

fellow students, as a sneaking shade of that leaden-weight feeling of recognition returns to my stomach during a professor's presentation about the poetry of John Donne. What is it about the way Donne expresses body disconnection, or connection with the bodies of other people, animals, and objects that strikes that note of trans\* familiarity within me? There is something about this classroom, something about college, something about *Donne* that makes me realize that the time for hiding is over.

### **A theory of one's own**

This thesis has a dual purpose: first, to promote trans\* theory as an important tool of literary analysis, and second, to evaluate multiple examples of a proto-trans\* theory in the poetry of John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and Richard Crashaw. I do not mean to imply any specific queerness, gender dysphoria, or gender fluidity in the poets themselves, but rather explore their conceits as a doorway to the greater philosophical questions of what it means to change sex, occupy multiple gender positions, and to question the relationship between internal identity and physical embodiment.<sup>4</sup> When the narrator and his lover leave their bodies in "The Ecstasy," does Donne not explicitly raise the question of what gender means, imagined apart from the body?<sup>5</sup> When Marvell speaks of transcending the physical world in favor of his imagination in "The Garden," what of sex and gender is he left with when he is awash in green after "annihilating all that's made?"<sup>6</sup> These questions emerge and are relevant regardless of the historical

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<sup>4</sup>A "conceit," as defined by *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, is "a complex and arresting metaphor, in context usually part of a larger pattern of imagery, which stimulates understanding by combining objects and concepts in unconventional ways; in earlier usage, the imagination or fancy in general (231).

<sup>5</sup> Donne, ed. Redpath, pp. 88-92; also, see an analysis of this poem later in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Marvell, ed. Smith, pp. 155-159; also, see an analysis of this poem in Chapter III.

distance that separates 17<sup>th</sup> century works from our own cultural moment. Authorial intent can never be truly known in any work, but exploring the meaning gleaned from an analysis of the poem can perhaps contribute to an expansion of the general understanding of gender as something beyond a restrictive binary of male and female. This general increase in understanding and awareness may then in turn lead to a decrease in harmful misunderstandings about trans\* people.<sup>7</sup> Though the purpose of this thesis is not to address or prevent bigotry or hate crimes directly, I feel that this work can be part of a large discursive movement to further trans\* visibility, even if the primary audience is confined to the community of Early Modernist scholars and poetry critics.

Before I can begin to use trans\* theory to analyze any poetry, the parameters of the theory need to be defined. It could be argued that much of the discussion surrounding gender has already occurred in the form of feminist theory, especially in terms of male/female binaries and patriarchal societal expectations. However, unlike some versions of feminism, transgenderism acknowledges multiple states of gender, and supports the twin notions that both sex and gender are self-constructed. In his essay from *The Transgender Studies Reader*, “Where Did We Go Wrong? Feminism and Trans Theory – Two Teams on the Same Side?” Law Professor Stephen Whittle notes that:

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<sup>7</sup> An example of anti-trans\* legislation can be seen here in Kentucky bill SB 76:

AN ACT relating to student privacy: to ensure that student privacy exists in school restrooms, locker rooms, and showers; require students born male to use only those facilities designated to be used by males and students born female to use only those facilities designated to be used by females; identify consequences for using facilities designated for the opposite biological sex; identify the Act as the Kentucky Student Privacy Act; EMERGENCY.  
(From <http://www.lrc.ky.gov/RECORD/15RS/SB76.htm>)

Feminism is about a better set of values in which gender loses some of its power of oppression, in which separate and distinct voices are not only heard but also listened to, and in which a better set of values is followed.<sup>8</sup>

This certainly could apply to trans\*theory, but by definition, “transgender” means: “of, relating to, or designating a person whose identity does not conform unambiguously to conventional notions of male or female gender, but combines or moves between these,” and “transsexual” refers to “having physical characteristics of one sex and psychological characteristics of the other.”<sup>9</sup> The parameters placed around the tenets of trans\* theory must include the analysis indicating the transformative aspect and movement amongst or between genders, the connection and moments of disconnection between the mind and body, and/or the alteration of the body to change sex; these are all additional points of distinction between feminist theory and trans\* theory.

In many of the works of criticism that have emerged as the central to the emergent canon of trans\* theory within the last twenty years, the critics’ autobiography appears as a recurring theme. Whittle also comments on this important aspect of the emerging trans\* theory:

Challenging their own sense of self, looking inwards to find who they are, using the process of autobiography that they know so well, is producing some very interesting answers which challenge the very binary structure of the complacent world in which gender was invented, and by which it has become obsessed. After all trans people did not invent gender. Gender is merely a word to signify a concept of the human imagination that belongs within and supports the foundations of patriarchal heterosexist hegemony. Feminists can take heart from the fact that within the trans community there is no hidden answer to what

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Whittle, from *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 202

<sup>9</sup> Both definitions from the online *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*.

gender is. However there are answers to how it is experienced and what those experiences mean.<sup>10</sup>

So it turns out that, working within this genre, I am not actually being as unique as I intended with my autobiographical segments; I am actually just participating in a common convention of trans\* theory. The intersection of gender, oppression, and distinct voices/stories under a patriarchal and binary-gendered society are shared between feminist theory, trans\* theory, and the next place of exploration: queer theory.

### **Separate, but necessarily entwined: intersection and kinship**

When I began this research project, I found myself excitedly explaining to a fellow student the elegant and curious ways in which gender fluidity was being described in a poem written 400 years ago. I mentioned my quest to find theories that could help me better understand what it was within me that hummed in tune with the poetry, and my fellow scholar said in an off-handed fashion, “Isn’t that *just* queer theory?” When pressed to answer why it was “just” queer theory, the student mentioned gender, sexuality, and the sort of all-encompassing nature of this theory. Defined by theorist, author, and professor of history and theory of sexuality David Halperin:

Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which is necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the poems written by John Donne, whose songs and sonnets are often cited as primary examples of metaphysical poetry, is certainly non-normative (and therefore, queer) compared to the love sonnets, devotional poems, and pastorals written by others

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Whittle, from *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 200

<sup>11</sup> Qtd. In Sullivan, 43

during his era. So why is this thesis not “just another” queer theory evaluation of 17<sup>th</sup> century poetry? The answer has to do with the need for specificity within the same space occupied by queer and gender-based theories and criticisms. Instead of being broadly interested in highlighting or making arguments about literature based on gender roles, general otherness, or subversiveness, trans\* theory should be recognizable as something that allows a shift in the readers’ viewpoints towards an understanding that would not otherwise occur.

Queer theory is crucially enabling for trans\* theory, and like feminist theory, it is important to consider it in conjunction with trans\* theory. I like to think of these theories as individual light bulbs on a strand of faerie lights – together they can cause surprising amounts of illumination about gender and sexuality, and if one burns out the entire strand becomes dark. Feminist theory must account for and acknowledge queer theory which must account for and acknowledge trans\* theory; each theory works to make our collective understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality greater over time.

To provide an example of why trans\* theory is important as an evaluative tool for literature, let us take a look at a classically interesting and contentious Donne poem, “The Ecstasy,” with a few different viewpoints of why it is an important poem for feminist, queer, and trans\* criticism.<sup>12</sup> With seventy-six lines broken into nineteen quatrains, it is a bit too long to reproduce here in its entirety, but I will reproduce certain segments to showcase Donne’s unique and inventive imagery. The main conceit of “The Ecstasy” is that two lovers are sitting on a river bank, their souls leave their bodies

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<sup>12</sup> Note: I utilize the 1983 edition of the anthology *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne: Second Edition*, edited by Theodore Redpath, wherein the spelling of “The Ecstasy” has been modernized from “The Extasie,” a common spelling variant.

and interact together, and then they return to their hosts. Though the conceit seems quintessentially metaphysical, the purpose behind the action in the poem is a source of debate, volleying this poem back and forth between a clever seduction plot to an ethereal battle, or in my trans\* theory reading, an introspection and internal mingling of gender and selfhood.

In her essay, “‘This Dialogue of One: A Feminist Reading of Donne’s ‘Exstasie,’” Janel Mueller indicates multiple points of interest regarding the characters in the poem, the implications of procreation, and the role of the silent female juxtaposed with two men. She highlights the opening stanza of the poem:

Where. Like a pillow on a bed,  
A pregnant bank swell’d up, to rest  
The violet’s reclining head,  
Sat we two, one another’s best.<sup>13</sup>

Combined with a “pregnant bank,” the mention of “eye-beams twisted” in stanza two indicate copulation, and the protection of the wild violet by the pregnant mother it grows upon.<sup>14</sup> Mueller chides the use of “man” instead of a more neutral term, and concludes with the interpretation that negotiations between the parties in the poem end in furthering phallogocentrism.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Donne, ed. Redpath, p. 218, lines 1-8

14 Eye-beams were shafts of light that were believed to extend from the eyeballs, and Mueller implies that their twisting action in the poem indicates physical connection.

15 Mueller’s word choice; “In post-structuralist, esp. feminist, theory: a structure or style of thought, speech, or writing (often considered as typical of traditional western philosophy, culture, or literature), deconstructed as expressing male attitudes and reinforcing male dominance; phallogocentrism implicitly communicated in or through language” from the *OED* online.

Although I do not disagree with Mueller's reading of "The Ecstasy," I am more readily drawn to an interpretation that favors equality between sexes (or rather, a sort of equality through mutual body negation), exploration of genders, and a fair amount of role reversal. I agree with Ben Saunders when he recalls the lovers' attempt at spiritual transcendence in a Neoplatonic paradox of both "affirm[ing] *and* deny[ing] the body."<sup>16</sup> The two lovers seem caught, in Saunders's view, between the Neoplatonic notion that physical love is less worthy than spiritual love, and the exact inverse of that, where physical love is prized. Both Saunders and Mueller find interest in the fourth stanza:

As, 'twixt two equal armies, Fate  
Suspends uncertain victory,  
Our souls (which to advance their state)  
Were gone out) hung 'twixt her, and me.<sup>17</sup>

Mueller declares that the two parties entering negotiation (the word Donne uses to describe their interaction in the next stanza) are equal, but notes that the dominate voice in the poem is masculine, and the "uncertain victory" seems to have been won by the speaker by the end of the poem.<sup>18</sup> Saunders does not name a victor in the negotiation, but focuses rather on the two "equal armies" of the first line of that stanza with "our souls" in the third line, bringing the focus more on the narrator's inability to either fully accept his lover in body, or fully commit to disembodiment together.<sup>19</sup> Both of these

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<sup>16</sup> Saunders, p. 143; additionally, the *OED* online defines Neoplatonism as "A philosophical and religious system based on Platonic ideas and originating with Plotinus in the 3rd cent.a.d., which emphasizes the distinction between an eternal world accessible to thought and the changing physical world accessible to the senses, and combines this with a mystical belief in the possibility of union with a supreme being from which all reality is held to derive." Essentially, this is the belief that the soul is the essence and importance of a person, as opposed to the body.

<sup>17</sup> Donne, ed. Redpath, p. 218, lines 13-16

<sup>18</sup> Mueller, p. 42

<sup>19</sup> Saunders, p. 144

readings analyze gender and sex, but there are certainly trans\* readings of this poem, too, where the act of physical and spiritual combination and separation can be read as the mingling of lovers, the exchanging of genders, or even the internal musings of a single person.

Recall the first stanza of the poem, wherein the lovers are resting on a bank. Their hands are joined together, their eyes are interlocked and in the third stanza they seem to be merging together when: “So to intergraft our hands, as yet/Was all out means to make us one.”<sup>20</sup> My proposal is that this is one person, gazing Narcissus-like into the reflective surface of a still river, and negotiating dichotomously gendered halves of their own soul. Granted, this is an incredibly unconventional reading of this poem (and it is by no means the only trans\* reading that could be gleaned from this), but consider the characters of the poem, and the language to describe them as the action progresses: first they are two, they try to become one, Fate holds their “uncertain victory” as they negotiate as their souls hang between them, they speak together while unaware of which soul fragment is which, then the souls flow back into the bodies, and finally, the entire exchange between them is called a “Dialogue of One” in the last stanza.

Without the theory that this is actually one person gazing at themselves, this poem still contains moments of overt gender combining and togetherness, where the male soul and female soul are indistinguishable, as in the eighth quatrain:

‘This Ecstasy doth unperplex,’

**We** said, ‘and tell **us** what **we** love;

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<sup>20</sup> Donne, ed. Redpath, p. 218, lines 9-10

**We** see by this it was not sex;

**We** see **we** saw not what did move:<sup>21</sup>

It might be helpful to define the word “ecstasy” here before moving past this stanza.

The *OED* definition of the word, is “the state of being ‘beside oneself’, thrown into a frenzy or a stupor, with anxiety, astonishment, fear, or passion.”<sup>22</sup> If they are read as

lovers locked in tender gaze, then certainly passion is the reason for this trance;

however, if this is one person staring at themselves in the water during a moment of

gender confusion or identity struggle, then the trance could indeed be from anxiety,

astonishment, or fear. Personally, the moments of self-discovering my trans\*ness were

not met with joy, but with vomiting, crying, and hiding from my friends and family.

The narrator does say that the ecstasy unperplexes, that is to say, it “ends perplexity, confusion, or affliction.”<sup>23</sup> It could be argued that through this day-long passion trance, two potential lovers experienced an extensive session of getting to know

each other from the inside out, but it could also be argued that this unperplexing came

from a day of introspection and negotiation between a suppressed half (that Mueller

read as being the female person/soul) and “That abler soul, which thence doth

flow,/Defects of loneliness controls.”<sup>24</sup> This “abler soul” dominating does not

necessarily read as a male dominating a female in this trans\* analysis, but rather the

gender that the individual decided to identify as being donned as the external

presentation. The last line of the 17<sup>th</sup> stanza utilizes the word “Prince,” which both

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<sup>21</sup> Donne, ed. Redpath, p. 219, lines 29-32; emphasis is mine.

<sup>22</sup> From the *OED* online, “ecstasy” definition n. 2a., followed by n.1.

<sup>23</sup> From the *OED* online, “unperplex”

<sup>24</sup> Donne, ed. Redpath, p. 219, lines 43-44

Mueller and the *OED* note is a gender neutral term for a person of power during Donne's lifetime.<sup>25</sup> The last three stanzas are worth reproducing, in order to enunciate the assertion that the narrator is one person and their reflection throughout the majority of the poem, then a single person in reflection at the end:

'So must pure lovers' souls descend  
To affections, and to faculties,  
Which sense may reach and apprehend,  
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

'To our bodied turn we then, that so  
Weak men on love reveal'd may look;  
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,  
But yet the body is his book:

'And if some lover, such as we,  
Have heard this Dialogue of One,  
Let him still mark us, he shall see  
Small change, when we are to bodies gone.'<sup>26</sup>

In the third line of the first stanza of this group, the non-personified "sense" must grab the souls from the air, back into the body, and back in control of bodily functions. Why? Because otherwise a gender-neutral person of power will remain deprived of personal liberty, in other words, the sexed body needs to be gendered, or it will not experience the freedom a body provides.

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<sup>25</sup> Mueller, p. 41; and the *OED* online, "prince"

<sup>26</sup> Donne, ed. Redpath, p. 220, lines 64-76

The intriguing parts of the next stanza are the last two lines, which acknowledge the mysterious (i.e. unknown) qualities of souls, but notes that a man who is interested in that mysterious soul can find knowledge about it by “reading” that soul’s body (i.e., sex). In the final stanza, the interesting phrase “Dialogue of One” stands out as a marker of one person, standing up (on the riverbank, perhaps), almost challenging anyone else in a similar situation to try to find (“mark us”) any noticeable difference on their body following the great crisis of self they just had.

The importance of this reading is that it has a few distinct features that separate it from a feminist or queer reading. I added in a single line of autobiography, I did not focus on sexuality, but rather on the transitional aspects of the narrator’s gender(s) in conflict with each other, and perhaps in conflict with the expectations of others. This reading could have been considered a queer reading, but I would like to pinpoint the areas where trans\* theory can diverge and create dialogues that might not have otherwise come to light. Here are some of the aspects of trans\* theory that I have noted from reading many essays that are specifically noted as being “trans:”

1. Though concerned with the experience of gender minorities in the face of the normative binary, trans\* theory specifically focuses on the transition *between* genders and sexes, and acknowledges an additional multitude of genders and sexes beyond a binary.
2. Trans\* theory incorporates autobiography and the individuality of the writer/speaker/narrator as an integral part of criticism. (My own autobiography in this thesis may be more extensive than previous and future works of trans\*

theory criticism, but it also stands as an exercise in practice and example, not the definitive standard.)

3. Trans\* theory acknowledges both queer and heteronormative sexualities within the non-binary gendered populations. A distinct difference is made between gender and sexuality in trans\* theory, though the intersection of and difference between the two is important to analyze within texts.
4. Like queer theory and feminist theory, trans\* theory encourages the intersection of gender with race, class, size, sexuality, and other ways of walking in the world that might be experienced differently from individual to individual.
5. Though a more specific theory than queer theory, the use of the moniker “trans” with an asterisk (\*) is used as a blanket term to highlight the inclusion of multiple forms of transgender and transsexual denominations.

Although these points are certainly arguable and not etched into stone, this list will serve as the working parameters of trans\* theory throughout the rest of this thesis, and hopefully beyond this work and into the works of others. In the next chapter, previous queer theory evaluations of renaissance era works will be compared to trans\* theory analyses.

## Chapter II: The (Already) Queer Renaissance

### **Narrative: This is not my mother's fault**

I can see how it would be really tempting to look for that one defining, external factor from my childhood that made a sweet, petite, dress-wearing, doe-eyed, princess of a girly-girl morph into a beer-swilling, belly-scratching, burly dude of a manly-man: I had two brothers; my mom is fairly feminine, but wears hiking boots and isn't afraid to get dirty; I played both sports and video games from a young age. No. These are simply stereotypes, including the assumption many people make that I was girly as a youth, and that I'm very masculine as an adult. I was a chubby, lonely, genderless, introverted kid who felt very disconnected from both my body and society throughout childhood and adolescence. I thought my penis would grow in at puberty; my brothers had tiny penises when we were all young enough to bathe together, and I assume *theirs* grew in (though I've never asked or checked), so why not mine? I thought that sure, they call me Deanna, "she," and sister or daughter now, but my family will understand when my penis grows in. My brother Duane and I both tried peeing while standing up, like Dad, and neither one of us were successful. I'll still write poetry, play with both Legos and dolls, draw comics, and kick my brother's ass at Mario 3 – I'll still be me, but when my penis comes in I can cut my hair. Right?

I was enrolled in youth soccer from ages 7-15, and I loved it, but I was also prone to daydreaming if the ball was on the other side of the pitch. I'd make up stories about the players, give them secret nicknames, and, once puberty started to hit, I'd fall into mini-crushes with "Amelia," "Gertrude," and "Paige," the fictional names for

opponents I would inevitably be hip-checking to the sidelines when they entered my territory. I played defense in soccer – is that a metaphor? I have always been a bit guarded. Before I was in soccer, I was enrolled in a tap/jazz dance class. I hated it, but only partially because it was so painfully feminine; I hated it because I had to wear a leotard, I was chubby, all of the other kids were older than me, and the dance studio had walls made entirely of mirrors. I have always been disconnected from my body in many ways, and seeing my pudgy gut stuffed into a Silly Putty-colored length of spandex, in “surround visual” was horrifying. Every class I would cling to the car door, cry myself sick, curl up on the floor of the locker room – anything to avoid seeing myself in those mirrors. Those mirrors wouldn’t let me hide in my own mind – my happy place where my body didn’t matter, I didn’t have long hair, I didn’t look and act “funny,” and where I could live in the world of my colorful imagination.

Yes, my mother enrolled me in tap/jazz, had me keep my hair long, had my ears pierced when I turned 13, and put me in dresses when I was little. This is not my mother’s fault – any of it – unless you consider the possibility that there may be a trans\* gene, and that I inherited it from her. Like most babies born with female genitalia, it was assumed by my family that I was a girl. How many parents, in the early 1980’s, had a sit-down conversation about gender, societal expectations and roles, and clothing preferences when their child was barely out of diapers? To my mother’s credit, she unenrolled me from tap/jazz after the a year of me whining and throwing fits before every session, and she stopped making me wear dresses after I balked in stores and started secretly stealing my dad’s clothing to wear instead of my own. We had a tumultuous relationship for much of my adolescence, but I have since become close to

her – and she admits that with hindsight she has regrets about not pulling me from public school (where I was beaten and tormented for years), and that she sees all of her “mistakes” years after I left the house. I was her first child, and both of my brothers are cisgendered,<sup>27</sup> fit, athletic, and heterosexual. My mother did the best she could for me with the limited experience she had; to the contrary of what some people assert, my home life growing up did not contribute to my genderqueerness. Many efforts were made to “cis” me until it was understood and accepted that I could not and would never be a cisgendered person.

### **Why 17<sup>th</sup> century “metaphysical” poetry?**

With the need for a trans\*-specific theory identified, and the parameters of the theory briefly sketched, the next question is: what does any of this have to do with certain poems written in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century? Part of the answer to this question involves the revolving designation of the term “metaphysical” to describe certain poems and poets. The term can be somewhat confusing, since it has historically described everything from the neutral term for philosophy of “reality, including questions about being, substance, time and space, causation, change and identity,”<sup>28</sup> and to the often negatively-connoted word for some forms of spirituality. In the poetic sense, “metaphysical” as a designation is given to poets who use of conceits, irony, paradox,

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<sup>27</sup> “Cis” is a semi-controversial term that is often used for people of normative gender. From the *OED*: “Latin *cis* prep. ‘on this side of’, opposed to *trans* or *ultra*, across, beyond.” In my personal experience, “cisgender” is often most controversial to those who do not feel a “cis” label should be placed on people who are in the majority.

<sup>28</sup> “Metaphysical,” from the online *OED*, 1a.

and religious ruminations that often wrestle with bodily disassociation and spiritual transcendence.

Whether these poets and poems are being called “metaphysical” or not, their imagery and conceits that are often quite queer, and occasionally (by nature of containing transcendental experiences) wrestle with some of the core themes that are often associated with being trans;\* namely, the discordance between mind and body, the struggle to understand sexuality as an internal drive, often debated without the need for genitalia, and the very definitions of “man” and “woman.” With hundreds of years between the composition of these poems and today, the question of whether or not the 17<sup>th</sup> century has anything left to teach us that is relevant to modern cultures is answered with a simple, but resounding “yes!” As evidenced in the analysis of Donne’s “The Ecstasy,” in Chapter I, many questions raised and wrestled with in older poetry are elements of humanity more so than chronological era. Whether the narrator in that poem is falling in love with a woman he connects with in his soul, or is a person having a crisis of self and working through it, a modern audience can identify with those themes.

Another reason I chose 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poetry to pair with trans\* theory is because more works from diverse eras need to be evaluated with trans\* theory. The experience of being trans,\* like being queer, transcends race, ethnicity, country, and culture, and the works of literature evaluated with these theories should represent the gamut of literature itself. Granted, 17<sup>th</sup> century England does not seem like the most diverse subject, but trans\* theory is still in its infancy.

## **Previous evaluations of queerness in renaissance works**

My inspiration for this project was fueled by my love for the poetry of Donne, whose works stood out to me in an English literature survey class as decidedly different from the work of others from a similar time period. Donne's poetic conceits are intriguing, sometimes shockingly queer, sometimes crude, almost always witty, often confusing, and hold a place of great respect on my shelf and in my heart. The shocking discovery of queer familiarity within 400 year old poetry is not unique to me; many scholars and authors have identified queer themes throughout the literature of the early modern period, from Shakespeare to religious lyrics.

One overtly queer work by Donne, "Sappho to Philaenis," deserves a mention here as an example of what is available in terms of queer scholarship for the early modern period. Saunders, Mueller, Paula Blank, and others have written about the uniqueness of Donne writing about female masturbation as the voice of Sappho, and about how the reader is to interpret a work written by a man in the (erotic) voice of a woman. Is it voyeuristic? Is it some kind of lesbian appropriation? Blank wrestles with the authenticity of Donne's lesbian eroticism, but eventually states that:

It is hard to say whether "Sappho to Philaenis" reveals anything about how women loved one another in an earlier age. What the poem does suggest, however, is that Donne's interest in homo-erotics was not heterosexist but rather transcended the gender of his speakers and those whom they loved; approached to his poetics must on that account alone be "queered." And Donne's poem suggests something more – that erotic desire is always desire for an other, that sameness is key not to the "nature" of homosexuality but to a cultural (homo)poetics that produces identities with others.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Blank, p. 366

The queer focus tends to center on gender in conjunction with sexuality, which is incredibly interesting to me, but not entirely what I am interested in for this trans\* theory evaluation. This poem is not the only “queered” poem written by Donne; I agree with Blank that approaching any work of Donne automatically elicits a queer reading. However, as queer as Donne is, I wish to explore the poem “The Flaming Heart,” written by Crashaw, who has been dubbed “the queerest poet of the 17<sup>th</sup> century” by Richard Rambuss, author of *Closet Devotions*, the chapter “Pleasure and Devotion: The Body of Jesus and Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric,” in *Queering the Renaissance*, and the editor of *The English Poems of Richard Crashaw*, the anthology I consulted for this work.

A published author in his lifetime, Crashaw wrote primarily religious poems that mimicked George Herbert’s *The Temple* with his work, *Steps to the Temple*, yet also shares similarities with Milton’s *Poems* though, Rambuss notes, Milton and Crashaw were religiously and politically different.<sup>30</sup> Rambuss emphasizes Crashaw’s sexually charged devotional verse, stating that “Just about all the figures in Crashaw’s poetry – male and female, human and heavenly – wind up being devotionally versatile, both penetrable and themselves penetrative.”<sup>31</sup>

This penetration motif is present in “The Flaming Heart,” through the final line, which ends in a bizarre, almost pornographic (by early modern standards) orgasm. The poem is a long, rapid-fire series of images, starting with the narrator breaking the barrier

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<sup>30</sup> Ed. Rambuss, p. xxxiv

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxvii

between author and reader (the “4<sup>th</sup> wall” in theatre terms) to announce their dissatisfaction with a painting of Teresia [sic] as a seraphim. The narrator then tells us:

You must transpose the picture quite,  
And spell it wrong to read it right;  
Read him for her, and her for him;  
And call the saint the seraphim.

Painter, what didst thou understand  
To put her dart into his hand!  
See, even the years and size of him  
Shows this the mother seraphim.<sup>32</sup>

At a first read-through, the wording is peculiar to me but not immediately queer; this could simply be a matter of an irritated client demanding that the painter he hired swap the faces in the painting to make the saint the more majestic and heavenly of the two figures. However, as the poem progresses, the narrator still seems to be calling out painting orders, but they (the narrator’s gender is unknown) speak with such rapidity in rhyming couplets that it is easy to get lost in the fracas of who has darts and who the glowing cheeks, and who is now male and female, and whether the narrator is referring to the formerly painted seraphim as “him” or “her,” and which figure is now Teresia.

Rambuss is keenly aware of the gender transitions that occur in “The Flaming Heart,” and he labels Teresia’s gendering as “gender ecstasy.”<sup>33</sup> He never takes the genital and gender swapping as a trans\* motif, but rather sees Teresia’s use of shafts and darts, then the return of the darts to the seraphim as predominately homoerotic. Just like the previous poetic analysis, I do not disagree with this reading of “The Flaming

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<sup>32</sup> Crashaw, ed. Rambuss, p. 238, lines 9-16

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. lxx

Heart.” That being said, I read far more into the genital swapping than Rambuss does. Where Rambuss sees a female gaining male parts and having sex with a male who has gained female parts as homoerotic, I see it as genderqueer. Technically speaking, the sex Teresia has with the seraphim is heterosexual, because they have made a full swap with each other. After the initial swap, the narrator chides the painter again, telling them:

    this speaks pure mortal frame;  
And mocks the female frost love’s manly flame.  
One would suspect thou meant’st to paint  
Some weak, inferior, woman saint.  
But had thy pale-faced purple took  
Fire from the burning cheeks of that bright book  
Thou wouldst on her have heaped up all  
That could be found seraphical;  
Whate’er this youth of fire wears fair,  
Rosy fingers, radiant hair,  
Glowing cheek, and glistening wings,  
All those fair and fragrant things,  
But before all, that fiery dart  
Had filled the hand of this great heart.

    Do then as equal right requires,  
    Since his the blushes be, and hers the fires<sup>34</sup>

In the second line of this quote, the narrator assigns Teresia “love’s manly flame,” and then they assume the painter would have given every attribute of the (male) seraphim to Teresia, had they painted her correctly. But, the last four lines of this quote indicate, that the “fiery dart” (Teresia’s manly flame, presumably a penis), had “filled the hand of

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<sup>34</sup> Crashaw, Ed. Rambuss, p. 239, lines 23-38

this great heart.” This line is confusing, aside from the confusion over Teresia and the seraphim’s genitals, because the line reads that “this great heart” is the narrator’s heart, yet Teresia’s imagined dart filled the hand of his heart. Upon consultation of the *OED*, the heart can be “described as having ears, eyes, or other organs or limbs, by analogy with the faculties of the mind, understanding, or emotions that these may be said to represent.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the narrator has perhaps fallen in love with Teresia, or has at least imagined a scenario where her “dart” filled his emotions. The final two lines of this section repeat his orders to the painter to assign the seraphim the female attributes and Teresia the male attributes, based on their internal identities of modesty or manly fire.

Continuing through the poem, I completely agree with Rambuss’s assertion that Crashaw’s devotional poems are erotic, and becoming downright surreal as Teresia (imagined by the narrator as the seraphim), begins “shooting thy shaft and thee,” shooting darts to many “well-pierced hearts” and causing them to live and die amongst the darts s/he has flung into them.<sup>36</sup> S/he “sends a seraphim at every shot,” and her/his barrage of darts is described by the narrator as “Heav’n’s great artillery in each love-spun line,” describing Teresia in ever growing sexual fervor and rank, as the originally male (now female) seraphim “kindly takes the shame.”<sup>37</sup> Directly after this nearly pornographic mental image of Teresia, the narrator shifts and says:

Give me the suff’ring seraphim.  
His be the bravery of all those bright things,

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<sup>35</sup> From *OED* online, “heart”

<sup>36</sup> Crashaw, ed. Rambuss, p. 239, lines 48-50; additionally, it should be noted here that the word “die” was often used as a metaphor for an orgasm in early modern poetry.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239, lines 54, 56, and 58.

The glowing cheeks, the glistening wings;  
 The rosy hand, the radiant dart;  
 Leave her alone the flaming heart  
     Leave her that; and thou shalt leave her  
 Not one loose shaft but love's whole quiver  
 For in love's field was never found  
 A nobler weapon than a wound.  
 Love's passives are his activ'st part.  
 The wounded is the wounding heart.  
 O heart! The equal poise of love's both parts  
 Big alike with wounds and darts.<sup>38</sup>

Although it seems unclear, with all of the masculine fire imagery used for Teresia, the seraphim in this section is, I believe, the original seraphim who was male before being painted as female. By the fourth line in, the imagery is more Teresia-like, and the next line instructs the painter to leave her the flaming heart, likely meaning a “vibrant emotional center,” and not a Christian “sacred heart.”<sup>39</sup> In his “Pleasure and Devotion” chapter of *Queering the Renaissance*, Rambuss explains that the last line of this section is the seraphim receiving his genitalia, and describes this as “a declaration which once again bottoms up the poem’s hierarchy of sexual positions.”<sup>40</sup>

I have interjected bits of my own trans\* reading of the poem throughout, but the ending is where I differ a bit from Rambuss. He comments on the sex-swapping and homoeroticism, but essentially ends the poem early with the comment that the seraphim

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 240, lines 64-76.

<sup>39</sup> According to the *OED*, the “sacred heart” was not used in Catholic imagery until after this poem was written.

<sup>40</sup> Rambuss, ed. Goldberg, p. 271

has his penis back and all is subversively well. However, the last few lines are interesting and confusing in terms of the narrator and painter in the plot:

By all the heav'ns thou hast in him  
(Fair sister of the seraphim!)  
By all of him we have in thee;  
Leave nothing of my self in me.  
Let me so read thy life, that I  
Unto all life of mine may die.<sup>41</sup>

Both characters of the painting (or fantasy that the narrator is having) are wounded and have darts by the end of the poem, implying the Rambuss commentary of Crashaw's penetration obsession holds true for these characters. However, in this post-coital state it is revealed that Teresia is the seraphim's sister, and that all of heaven is in him and all of him is in her. This is a striking revelation of intersexuality, which is not necessarily "trans,\*" but is certainly far from the expected binary. This explains the difficulty in determining which sex or gender was assigned to who as the poem progressed; this might have been intentionally confusing to blur the lines between male and female in the fantasy the narrator created while describing what he wanted to the painter. In the final three lines, the narrator asks that nothing of himself be left, and that they to read their life (at this point the person they are talking to seems to be Teresia/seraphim, not the painter) and into their life die, or rather, orgasm. The end result of this poem, for me, is that of a narrator who is sexually attracted to an intersexed character, struggles with the implications of this (and therefore assigns masculine qualities to the female

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<sup>41</sup> Crashaw, ed. Rambuss, p. 241, lines 103-108

form, and feminine qualities to the male form), and ultimately releases himself just as the Teresia/seraphim did earlier.

Overall this is an incredibly difficult poem to sink into, and the imagery is just as devotionally and sexually bizarre as Rambuss described. It is certainly queer, but there is a massively important gender and genitalia aspect to the poem that is deeper than homoeroticism, yet lacking in many queer readings of this poem. Moving away from feminist and queer readings juxtaposed with trans\* readings of poems, the next two chapters are devoted to readings of poems that speak to trans\* identity and body modification.

### Chapter III: The Negotiable Body

#### **Narrative: Do I owe you my surgery?**

There are multiple tropes I have come to rely on when the inevitable moment of “outing” myself as genderqueer occurs within every friendship I have had. First, I have to explain to them that I was born with girl parts but knew from an early age that I should have boy parts, because often when I say, “I am transgendered,” people automatically assume I mean male-to-female (MTF), not female-to-male (FTM), regardless of how I act and look. Second, I ease the (often shocked) friend into the notion that I am simultaneously transgendered, a bit non-gendered at times, and sometimes what I like to call “between genders,” as though I’m simply window shopping the spectrum and haven’t found the right sale price yet. It’s typically around this point that the friend remembers that I am married to a man, so they’ll say something like, “But, I thought you were gay?” To this shift from gender to sexuality, I typically say something like, “I’m queer,” or “I’m bisexual,” or “I tend to just be attracted to people – all people everywhere on the gender spectrum,” or “I don’t have gender and I don’t tend to see gender unless it’s told or presented to me;” the answer varies depending on my mood and who I am talking to.

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It’s one of those gorgeous, dewy spring mornings in Eugene – the kind of morning that inspire me to actually wake up with the sunrise and chitchat with friends before a full cup of coffee has been consumed. I’m trying to focus on making breakfast for the four of us, but I can’t help listening to the conversation between my partner and

my two houseguests, who are also a couple. As Candice (one of the houseguests) quipped the other day, “between the four of us, is there any part of the LGBTQI spectrum we *don’t* cover?” Candice, Candice’s partner Addison, my partner Bryce,<sup>42</sup> and I are all arguing about whether the terminology for people with non-binary genders is offensive, confusing, appropriated, too inclusive, or too exclusive.

Candice makes a few good points, noting that the words “transgendered” and “transsexual” have technical, medical backgrounds and to have individuals, society, and/or academia alter these definitions might cause insurance providers to deny hormones and surgeries to patients, since these treatments will no longer be seen as the “cure” for everyone with the “disorder.” Bryce argues that we need different language – that the alteration of terms like “transgendered,” “transsexual,” and the now passé term “transvestite” are the terms the LGBT community and general society have accepted for people who fall outside of the gender binary, so the terms “genderqueer,” “gender fluid,” and “gender non-conforming,” as well as the people who identify as transgendered but do not want surgery or hormones, are all under the umbrella of the new term “trans\*” because they all buck the typicality of gender standards, which is totally acceptable.

Candice flashes back that genderqueer and gender fluid people are not necessarily transsexuals, and that the assumption that everyone under the trans\* umbrella wants neutral bathrooms, neutral pronouns, and neutral places to exist is basically a denial of a transsexual’s gender identity. If she is female, she is female – and

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<sup>42</sup> I have chosen to change the names of those personally involved in this stories, because there is a firmly understood rule in the trans\* community: you do *not* “out” other people. The only person you should ever “out” is yourself, unless you have the explicit permission of the other person(s).

does not want to be forced or expected to use a gender neutral bathroom; she wants to use the women's bathroom. Personally, I think every bathroom should be neutral. Why do we segregate ourselves based on gender? If it is out of fear that women will be raped, or children will be exposed to stranger's private parts, then maybe all restrooms should be "family style" individual stalls, with a toilet, sink, urinal, and baby changing station in every one. Sure, this is impractical. But so are the legislative pieces coming out lately that bar trans\* people from using the "wrong" restroom – based on the judgments of what other people deem as "wrong" for that person. If man-power, money, time, and energy can be spent policing bathrooms, couldn't it also be spent making them single-stalled, family-friendly, and gender neutral?

I'm just trying not to overcook everybody's different order of eggs. Bryce likes them with the yolk gelatinous (not runny) and the whites solid, Candice wants them over-easy, Addison just wants toast (no eggs), and I tend to take whatever eggs have broken yolks, burnt bits, or uneven seasoning. I mean, it's just breakfast...but it's really important to make and serve something nice that everyone can enjoy and appreciate, right?

### **“Curing” gender through body modification**

The most recent update to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) was released in 2013, and it contained a significant change in the wording of “gender identity disorder” (GID) to “gender dysphoria.”<sup>43</sup> The APA consulted with trans\*-identified people before

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<sup>43</sup> “Gender Dysphoria,” *DSM-5*, n.p.

changing the diagnosis in the *DSM-5*, and published a list of reasons why the wording needed to change. These changes were made, according to the APA, to remove the stigma surrounding the words “disorder” and “dysfunction,” while ensuring that individuals with gender dysphoria could still obtain treatment and maintain a clinical diagnosis.<sup>44</sup> The problem with gender dysphoria (and the previous diagnosis of GID), is that clinical diagnosis from a manual begets a correctional treatment for the psychological difference, and treatment for GID (pre-2013) often meant hormone therapy followed by one or more surgeries.

These treatments are colossally invasive, with the expected side effects including scarring, sterility (in most), and increased risks for heart and liver damage, and the unintended occasional consequences including loss of nerve sensation, loss of limb function (in the case of phalloplasty, which is the construction of a penis from arm or leg tissue), cancer, and organ degradation. Hormone therapy and surgeries are often the answer to the “problem” of a trans\* person feeling their gender is discordant with the sexual aspects of their body, and many people in the trans\* community are relatively satisfied with the results of these procedures (compared to not having the procedures). However, I feel that something is missing from the currently held standard of care for differently-gendered individuals, whether the care is the previous *modi operandi* for GID, or the seemingly more patient-led methods encouraged by the new *DSM-5* for gender dysphoria.

Personally, my greatest frustration with the use of hormones and surgeries as treatment is that the end product is a person with a modified body, but not a body that

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., n.p.

genetically matches the desired gender. It seems contentious right now to stomp my foot and state that a flaccid chunk of my arm sewn onto my groin would not feel like an actual penis; urine would pass through it, but an additional pumping apparatus would be required to make the penis a sexual, rather than ornamental body part. However, in fifty or one hundred years, with laboratory-grown organs or stem cell growth methods, it might be a valid complaint to protest against the phalloplasty surgeries of today. For right now in 2015, I personally feel discordant with the way my body and mind fit into the general gender binary, but with medical treatment for gender dysphoria, I sometimes feel discordance between my mind and my own (modified) body.

Just as there are many trans\* people who feel secure and happy in their bodies following medical transition procedures, there are also many trans\*-identified, or differently gendered people who would rather leave their bodies unaltered, in favor of general societal acceptance of an individual's identity regardless of their medical record. This desire to be physically unaltered, or to be accepted in "natural" (i.e., existing without medical alteration, but not to infer that alteration is unnatural) state is a theme I frequently encounter in the works of Andrew Marvell, and specifically in his poem "The Mower against Gardens."

Marvell was a tutor, Latinist, and politician, and was not celebrated as a poet until his work was published posthumously in 1681.<sup>45</sup> Although it is not known exactly when "The Mower against Gardens" was written, it contains pastoral elements and is one of several of his poems themed around gardens and those who dwell in and tend them. Pastoral poems often express a lament of a shepherd missing their flock, or some

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<sup>45</sup> Smith, p. 130

other sentimental longing for something lost; similar in theme but curiously unique, this specific poem contains a tension between negative descriptions of human interference with Nature (personified with a capital “N”) and descriptions of what Nature was and should be. The references to walled gardens and a return to what was perfect in another era seems to be a clear reference to Eden, but Nigel Smith, editor of the thoroughly detailed Marvell anthology used here, denies this as a traditional interpretation of the poem, and notes that the frustration present in the poem is likely related to the anxiety surrounding the indulgences of “garden fanaticism.”<sup>46</sup> Additionally, some modern criticisms of the poem suggest readings of the enclosed garden as: a metaphor for imperialism, or women through the sexualization of plants.<sup>47</sup> The poem does have an over-arching theme of nature over human intervention, but drives this message with words of disgust and a fear of altered spaces, which is relatable to me as someone who has not had surgical alteration on my body yet and fears the negative side effects of the procedures.

The poem begins with two abrasive lines: “Luxurious man, to bring his vice in use/Did after him the world seduce.”<sup>48</sup> The definition of the word “luxurious,” in this case is “lascivious, lecherous, or unchaste,” and when combined so closely with the words “vice” and “seduce,” the poem takes on an uncomfortable tone immediately.<sup>49</sup> The plant life is described as alluring to man, and Nature is described as pure. Man immediately encloses Nature and seemingly tricks them into staying within the walls.

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<sup>46</sup> Smith, p. 131

<sup>47</sup> McKeon and Hill, qtd. in Smith, p. 132

<sup>48</sup> Marvell, ed. Smith, p. 133, lines 1-2

<sup>49</sup> From *OED* online, “luxurious”

The next few lines describe various plants altering themselves:

The pink grew then as double as his mind;  
The nutriment did change the kind.  
With strange perfumes he did the roses taint,  
And flowers themselves were taught to paint.  
The tulip, white, did for complexion seek;  
And learned to interline its cheek:<sup>50</sup>

The unwitting plants, doing as they are told by someone they trust, alter themselves permanently to please man, yet man continues demanding alterations to his whims: grafting plants together so much that the plants themselves cannot tell which stock they came from. The plants are slowly losing their identity as man tends them.

By breeding the pit out of the cherry, the narrator notes that, “in the cherry he does Nature vex,/To procreate without sex.”<sup>51</sup> These lines are especially potent to me, because the societal, cultural (and often legal) expectation that trans\* people all must uniformly participate in medical transition means that, like the altered cherry, trans\* people are often rendered sterile. The last lines of the poem do not solve the rather depressing actions within the rest of the poem, but rather bring up the question of who the narrator is:

While the sweet fields do lie forgot:  
Where willing Nature does to all dispense  
A wild and fragrant innocence:  
And fauns and fairies do the meadows till,  
More by their presence than their skill.

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<sup>50</sup> Marvell, ed. Smith, p. 133-134, lines 9-14

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 134, lines 29-30

Their statues polished by some ancient hand,  
    May to adorn the gardens stand:  
    But howsoe'er the figures do excel,  
    The gods themselves with **us** do dwell.<sup>52</sup>

There are still uncultivated areas outside of human touch, according to the first few lines, and mythological creatures exist in that untouched space. The last line finally forces the reader to question who the narrator is; they use the word “us,” which implies they are the same sort of creature as the reader, assuming the narrator is speaking to the reader directly. There is also an air of arrogance in the line with the assertion that the gods favor whoever (or whatever) the narrator is. The only real clue as to the narrator’s origins is in the title, “The Mower against Gardens,” which implies that the narrator is the mower, and is self-hating in the sense that the thing that defines him within the universe of this poem (mowing) is the product of the thing he hates (gardens).

Continuing this conceit with a trans\* interpretation, medical body modification may or may not seem like the correct option for every trans\* person, but regardless of the quality of the aesthetic of the final product of the modifications, it is ultimately the choice of the individual to continue the modification or not, though it is, perhaps, the other mowers (so to speak) who keep the walls up and continue the need for pit-free cherries and variegated tulips. At the heart of the debate over whether or not to modify a body to suit an internal (or societal) need for acceptance is the question of where the self is, and whether that self has gender or a sense of sex. This question was explored in Donne’s “The Ecstasy,” but is also heavily present when explored through the sexual negation within more of Marvell’s poetry.

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<sup>52</sup> Marvell, ed. Smith, p. 135, lines 32-40; emphasis mine.

### **Leaving the body in favor of neutrality or negation**

Consider the action of jumping on a trampoline: when you perform this exercise, your bodily mass vaults into the air when you bounce, and your exterior (skin, fat, superficial biological sexual characteristics, etc.) remain at the apex of the jump as the rest of you plummets back towards Earth. In those brief moments of movement, you can feel all of the bodily characteristics that cause so much societal agony, suicide, and murder to members of the trans\* community. Yet personally, my thoughts while trampolining are not, “Gee, I am such a transgendered person;” my thoughts are typically focused on the enjoyment of the moment. I imagine this sort of body irrelevance (or “forgetting” about the body in favor of an internal identity) when I read many Marvell poems.

There is a sense of physical negation in certain Marvellian conceits, like those found in “The Garden,” wherein the plants surrounding the narrator offer an alternative space that seems separated from the world of other humans, in favor of the world created by the narrator’s imagination. Smith notes in the margins of this poem that many consider it to be a poem extolling the benefits of retirement, and perhaps that sense of freedom from the constraints of daily work are what draws me closer to analyze the qualities of mental escapism from physical limitations.<sup>53</sup>

The poem begins with the narrator immediately turned off by the vain efforts men will go through to win wreaths made of plants, when the plants themselves weave into “the garlands of repose,” which gives imagery of the plants having the agency to

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<sup>53</sup> Ed. Smith, p. 153

choose to weave a hammock for the narrator.<sup>54</sup> In stanza three, the narrator states that “No white nor red was ever seen/So am’rous as this lovely green;” the white and red are glossed as the lilies and roses of passionate love.<sup>55</sup> This seems like a personal color preference or perhaps an inconsequential detail or quirk of the narrator, until later in the poem, when green resurges. In the meantime, the narrator travels farther and farther from reality, almost into a sort of Wonderland, joyfully noting in stanza five that fruit is flinging itself into his mouth, and:

The nectarine, and curious peach,  
Into my hands themselves do reach;  
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,  
Insnares with flow’rs, I fall on grass.<sup>56</sup>

The peach has the consciousness to express curiosity and act upon its whim by reaching out, and the flowers turn a bit sinister as they hold the narrator back. The next stanza is perhaps the most interesting in terms of a trans\* reading of the poem, as the thin veil of the realities of physicality melt away when the narrator closes his eyes:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasures less,  
Withdraws into its happiness:  
The mind, that ocean where each kind  
Does straight its own resemblance find;  
Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other worlds, and other seas;  
Annihilating all that’s made  
To a green thought in a green shade.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Marvell, ed. Smith, p. 155, line 8

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 156, lines 17-18

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 157, lines 36-40

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 157-158, lines 41-48

The idea that within the mind, when experiencing only its own pleasures (as opposed to the lesser pleasures of the world outside the mind), finds itself. The narrator makes no mention of gender or genitalia, or other external signifiers of who the person is in body, only that the mind, once finding itself, can create and rise above any number of imagined creations.

Who are you when you close your eyes, when you have no body? Do we define ourselves with the same categories when we are alone as when we are in large groups of people? As philosophy professor and author Jacob Hale states in his essay, “Tracing a Ghostly Memory in My Throat:”

Those of us who are dislocated from already given gender categories – both normative and non-normative ones – are dislocated in that we cannot fully inhabit any of them. We place ourselves and are placed by others in the margins of any number of gender categories, never close to the paradigmatic core of any but also never falling fully outside all. I am, i.e., not fully man nor woman, nor male nor female, nor medically-induced hermaphrodite nor drag queen nor butch leatherman nor lesbian man nor faggot butch dyke nor transsexual nor ftm nor transgendered nor third gender nor fourth gender nor...anything, since I do not fit the paradigms of any of these categories. I flit about the margins of each of these categories.<sup>58</sup>

The narrator in “The Garden” detests being around other people, perhaps because of the expectations others have. When he annihilates everything, clearing his mind as though wiping a slate, what emerges as his self is “a green thought in a green shade.”<sup>59</sup> This seemingly nonsensical sense of self is actually a logical statement in the universe of this poem, and the mind of this narrator. Remembering that earlier the narrator found green

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<sup>58</sup> Hale, p. 115

<sup>59</sup> Marvell, ed. Smith, p. 158, lines 47-48

to be amorous (as opposed to red and white), and the physical act of “falling” onto grass has a sexual connotation within the context of all of the plants extending themselves with curiosity into his hands and mouth. Therefore, the appearance of a green thought in a green shade is perhaps a sense of a sexual self existing in the absence of seeing actual sex organs. This question of self will continue in the next chapter, through the exploration of bodily transformation.

## Chapter IV: Risk Takers and Secret Keepers

**Narrative: So this one time, when I was kicked out of Macy's...**

I hadn't officially "come out" as trans\* yet in 1996 – I was a junior in high school, 16, and dating a 19 year old butch dyke, who called me her "baby dyke" and was always trying to make sexual moves on me, but I wasn't having any of it. I was really rather asexual – I was attracted to people, but had no interest in doing anything other than flirt and admire them. Holding hands was a thrill, but kissing creeped me out and caused me to sort of disassociate from my already distant body.

We used to hang out in the seedy underpass area between the downtown mall and the boardwalked Old Town. It was a place where homeless teens begged for change, shot up, found johns, smoked stolen cigarettes, and wasted 100-degree summer days in the shade of the basement arcade, The Time Zone. The manager of that piss-smelling rathole was a lecherous man who tickled the palm of my hand when we shook hands the first time we met. On this particular summer day, I had been guzzling free water from the mall fountain, and my girlfriend had sprung for a giant soda in Old Town in another futile attempt to curry my favor. We were looking for a public restroom, and decided to slog back to the mall. (Without the safety of my gang of friends, there was no way I'd wander into The Time Zone, even for a quick piss.)

The first store in the mall is Macy's, so we ducked in and raced to the women's room. Granted, if you squinted your eyes a bit you might miss the fact that my rail-thin girlfriend had breasts, but my 40Ds were difficult to miss, especially since I didn't wear a bra. However, the moment we entered the restroom we were bombarded with a

screaming woman, who then set the other women into a spiraling panic of “GET THESE BOYS OUT OF HERE!” and “CALL SECURITY!” I tried to calm them down to assure them that we were both in the right restroom, but it wasn’t working. My girlfriend barred herself into a stall, and I whipped my shirt off. “Would a boy have tits? Huh?” We were forcibly removed by security, and I’ve been wrestling ever since with my own question – since I’ve not had any sort of surgery yet. I do, however, have scraggly sideburns to contrast with those large globules of fat and tissue that cling to me like white ticks that have swollen to the size of cantaloupes.

It was shortly after the “Macy’s Incident” that I began “binding” and using the men’s room in high school and in public places. Ah, binding: the art of taking some sort of chest compression device and forcing your breast tissue (or “chesticles,” as I like to call them) into the flattest shape possible, in order to pass undetected as a man in the general public. My first true attempts at binding, around age 16 or 17, involved putting on 2 or 3 of my sports bras at once. I would often become light-headed from the effort, and have red welts along my shoulders and ribcage (where the elastic pressure cut into my skin). When I moved out of my parents’ house at age 18, I experimented with multiple combinations of plastic wrap, sports bras, and duct tape (which I don’t recommend, unless the tape is placed on the OUTSIDE of the sports bra). Later, after connecting with Female to Male International (FTMI) through the S.F. queer film festival, I would begin purchasing medical chest compression shirts through a catalog,

and I have been wearing them ever since.<sup>60</sup> You might be wondering what it feels like to “bind” every day of your life. For me, as a 280+ lb. person with a large chest, it feels very much like what I imagine being corseted feels like. I become winded easily, when I become panicked or exert myself too much I cannot breathe, I sweat profusely because of the extra layers covering my chest, belly, and biceps, and (perhaps because of the years of constantly wearing it), I have to have days off from binding and limit my binding time to 8 hours or I have severe spine, shoulder, and rib pain.

I do not enjoy binding, but binding allows me to pass. My thin doodles of facial hair on my upper cheek bones afford me just enough masculinity to survive the peripheral vision and second glances of strangers, and allow me the time to dash off before that third glance comes my way. By passing I have so far avoided becoming a trans\* murder statistic. I have been able to side-step much of the awkwardness and stares that come from being noticeably “out.” However, everyone I have met while passing might be unaware that they’ve met a trans\* person. They might have taken a class with a trans\* person, or spent the night at a trans\* person’s house and eaten breakfast cooked by a trans\* person in the morning. They might have shared secrets with a trans\* person, without ever knowing *that* secret. They might never realize that they have a trans\* person in their life, and that might negatively impact the way they speak to their children about a character they see in a movie who is negatively

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<sup>60</sup> The devices used are often garments given to patients who have just had major surgery. They are typically made of multiple layers of elastic cloth, either in a t-shirt style that is pulled on over the head, or a hook-and-eye style that has a ribbon of hooks on the front or back. These are descriptions of just a couple of binder styles – there are many different varieties, just as there are many different body shapes within the trans\* community.

portraying a trans\* stereotype, or it might alter the way they vote in the election, if they have no reason to care about the issues of LGBTQ people, because they have no idea that they have a friend who is trans.\*

### **Secrecy, privacy, and identity**

A question that is perhaps unique to the LGBTQ community is the debate to “pass” (i.e., to hide any possible exterior signals of LGBTQ identity in order to preserve the assumption in public of not being LGBTQ) or not. In the trans\* community, passing has its own set of privileges and downfalls. As author and activist Leslie Feinberg states in “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come:”

Transgender women and men have always been here. They are oppressed. But they are not merely products of oppression. It is passing that’s historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility: Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or acts of violence. But that is not the case today.<sup>61</sup>

There is a sense of vulnerability being out as a trans\* person. Death could be around the corner because a ripped binder or loose wig caused that dreaded third glance while walking past a group of strangers. Being out and trans\* is putting your own personal safety in the hands of others, which is terrifying.

I felt that familiar sense of vulnerability at the hands of others when I read Donne’s “A Valediction: of my name, in the window.” In this poem, the conceit is that the narrator has scratched his name into a pane of glass (imbuing it with his “firmness,”), but the fascinating aspect of this conceit is that the image of both the narrator and the narrator’s lover bounce back and forth between them when she looks at

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<sup>61</sup> Feinberg. Eds. Stryker and Whittle, p. 205

his signature, due to the reflectiveness of eyes and glass. Saunders notes that this poem, along with “The Flea,” and “The Canonization” are often called Donne’s poems of “mutuality” and all contain aspects of intense interconnectivity between narrator and love interest.<sup>62</sup> Of those three poems, “Valediction” evokes the strongest sense of helplessness, even though the fledgling “love” within the body of the flea is brutally crushed in “The Flea,” the poem is almost too cartoony in its imagery and conceit to be taken as seriously as some of Donne’s other works. In “The Flea,” the reader sees the potential for a future, but then sees the destruction acted out in front of them, whereas in “Valediction,” the concern over destruction is worried over by the frail pane of glass, which is in fact a transformed human.

In the fifth stanza, the glass narrator seems to become the woman who views him:

Then, as all my souls be  
Emparadis’d in you (in whom alone  
I understand, and grow, and see),  
The rafters of my body, bone,  
Being still with you, the muscle, sinew, and vein,  
Which tile this house, will come again.<sup>63</sup>

He then morphs from being inside his lover to being the house they share, where she is living alone (other than his many incarnations). The first moment of vulnerability occurs in the eighth stanza, “When thy inconsiderate hand/Flings out this casement, with my trembling name,” and the narrator is made well aware that his life is not only frail, but entrusted to the hands of someone who could easily shatter him with an errant

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<sup>62</sup> Saunders, p. 159

<sup>63</sup> Donne, Ed. Redpath, p. 186, lines 25-30

flick of the wrist.<sup>64</sup> The narrator becomes paranoid of a lover coming into his house-body and inscribing *his* name over the narrator's glass-self. The unified image of the lover and narrator becoming one image in one another's reflection is the death of a third being – a dual-gendered manifestation of their relationship, held in an infinite reflection loop.

While the narrator is glass, imbued in his lover's personage, the house, or in "The Flea," a miniscule amount of blood held within the body of an insect, his identity remains static though his exterior form morphs. This transformative property of the exterior, while maintaining a sense of gender, sex, sexuality, and personal identity inside the mind is at the core of what trans\* theory can be used to explore when used as an evaluative tool in literature, and it is certainly at the core of metaphysical transcendence from earthly trappings in the poems of Donne and Marvell.

### **Future studies**

This thesis is not a definitive guide to trans\* theory; it has been created within the limits of an undergraduate research assignment. To borrow an oft-quoted phrase from our dear Marvell, "had I but world enough, and time,"<sup>65</sup> I would certainly expand upon the breadth of trans\* theory within the scope of literature from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and also delve a bit deeper into subjects pertaining to early modern identity, sense of self, and religious notions of the soul in different religious sects and teachings. I originally planned on analyzing several more poems, including Donne's "The Canonization," "The Flea," and "Air and Angels;" Marvell's "A Dialogue Between the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 187, lines 43-44

<sup>65</sup> Marvell, Ed. Nigel Smith. p. 79, line 1 of facsimile from the Haward Manuscript.

Soul and Body,” “Upon a Eunuch: a Poet,” and “The Match,” but worried about sounding repetitive, or muddling the balancing act of the connections between the autobiography, discussion of trans\* theory, and the poetry analysis.

Additionally, these three poets whose writing I chose to focus on represent only a narrow slice of works that could benefit from re-examination with trans\* theory, in order to bring these works to a new generation of scholars and those who feel differently gendered and seek validation of their struggles between lines of timeless poetry.

Regarding trans\* theory specifically (and possible “trans\* studies”), I see a wide variety of possibilities for the future:

- Edits to the framework of trans\* theory that I outlined in Chapter 1 – I would love to see the points I outlined from my research argued against, changed, and molded into something beneficial as a stand-alone literary theory
- Eunuch and “hermaphrodite”<sup>66</sup> studies, or how eunuchs and “hermaphrodites” were perceived as gendered/sexed individuals in middle and early modern England. There may be some interesting “proto-trans\*” elements within these literary characters.
- Greater breadth of evaluation from religion-based writings. I am not a well-read theologian, but I am interested in doing trans\* theory readings of biblical narratives, the works of Hildegard von Bingen, etc.

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<sup>66</sup> The preferred term now is “intersexed,” but I use hermaphrodite here because that was the terminology used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

- Other English language genres, besides 17<sup>th</sup> century poetry; the poetic works of Sir Philip Sidney, modern graphic narratives, and science fiction novels and short fiction are a few categories that have tempted me during the last year of research
- Multiple intersections of race, culture, age, religion, ethnicity, gender, and being trans\*, and how these identities make and change personal histories
- Works with the “doppelganger” narrative motif examined with trans\* theory (the idea of the sinister/evil/wrong “other” person, who often turns out to be part of the protagonist’s own psyche)
- Trans\* tropes in popular modern media (television, movies, fiction, social media, etc.)
- Differences between MTF, FTM, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, and intersexed voices, stories, perspectives, and places in narratives

Additionally, I utilized the tenets of trans\* theory in a final research paper for a Virginia Woolf CHC course I took in spring 2015. The paper is titled, “Orlando: the Biography of a Trans\* Man,” and argues against the common notion that the character Orlando is either a lesbian or an MTF, and argues in favor of the theory that he is actually an FTM. At the outset of my research, Woolf’s *Orlando* seemed like “low hanging fruit” for an example of trans\* theory, but surprisingly the topic was both fresh and well received by the class and the professor, who is a Virginia Woolf scholar. Through this experience, I have come to appreciate that trans\* theory has a place beside other important methods of analysis. Trans\* voices are not just curiosities spoken by a minuscule minority group,

but important dialogues that invite people of all genders to our collective and continuing discussion of identity and selfhood, regardless of which century this discussion takes place.

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