In John Donne’s devotional lyric, “Batter my heart,” the unnamed speaker of the poem creates a rhetorical argument to convince deity to intervene ever more aggressively in his personal salvation. Published after the poet’s death in 1633, the poem climaxes with shocking language: the speaker begs God to “ravish” him in order to save him (ll. 14). This frightening and seemingly blasphemous request has incited controversy among literary scholars. Some argue that the line serves as a metaphor for the difficulty of submitting individuality to divine will. Others contend that the poem illustrates the inherent problems in applying human understanding to infinite wisdom. I argue that Donne uses rhetorical tools, which were widely understood by his contemporaries, to create a persona whose emotions overpower his reason, whose argument reveals a character devoid of virtue. By rereading this poem with an understanding of the Renaissance rhetorical tradition, the final shocking line of the poem reveals the speaker’s poor judgment, not an indictment of the unknowability of God.

The frightening and seemingly blasphemous request at the conclusion of the poem has incited controversy among literary scholars. Some argue that the request serves as a metaphor for the difficulty of submitting individuality to divine will. For example, Arthur Marotti takes a New Historicist approach in his claim that Donne’s purpose is to “enact his conflict of assertion and submission [to God]” (89). He asserts that Donne views individuality as something precious that can only be sacrificed to God through painful force. Others contend that the poem illustrates the
inherent problems in applying human understanding to infinite wisdom. In his metaphor criticism, William Kerrigan argues that human nature cannot conceive of perfection, so humans accommodate that conception with metaphor, naming things that are like perfection. He states that “Donne could not conceive of God without discovering, somewhere in the folds of his conception, human vice” (360). Marc Guillian, who takes a rhetorical approach to his analysis, claims that the poem aims to illustrate the speaker’s “honesty in recognizing personal limitations” and to show that “there are certain things [the speaker] cannot know about the divine” (8). Poststructuralist Stanley Fish provides a singularly scathing criticism that Donne creates the shocking metaphor to satisfy his own ego. Fish argues that Donne is “bulimic” and states that Donne’s purpose is to “secure the control and domination the poet continually seek[s]” (157). These incongruous interpretations use various critical lenses to make sense of Donne’s poem, but none take into account the principal goal of Renaissance readers in analyzing text: to evaluate the quality of the speaker’s moral judgment.

I argue that Donne’s poem makes an ethical argument about the speaker of the poem: the strategies the speaker uses in attempting to persuade deity demonstrate that passion unbridled by reason results in a false understanding of truth itself. For Renaissance readers, specifically Christian humanists, text serves as a vehicle for understanding a speaker’s moral judgment. This emphasis on the judgment of the speaker differs from modern readings in that it relies on the following assumptions common to Renaissance readers: that absolute truth exists, that reason follows universal laws that reflect absolute truth, and that proper application of reason allows readers to judge how closely an argument approximates absolute truth. In his Nobilitas Literata, Johann Sturm instructed his pupils that “in reading you must take the parts in hand one by one for learning, judging, and weighing, so that nothing shall escape your understanding” (148).
Christian humanists not only believed that moral judgment of the speaker was not only possible in their analysis of texts, but was the ultimate goal of all reading.

According to Christian humanist tenets, a man’s moral judgment and his rhetoric were inextricably intertwined. Nancy Christiansen writes that much of rhetorical education centered on developing a rhetor’s morality in order to take advantage of this relationship (Christiansen 92). Erasmus wrote “one cannot be a good orator who is not also a good man” (*Ciceronianus* 45). This statement reflects a widely-held belief that a rhetor cannot artificially manufacture virtue. Erasmus argued, “what clothing is to the body, diction is to the expression of our thoughts” (*On Copia* 18). Erasmus argued that if a man fails to understand virtue, he will eventually reveal that failure through his speech or actions. Christian humanists argued that speakers cannot convincingly express information they do not understand. Speeches that reflect good judgment are therefore signs of virtue within a man.

The main criterion Christian humanists used to demonstrate good judgment is appropriateness. They viewed speech and action as expressions of the mind mediated by a rhetor’s judgment. As such, they viewed all forms of expression as performances (Christiansen 167). The quality of these performances was judged by the appropriateness to the situation. Rhetors must take into account the situation surrounding the occasion, including the “subject matter, occasion, speaker, audience, and purpose” as they determine the style and content of their speech (166). If a rhetor demonstrates appropriateness in his argument, the audience will perceive “an organic relation between style and substance” (166). Since rhetors knew what was expected of them by their audience, they made deliberate decisions to demonstrate good judgment in evaluating the appropriateness of their speeches. Therefore, Christian humanists also defined all performance, including style *and* content, as inherently argument.
Rhetoricians expanded systems of rhetorical classification established by authorities from antiquity to codify good judgment. They established logical and rhetorical categories, called “places,” organized and defined by their relationships to each other. For example, in Thomas Wilson’s textbook *Rule of Reason*, the logical places called *predicables* organized the definitions of words by the following categories: general, specific, difference, properties, and accidents (*Rule of Reason* 4). The *predicaments* divided words by their inherent qualities in another set of categories: substance, quantity, quality, relation, action, suffering, when, where, settling, and appareling (9). These logical places served to determine the proper relationships between words and ideas to what degree they are alike or different, and in what manner they are alike or different. By maintaining control of the places, rhetors could maintain logical consistency in their arguments, which allowed them to more closely approximate truth, express good judgment, and reflect virtue. Rhetoricians did not restrict places to concepts or words. Stylistic figures, as part of the performance, were also assigned places. In this sense, style works in tandem with content in expressing the argument of any text. Knowing that all Renaissance authors created texts with a self-conscious emphasis on the effect they created on their readers, modern readers ought to consider rhetorical conventions in order to understand the intended argument of a text, including the fact that the argument inherently contains a moral paradigm.

In Donne’s poem “Batter my heart,” Donne creates a fictional speaker who demonstrates poor judgment, and therefore lack of virtue (that is, vice), in his address to God. This speaker takes on the persona of a Christian suffering incredible angst at the thought of reprobation for sin. In the poem, the speaker hurls a series of increasingly violent and desperate demands of force from God. First, he demands bodily violence with the commands “batter,” “break,” “blow,” “burn” (ll. 1-4). These commands ask God physically harm speaker’s body, making it more
difficult for the speaker to freely commit sin. Then he moves to legal violence with “divorce” and “imprison,” demanding that God remove his freedoms directly (ll. 11, 12). Here, the speaker moves to a more forceful method of divine control rather than self-control. Lastly, the speaker demands sexual violence, the most intimate form of control (ll. 14). In demanding such a complete and painful transfer of control, the speaker reveals his lack of confidence in his own ability to avoid sin. He demands pain now rather than pain in the afterlife, perhaps hoping that pain from God would somehow be sanctifying. A desire for pain is irrational, and a reader can see the speaker’s increasingly desperate pleas for subjugation as evidence of a strong emotion fitting into the angst tradition. Since the speaker is overcome by passion, he neglects reason as the controlling argument of the poem and, as a consequence, draws disturbingly illogical conclusions about the nature of his relationship to God. The stylistic figures and logical and rhetorical places in the poem reveal the speaker’s lack of judgment. The poem reveals specific vices of his character in the speaker’s appeal to God: namely selfishness, manipulation, and masochism. In fact, as the speaker fails to understand his relationship with God, he projects these moral failings onto his conception of God. Despite an illogical argument, the speaker convinces himself that God’s only recourse to saving the speaker’s sinful soul is by committing a sinful act—rape. The speaker ends the poem with a request to be ravished in order to be made chaste. Here he declares a contrary relationship (rape as a virtuous act rather than a sin) to be a like relationship, a clear violation of the logical places and a demonstration of poor moral judgment.

In the poem, Donne creates a fictional speaker (*prosopopoeia*) within the context of a dramatic situation, requiring a reader to analyze two dual frames of speaker and context in order to completely understand the moral message being communicated (Christiansen 186). The first frame contains the rhetorical situation of the speaker of the poem and his audience, God. The
second frame refers to the rhetorical situation of the poet and his audience, the readers of the poem. Within the first frame, the speaker creates an argument aimed at convincing God. The speaker argues that God must use violent force to ensure the speaker’s salvation. He implies that there is no other way for him to escape damnation. Donne’s frame expresses a different argument. By making the speaker’s flaws apparent through his stylistic, rhetorical, and logical choices, Donne argues that the speaker’s approach to communion with God is doomed to fail due to the speaker’s misconception of God and of truth in general. Donne argues that the speaker’s preoccupation with emotion overpowers reason, causing the speaker to produce an argument poorly suited to the situation, revealing poor judgment and lack of virtue.

By creating the poem in the form of a sonnet, Donne takes on all the signification that tradition carries with it. Gary Stringer writes “the sonnet was so closely identified with the central theme of love that the form had become a virtual metaphor for the subject. To write a sonnet was to write of love, or—which is quite as significant—to have one’s effort measured against the expectation that it should be so” (174). In this poem, Donne portrays the speaker as having a combative, rather than loving, relationship with deity. Although the speaker claims to love God, he takes on a commanding, confrontational tone as he demands various forms of violence. Rather than request understanding from God, the speaker demonstrates distrust of God’s ability to change him by instead demanding to be changed despite himself. The structure of the first command is an enthymeme with the claim “Batter my heart” (ll. 1) justified by the result, or reason “That I may rise and stand” (ll. 3). The speaker here implies that he cannot “rise and stand,” a metaphor for self-reliance, without God’s violent interference. The disconnect between the expectation of a relationship determined by love and the actual representation of one
determined by (ultimately) sexual violence adds to the shock value of the poem and also displays the speaker’s inability to properly understand logical relationships.

Donne uses two common literary conventions to create the fictional frame of the poem: he creates a sonnet of angst and a female speaker. The sonnet of angst represents a speaker who is unsure of his salvation, and therefore terrified of reprobation. Paul Sellin writes that the sonnet of angst has its roots in Articles of the Synod of Dort of 1619, which divides fallen man into three classes: the elect, those who feel mildly uncertain about their salvation, and those who feel intense angst because they are unable to “make such progresse in the way of holinesse and faith as they wish” (Articles qtd. in Sellin 164). The speaker in this poem represents the most desperate Christian, one who has sinned and cannot see a way to repent. The second poetic convention relies on a medieval tradition which Barbara Newman describes: “a masculine speaker adopts the position of the generically feminine Soul and speaks in a woman’s voice” (Newman 86). Donne undoubtedly inhabits this feminine space in order to personalize the metaphor used in the poem of God as bridegroom. However, as the speaker inhabits the persona of an emotionally irrational and female Christian, he allows the emotions expressed to overpower him and distort his understanding of his relationship to God.

Donne also uses the convention of meditational poetry in his portrayal of the speaker’s supplication to God. In The Saints’ Everlasting Rest (1650), Richard Baxter outlines the process and purpose of meditation of spiritual subjects, the first step of which is consideration. Consideration allows the speaker to contemplate his emotions along with reason in preparation for prayer. Baxter states that consideration “opens the door between the head and the heart” (159). This invitation to include emotion along with reason provides a rationale for Donne’s inclusion of emotion in the poem. However, where Baxter argues for balance between feelings
and reason, Donne’s speaker succumbs to overpowering emotion and manipulates his reason to
match. Baxter exhorts the worshipper to follow consideration with a soliloquy, or “a pleading the
case with thyself” (168). He asks the worshipper to “plead with [the doctrine at hand] in the most
moving and affecting language, and urge it with the most powerful and weighty arguments”
(168). He even compares this process to the method a minister uses in preaching to others,
suggesting that worshippers ought to study scripture and pray as they reason with themselves.
Donne’s speaker ignores this exhortation for reason balanced with emotion, which results in an
unstable argument that reveals the speaker’s vices: selfishness, manipulation, and masochism

In the poem, the speaker reveals his selfishness through his intense focus on his own
needs. The poem begins with a command (prostacticon, adhortatio) that God “batter [his] heart”
(ll. 1). This command is followed by many other commands. He demands that God “o’erthrow,”
(ll. 3) “break, blow, burn, and me new,” (ll. 4), “divorce me, untie, or break that knot again” (ll. 11),
“take me to you, imprison me” (ll. 12), and finally “ravish me” (ll. 14). The commands
become increasingly violent throughout the poem, revealing the speaker’s increasing myopic
vision, focused as he is on himself. The speaker also uses the word “I” or “me” thirteen times,
compared to “you” only four times. When the speaker does mention God, he does not
concentrate on the nature of God, but rather on what God can do to improve the speaker’s
situation. The speaker is mainly concerned with how circumstances affect his own state of being.

The speaker also reveals self-centeredness in the reasons he gives for his current
predicament. He provides excuses (dicaeologia) for his actions that range between insufficient
effort (“[I] labor to admit you, but oh, to no end” (ll. 6)) to irrelevant (“Yet dearly I love you” (ll. 9)). Each reason given for sin is an attempt to exculpate the speaker from guilt. When the
speaker does acknowledge fault, he personifies Reason, the faculty that ought to have kept him
safe from Satan, making sure to place the faculty as separate from himself (ll. 7). By creating Reason as a separate being, he assigns responsibility for his sins to a separate object. However, he also claims three reasons for Reason’s failures: it is “captiv’d” as well as “weak or untrue” (*peristasis*) (ll. 8). “Captiv’d” describes attendant circumstances that mirror the excuse given to explain the speaker’s own captivity. However, even if Reason proves “weak” or “untrue,” the weakness has been effectively separated from the speaker, absolving him of responsibility.

The speaker does not realize the fallacies introduced by separating Reason from himself, and by doing so inadvertently reveals his poor understanding of logic. First, reason exists as part of a whole—reason and passion are both parts of the mind. To argue that an anthropomorphized Reason abandoned the speaker is to argue that reason is either not part of the speaker’s mind or that a mind can exist without reason, neither of which are true. Here Reason serves as a *synecdoche* for not only rational thought, but for the entire system of logical places that rhetoricians used to determine the truth of a matter. By declaring Reason to be a separate entity, the speaker has also abandoned claim to presenting reason in his own argument. When the speaker admits his lack of reason, his subsequent argument is far less convincing. The speaker does himself a disservice in abandoning reason before asking for his outrageous rape. He damages his ethos, showing poor judgment and misunderstanding of an audience with perfect understanding, God.

It is unclear whether the speaker is aware of the logical fallacies in his argument, but he attempts to make up for them with emotional manipulation rather than address those flaws. The speaker attempts to elicit sympathy (*commiseratio*) several times in the poem. The interjection “oh, to no end” (ll. 6), following the speaker’s weak excuses, sounds like a forlorn sigh. The utterance also functions as a *threnos*, or lamentation, and *excuscitatio*, or utterance designed to
evoke emotion. Later the speaker attempts to move God’s emotions by pointing out, “Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov’d fain” (ll. 9). This statement expresses love for God, but immediately demands love in return. Here the speaker professes love in order to receive it. The speaker makes no attempt to give logical reasons for God to save him from his current predicament, but rather attempts to move God’s emotions instead (ad misericordiam). To be appropriate to the situation, the speaker’s emotional appeals should complement the logical content of his exhortation. However, the speaker demands pity and love from God in much the same way he commands force, attempting to manipulate God’s emotions.

The speaker undermines his attempts to adopt a submissive posture in appealing to God’s grace by attempting to manipulate God through commands. The speaker admits that he is powerless. He describes himself in terms of his lack of power; he is “like an usurp’d town” (simile) (ll. 5) and “never shall be free” (ll. 13) without God’s intervention. However, despite this vulnerable position, the speaker speaks to God mainly in commands (adhortatio, prostacticon). Guillian identifies this posturing, but does not explain the full significance of the problems involved. He writes, “the petitioner feels he is in control of the situation to the point that he can use rhetoric that does the double work of blaming God and ordering him to change” (28). However, throughout the poem the speaker admits that he is not in a position of power, so by blaming and ordering God, the speaker shows poor judgment of his audience. Rather, he draws attention to his overpowering emotions of angst and anger about his inevitable punishment for sin.

The speaker attempts to absolve himself of guilt by altering the relationship between himself and God using metaphors. These metaphors emphasize the necessity of force for the speaker’s salvation. However, the speaker does not take care with the logic involved in
metaphorical figures and causes problems with his conceptualized relationship with God. Two main metaphors used, God as conqueror and God as bridegroom, are intended to describe a figured relationship between God and his church. This is a relationship between the species (God) and genus (the church) (Wilson Rule of Reason 8). However, the speaker attempts to individualize these relationships, replacing the genus term with another species, the speaker as an individual. This small change calls into question the boundaries of metaphor. When dealing with a genus, arguments can be made regarding infinite questions, or universals (Wilson The Art of Rhetoric 2). For example, if the church as a whole were represented as the speaker in the poem, the speaker might be able to answer questions about whether the church deserves salvation from sin. However, by individualizing the metaphor to a species, the speaker has introduced a definite question specific to his own situation (2). The speaker encounters logical problems when he attempts to apply a general relationship between the church and God to himself individually. I argue that this is a false analogy, for although the speaker is a part of the church, he relates to the church as part of a whole, and so cannot take on the role of the church in the metaphor.

Additionally, the speaker introduces another fallacy by sexualizing the metaphoric relationship between himself and God. The original metaphor connects things spiritual. God is a spiritual bridegroom to the church, a spiritual conqueror of Satan. The speaker changes that relationship to involve bodily relationships. However, those two substances, spirit and body, differ so much that the metaphor changes meaning in the bodily context. By sexualizing the relationship, the speaker changes the focus of the relationship between man and God from a spiritual relationship to a physical one. The speaker offers his body, not his spirit, to God at the end of the poem. However, to argue that body and spirit are the same is to ignore the nature of substance as a place of definition. By switching the focus of the metaphor from the spiritual to
the physical, the speaker changes the meaning of the metaphor. His attempts to manipulate the relationship result in a shocking, even blasphemous request for salvation (spiritual) through rape (physical).

The speaker’s obsession with the physical can perhaps be explained by his tendency toward masochism. He requests violence from the beginning of the poem. The phrase “batter my heart” (ll. 1) foreshadows the rape requested at the end of the poem. “Batter” means to strike with repeated blows, to bruise or beat out of shape (cacemphaton). “Heart,” in addition to its use as a description of the circulatory organ and the seat of love, emotion, life, and understanding, was a common slang term for vagina (pun) during the period (Kerrigan 354). The pun implies that the speaker had rape in mind from the first. Even more disturbing, with the other definitions in mind, the pun implies violence to more than just the body: it also violates the speaker’s capacity to love, feel, live, and understand. The speaker consistently reveals a desire for violence, especially sexual violence. He continues this pattern in the second line. It is not enough for God to “knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend” (ll. 2). He must also “break, blow, burn, and make me new” (ll. 3) (cacemphaton). The speaker demands a violent, painful transformation at God’s hand. It is possible that the speaker arrives at this conclusion, that violence is necessary, because he approaches his argument with a hypothesis contrary to fact. If he assumes that his soul is already damned, perhaps he expects punishment from God no matter what he does. In that case, the speaker might find it logical to experience pain for sin as long as he can also ensure salvation along with it.

However, the speaker’s continual requests for violence represent his poor judgment. He commits the fallacy ad baculum, an appeal to force. This is an odd usage, since the speaker is the one demanding force in order to make a change. However, by appealing using this fallacy, the
speaker denies the ability of rhetoric, even God’s rhetoric, to persuade. He only sees pain, and demands it repeatedly. In demanding rape, the speaker also introduces a logical problem according to betrothal laws of the time, another topic he apparently does not understand. The law stipulated that a fiancé could only be released from an engagement if both parties agree to the matter. Even if God were to agree to commit the rape, the act would not necessarily release the speaker from the betrothal to Satan. Guillian calls the request a “legal loophole” that is “far-fetched” (36). The speaker displays logical inconsistency even in the legality of the violent request, which confirms the speaker’s poor command of logic and judgment.

Rather than good judgment, the speaker of the poem exhibits all the signs of sophistry. In the final line of the poem, the speaker has reached an apex of using fallacies as arguments. Whereas earlier, the speaker tended to confuse more closely related places, in the final line the speaker declares contraries to be completely alike. When the speaker states “Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me” (ll. 14), he has created an antiphrasis, giving an honest name to an evil deed. This demonstrates sophistry, defined by Wilson as “prov[ing] truth as falsehood, falsehood as truths” (Rule of Reason 2). While the speaker has demonstrated elements of sophistry in ignoring fallacies and confusing logical places, here he takes a leap, defining good as evil and evil as good in order to gain what he wants: unearned salvation. As the speaker attempts to alter the relationships between places to serve his own wishes, he has eventually completely reversed the places so as to destroy all meaning.

In this poem, Donne illustrates the inevitable consequences when a person manipulates language and logic for selfish reasons. Words cease to mean because the speaker has altered their meaning to meet his own needs. In this poem, Donne creates a speaker who, overwhelmed by emotion, creates an argument that exhibits poor judgment in appealing to God’s mercy. The
speaker creates a blasphemous request that reveals his own mind to be blasphemous (although unintentionally blasphemous) as well. Donne shows that manipulation of logical and rhetorical places cannot persuade as nearly well as a well-reasoned argument, because the vice involved in creating false relationships between the places will be revealed through speech.
Works Cited


