

Tamar Abu Hanna
037753001
Representation of Beauty and Ugliness in the Arts
Professor Hanna Scolnicov
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The Expression of Beauty in the Renaissance Sonnet: A Convention Challenged

Beauty is the quality in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleurably exalts the mind or spirit (Merriam Webster dictionary). It is said that the standards of beauty are subjective and that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. However, the perceptions of what is beautiful vary with time and culture, so was the accepted concept of beauty in Renaissance Europe. Neil Haughton argues that, "the Renaissance artist's perception was determined by his philosophical environment, his visual experience (the 'period eye'), [and] the demands of his patrons" (229). In the artist's attempt to depict and idealize features and bodies, the Renaissance artist was trying to reproduce the image of his object and so eternalize it, either by a portrait or as piece of literature. Renaissance artists depicted the image of beauty in accordance with their philosophy, era and background.

It is understood that "between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries the codification of feminine beauty, conceived as physical perfection, leads to an orderly and detailed anatomization of the woman's body in descriptive praise or blazon" (Bettella 7). However, it is also clear that Renaissance beauty has undergone transformations and modifications throughout this period. The concept of the Italian Renaissance beauty changed with the geographic location, when it moved to Elizabethan England; those two cultures are different, their conventions and ideals differ.

In Renaissance art, a beautiful woman is someone who is goddess-like. She exemplifies “youth, pale skin, rosy cheeks, and red lips, the whole combined in perfect proportions” (Kirkham 55). Renaissance poets and painters established an ideal canon of beauty carefully represented and catalogued. However, Shakespeare distinguished himself from his contemporaries and predecessors by identifying what is singular and by appreciating unconventional beauty.

Ideals of beauty in the Renaissance will be presented from Petrarca’s Sonnet 292. However, the main focus of this paper will be Shakespeare’s sonnet 130 in which he challenges the consensus and puts the conventions of beauty in the Renaissance in doubt; this will be achieved by comparing the Italian sonnet with the Elizabethan one.

Writers such as Francesco Petrarca and William Shakespeare drew women’s portraits with rhetoric and with their figurative genius. Petrarca's famous sonnets were written as a series of love poems to an idealized and idolized mistress named Laura. In the sonnets, Petrarca praises her beauty, her worth, and her perfection using a variety of metaphors based on natural beauties. Whereas, Shakespeare’s sonnet 130, challenges the conventions of love poetry common to Shakespeare's day, since most sonnets in Elizabethan England were modeled after those of Petrarca. Moreover, what makes the piece of art more unique and controversial is the subjectivity of the artist, namely the painter or the writer, who rejects the conventions and does not abide by them; Shakespeare's sonnet breaks the conventions that were still the common techniques for writing love poetry thus making his work exceptional.

Francesco Petrarca, who is one of the major Renaissance writers, established certain conventions in his sonnets. This Renaissance poet addresses a lady, the poet/ lover praises his beloved's superlative qualities using descriptions of beauty, such as: "golden hair," "white breast," "coral lips"; the mistress is the object and image of love. Kirkham writes:

If Petrarca's verse scatters the moments of his romance, so also he fragments his lady, focusing on her body piecemeal – her blond tresses, her fair face, her ivory skin, her cheeks like roses, her lips like coral, her sweet smile, her dainty hand, her holy feet, and above all, her mesmerizing eyes, source of the solar rays that brighten and torment his existence. (57)

In sonnet 292, Petrarca remembers his dead beloved, and laments her. He begins his sonnet with the eyes, an important feature in Renaissance beauty. Even though Petrarca does not mention the color of his beloved's eyes, we know that "heavenly blue" (Burckhardt 340) was the ideal color. His beloved's eyes arouse ecstatic passion in him and he carries on praising other bodily organs, such as: the arms, hands and feet. According to Petrarca, these beautiful organs take the poet/lover to a new world that is enclosed and he is alone in it. In line 5, Petrarca talks about his beloved's hair that is bright and "of pure shining gold". In his essay on ideal beauty in the Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt writes that the most beautiful color for hair is "a soft yellow inclining to brown, also the hair should be thick, long, and locky" (340). Petrarca also mentions her "lightning [...] angelic smile" that transforms the earth into a divine place every time his beloved smiles. The smile is a noteworthy and distinctive feature of Renaissance beauty; Burckhardt writes that laughter is the "radiance of the soul" (343); the "angelic" quality of the beloved indicates her purity and this is important since the beloved is dead. The poet is miserable and feels adrift, he confesses that his muse is dead "now make an end of my loving songs / the vein of my accustomed wit is dry," and his lyre "is turned again to

weeping.” The second half of the sonnet is full of negative language and imagery, unlike the first half that describes the beloved with such vibrant language. However, even though the beloved is dead and she is now “little dust, that feels no thing,” her image remains carved in the poet’s heart and mind and so eternalized in his poetry.

In a lecture titled “Shakespearean Beauty Marks,” Stephen Greenblatt says: “Shakespeare’s contemporaries preferred an Elizabethan type of beauty, flawless and indistinctive, that is reflected in the unmarred faces in the works of European Renaissance artists. Those (flawless) features, as literary and art historians have shown, had a virtually programmatic personality,” however, Shakespeare’s “determinedly different preference for individuality, as expressed among his characters, is what makes Shakespeare's writing not only unique, but beautiful.”

In sonnet 130, Shakespeare attempts to draw a verbal portraiture of his beloved. His description of her features is truthful and sincere. The lady of his love poem is a woman of flesh and blood and is not beautiful like a goddess, yet her imperfections are made worthy of eternalizing in a poem. Shakespeare begins with an unconventional statement about his mistress: her eyes are not like the sun, "coral is far more red" than her lips. Snow may be white, but his mistress' breasts have no such color but are closer to a dull grayish brown. Her hair is neither fair nor soft; it is black and hard like “wires.” His beloved's cheeks lack the redness and glow seen in roses; "in some perfumes is there more delight" than the disagreeable odor of her breath. The verb reeks, has negative connotations which emphasizes that this unconventional beauty is so ordinary and imperfect that there is no one similar to her in literature, and although he is delighted with the sound of her voice, it is not music. This implies to the idea that Shakespeare is

criticizing the notion of superficial love that is based on conventional beauty and rather appreciates his mistress' views and opinions.

In the couplet, the speaker shows his intent, which is to claim that love does not need these pretentious standards; and women do not need to look like goddesses in order to be beautiful. By this Shakespeare states that beauty is beyond the soft golden hair, the white skin, and the “false compare” portrayed in conventional poetry. Sonnet 130 defies the typical Petrarchan conventions by presenting a speaker who disregards all the conventions of the deceitful ideal beauty, and somewhat mockingly tells the truth. “It is a mark of all that Shakespeare found indelibly beautiful in singularity and all that we identify as indelibly singular and beautiful in his work” (Greenblatt).

The rhyme scheme in Sonnet 130 is important for it maintains a crossed rhyme scheme *abab*, but with a different sound except for the couplet that has a full rhyme. In the first quatrain, Shakespeare writes one line on each comparison between his mistress and an object (sun, coral, snow and wires). In the second and third quatrains, he expands the descriptions to occupy two lines each, so that roses/cheeks, perfume/breath, music/voice, and goddess/mistress each comparison has two lines. Instead of embodiments of just proportion, harmony and symmetry, we have a figure that is real and truthful and yet whose imperfections are rare and appealing. This is evident because he thinks of his beloved is “as rare” as those conventional beloveds represented “with false compare” to the sun, coral and snow, yet this unconventional beauty entices his love for her.

In their sonnets, both Petrarca and Shakespeare describe bodily features of their loved ones. The common features are the eyes, the hair and the color of the skin. They

commence their sonnets with the same bodily feature and that is the eyes. Petrarca praises those eyes and says their beauty put his body in ecstasy, whereas Shakespeare says “my mistress’s eyes are nothing like the sun,” to proclaim that her eyes are probably not as bright and round, they are not “large and full, and brought up well forward” (Burckhardt 340) and since the sun is the brightest and largest physical object, the eyes of Shakespeare’s mistress seem quite normal. The hair of the beloveds is also described: Petrarca’s beloved had blond hair whereas “black wires grow on” Shakespeare mistress’s head. Patrizia Bettella, writes “the literary canon sanctioned by Petrarca and Petrarchism contributed to the affirmation of blonde hair as emblem of female beauty” (133). This Petrarchan ideal of beauty is mocked and turned into black wires in sonnet 130. Furthermore, in Renaissance sonnets the mistress is compared to an angel or a goddess. Petrarca compares his beloved to an angel, who with a smile could change the earth to a divine place, Shakespeare alludes sarcastically to such idealization in lines 11-12, in which he implies that this woman does not possess angelic or goddess-like qualities:

I grant I never saw a goddess go—
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground

Another interesting feature of comparison is the status of the beloved in the sonnet. In the Petrarchan sonnet, the beloved is dead which gives a metaphysical sense to the sonnet, whereas in Shakespeare’s sonnet, the beloved is alive. It seems as if Shakespeare has been intimate with his mistress unlike the distant description of the beloved in Petrarca, “Petrarca adores Laura from a distance, pure in her pallor and eternally unattainable” (Kirkham 59). This adds another dimension to the way Shakespeare managed to challenge the fixed poetic tradition. Shakespeare’s sonnet subverts and reverses the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet. Shakespeare’s idealizing

love poem is not written to a perfect woman but to a loved one, who is far from being perfect, yet she is “as rare as any she belied with false compare”.

The content of both sonnets is different. Petrarca the founding father of the Italian Sonnets and Shakespeare the most prolific and original English writer created two sonnets that are different in merit. Both writers perceive their ladies differently, but these two different and almost opposite approaches emphasize that beauty is subjective but also contextual. I could argue, that Petrarca was more loyal to his beloved “the poet confesses his obsessive, unreciprocated love for Laura, for twenty-one years while she lived and another decade after she died” (Kirkham 56), while Shakespeare’s lady changes in his sonnets.

In her book *Shakespeare’s Sugared Sonnets*, Katherine M. Wilson sums up: The sonnet “could be nothing other than a parody. Shakespeare assumes a mocking naivety in which he says his lady has none of the wonderful qualities common to the ladies of other poets and yet he thinks her as good as any woman about whom such lies are invented” (83). In this sonnet, Shakespeare refutes the Petrarchan and Renaissance ideal of beauty, he “makes fun of prevailing fashion” (85) and presents his own. In addition, Shakespeare’s description of his beloved seems as a realist revolt against the formulas: golden hair, red lips, white skin and rosy cheeks; he rises above his mistress' physical attributes and falls in love with her as an individual and not her beauty. By this Shakespeare makes a statement that love is more precious and is not connected to beauty, which is another Italian convention Shakespeare rejects and that is beauty is the “agent of beauty that draws men to love” (Kirkham 59).

The Platonists define three kinds of “true and laudable beauty, that of the soul, the body, and the voice” (59). The paper presented the different notions of beauty in the Renaissance. The extrinsic beauty is presented thoroughly at first and later on the poet addresses the intrinsic beauty indirectly. Furthermore, the apprehension of “what is characteristic is an essential condition for detecting and representing the beautiful. In poetry, it is true, circumstantial description may be a fault, not a merit, since a single feature, suggested by deep passion or insight, will often awaken in the reader a far more powerful impression of the figure described” (Burckhardt 338). In Petrarca what is characteristic is his beloved's extrinsic beauty whereas in Shakespeare the tone is different, mocking and ironic, therefore explodes the romanticism of the conventional sonnet.

Lastly, the perception of beauty has always faced a dilemma: idealism versus realism. The perception varies with time and culture, “so the accepted concept of beauty in Renaissance Europe varied between countries and even between cities” (Haughton 233). In this paper I attempted to portray two Renaissance perceptions of beauty. The first is an early idealist depiction of the goddess-like beloved in a sonnet by Francesco Petrarca; and the second is a more realistic depiction of the mistress, it is a novel and unconventional beauty represented in William Shakespeare's Sonnet 130.

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