

**“I HAVE COME TO CLAIM”: THE FEMINIST APPROPRIATION
OF THE FEMALE IMAGE IN POETRY**

by
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This thesis examines how traditional visual representations of female bodies in western poetry have influenced twentieth century feminist poets like Sylvia Plath, Judy Grahn, and Adrienne Rich. While it may seem that our ideas of beauty today are shaped by cultural productions in the media, in actuality these standards of female beauty date back at least to the Renaissance, when poets conventionalized female beauty by conventionalizing a means for representing it. By examining poems from the Renaissance to the present, we can see how these conventions of representation have influenced the way we *see* women's bodies in the twentieth century how feminist poets work toward making us see women in new ways.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“I HAVE COME TO CLAIM”: THE FEMINIST APPROPRIATION OF THE FEMALE IMAGE IN POETRY	1
APPENDIX	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

“I have come to claim”: The Feminist Appropriation
of the Female Image in Poetry

Choose an image of a traditional nude. Transform the woman into a man. Either in your mind's eye, or by drawing on the reproduction. Then notice the violence which that transformation does. Not to the image, but to the assumptions of a likely viewer.

(Berger 64)

Blonde Bombshell

Love is boring and passé, all the old baggage,
the bloody bric-a-brac, the bad, the gothic,
retrograde, obscurantist hum and drum of it
needs to be swept away. So, night after night,
we sit in the dark of the Roxy beside grandmothers
with their shanks tied up in the tourniquets
of rolled stockings and open ourselves, like the earth
to rain, to the blue fire of the movie screen
where love surrenders suddenly to gangsters
and their cuties. There in the narrow,
mote-filled finger of light, is a blonde
so blonde, so blinding, she is a blizzard, a huge
spook, and lights up like the sun the audience
in its galoshes. She bulges like a deuce coupe.
When we see her we say good-bye to Kansas.
She is everything spare, cool, and clean,
like a gas station on a dark night or the cold
dependable light of rage coming in on schedule like a bus.

In “Blonde Bombshell” Lynn Emanuel depicts an actress whose beauty is so dazzling on the screen she becomes a meteorological and metaphysical phenomenon. We recognize in her the ultimate stereotype of a beautiful woman—the voluptuous blonde. Yet by describing her presence but not her body, Emanuel invokes the contradictions inherent in our ideas about female beauty today. In spite of the fact that the movie star’s body is not displayed for us, we are shown the effect her beauty has on the theater audience; this illustrates the power that the idea of female beauty carries in our society. It

is significant that the idea of the blonde's beauty exists independently of a visual description of her body. If we take a historical view of the female image in poetry over the last five hundred years, we will see that Emanuel's "huge spook" is one small part of a very long and complicated tradition.

While it may seem that our ideas of beauty today are shaped by cultural productions like the movie in Emanuel's poem, in actuality these standards of female beauty date back at least to the Renaissance, when poets conventionalized female beauty by conventionalizing a means for representing it. Francesco Petrarch, a fifteenth-century poet, is credited with perfecting the Italian sonnet and establishing a poetic tradition later called Petrarchism. In his series of poems titled *Rhyme Sparse*, Petrarch expresses his speaker's intense desire for an unobtainable woman named Laura who is represented by descriptions of various body parts: "What goddess ever loosed to the breeze locks of such fine gold?" (304). Rather than producing a complete picture of her, he repeatedly compares her specific physical features to beautiful objects in nature, for instance, hair like gold, skin like ivory. While Petrarch did not originate the use of inventory in describing a woman, he certainly popularized it. This "obsessive insistence on the particular" (Vickers, DD, 96) is maintained by the tension produced by the male speaker's constant desire in relation to her perpetual resistance. Because he is not able to interact with his beloved on a personal level, he must try to content himself with a mental image of her. Her resistance causes him to suffer and also paradoxically perpetuates his love for her because her virtuous behavior is one of the qualities which makes her so appealing to him: "When did a heart gather within itself so many virtues?" (304). In his

musings about her, she is not only beautiful and virtuous: She is the *most* beautiful and virtuous woman who has ever existed.

Petrarch, known as the father of the Renaissance, influenced many later writers, like sixteenth-century poets Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) and Sir Phillip Sidney (1554-1586), who wrote long sequences of sonnets about unattainable women with the same physical attributes as Laura. In these poems they popularized the blazon, which means literally “coat of arms” or “shield”; in poetic terms the blazon describes verse which represents a woman’s beauty by offering a figurative inventory of her physical traits. An example of a sixteenth-century blazon is this passage from Spenser’s “Epithalamion:”

Her goodly eyes like sapphires shining bright,
Her forehead ivory white,
Her cheeks like apples which the sun hath rudded,
Her lips like cherries charming men to bite,
Her breast like to a bowl of cream uncrudded,
Her paps like lilies budded,
Her snowy neck like to a marble tower,
And all her body like to a palace fair. (301)

Sapphires, ivory, fruits, lilies, and marble are all natural objects of value and beauty. By comparing a woman to these natural objects, the poet is able to enhance her beauty, thus creating an image of a woman who embodies perfection. During the Renaissance, these lists of images became increasingly excessive and hyperbolic, the result being a figure who is more divine than human.

By figuring his beloved as divine, the poet exaggerates her unattainable status. In the sonnet tradition, the desire of the male speaker is always coupled with the resistance of the unattainable woman, creating intense feeling on the side of the man who has no

hope of an eventual union. The dynamic between the man's desire and the woman's resistance to that desire provides a dramatic tension throughout a long sequence of poems. Her virtue, an essential quality of a true Petrarchan lady, ensures there will be no union. Unrequited love is thus the foundation of the relationship. The speaker, unable to have his beloved physically, does so visually by obsessively describing her body parts. This heavily imitated convention led to a standardized and influential representation of woman's bodies in the tradition of Western poetry.

The use of visual metaphors to create an untouchable female figure is exemplified in Spenser's sonnet "[Ye tradeful merchants, that with weary toil]." The result is the abstraction of the woman's body into an assortment of salable items:

Ye tradeful merchants that, with weary toil
Do seek most precious things to make your gain;
And both the Indias of their treasure spoil;
What needeth you to seek so far in vain?
For lo, my love doth in herself contain
All this world's riches that may far be found:
If sapphires, lo, her eyes be sapphires plain;
If rubies, lo, her lips be rubies sound;
If pearls, her teeth be pearls, both pure and round;
If ivory, her forehead ivory ween;
If gold, her locks are finest gold on ground;
If silver, her fair hands are silver sheen:
But that which fairest is, but few behold,
Her mind adorned with virtues manifold. (228)

By this time, Spenser's metaphors are very familiar: sapphires for eyes, pearls for teeth, gold for hair, etc. However, by choosing to compare her attributes to precious gems, he commodifies a woman's beauty, as if a woman's beauty can be assessed like precious objects, according to a money value. Spenser is ostensibly celebrating his beloved's beauty by comparing her to beautiful gems; however, he specifies his imagined audience

as merchants and the metaphor of a gem becomes abstracted. A merchant has no practical purpose for gems other than to sell them to someone who will use them. In this way, the woman's beautiful features further become commodities that can be associated with market prices. While Spenser's "[Epithalamion]" reveals a distant relationship between lover and beloved, "[Ye tradeful merchants]" exposes an economy where men looking *for* beautiful women are men looking *at* beautiful women and are figured as merchants surveying woman as a collection of commodities.

Like Petrarch, Spenser mentions virtue along with all of her other beautiful features. However, by describing her mind as "*adorned* with virtues manifold," he turns virtue into one more abstracted and commodified jewel, the purpose of which is solely to enhance beauty. The woman in this poem has been compared to a collection of adorning jewels that could be easily sold separately. The result is an absolute reduction of the idea of woman to a "collection of exquisitely beautiful dissociated objects" (Vickers, DD, 266). Thus, the image of ideal beauty becomes an abstract visual concept that no human woman can possibly achieve because it does not actually exist.

This conventional representation is sometimes exaggerated to a bizarre degree; this tendency illustrates the writer's *and* the reader's willingness to "forget" what a real woman looks like in order to accommodate the figures in the poem. In his famous sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, Elizabethan poet Sir Phillip Sidney emphasizes the distant relationship between his narrator and beloved by naming his characters Astrophil and Stella, which mean "star lover" and "star" respectively. In his sonnet "[Queen Virtue's court, which some call Stella's face]" the remoteness of the lady is translated directly into a distinct physical strangeness:

Queen Virtue's court, which some call Stella's face,
 Prepar'd by Nature's choicest furniture,
 Hath his front built of alabaster pure;
 Gold is the covering of that stately place.

The door by which sometimes comes forth her Grace
 Red porphir is, which lock of pearl makes sure,
 Whose porches rich (which name of cheeks endure)
 Marble mixed red and white do interlace.

The windows now through which this heav'nly guest
 Looks o'er the world, and can find nothing such,
 Which dare to claim from those lights the name of best,

Of touch they are that without touch doth touch,
 Which Cupid's self from Beauty's mine did draw:
 Of touch they are, and poor I am their straw. (462)

The description of Stella's face as a building effectively distances her from the narrator. She is figured as physically much larger than he is; if her cheeks are porches, then her face is at least two stories tall. Astrophil can look at this "building," but he cannot interact with it or enter it. Likewise, figuring Stella as a queen puts her socially out of reach, and calling her Queen Virtue puts her morally out of reach. By figuring her mouth as a locked door, he has also placed her physically out of reach. In this poem, Sidney has created a figure for Stella that resists the possibility of human interaction on many levels. Indeed, it is the impossibility of a real relationship that drives the imagery to this extreme distortion of Stella's face. Her resistance to his desire is the impetus for her subsequent deformation into a grotesque marble representation of herself.

This type of figurative deformation marks a substantial transition from Petrarch's description of Laura as an ideal of femininity which used metaphors from nature to

describe her beautiful features. While Petrarch's relationship between male desire and female resistance remains recognizable in both Spenser and Sidney's poems, the representation of female beauty does not. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the comparison of female features to items of natural beauty has become a comparison to aspects of culture which are visually unrelated to a woman's body. The obsessive inventorying of body parts ultimately dismantled not just the image of woman but the concept of female beauty as a part of nature as well. The tropes of female beauty became disengaged from nature, and, as we see in Sidney's sonnet, do not reflect or even require an accurate picture of a female body. In this poem, female beauty has become a place. In Spenser's poem, female beauty is a collection of salable items.

The blazon, though heavily imitated to the point of cliché, was also criticized by Elizabethan poets for this departure from its apparent purpose of celebrating the beauty of an individual woman [Figure 1]. William Shakespeare criticizes the hyperbolic comparisons of the Petrarchan poets:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;
 My mistress when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare. (Shakespeare 112)

In this anti-blazon, the catalogue of features is not only opposed to the traditional ones, but it completes a different task. The first six lines are comprised of parodies of the conventional metaphors, in fact echoing the grammatical construction of “[Ye weary merchants]”: “If sapphires, lo, her eyes be sapphires plain.” The tone changes in the seventh line; instead of the expected visual metaphors, he describes a specific smell and a sound. Instead of distancing the speaker and the reader from the woman, these images bring them closer together. The images of the odor of her breath and the sound of her voice imply that the speaker has had intimate contact with her. Similarly, the description of her walking on the ground explicitly asserts her mortality and at the same time points out that women described in Petrarchan poems are, after all, mortal as well. In so doing, it removes the distance between both her and the speaker, and thus between her and the reader.

This poem significantly lacks any mention of physical desire; in fact, this woman is undesirable in conventional terms. Yet, she is still catalogued and denied integrated representation. Instead, the speaker places importance on accurate representation, claiming that his love “is as rare / As any she belied with false compare.” This position constitutes an accusation that the typical Petrarchan lady is misrepresented by false comparisons. “[My mistress’s eyes],” by resisting over-used conventions, offers a more realistic woman but it still does not offer an intact woman. The desire on the part of the speaker is not sensual desire for a woman but rather desire for an accurate or realistic portrayal of a woman. His struggle is not with her, but between himself and other poets; she remains an object used for comparison.

In her article, “Diana Described: Scattered Women and Scattered Rhyme,” Nancy Vickers suggests that by repeatedly representing Laura through the description of select body parts, Petrarch effectively dismembers her. She argues that in the twenty-third poem of his *Rhyme Sparse*, the narrator’s desire for Laura threatens his own well being when he figures himself as Acteon, who is out hunting with his hounds and sees the goddess Diana naked in the forest. In this Greek myth, Diana, in retaliation for having been seen naked, changes Acteon into a stag who is then ripped to pieces by his own hounds. Vickers argues that this dismemberment is reversed in the blazon: “Petrarch’s Acteon, having read his Ovid, realizes what will ensue: his response to the threat of imminent dismemberment is the neutralization, through disruptive dismemberment of the threat. He transforms the visible totality into scattered words, the body into signs; his description, at one remove from experience, safely permits and perpetuates his fascination” (DD, 273). In other words, the woman’s resistance to the man’s desire, made inevitable by the quality of virtue required in a Petrarchan beauty, results in the dismemberment of her body.

The Petrarchan ideal of female beauty not only influenced poetry, but other art forms like painting as well. In her article “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo*, and the Vernacular Style,” Elizabeth Cropper describes how painters, such as Botticelli in his *Primavera* and Leonardo da Vinci in his *Mona Lisa*, drew on Petrarchan conventions of beauty such as blonde hair and elongated necks to create their “ideal types, beautiful monsters composed of every individual perfection” (376). By comparing Botticelli’s “The Birth of Venus” to the photograph of the Barbie doll posed in imitation of this painting, we can see that the ideal of beauty we hand to our female

children today is similar to that developed from Petrarch's description of Laura [Figures 2 and 3]. More significant than the color of eyes or hair or length of neck is our tolerance of an ideal of beauty that no human being can attain. The Petrarchan tradition of physical beauty was not transferred on to the canvas alone; the tradition of dismemberment accompanied it. In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes that Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) "believed that the ideal nude ought to be constructed by taking the face of one body, the breasts of another, the legs of a third, the shoulders of a fourth . . . and so on" (62). This approach to constructing an image of female beauty depends on the notion that no *one* woman is beautiful enough, and therefore the ideal of female beauty is essentially a physical impossibility and can only be constructed through art which allows the imaginary to exist. However, women are nevertheless expected to measure up to these impossible standards. The traditional European image of women's bodies is dependent on and inseparable from policies of dismemberment. The figure of woman became inextricable from its position as object—and that object is traditionally assembled with dissociated parts.

In examining the history of the nude in European oil painting, Berger describes how the tradition began with the depiction of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden becoming aware of the shame of being seen naked after eating the apple. In the Renaissance, Adam and Eve began to be depicted looking straight ahead; instead of being aware of each other's nakedness, their body positioning suggested the awareness of the spectator. Their nudity became a display. The female nude which came out of that tradition was traditionally displayed with reference to the spectator. Berger describes a typical relationship between the male owner of the painting of a naked woman and his

male guest to whom he shows the painting, which is exemplified by a painting by Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680) of Charles II mistress Nell Gwynne [Figure 4]. Her nakedness, Berger writes, “is not, however, an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner’s feelings or demands. (The owner of both woman and painting.) The painting, when the king showed it to others, demonstrated this submission and his guests envied him” (52). This dynamic is similar to that in poems like Spenser’s “[Ye weary merchants]” between the poet and his male audience; the woman is an object on display whose voice at best has been reduced to one of her beautiful features, important because it makes her desirable to men. The male poet is the subject who observes and describes his “object” to another man. Just as the conventional physical features became firmly embedded in the tradition of literature and painting, as well as the larger culture, the means of representing beauty through the figure of an objectified, and effectively silenced, woman became standardized as well.

What happens when that object decides to speak? The female speaker has first to wrestle with the ingrained dynamics of woman as an “object of vision: a sight” (Berger 47), who is poised to be dismembered by male desire within the poetic form. What would it mean or how would it look for her to resist that dynamic? Instructive experiments in resisting the problems of the blazon convention come as early as the sixteenth century. While many of the Petrarchan poets have defied various aspects of the tradition, it is notable that female poets have repeatedly chosen to challenge the standardized depiction of women. Three of these women are Louise Labé, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Louise Labé (1520-1566) published a series of love sonnets in 1555. The daughter of a ropemaker in Lyon, she received an education considered exceptional for a woman of her class. She studied Latin, Italian, some Greek, and music. Her sonnet sequence is written very much in the Petrarchan tradition; in fact, the first sonnet is written in Italian. However, by refiguring the relationship between her speaker and beloved, and the role that desire plays between them, she manages to give her female speaker subjectivity typically denied to women in the sonnet tradition.

In the opening poem of her sonnet sequence, Labé's description of love as an attack from the god Eros is similar to that of Petrarch's but differs in that her speaker is not described as hopelessly defeated. Here, Robert M. Durling's translation of Petrarch's second poem [translated in prose] offers a traditional view of sexual desire:

To take a graceful revenge and to punish in one day a thousand offenses, Love took up his own bow again secretly, like a man who waits for the time and place to hurt.

My vital power was concentrated in my heart, to make there and in my eyes his defense, when the fatal blow fell where every previous arrow had been blunted;

therefore, confused in the first assault, he lacked both strength and time to take up his arms in need,

or to lead me up the weary high mountain away from the slaughter, out of which now he would wish to help me, but cannot. (36)

The act of falling in love is figured as an attack: an arrow in the speaker's heart, the place where his "vital power was concentrated." In the last stanza, we see that his vital power is now unable to help him. He certainly seems to love Laura against his will, which is why his desire for her is figured as a threatening force against which he must retaliate by dismembering her. Labé, on the other hand, does not describe love as destructive:

Neither Ulysses nor anyone else
 even if wiser, from that divine face
 full of grace, honor, and respect,
 could have foreseen how I suffer pain and woes.

How, Love, with the beautiful eyes, you have made
 such a wound within my innocent breast,
 of food and of heat such is your recipe
 that there is no remedy for it unless you give it.

Oh harsh fate, that makes me be one
 stung by a scorpion and to have to ask the cure
 against the poison of the very same animal.

I ask only that he kill this pain,
 not extinguish the desire to me so dear,
 that I could not be without lest I should die. (183)

As in Petrarch's poem, love is figured as a wound to the chest, however, this wound is not fatal. Labé has interjected hope into a convention that previously depended on hopelessness by figuring desire in direct opposition to Petrarch's. In so doing, Labé resists the hopelessness of the Petrarchan lover and challenges the use of desire to objectify his female object. Because love is the force that will potentially heal her suffering, only a successful union with her beloved will save her; therefore, he must become her ally rather than her enemy. For Petrarch, who has no hope that an actual union or marriage will ever occur, his beloved remains the cause of his suffering.

Deborah Lesko Baker compares Labé's use of desire in this poem to that of Petrarch's:

Labé's culminating lines seek to valorize erotic desire as a dynamic impulse that drives human life onward and outward rather than sapping its energy and leading it into a downward spiral of obsessive inner turmoil. It is the acceptance and cultivation of desire as such an energizing force that signals the innovation of Labé's lyric speaker that allows her to retain an intact erotic vision and the hope for a unified couple—even within the universe of loss and pain she shares with her male counter-part [Petrarch]. (136)

Labé disrupts the tension between desire and resistance that proves destructive to both lover and beloved; her speaker chooses to accept desire, not as a destroying force, but as a healing force. By eliminating the potential violence of her own desire, she is not forced to destroy her beloved in an act of self-preservation.

Such resistance to the conventions of Petrarchan desire and its poetic forms are rare, of course; however, two nineteenth-century poets extend and deepen Labé's sixteenth-century critique of female objectification. English poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), born in Italy and raised in London, illustrates the inadequate and problematic nature of portraying a realistic woman using traditional conventions. In spite of efforts like those of Labé, the poetic tradition still objectifies women. Rossetti's sonnet challenges the image of a woman that can exist only in a man's imagination:

In an Artist's Studio

One face looks out from all his canvases,
 One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
 We found her hidden just behind those screens,
 That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
 A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
 A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
 A saint, an angel—every canvas means
 The same one meaning, neither more or less.
 He feeds upon her face by day and night,
 And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
 Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
 Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
 Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream. (899)

She argues that many of the paintings in a male painter's studio are portraits of one woman and that "every canvas means / The same one meaning, neither more nor less."

Rossetti describes an impulse similar to that of the English sonneteer to

disassemble the idea of one real woman into a collection of parts; in this case, a woman who, being human, embodies changing emotions and attitudes is reduced to the repeated depiction of an interpretation of one state of mind. This “face,” according to Rossetti, is depicted “Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.” The woman’s relationship to the painter can be compared to Astrophil’s relationship to Stella in that the artist, through visual depiction of his beloved, creates the objectified image of an ideal woman rather than a subjective image of the real woman he is ostensibly in love with. Once again we see male desire for an unattainable woman—though in this instance she is unattainable *because* she is an idealized image. She resists him by virtue of being imaginary. Rossetti describes the actual model as “wan with waiting” and not as she “was when hope shone bright,” suggesting that the real woman in the poem *is* attainable, though competing unsuccessfully with her own idealized image for the painter’s love. Where the sixteenth-century sonneteer explained his lady’s resistance as a result of her virtuous behavior, this poem argues that female resistance is contrived absolutely by the imaginings of the lover-painter himself. Although this poem was written in 1896, Rossetti still finds herself grappling with the legacy of the distanced and only partially represented woman. She points out the consequences of the conventional idealization of woman. In this poem, the painter has captured the real beauty that his model once embodied, “when hope shone bright,” and has memorialized it in his paintings. However, the model has been literally separated from her beauty by the artistic process, reinforcing the idea that female beauty can exist independently from a woman’s body. In spite of Rossetti’s strategy to expose the effects of male desire resulting from the artistic depiction of woman, her female figure becomes another casualty of male desire through fragmentation and subsequent loss of

hope and beauty. The end result is a woman who has been scattered among the different representations of Woman.

Like Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) uses the form of the Petrarchan sonnet to interrogate the blazon tradition. In “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,” she is able to avoid the objectification and subsequent fragmentation of her beloved by revising the purpose of the inventory:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
 I love thee to the level of everyday's
 Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
 I love thee freely as men strive for Right;
 I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
 I love thee with the passion put to use
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
 With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
 Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
 I shall but love thee better after death. (276)

Her first line, “How do I love thee? Let me *count* the ways,” invokes the tradition of inventory associated with love sonnets; however, instead of proving her love by her own ability to describe the physical attributes of her beloved, she concentrates on the qualities that make her love unique. She also situates her love in the context of everyday things like “breath / Smiles, tears” rather than the idealized natural context already criticized by Shakespeare. Because the use of inventory in its traditional form would ultimately objectify her beloved, she instead enumerates her own capacity to love, thus avoiding his objectification. Moreover, she emphasizes the spiritual, as opposed to the physical, aspect of her love by promising that she will love him even more after death.

While it is true that both Labé and Barrett Browning wrote sonnets that successfully presented love and desire as unthreatening, neither of them dealt explicitly with the violence of the blazon's inventory. This is not to suggest that this should have been the aim of either of these poems but to make clear that the problematic nature of physical representation has not been solved in any of these instances.

Labé and Barrett Browning's refusal to provide a physical description of the beloved allows desire to exist nonviolently; yet is this removal of the female body, or any body of the beloved, the only solution? The dissociation of the concept of female beauty from a literal image of her body, as we saw in Sidney's "[Queen Virtue's Court]," may allow the seemingly benign act of looking or visualizing to become violent. Emanuel's "Blonde Bombshell" illustrates the problem of accurate physical representation poets still face in the twentieth century. By describing the blonde actress as "a blizzard, a huge / spook [who] lights up like the sun the audience," Emanuel presents a disembodied agent who acts upon the audience rather than an object to be acted upon; however, the blonde's power, once again, is dependent on the omission of her physical description. Emanuel, like Labé and Barrett Browning, avoids subjecting her character to the violence of desire by preventing readers from committing the act of *looking*, remarkably, even in a poem about a *visual* art. A closer examination of how we "look" may provide a basis for

understanding why these poets avoid physical representation of the subjects of their poems.

We know very well that Stella's mouth does not really look like a door, that this is just a metaphor, but we are willing to "not see" an actual mouth in our imaginations in order to enjoy Sidney's imagery. Likewise, Spenser offers images of objects valued for their beauty and of particular and professional interest to his audience, ostensibly identified as merchants. Each poet is inviting his reader to look with his mind's eye at a highly stylized image of a woman. Our willingness to forget the actuality of a woman's body allows us to imagine the perfected image of woman offered by the blazon. These poems appear to ask a very simple request of the reader: to read the poem and to imagine, or "look at" with the mind's eye, the images the poet wants us to see. Yet, *we* decide how we want to see things, says art historian James Elkins in his book *The Object Looks Back*: "Each act of vision mingles seeing with not seeing, so that vision can become less a way of gathering information than avoiding it" (201). This suggests that *what* we see is influenced by what we *desire* to see. When Sidney compares Stella's skin to alabaster, he creates a metaphor of white smooth skin; however, the literal depiction of balconies protruding from her cheeks is disturbing. We want to see a beautiful image, so we choose to "see" the idea rather than the literal image as it is described. Likewise, the description of Stella's mouth as a door made of red porphir is not a metaphor based on how the mouth looks but how it functions. A mouth can be said to close as can a door, but a real mouth does not look like a door. Similarly, teeth can be locked, but not with a key. Obviously, we are not supposed to visualize each of these images literally, or we would see an image like the sixteenth century illustration of a literalized Petrarchan lady [Figure

1]. Like Shakespeare's "[My mistress' eyes]" this picture shows an opinion during the Renaissance that these comparisons were on some level ridiculous. Elkins writes, "To read about a face is to set yourself a specific task, and it involves forgetting what is visual and remembering only ideas" (164). This suggests that specific requirements are placed on the reader. In order to appreciate Sidney's poem, a reader must be capable of distinguishing between what is to be visualized or "seen" and what is not to be "seen."

When surrealist painter Salvador Dali (1904-1989) "literally" combines the idea of an apartment with Mae West's face [Figure 5], the outcome is bizarre. Mae West, icon of sexuality, is a twentieth-century physical manifestation of a Petrarchan lady. Like Sidney's "[Queen Virtue's court, which some call Stella's face]," Dali's "Mae West's Face Which Can Be Used as a Surrealist Apartment" depicts an ideal of female beauty (West's face) as a building. In both of these works, female beauty is no longer simply being enhanced with comparisons to beautiful objects from nature; it is being turned into items of cultural significance that have no relationship whatsoever to a woman's body. The fact that Dali's English patron, Edward James, "later had a real lip sofa made along the lines of the one in the painting" (Maddox 42) indicates an even further impulse to disassociate the concept of female beauty from the woman's body. Body parts such as eyes, lips, and hair no longer signify a woman's body but the abstract concept of beauty instead. This is an extreme example of how female beauty has come to exist on its own, independent from a female body. This painting does not provide a distinction between imaginary and literal imagery and therefore demonstrates the bizarreness of a metaphor like Sidney's "[Queen Virtue's court]." Although we might consider the act of looking to be objective and benign, this painting reminds us of how much we are willing to "not

see” in order to accommodate metaphors like Sidney’s, and that the impulse to “not see” a woman’s body is still prevalent in our culture.

Indeed, we often consider “objective observation” the basis for scientific study despite the discovery of quantum physics which shows that on the molecular level, the simple act of observation does in fact have a determining influence over the results of an experiment. Elkins questions the objectivity of seeing, describing it as “irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious” (11). If this is true, it suggests that the viewer/reader may be an active, though unknowing, participant in the objectification of woman in these poems and paintings; the way we allow our “threads of the unconscious” to visualize women has been influenced by our tradition of art and literature. Perhaps we have learned to “not see” women in spite of the fact that it could be said that our culture is obsessed with looking at women. We can see how Judy Grahn, in her poem about Marilyn Monroe’s dead body, published in 1978, “[I have come to claim],” literally disrupts the act of seeing with the destruction of the photographer’s camera:

... but when one of the reporters comes too close
 I beat him, bust his camera
 with your long, smooth thigh
 and with your lovely knucklebone
 I break his eye. (32)

Here, the act of looking is an act of commodification because the photographer would presumably sell the photographs of Marilyn Monroe. The speaker prevents the photographer from commodifying Monroe’s body by breaking the camera with Monroe’s

knucklebone. This poem successfully parodies the objectification of women and challenges the reader's own assumptions about Monroe as a sex object by literalizing the act of looking.

Grahn's poem vilifies the type of man who is interested in looking at a woman's body for sexual pleasure, and who is identified by the repeated refrain, "hubba, hubba, hubba" (32). This is the same kind of male viewer who would probably purchase *Jem* magazine [Figure 6] on the cover of which we see one example of what "not seeing" means. The model, Betty Weider, is a version of one of Cropper's "beautiful monsters" with her impossibly small waist, likely the result of the surgical removal of ribs; the smallness of her waist in contrast to the largeness of her breasts and wideness of her hips is an exaggeration of a shapely woman's figure. The "painter's" incomplete version of her body on his canvas "sees" the model for the viewer, by representing part of her body on his canvas. The fact that the painter is drawn as a cartoon character, maybe half the model's height, invokes the larger than life idealization of the Petrarchan lady. His depiction of her on the canvas is an example of seeing and not seeing at the same time; her body is reduced to what Margaret Atwood refers to, in this prose section from her 1974 "Circe/Mud Poems" as "the essentials": "When he was young he and another boy constructed a woman out of mud. She began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to the essentials" (2297). Of course, it is no surprise to see a woman objectified and reduced to her sexually important parts on the cover of a pornographic magazine; indeed, the pornographic treatment of women is only one example of how our culture as a whole treats women's bodies. And even here, where looking is the only goal, we still only look partially, where women have "meat . . . in useful places" (Grahn, 32).

Even when we buy magazines that expose women's bodies, we "don't see" as much as we "see."

What does it mean to look at something and not "see" it? In his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*, neurologist Oliver Sacks describes Virgil, a fifty-year-old man who regained his vision after forty-five years of blindness. After their first meeting, Sacks wrote that "instead of looking at me, taking me in the normal way, [Virgil] made sudden strange fixations—on my nose, on my right ear, down to my chin, up to my right eye—not seeing, not 'getting,' my face as a whole" (117). It is clear from Sacks' account, as well as the accounts of others who have observed adults who recover sight, that integrating details into a whole is a skill we learn from birth—that part of the natural process of seeing is to learn how to combine a collection of details into a whole picture. Virgil's blindness of course, made acquiring the integrative skill impossible. Though surgery gave him the capacity to see in adulthood, it did not give him the ability to unify his vision. As a culture of readers, under the weight of the authority of our literary canon, our ability to see an integrated physical representation of a woman in poetry has likewise been disrupted. In Virgil's case, his inability to integrate details into an intact image of the world around him is more unsettling and debilitating than his previous blindness (143). Labé, Barrett Browning and Emanuel have been forced to choose a kind of blindness by preferring the absence of the female image altogether over the violent disintegration of that image inherent in physical representation in our culture. We have, through the interactive process between author and reader, created a large-scale cultural disability which leaves the poet interested in depicting a woman's body one of two choices—dismemberment or blindness. The figurative

dismemberment is facilitated by the impulse to create images of women dependent on the reader's willingness to "not see" her. Some feminist poets have chosen a kind of blindness and have literalized it by refusing to provide visual images of women altogether rather than subjecting to the inevitable partial representation conventionalized by male poets.

In "Blonde Bombshell," Lynn Emanuel avoids any description of the blonde's body showing, instead, the effect of her presence on the audience. Although the speaker is looking at her, she does not share her visual experience with the audience. In this way Emanuel's strategy is markedly different from Spenser's in "[Ye weary merchants]" where a male narrator describes a woman for a male audience. Adreinne Rich and Alurista, are two poets who respond to the convention of "not seeing" female bodies by avoiding visual imagery altogether. This is important because although they are consciously writing well within the tradition of love poetry, they are challenging the specific convention of how women are seen within that tradition. Their reluctance to trust readers with visual images leads to more resourceful and unusual ways of imagining women. In the course of dismantling expected methods of representation, Alurista goes even further and challenges the conventional use of language itself as sexist and objectifying. In these poems we see that twentieth century poets have made adjustments in who is looking and how they do so.

It is significant in "Blonde Bombshell" that Emanuel's narrator does not report to us how this blonde looks, but rather how her presence on the screen affects the audience in the theater. While the blonde's features are conventional, their presentation is not. The speaker is not concerned with the reality of movie star, but with the unreality of her

presence on screen and therefore does not attempt to make her real: “There in the narrow, / mote-filled finger of light, is a blonde / so blonde. so blinding, she is a blizzard, a huge / spook, and lights up like the sun the audience / in its galoshes” (9). Although she is introduced as an intangible being that exists in a “finger of light,” she is powerful enough to blind her audience. Emanuel emphasizes both her absence of physicality and her power over the audience by calling her a “huge spook.” Her illusory presence is compared to the mundane audience “in its galoshes.” The narrator is looking for an escape from reality; in a poem like “In an Artist’s Studio,” we see that the painter’s idea of reality is replaced by his idealized version of his model. Emanuel’s speaker, like Rossetti’s painter, is in love with an image, not a real person; at the end of the poem, however, unlike the painter, she is not able to maintain this image. The blonde comes “in on schedule like a bus.” but neither this nor the car image actually takes the narrator away from her mundane life. In this case, ideal female beauty is shown as appealing but ephemeral and ultimately unfulfilling.

In her “Twenty-one Love Poems” Adrienne Rich (b. 1929) grapples with the implications of describing her love for her lesbian lover using a language that has authoritatively objectified women for centuries. Her choice to write a series of numbered poems that mimic a conventional sonnet sequence indicates her intention to join this tradition, lending her subject matter canonical authority. Yet, by writing formally unorthodox sonnets she resists traditional restrictions. The sequence actually contains twenty-two poems, however, the only poem that describes the physical act of love is not numbered. This indicates that the sonnet tradition as it stands is not able to accommodate the type of erotic subject matter she wishes to discuss:

(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)

Whatever happens with us, your body
 will haunt mine—tender, delicate
 your lovemaking, like the half-curved frond
 of the fiddlehead fern in forests
 just washed by sun. Your traveled generous thighs
 between which my whole face has come and come—
 the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there—
 the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth—
 your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
 me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
 reaching where I have been waiting years for you
 in my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is. (32)

This description of two women making love is particularly unconventional in the context of the sonnet sequences alluded to by Rich. One way she resists the traditional objectification of her lover is by disrupting the reader's visual access to the women. Through the strategic use of line breaks, Rich leads us to expect a visual image which doesn't arrive; for example, when we read just to the end of the second line, "Whatever happens, your body / will haunt mine—tender, delicate," we expect that "tender, delicate" is the beginning of a description of her body. When we continue to the third line, however, it is not the body but the act of lovemaking being described. By creating the expectation of a visual image and then refusing to fulfill that expectation, Rich draws attention to the reader's assumption that the body will be described—and to her refusal to do so.

Rich replaces the act of looking with touching and tasting; she also displaces the conventional objectification of the beloved by describing how this act of lovemaking effects the narrator. It is *her* face that is orgasmic between her lover's thighs. Her use of the word "rose" in the last line reminds us that she *is* using the language of Sidney and

Spenser, and even though she is not writing in Italian, she uses Petrarch's language of the natural metaphor. However, by using "rose" to describe the woman's sexual organs, she subverts the cliché of woman as a visual object subject to the violence of objectifying male sexual pleasure into a new image of a woman actively experiencing her own pleasure. Indeed, the "rose" is now a "cave" which provides protection from the male gaze.

When Rich writes in poem XIII "we're out in a country that has no language / no laws" and "whatever we do together is pure invention" (31), she declares that the female lovers depicted here are not dependent on the traditional language of heterosexual love. However, for the speaker, "showing" her lover to the world "is not simple" (25); because there is no language available to her that is not implicated in the objectification of women, she must engage the language that has been used before. Rich uses a natural lexicon to describe the lovemaking between the two lovers. Like the Petrarchan poets, she is seeking the authority of nature to help her argument. Yet, unlike the Petrarchan poets, her argument is not that her lover is more pleasing to look at than other women; we are given only glimpses of her body as it is engaged in sex. Rich does not use her natural metaphor to describe her lover's body, but to describe the physical expression of love. The peaceful image of a fern beginning its spring cycle of growth locates lesbian love in the natural world—a world whose laws supersede the laws of man which discourage same sex love and which "has not imagined" (25) them. But it's also a world that claims heterosexuality is "natural." So nature is being recruited here to counter that claim.

While Rich disrupts the act of looking by presenting sensual rather than visual imagery, the Chicano poet Alurista (b. 1947) goes a step further by disrupting the

This poem participates in the tradition of love poetry by including an inventory of body parts, however, Alurista provides us with a new version of the inventory. The list grammatically confuses parts of both lovers by linking them together with unlikely verbs. This strategy seems to dismantle, not the lover's body, but the traditional separation of the two lovers. By including the speaker's body parts in the inventory, Alurista resists the objectification of either lover. The layout of this poem further disrupts the usual hierarchy between subject and object. Just as the physical relationship between the two is revitalized, by his grammatical constructions, it is further "reimagined" by the concrete nature of the list of prepositions and pronouns "above / within / and / without / I / you." The traditional structure of a sentence like "I am above you" immediately identifies the subject "I" and the object "you." The list resists such designations.

Like the poems of Labé, Barrett Browning, and Rich, this is not a poem about distanced and unconsummated love. And once again there is no visual description of either of the lovers' bodies; in all of these poems, love is clearly not dependent on the act of looking. However, Alurista goes even further than the others in disrupting the subject-object distinction by grammatically conflating the actions and desires of both lovers into the single voice of the speaker. What can it mean that "no one couples my attention like your rhythms?" By grammatically mingling the actions and effects of these actions between people in the poem by "mismatching" verbs and nouns, Alurista effectively disrupts the basic construct of subject/object. This strategy works to remind us that language is a construction that shapes how we think of and interact with the world around us. Conventional use of the English language is clearly not adequate for his purposes, so he puts words together in ways that do not make conventional sense and, by doing so,

creates new meanings—and through new meanings he makes new ideas. By matching verbs and nouns that are not associated by denotation within the structure of a repeated grammatical construction, such as “no one suckles my childhood like your eyes” and “no one thinks my fingers like your feet,” he is able to use the English language to create the impression of an otherwise indescribable intimacy between lovers.

The repetition of the words “no one” is interestingly listed along the left margin of the poem, perhaps undermining the construct of the speaker’s identity. Perhaps it can be read that no one—meaning no one person—can perform these intimate acts like two people can. The eleventh line begins with “no one,” and then breaks the pattern established in the first ten lines, reading “no one I am.” Perhaps this can be read as “not one I am” or “I am not one.”

In the last line he offers sound affinities between English and Spanish, “two, us, dos,” creating a phonetic marriage of the two languages. This blending echoes the grammatical blending of the lovers’ bodies. In this poem desire does not exist as a force one person feels for the other. Desire mingles between them as its assignment to subject and object is lost through the destruction of conventional subject and object oriented sentence construction.

Although all three of these poets have successfully subverted the violence of male desire while disrupting imagistic, syntactic, and linguistic conventions, part of their success lies in the fact that they have removed the traditional object of male desire: the female body. They have found ways to discuss sexual and emotional intimacy and love without subjecting the loved one to the destructive gaze of the viewer, yet they have once again chosen blindness over dismemberment. Yet, many woman poets are not willing to

safeguard the female figure by censoring it completely. For them, the female body must be represented, and the problem is how to do so without reproducing the problems of the blazon convention.

Three contemporary poets who address the problematic representation of women's bodies through the portrayal of corpses are Sharon Olds, Judy Grahn, and Sylvia Plath. In examining these restorations of the female body to the poem, we can see how the conventions of inventory and dismantling continue to exert their powers of objectification. All of these poets attempt to subvert convention, but unlike Alurista or Rich, they refuse to leave the visual aspects of the female body out of the picture. Their women, however, are no longer intact—they are the disfigured, destroyed women from the tradition. This portrayal forces us to consider the consequences of institutionalized objectification and also brings the discussion of female beauty out of the realm of divine immortality conventionalized by Petrarchism. By discussing female beauty in relation to its mortality, it is necessarily linked to the body, no longer existing as an abstract concept.

The images of dead bodies within the poems respond to another poetic convention of the Renaissance in which a poet claims to immortalize a woman by documenting her beauty in a poem. In Shakespeare's famous sonnet "[Shall I compare thee to a summer's day]," the speaker declares that unlike the season, which is subject to the passage of time, "thy *eternal* summer," as immortalized in this poem, "shall not fade . . . So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (Shakespeare 18). This conceit succeeds because of our willingness to conceptualize the existence of the young woman's beauty through the use of metaphor. The natural beauty of summer is inferior to metaphoric beauty because it will eventually turn to fall just as the beauty of a

real woman is inferior to that of poetic metaphor because she will eventually grow old and die. The feminist use of women's corpses shows the consequences of objectification and relocates the female image back into the temporal world, which is a step toward reuniting female beauty with the body and thus towards creating an image we can see in its entirety. While this may be a move toward the reunion of beauty and body, the corpse, in the meantime is an unsatisfactory substitute for an integrated female image.

Sharon Olds's (b. 1942) poem "The Death of Marilyn Monroe," written in 1975, exemplifies ways that Petrarchan conventions continue to shape our ideas as well as poetry in the twentieth century and points out the societal violence associated with these ideas. This poem explores the fate of a real woman who has come to represent this unrealistic portrait of female beauty, and the effect her death has on men who witness it. Notice how Olds's list of a woman's features challenges the expectations we have developed from reading Spenser's "[Ye tradeful merchants]":

The Death of Marilyn Monroe

The ambulance men touched her cold
body, lifted it, heavy as iron,
onto the stretcher, tried to close the
mouth, closed the eyes, tied the
arms to the sides, moved a caught
strand of hair, as if it mattered,
saw the shape of her breasts, flattened by
gravity, under the sheet,
carried her, as if it were she,
down the steps.

These men were never the same. They went out
afterwards, as they always did,
for a drink or two, but they could not meet
each other's eyes.

Their lives took

a turn—one had nightmares, strange
 pains, impotence, depression. One did not
 like his work, his wife looked
 different, his kids. Even death
 seemed different to him—a place where she
 would be waiting,

and one found himself standing at night
 in a doorway to a room of sleep, listening to a
 woman breathing, just an ordinary
 woman
 breathing. (10)

This poem shows how the death of an ideal of female beauty affects three presumably average American men and challenges traditional male/female roles by invoking the blazon tradition with the list of body parts; “The body . . . heavy as iron” and the eyes, mouth, hair and breasts are described as open, caught and flat in death. Olds does not have to elaborate on the colors of these features because every American reader is going to fill in the blonde hair, blue eyes, red lips, full breasts, and pale skin. She also does not have to state that this is an American ideal of beauty because, after all, it is Marilyn Monroe. However, Olds’s ideal woman is dead, and her body parts are gruesome, not beautiful any longer. Olds’s use of a list of Monroe’s body parts indicates that Petrarchan conventions still influence how we describe beauty today.

She effectively distances her narrator from the typical male point of view by describing three average men who are actually looking at the body; this gives the reader the opportunity to consider the effects of the convention of the observation of the male narrator. These three men experience first hand the death of idealized female beauty. The fact that “Their lives took / a turn” shows that their ideals were destroyed as well. One man’s wife looked different, showing that the intact ideal informed his image of his

own wife. One man suffered sexual impotence, as if his normal sexual function is dependent on an ideal of impossible beauty. The third man is sinisterly poised outside “a room of sleep.” The repetition of the words “woman breathing” in the last three lines hints at harm he may be about to inflict on this woman. The last two lines separate the word “woman” from the word “breath,” as if he has already cut off her breathing. It is interesting that following the death of ideal female beauty, the sleeping woman is figured without physical presence, as if she has become an abstract concept, no longer anchored in reality by a traditional, and artificial, listing of her physical features. In this poem lack of physical representation ceases to protect her from harm because the ideal has been lost. Olds, like Rossetti, in showing the effects of the worship of the ideal of female beauty, does so at the cost of the subjectivity of the women in the poem. In this case, although the myth of idealized female beauty is destroyed, the destructive male gaze is left intact and powerful.

Judy Grahn, (b. 1940) in another poem about Marilyn Monroe’s dead body, disrupts the male gaze and subsequently its ability to inflict harm:

I have come to claim
 Marilyn Monroe’s body
 for the sake of my own.
 dig it up, hand it over,
 cram it in this paper sack.
 hubba, hubba, hubba.
 look at those luscious
 long brown bones, that wide and crusty
 pelvis. ha HA. oh she wanted so much to be serious

 the reporters are furious, they’re asking
 me questions
 what right does a woman have
 to Marilyn Monroe’s body? and what
 am I doing for lunch? They think I

mean to eat you. Their teeth are lurid
 and they want to pose me, leaning
 on the shovel, nude. Don't squint.
 But when one of the reporters comes too close
 I beat him, bust his camera
 with your long, smooth thigh
 and with your lovely knucklebone
 I break his eye.

Long ago you wanted to write poems;
 Be serious Marilyn
 I am going to take you in this paper sack
 around the world, and
 write on it – the poems of Marilyn Monroe –
 Dedicated to all princes.
 the male poets who were sorry to see you go,
 before they had a crack at you.
 They wept for you, and also
 they wanted to stuff you
 while you still had a little meat left
 in useful places;
 but they were too slow. (31)

This narrator finds value in Monroe's body, unlike the men she describes, who were only interested sexually when she "still had a little meat left / in useful places."

Grahn writes "she never stops smiling now" and after a moment's reflection it becomes obvious that she is referring to the skull's grinning appearance. When she describes the reporters, she writes, "Their teeth are lurid." This is an unexpected twist as we would more readily expect a skeleton's grin to be described as lurid. Though there is an unsettling quality to Grahn's description of the women's bones, they are not described as "lurid," but as "luscious" and "lovely." Her narrator's protective attitude toward them, and her aggressive wielding them against the reporter, not only implicates this voyeuristic male carrying a phallic camera but fights back with the underlying reality of the human body in the form of Monroe's thigh bone. Because its sexual use has disintegrated with

the flesh, it is no longer subject to male desire and can be used as a weapon against that male gaze.

This female voice works to dismantle the dynamic described in Olds's poem; where Olds has identified a connection between our society's traditional attitude toward female beauty and violence toward women, Grahn refuses to accept that violence as inevitable. This is not a woman whose breathing is going to be cut off by a disillusioned man standing outside her bedroom door. By claiming the bones of nine dead women, Grahn's narrator recognizes value in that which is sexually useless to men. The symbolism of the "eye," or camera lens, of the reporter being destroyed by Monroe's knuckle bone shows that what is dangerous to women is the male *look* or *gaze* which turns them into a sexual commodity. This male view that reduces woman to an assemblage of body parts is our legacy from the blazon tradition.

Olds's poem suggests that this problem exists beyond the perimeters of poetry and contributes to general violence toward women. By the end of Grahn's poem, the speaker has rid herself of the threat of the "male reporter and camera"; this is a significant reformulation of the traditional relationship between male observer-describer and the abstract ideal of female qualities established in the Petrarchan poetic tradition. Here, female beauty is not available separately from the visual reminder of human mortality. This move to subject female beauty to the processes of time and the realm of mortality is similar to Shakespeare's move to bring his dark lady down to earth, out of the ether of idealization; unlike Shakespeare, however, she does not figure Monroe as an object of comparison in order to prove her poetic prowess. She entitles herself to the power of voice by describing Monroe's corpse. Grahn disrupts the male gaze, challenges male

poets and works to give the mortal female image a voice with which she can express her self.

In “Lady Lazerus,” Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) provides her female corpse with a strong and persuasive voice. This strategy is different from that of “The Death of Marilyn Monroe” and “[I have come to claim]” in which the narrator describes the corpse for the reader. Lady Lazerus inventories her own body. She also invokes the economy of men looking at beautiful women we saw in Spenser’s “[Ye weary merchants].” While Spenser reduces the woman in his poem to a collection of metaphorical jewels to be examined and exchanged within an economy that excludes her as an active participant, Plath, while also figuring her female speaker’s body parts as marketable goods (whether to be exchanged or looked at), gives her female speaker full control of all exchanges:

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
my enemy.
Do I terrify?——

The nose. the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day
.....
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
 The peanut-crunching crowd
 Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——
 The big strip tease.
 Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
 My knees.
 I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman

 It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
 To the same place, the same face, the same brute
 amused shout:

'A miracle!'
 That knocks me out.
 There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
 For the hearing of my heart——
 It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
 For a word or a touch
 Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
 So, so Herr Doktor.
 So, Herr Enemy

.....
 Ash, ash –
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,
 A wedding ring,
 A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (244)

This poem, like many others, displays the cultural tendency to describe a woman by listing her parts; “a sort of walking miracle, my skin . . . my right foot . . . My face.” However, these parts are described in the context of private and public horrors. She mixes the lexicon of the female body with the lexicon of the Holocaust. She describes her parts in terms of a tradition that literally dismembered Jewish bodies in an effort to create usable objects from the bodies. This move is eerily reminiscent of Spenser’s commodification of beauty, though in this case the narrator and the object are one, meaning that the subject and object are the same person.

The speaker immediately acknowledges herself as a casualty of a misogynist tradition by comparing parts of her body to products Nazis made in an attempt to capitalize on the bodies of murdered Jews. However, she successfully resists the helpless position of victim by remaining in control of the situation, which we see in the lines, “My face, a featureless, fine / Jew linen. / Peel off the napkin / my enemy. / Do I terrify?” Here, the speaker controls the horror of the scene by directing her “enemy” to peel off her face. The relationship between who is perpetrating violence and who is feeling the effects of that violence is carefully constructed. By asking “Do I terrify?” she implies that although she has been victimized and objectified, that she is nevertheless able to use her own victimization to horrify others. We have seen how important descriptions of a woman’s beautiful face have been in the Renaissance blazons and how the portrayal of a

beautiful face subjected it to the violence of fragmentation in Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio." In "Lady Lazarus," Plath has horrifyingly and literally removed the face from the equation, and we see that the woman is still there: she is not equal to her face. It is significant also that she is not silenced, even by death.

It is no coincidence that peeling off of her face turns into a striptease. She compares society's desire to look at women in a sexual way to the morbid urge to look at a dead body. The peanut-crunching crowd's fervor to see a dead woman is equivalent to the desire to see a woman strip naked just as the *Jem* cover equates being stripped naked with being dismembered. She is able to disrupt our tendency to "not see" because she is already assuming that her audience is not seeing. She addresses an audience who wants to see the destruction of a woman, but she is not allowing the audience to perpetrate that destruction. By exaggerating the subject-viewing-object relationship, she creates her own spectacle which she is able to control by "charging admission."

With her phoenix image, Plath asserts that ultimately representation of the female body will eventually transcend commodification and dismemberment, and that even its physical destruction will not prevent it from rising "out of the ash" to "eat men like air." While this figure provides hope that a viable method of representation will manifest in spite of the victimization of women, it does not provide an image of what this manifestation will look like. Both Plath and Grahn successfully provide images of female bodies that are not susceptible being "not seen" by the reader; however, the cost is great for they are dead: These two poets diagnose the problem, though neither provides a solution. Olds's vision is bleak, but is perhaps the most realistic of the three. We are

conscious of the problem and have the tools of analysis, but ultimately we still want to see Marilyn Monroe's breasts.

Adrienne Rich, Alurista, and Lynn Emanuel all create successful images of female bodies by avoiding their visual aspects. Emanuel's blonde is a blinding blizzard, but is ultimately intangible, composed only of dust motes in a ray of light. Each of these poets has chosen to control what we see and don't see. Solutions involving visual imagery, like those of Grahn and Plath, are not adequate for love poems as the bodies they deem impervious to dismemberment are corpses. This leaves us with a continuing avoidance of the female figure, the alternative to which we have seen so far is the depiction of women disfigured by death. I was frankly surprised not to have found more contemporary poems which depict living beautiful women. In the Polish poet Anna Swir's (1909-1984) "Large Intestine," the speaker is a woman who like Lady Lazarus inventories her features for the reader. Unlike Lady Lazarus, however, this woman is alive and is sexually appealing, though she is considering her own mortality and does imagine herself dead. This poem is one example of how an image of a woman's body can be visually represented without unintentional dismemberment: She trusts us to see the female figure the way she wants us to only because she continuously draws our attention to our impulse to "not see" her:

Look in the mirror. Let us both look.
 Here is my naked body.
 Apparently you like it,
 I have no reason to.
 Who bound us, me and my body?
 Why must I die
 together with it?

 Where am I, I, I myself?

Belly, am I in the belly? In the intestines?
 In the hollow of the sex? In a toe?
 Apparently in the brain. I do not see it.
 Take my brain out of my skull. I have the right
 to see myself. Don't laugh.
 That's macabre, you say.

.....
 I wear the used rags of my family,
 an alien brain, fruit of chance, hair
 after my grandmother, the nose
 glued together from a few dead noses.
 What do I have in common with all that?
 What do I have in common with you, who like
 my knee, what is my knee to me?

.....
 I will leave both of you here,
 my knee and you.
 Don't make a wry face, I will leave you all my body
 to play with.
 And I will go.

.....
 One must hurry
 before death comes. For by then
 like a dog jerked by its chain
 I will have to return
 into this stridently suffering body.
 To go through the last
 most strident ceremony of the body.

Defeated by the body,
 slowly annihilated because of the body
 I will become kidney failure
 or the gangrene of the large intestine.
 And I will expire in shame.
 And the universe will expire with me,
 reduced as it is
 to a kidney failure
 and the gangrene of the large intestine. (74)

Like Olds and Grahn and Plath, Swir is largely concerned with images of death; however, these images are operating differently here. In this case, by describing death, Swir is able to discuss life. She examines the relationship between the consciousness and the body by

looking at her body because she cannot see her consciousness. When she writes, “the universe will expire with me,” we see that this also means that the universe exists *because* of her, and *she* exists because of her body. By saying to her lover “apparently you like [my body],” and then imagining herself as her belly, her intestine, her brain, she contrasts the reality of a functioning woman’s body with its stereotypes of sexuality. Where Alurista and Rich refused to speak for the women in their poems, Swir’s woman speaks for herself. This strategy invokes once again the reader’s role as voyeur. However, because this speaker is very specific about how she wants us to look, we are not looking the same way we look at Spenser’s lady.

The only metaphor she uses to describe her body is to call her brain and features “the used rags of my family” which compares her body to clothing that covers her real self, her consciousness. She chooses to reduce her body to its visual (and physical) components because she is interested in exploring its relationship to the consciousness. She is successful in this endeavor because she avoids unwanted objectification by the gaze of the reader by addressing it, through her lover, throughout the poem. She ultimately appropriates the act of objectification for her own purposes as she makes her consciousness the subject and her body the object.

This is one example of how a poet can negotiate her way through the pitfalls of our poetic tradition in order to offer us a new and refreshing glimpse of a woman. We have seen poets approaching objects in different ways in their efforts to visualize lovers in undamaging ways. Readers of poetry must continue to look for those poems that contain new ways to read just as poets need to continue to look for new ways to write about women’s bodies, because, as Anna Swir says, “I have the right to see myself.”

Appendix



Figure 1 (Booth 453)

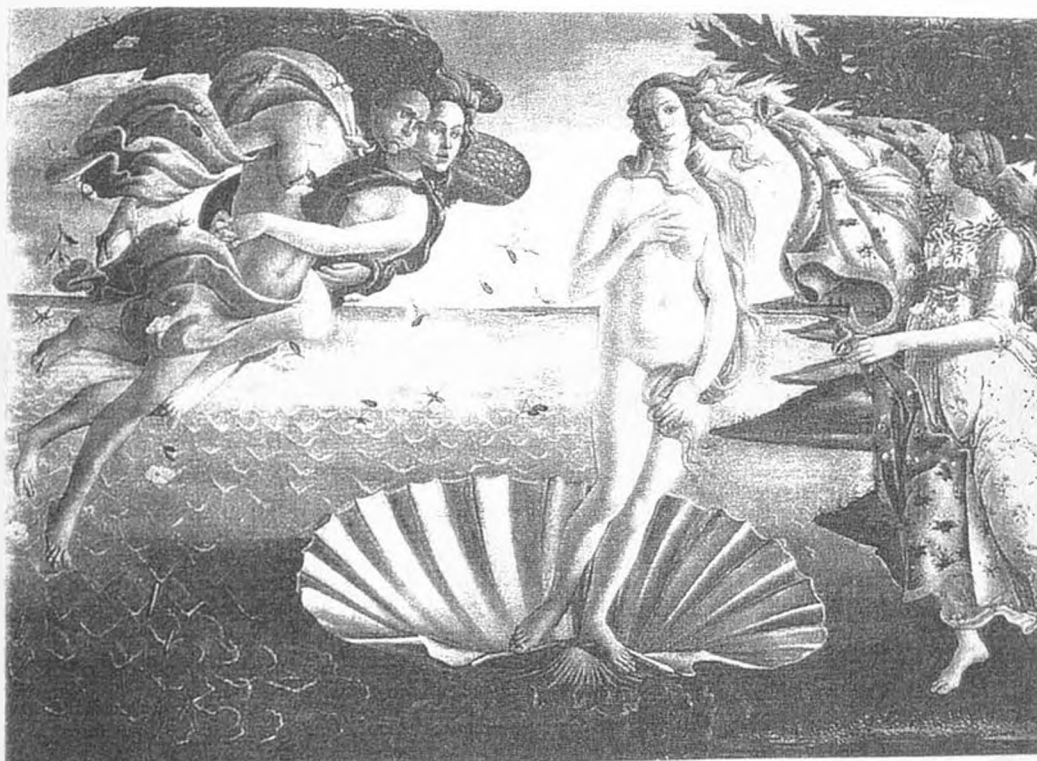


Figure 2 (Botticelli)



Figure 3 (Brown)

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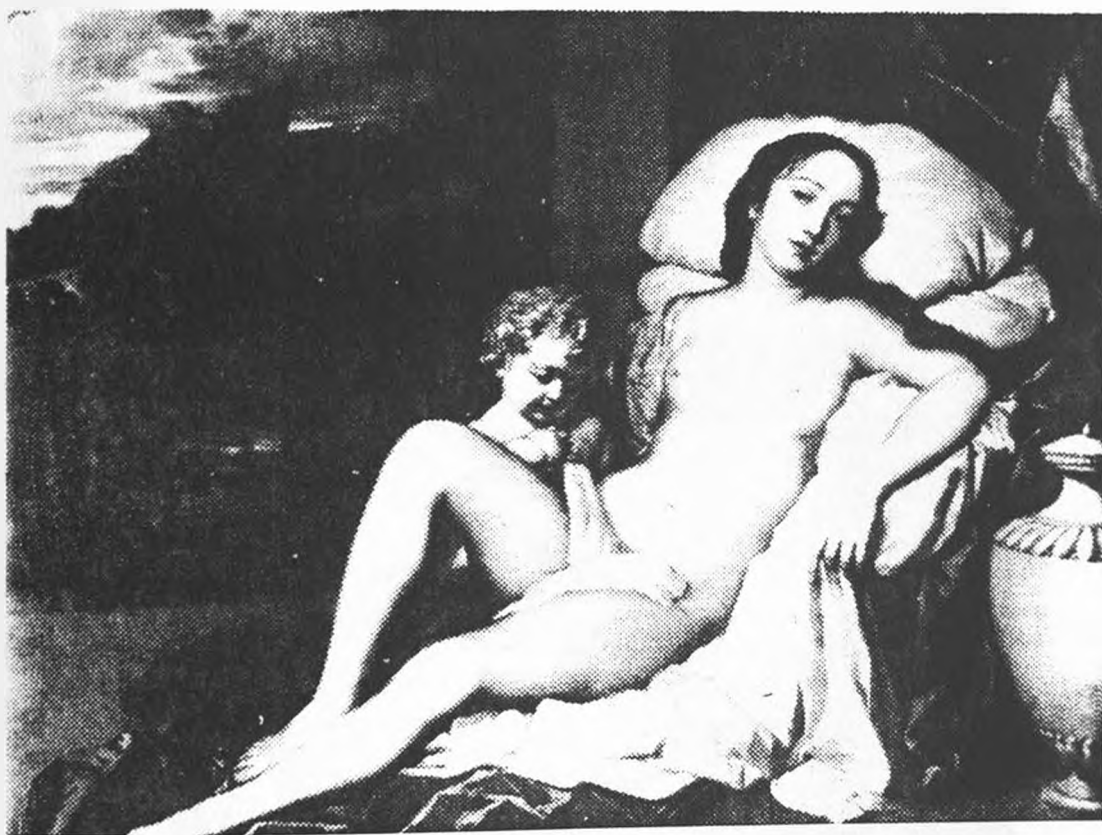


Figure 4 (Berger 52)

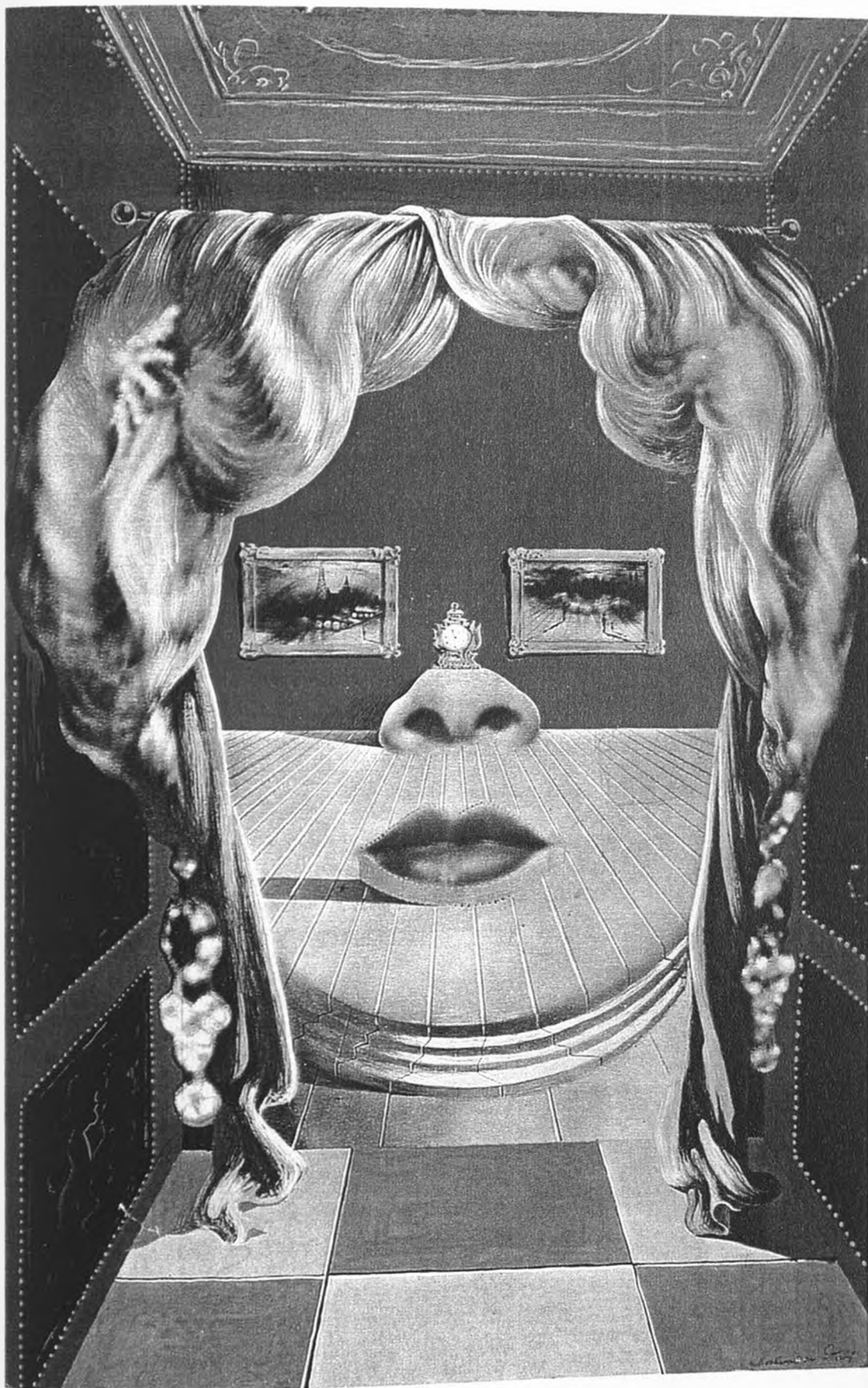


Figure 5 (Maddox 43)



Figure 6 (Jem Magazine)

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