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Communication-oriented approach to media and genre blending in a sample of Early Modern English poetry

Synkretyzm gatunkowy i intermedialność wczesnonowożytnej poezji angielskiej – analiza utworu w perspektywie komunikacyjnej

Abstrakt

Artykuł przedstawia analizę tekstową poezji wczesnonowożytnej w perspektywie interdyscyplinarnej. Rozważania dotyczące elegii Johna Donne'a pt. *The Comparison* przebiegają w ramach komunikacyjnej teorii łączenia gatunków w dziele literackim i mają na celu opis specyfiki ówczesnej wypowiedzi poetyckiej. Analiza prowadzi do wykrycia wzorców tekstowych służących interakcji z odbiorcą oraz wielowymiarowości komunikatu w obszarze jego funkcji. Odsłania misterny mechanizm ukształtowania poetyckiego dzieła z wykorzystaniem cech i funkcji różnych form i sposobów komunikowania treści, łączonych z obszarem literackim i pozaliterackim. Artykuł dowodzi, iż elegia Donne'a nawiązuje swoją obrazowością do XV/XVI-wiecznych sztuk wizualnych, w tym określonych dzieł malarstwa portretowego i rodzajowego z nurtu będącego przeciwagą dla ogólnie przyjętych form. Rozważania prowadzą do wniosku ogólnego, iż Donne wykorzystuje różne, wówczas dostępne kanały komunikacji, aby zapewnić intermedialność swego przekazu, a jego koncepcja wypowiedzi poetyckiej zakłada określone procesy poznawcze i twórcze po stronie adresata. Ogląd utworu Donne'a w powyższych kategoriach wskazuje na aspekt ówczesnej poezji dotychczas tylko fragmentarycznie opisany.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja późnorennesansowa a sztuki wizualne, synkretyzm gatunkowy, intermedialność, groteska

Abstract

The article uses an interdisciplinary approach to selected early modern poems of John Donne and aims to delineate the research area which still awaits systematic exploration. The textual analysis of his elegy: *The Comparison*, operating within the communication-oriented theory of genre blending, leads to the detection of its multigeneric and dialogic patterns. It reveals the intricate manner in which features and functions of various literary and non-literary forms are intertwined and harmonized in one poem. It is also argued that Donne's elegy derives its imagery from an experimental trend toward caricatures (grotesquery) followed by the 15th/16th-century portraitists and genre painters. The

general conclusion is that Donne utilizes various, then available, communication channels to ensure intermediality of his message and that his concept presupposes certain cognitive and creative processes on the addressee's side.

Keywords: late Renaissance poetry, visual arts, multigeneric patterns, intermedia space, caricature

Introduction

This essay focuses on the poetry of John Donne (1572–1631) – a writer whose creative space lies at the meeting point of apparent contradictions: the author of both secular and religious works, referred to by his contemporaries as “strong lines” (Gardner 1982: 15), of vicious satires and flattering letters, brief epigrams and extensive theological polemics, erotic poems with philosophical overtones as well as poetically structured sermons in prose. Labeled as metaphysical, after Johnson's *Life of Cowley* published in 1779–81, Donne's poetic works are frequently regarded in terms of their “philosophical conception of the universe” (Grierson 1962: 4). The aim of this essay, though, is to uncover still another facet of the specific early modern *coincidentia oppositorum* visible in Donne's verse. It will be observed in the poet's attempt to utilize features and functions of various, then available, communication vehicles (literary and non-literary forms) to ensure not only a certain presupposed reception of the message conveyed, but also an effect which may be referred to as the unceasing dynamism of his poetic creation. In other words, this essay is preoccupied with a sample of early modern *strong-lined* poetry created, it seems, with full awareness of the rules governing the process of effective communication and cognition. To illustrate this point, the linguistic layer of Donne's elegy *The Comparison* will be carefully scrutinized in terms of its numerous multigeneric patterns and dialogic relations. Furthermore, it will be argued that these relations extend toward a specific trend in 16th-century visual arts. All in all, Donne's poetic utterance will be viewed as harmonizing different functions (i.e. satirical, polemical, entertainment, opinion-forming) which eventually prove subordinate to his didactic message. Yet this primary didactic function is intricately woven into, cunningly concealed in, the textual intricacies of Donne's verse. It requires careful study of his riddlic poetry¹: his supercode built intertextually and intermedially.

¹ On biographical facts attesting to Donne's interest in the techniques of creating poetic riddles, see Rieke 1984. On the Anglo-Latin tradition of riddlic poetry: “didactic verses” aimed at transformation in the addressee's “frame of mind”, see Boryślowski 2004: 26.

In line with the suggestions offered by Riesner and Danneck, this essay examines “different varieties [and] grades of blending” in Donne’s poetry by observing the following “aspects of [its] generic profile”: “intertextuality², intermediality, shifting modes of writing (seen as modes of communication), and genre hybridity” (2015: 1; see also remarks on generic “contamination” in literature in Seibel 2007: 137–42). The approach of Brockstieger and Rémi³ (based on Genette, Pfister and Seibel) is adopted. It “allow[s] for identifying such hybridity as well as account[s] for the supposed processual character of genre blending in the interaction of its four communicative components: *text, author, reader, and context*” (Riesner and Danneck 2015: 1). Therefore, to illustrate “the extent of genre blending” in Donne’s verse, the composition of the text itself is examined and its “generic design” viewed from the perspective of the poet’s implied “genre consciousness”. The notion of the addressee is also conceptualized and the “patterns of reception” and its cognitive aspects considered to point to the aesthetic value and the social significance of Donne’s poetic experiment. Finally, the phenomenon is contextualized, its “pragmatic, social ... and literary background conditions” taken into account, “in order to determine its functions and achievements”. All in all, this essay operates within the “communication-oriented theory of genre blending” (quotes: Riesner and Danneck 2015: 1, 7; cf. the constitutive factors of communication in Jakobson 1960: 350).

Postmodern communication research views “all communications [as] social constructions influenced by countless perspectives” and “media, communication, and culture [as] interrelated and interdependent” (Leslie 2018: 62). The emphasis is, firstly, on the synergy of various media, defined as means of mass communication employed for social purposes; secondly, on the anticipation of an active role of the addressee in the process of designing messages meant to be effective; thirdly, on interaction which involves the coupling of intellectual and sensory experience and depends on the recipient’s perceptive skills; and lastly, on the degree to which the cognitive sphere has been stimulated (cf. Du Plooy 2002: 29–34). These phenomena are frequently discussed in the context of “transmedia storytelling” (term in Jenkins 2006: 93), which is called a sign of our time (Boczkowska 2014: 125–37). Inspired by these interdisciplinary observations, this essay offers a reading of early modern poetic text in terms of the degree to which it synchronizes

² Understood as “the totality of ... relations in a given text which indicates the dependence of its creation and reception on the knowledge of other texts ... in the process of communication” (Nycz 1990: 97), transl. mine.

³ In Riesner and Danneck 2015: 1.

then available vehicles of communication: oral performance, visual arts and written word. As “primary modeling systems that use signs of the same type”, sound, image and text are considered distinct media prior to the complex structures they co-create, such as “artistic orders [and] cultural paradigms” (Wasilewska-Chmura 2011: 27–8; Lotman 1977: 16–8). Intermediality is therefore understood broadly and recognized in each case when the influence of another medium, not necessarily its physical presence, is observed (Wolf 1999: 35–6; Wasilewska-Chmura 2011: 31). Donne’s texts are then presented as aiming at multidimensional interaction and his concept as grounded in his intuitive understanding of cognitive processes occurring at what Iser, centuries later, calls the aesthetic end of the bipolar literary work (1974: 125). The gradual unfolding of Donne’s concept presupposes the addressee’s perceptive capability which is to open the entire spectrum of images affecting both the brains and the senses and thus reconciling ideas with empirical evidence. Such cognitive ground is anticipated by the poet; it is textually crafted in the manner which appears optimal for his satirical, polemical, and didactic purposes (cf. Frantz 1989: 219).

1. *Coincidentia oppositorum* in Donne’s creative act of cosmogony

In Donne criticism *The Comparison* is perceived as controversial. Indeed, the first reading of this elegy leaves the impression it exceeds the limits of good taste in the degree of ugliness and ridicule ascribed to the female body (Frantz 1989: 219). Yet in *The Comparison* the lyrical “I” begins by presenting his own beloved (“my Mistres”) as breathtakingly beautiful. She appears a model of beauty also due to the affinity of Donne’s description with the imagery and lexical layer of Francesco Patrarich’s sonnets to Laura (*Canzoniere*):

As the sweet sweate of roses in a still, (1)
 As the allmighty balme of the’early East
 Such are the sweat dropps on my Mistres brest.
 And on her neck her skin such lustre setts
 They seeme no sweat drops but pearle carcanetts. (3–6)⁴

The drops of sweat on the lady’s chest become, by their very location, sweet and aromatic. The radiance of her skin produces a visual effect – transforms them into a pearl necklace. Without doubt the poem evokes a standard

⁴ *The Comparison* in Stringer 2000: 51; line numbers in parentheses.

with which an unspecified man's beloved is then unfavorably compared: "my Mistres" (4) vs. "thy Mistres" (7); it provides a yardstick against which to measure her particular physical traits (Boire 1980: 58).

As can be seen in the passage quoted above, Donne's poem presupposes a cognitive mechanism based on aroma-taste-texture-image interaction. Paradoxically, such a variety of sensory stimuli, accumulated in a short extract of what is expected to be elegiac poetry, first revives and then synchronizes the consecutive senses, all in all resulting in synesthesia. With such an exaggerated presentation of female ravishing beauty, excessively engaging the senses, the elegy's initial sestet is seen not only as a prelude to the main argument, but as a parody of the Petrarchan sonnet convention (Frantz 1989: 219). The degrading effect is heightened by the very interplay of two poetic genres and their traditional functions evoked in the wake of this analogy: sonnet (love lyric) \rightleftharpoons elegy (funeral themes).

The whole of the speaker's dramatic monologue thereby initiated may be called an intricate joke (Stein 1951: 257). The presence of the listener – a figure in the background – is apparent; the distance is bridged and the message personalized by means of the second-person singular pronoun: "thy". Donne's speaker uses all his wit to weave a long and convoluted sequence of unfavorable comparisons, at times seemingly coarse, at times balancing on the edge of acceptability (Frantz 1989: 219), yet at times hilariously funny:

Thy head is like a roughewen Statue of ieat
Where marks for eyes, nose, mouth, are yet scarce sett;
Like the first Chaos, ... (19–21)
And like a bunch of ragged Carrets stand
The short swolne fingers of thy gowty hand. (33–4)

The Comparison reflects the readiness of *strong-lined* poetry of that time to borrow lexis from various non-literary domains. Donne follows the trend, in an uproarious way balancing, in the image of the lady's body, the domestic (hand-related) and the artistic (head-related). The ugly woman is characterized by means of an analogy with gardening: she displays swollen, ill-shaped fingers, which altogether resemble a bunch of rough vegetable roots. Her head, in turn, is viewed from the perspective of arts (sculpture) – as a rough-hewn dark statue in which "eyes, nose (and) mouth" are dispersed, carved negligently, so to say – casually.

In the above-quoted lines the poet seems to jokingly refer to the classical principle of rhetoric and, in particular, da Vinci's conception of *decorum* – the fitness of the setting to the subject being presented, which exerted a profound influence on Renaissance visual arts (Clarke 2010: 44). In the elegy, the notion of the setting is treated even more punctiliously: it is each time tuned

to the scrutinized part of the subject's body (head – art, hand – gardening) and thus becomes a dynamic phenomenon. As if in response to the principle, Donne blends the down-to-earth (everyday) and the lofty (cultural) spheres, literally, on one physical plain by attributing them to a single body, and then flavors the whole with a pinch of medical connotations as well as strong cosmographic associations.

An ungodly creature, beyond any human classification system on account of her affiliation with “the first Chaos” (19), is what provides a striking contrast to the Petrarchan lady. At this point Donne draws on Greek creation myths, on the ancient notion of *χάος* – “infinite darkness” (Liddell 1940, *χάος*), a void state prior to the creation of the universe, an original gap between Heaven and Earth when “separated from their primordial unity” (Moorton 2001; Kirk et al. 1983: 42–4). It coincides with the biblical story of formlessness and non-being – nothingness – preceding God's creation of the universe (Genesis 1:2; Guthrie 2000: 59, 68). As such the concept of *prima materia* was adopted by Renaissance alchemy and associated with “orderless confusion” in human affairs c. 1600, precisely in Donne's times (Harper 2001, *chaos*; cf. Brown 1993: 372). Endowed with all these connotations, the briefly mentioned “first Chaos” is in fact employed in *The Comparison* as an underlying motif which accounts for the poem's blend of various micro- and macro-level phenomena. On the one hand, it illustrates the complete disorder and confusion observed in the lady's particular features and obviously signifies satirical exaggeration (on this meaning of *chaos* in early modern texts, see Gosson 1579: 43). On the other, it denotes physical matter in its shapeless yet potentially dynamic state, in contrast to the Petrarchan lady, who, in Donne's poem, holds her perfect beauty “in a still” (1). The female body depicted as a disharmonious cluster of parts and functions offers a meaningful context for the co-functioning of spheres perceived as opposite. In the lines quoted above these are artistic and domestic domains, just like heaven and earth⁵.

Therefore, the poem may be viewed as an allegory aiming at a twofold result – visualization (satirical exemplification of the chaotic state of affairs) and reorganization (a new beginning): shaping a desired model of the world out of what is considered formless, out of what is regarded as nothingness⁶. However, this attitude is only briefly, as if negligently, so to say – casually,

⁵ On chaos concealing “opposing forces”, undifferentiated and dissolved, see Cirlot 1971: 43; Blavatsky 1888: 9.

⁶ On “primordial chaos ... containing ... all forms [and] all the seeds of universal creation”, see Blavatsky 1888: 9.

suggested in the very final couplet of *The Comparison* advocating a departure from the chaotic (subject) matter: “Leaue her, and I will leaue comparing thus / She, and comparisons are odious” (53–4). As Hill and Caracciolo-Trejo rightly observe, Donne as well as other baroque poets “are not, for the most part, concerned to create new conventions, new poetical topics, but to invert the already existing, or to find new stratagems for making verse out of them” (1975: 66). It seems also in his poetry Donne relies on the 16th-century technique of meditation, clearly visible in his *Sermons* and similar to that postulated by Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1596). It consisted in visualizing a scene before its meaning was considered and emotions stirred, all to prepare the ground for prayer (Sloane 2006: 212–4). Donne creates a specific meditative poem which includes not a mere abstract idea, but a process performed both mentally and physically.

Modeled, it seems, on the biblical story of creation *ex nihilo*, Donne’s elegy provides ground for the justification of a paradox. In *The Comparison* the allegorical female body turns into the point of intersection of micro- and macrocosmic perspectives (cf. the philosophical background in Copleston 2003: 236; Norford 1977: 422). As illustrated in the above-presented passages, the speaker’s characterization forces the addressee to focus on central detail and, simultaneously, to “inflate [the] thought ... to give it universal dimensions Condensation and expansion [the aim of all Baroque poetry], the two contrary movements cross one another and find a meeting place” (Poulet 1966: 19, 25), subjecting the addressee’s brains and imagination to constant exercise.

Critical, mocking (deconstructive) and constructive attitudes – these opposites also seem intricately intertwined; yet they are to be gradually separated by the implied reader, intellectually stimulated and sensitized to detail, to facilitate the recognition of the poet’s creative act of cosmogony – transforming disordered world phenomena into a new, more desirable state of being. In the light of the above, the primordial state in which the ugly woman remains may be regarded as the phase of the message from which a new order will eventually emerge, thanks to the poet’s creative power and his skill in operating a whole machinery of literary devices, genre conventions and modes of communication.

2. Petrarch, da Vinci, Massys, Passarotti – Donne’s intermedial (self-destructive) clash of opposite images

Donne’s concept in *The Comparison* rests on the clash of opposites, among them idealized beauty and extreme ugliness. It may be argued that Donne relates to the 15th/16th-century *Portrait of Laura* (authorship unknown), a famous illustration of Petrarch’s sonnets (fig. 1) – this affinity is strong in the very first lines – and then juxtaposes it with the work known as *The Ugly Duchess* (or *A Grotesque Old Woman*), created by Quentin Massys around 1513 (fig. 2) and inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s 1480–1510 sketch *Grotesque Head* (fig. 3).

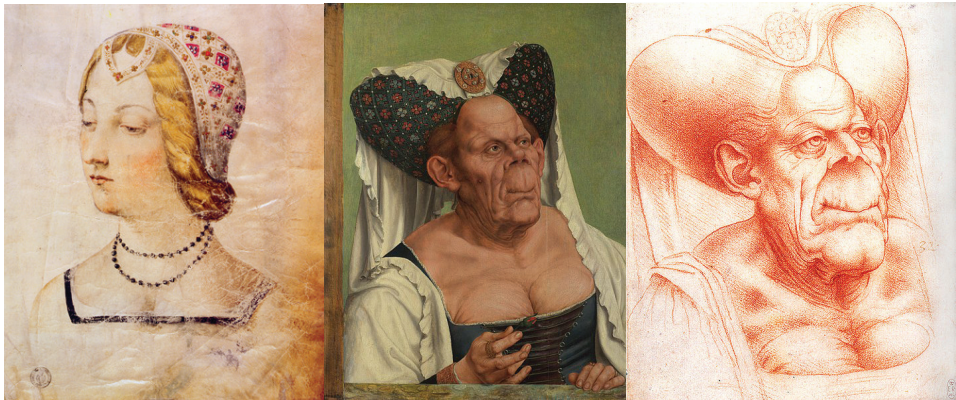


Fig. 1. *Portrait of Laura in the Laurentian Library*. Fig. 2. *The Ugly Duchess* (oil on panel). Fig. 3. *Grotesque Head* (red chalk on paper). Public domain

Source: Accessed via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francesco_Petrarca01_page.jpg; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Quentin_Matsys_-_A_Grotesque_old_woman.jpg; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grotesque_Head.jpg

The similarities are immediately noticeable when the earlier quoted lines of Donne’s elegy are provided as an accompaniment to the comparison of these paintings (fig. 1–2). Above all, it is in the very introductory lines of *The Comparison* that “pearle carcanetts” are mentioned and right in the first line that the phrase “in a still” indicates the artificiality of the fair lady’s pose. It is also the ugly duchess’s outstretched hand, coarse and dark, that creates a clear link between Massys’s painting and Donne’s elegy, where the image is subjected to further scrutiny and ridicule. It seems Donne deliberately resorts to elements of visual culture “as yet another potent

technical tool to be wielded in the exploration of both physical and spiritual experience” (Hurley 2005: 204).

The manner in which the female figures are shaped throughout *The Comparison* results in the synergy of the senses, as already noticed, with the visual stimuli boosted by the very intermediality of the presented images. Given the frequent mind-stimulating “condensation and expansion” of perspective, one may conclude the aspects through which cognitive processes emerge (senses, thoughts, experiences) are collectively taken care of and harnessed effectively for the poet’s dual purpose – deconstructive (satirical) and potentially constructive (opinion-forming). After all, the motif of chaos is to be associated with “the condition of the unconscious” (Cirlot 1971: 43).

With the senses all stimulated and synchronized, the poem’s addressee witnesses a dramatic growth of ugliness:

Ranck sweaty froth thy Mistres brow defiles,
 ... like the Scumm, ...
 From perboyld shoes and bootes and all the rest (7–11)
 ... warts or wheales ... hang vpon her skinne. (14)
 Like sun-parch’d quarters on the City gate,
 Such is thy tann’d skins lamentable state. (31–2)

In this respect *The Comparison* follows the contemporaneous trend toward caricatures, which may be regarded as a counterweight to the growing demand for various portraits (of court members, middle-class families, friends, professionals) expected to embellish and rejuvenate the image of the client. Donne even appears to compete with those caricatures – the objective relentlessly pursued is to explore the limits of hideousness and grotesque. Hence, in *The Comparison* it is not one wart, like in *Caricature of an Old Couple* (oil on canvas)⁷, attributed to Bartolomeo Passarotti (1529–92) – a famous Italian painter of the mannerist period, but many warts or wheals that “hang vpon” the ugly woman’s skin.

Although no direct biographical evidence can be provided to support the recognition of this affinity, what may be argued is the textually substantiated possibility that Donne draws (heavily) on this very painting. It is perceptible not only in the line presenting “warts (that) hang vpon her skinne”, but, even more clearly, in the lines foregrounding the image of the woman’s huge “drad mouthe” (39–42). The whole lengthy passage quoted below appears to develop (to put into motion) Passarotti’s scene by vividly illustrating the nuances of the lovers’ intercourse, with a threefold emphasis on their atrocious act of kissing:

⁷ In private collection; see: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grotesque_Head.jpg

Thyne'is like the drad **mouthe** of a fired gun
 ...
 ... or like that Etna
 ...
 Are not your **kissings** then as filthy and more
 As a worme sucking an envenomd sore?
 Doth not thy fearfull hand in feeling quake
 As one which gathring flowers still feard a snake?
 Is not your last act harsh and violent
 As when a Plough a stony ground doth rent?
 So **kis** good turtells, ...
 ...
 ... we embrace or touch or **kis**. (39–52; emphasis mine)

The image of grotesquely supersized mouth as well as the multiplication of “kissings” closely correspond with *Caricature of an Old Couple*. The observation that Donne’s speaker in *The Comparison* may be referring to the couple painted by Passarotti brings mutual benefits. It results in the enhanced visuality of Donne’s elegy, on the one hand, and in the increased dynamism and sensory impact of the painting (all of the senses are severely affected), on the other.

The Comparison as if takes a close-up of the ugly mistress’s mouth (with the degree of grotesquery taking Passarotti’s image a few steps further), only to enlarge it to the size of a giant stratovolcano – Etna (note the clue: Italy). This rapid expansion of perspective is, here again, not only hilarious, but also functional. Not only does it attract attention due to its sexual load, but adds dynamics to the poet’s creative act of cosmogony. Seemingly, Donne treats the concept of *decorum* playfully. Yet the fact he evokes the alchemist’s “masculine ... fyre” which “doth inspyre / ... a Soule of gold” into “worthlesse durt,” alongside the “heate [the lady’s] best lou’d part doth hold” (35–8), corresponds to the concept of *prima materia*. Also, the powerful image of volcanic setting is in tune with the destructive clash of conflicting phenomena and the potentially constructive dynamism of forms observed throughout the elegy. When in the poem’s “Limbecks warme wombe” (36) – alchemical distillation (Partides 1988: 91), this promises a new product: the (subject) matter properly balanced, its “Soule of gold” shown, which appears the poet’s ultimate goal.

Altogether, the manner in which the textual units are organized in *The Comparison* seems to reflect the process the poem seeks to illustrate. In other words, Donne builds on the concept of *decorum* and develops it into specific iconicity: thematic and structural unity observed in his poetic utterance (cf. def. in Tabakowska 2006: 9). As Donne himself explains in his elegy *The Bracelet*, “forme giues beeing” (76) (Stringer 2000: 6).

Though apparently rhetorical, the speaker's three successive questions quoted above (43–8) leave the impression that *The Comparison* eventually reveals a dialogic character. Furthermore, the elegy's most daring passages explicitly relating to the physiology of the female body, with particular attention to its smells and liquids (7–12, 40–6, in contrast to 1–6), and, especially, the mention of “her ... brest” (24) and her “tann'd skins lamentable state” (32) shift Donne's elegy toward another then lesser-known work attributed to Passarotti and referred to as *The Crazy Ones Loving* or *Marry Company* (genre painting, c. 1550) (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. *The Crazy Ones Loving* – oil on canvas. Public domain

Source: Accessed via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bartolomeo_Passarotti_Allegra_Compagnia.jpg

It is in *Marry Company* that Donne's dramatic monologue, with its comment-type questions, seems perfectly illustrated and gains a likely context. Donne's lyrical “I”, arguing eloquently yet harshly and disrespectfully, can be associated with Passarotti's joyful speaker, not quite sober (judging by the size of the pitcher), with his mouth wide open. He is speaking and there is a listener – a companion at the same table. The motif of “her ... brest” is the most striking element of Passarotti's painting. Positioned centrally, it draws attention to what may be called her “tann'd skins lamentable state”.

It is also worth noticing, as it influences the reception of Donne's poetic message, that Passarotti's scene is set in a tavern-like bawdy context, with a high degree of familiarity in the relation of the characters presented. Furthermore, both *The Comparison* and *The Crazy Ones Loving* foreground two male characters and two central figures that may be recognized as female (“my Mistres” vs. “thy Mistres”), one of them depicted (by both artists)

as a non-human creature. Also, in both the background presence of an audience is indicated. It seems in *The Comparison* Donne seeks to preserve the playfully treated asymmetry and the concept of distorted mirror images seen in Passarotti's *The Crazy Ones Loving* (cf. notes on Donne's use of "the mirror image as a metaphor" in Stringer 2017: 260).

What makes the intermedia link even more probable is the illuminating observation that Donne's *The Comparison* and both Passarotti's paintings mentioned above definitely undertake the same theme of love confronted with the passage of time. After all, it is Donne himself who writes in his lyric *The Sunne Rising* that:

Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,
Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time. (9–10)
(see Patrides 1988: 53)

At this point Donne's insight into 16th-century visual arts has further textual consequences. In *The Comparison* he carries the motif of the aging body to extremes as if in an attempt to surpass the effect achieved by Quentin Massys (authorship attributed) in *Portrait of an Old Woman* (c. 1510; oil on oak wood)⁸.

This work of art is likely to have given rise to the couplet of *The Comparison* where female breasts trigger images, smells and other graveyard (coffin-like) sensations:

Thyne like Warne-eaten truncks clothd in Celes skin,
Or graue, that's durt without, and stinch within. (25–6)

This, in turn, perversely explains why the poem was labeled an elegy. It returns to the very roots of *elegeia* – a funeral elegy written in couplets – and combines its original function with "the Latin love-elegy's conventions" employed in Ovid's *Amores* and centuries later transplanted to the English Renaissance soil (Patrides 1988: 134; LaBranche 1975: 399–410). There love elegies flourished and developed into various forms of "young men's [lyric] poetry," and this is probably what encouraged Donne to select the genre (Marotti 1986: 44) as a springboard for his poetic experiment.

Satirizing, on both intellectual and empirical grounds, the Petrarchan sonnet and its impact on the general perception of love, *The Comparison* seems to derive its concept from alternative (outside of the mainstream) works of acknowledged portraitists. The well-educated *coterie* reader of Donne's elegy, having recognized the intermediality of the theme and its related

⁸ In private collection; see: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/PORTRAIT-OF-AN-OLD-WOMAN/B3AAA9A645DB3E5E>

motifs (following them on both levels – of poetry and painting), automatically linked the poem to a more broadly understood artistic experiment with conventional motifs and imagery. As already argued by Evett (1986: 123), “grotesquery and realism were artistic styles, then experimental, upon which [Donne] drew to construct ‘whole works’” (in Stringer 2017: 260–2). Donne’s *The Comparison*, today regarded as merely controversial, was then probably viewed as an alternative proposal meant to counterbalance dominant trends, an experimental poem in defiance of the existing framework: written to jokingly reflect on and playfully put to death obsolete attitudes rooted in the past. The possibility of combining poetry with painting, words with images, ideas with sensory experience, resulted in the observation of what is hardly perceptible in *The Comparison* alone: the background, muffled but imperative, tone of voice – Donne’s persona advocating a realistic approach to the theme of love. In other words, tracking the topic-related motifs on distinct artistic plains enabled the *coterie* reader of Donne’s *The Comparison*, without doubt familiar with the genres of Elizabethan drama, to notice the different roles the lyrical “I” adopts, or the various masks he puts on within the text of a single poem – that of a Petrarchan lover, that of a sarcastically anti-Petrarchan lover, and that of a concerned (realistic) lover. All these personae were to be viewed as engaged in a seemingly irreverent yet profound debate on love and relationship in the real world, perceptible in Passarotti’s caricatures.

Donne, however, goes a few steps further in his depiction of ugliness than the above-mentioned 16th-century artists. Such a degree of exaggeration in accumulating repulsive imagery brings about a specific effect – it undermines the controversy in and the reliability of the lyrical subject’s rhetoric. Compared to “the first Chaos” (21) and thus named an agent in her dynamic primordial state prior to the rise of humankind, so ugly a woman (“thy Mistres”) clearly does not exist. Therefore, the juxtaposition of female figures performed by the speaker should not personally touch anyone. *The Comparison* remains merely entertaining and displays features of a poetic riddle operating with self-destructive elements concealed in its own argument. In simpler terms, logical reasoning leads to undermining the foundation on which the speaker’s oratorical performance rests.

It eventually transpires that Donne’s controversial imagery is, all in all, functional. It successfully holds the reader’s full attention down to the final lines of *The Comparison*. Here, quite unexpectedly, the speaker undergoes a rapid metamorphosis. He switches from the descriptive to the conclusive mode of expression, from the hyperbole to the down-to-earth attitude and, in what appears a perfectly sober voice, states:

Leaue her, and I will leaue comparing thus
 She, and comparisons are odious. (53–4)

A cursory reading of Donne's elegy, or that aligned with phenomenological perspective – “represent[ing] lived-experience in as raw and un-elaborated a way as possible” (Willis 2001: 1) and “prior to cognitive realization” (Chen and Steipe 2017: 246) – leaves the impression that this couplet encourages one to abandon his partner on finding her repulsive and that the poem, as a whole, downgrades the female body by subordinating it to the whim of a man. However, as no one can possibly pinpoint, in their extra-textual reality, so hideous a woman still bearing the imprint of the first chaos, this argument loses its logical foundation. What is therefore to be taken seriously is the hideousness of the very act of comparison, of measuring individual features against the yardstick of conventions rooted in literature (fiction). In view of the above, Donne's exemplification of chaotic ugliness gains an alternative dimension: it becomes an illustration, a didactic aid, meant to eradicate repulsive attitudes and, in effect, inspire (potentially) appropriate ones. Building on “the first Chaos”, “identified with the unconscious” (Cirlot 1971: 43), *The Comparison* aspires to play a role in opinion-forming processes, and, following the rules of effective teaching, finds a playful intermedia context most suitable for that.

Conclusion

The network of associations contained in this early modern poem, and partially reconstructed in the course of the presented analysis, extends to the features and functions of distinct genres and types of literature (elegy – sonnet – dramatic monologue – satire/parody – allegory – meditative poem – ekphrasis – riddle – didactic poem) as well as visual arts (sculpture – portrait – genre painting). Yet this expanded whole is embedded in basic logic (in the sphere of the addressee's everyday occurrences) and eventually gets reduced to common sense. For this, though, as well as for its cumulative effect, Donne's poetic experiment depends heavily on interaction involving different levels of communication: another in-text character – the *coterie* audience – the implied reader. The recognition of Donne's personae presenting various attitudes (humorous, sarcastic, polemical, analytical, concerned) serves the debate on the theme of love, to which the addressee is invited by various means. To ensure that the nuances of this debate are recognized, Donne's elegy intensely activates the addressee's cognitive sphere. It targets at the versatility of cognition, which is guaranteed by the rhetoric resulting in the

synergy of the addressee's intellect and their senses, the visualization of the subject on intermedia ground and the blending of features and functions of various genres and communicative modes. The outstanding quality of the poetry in question lies in the fact that all the above-mentioned phenomena are harnessed and coordinated within one relatively short poem.

All things considered, the analysis of Donne's *The Comparison* shows that in early modern poetry "genres need to be treated as flexible categories shaped by the aesthetic and social needs of different agents in the literary field" (Riesner and Danneck 2015: 1). Given the fact that still "little is known about the impact of plastic arts on Donne's works" (Ellrodt 1984: 121; see the critical and scholarly discussion compiled in Stringer 2017: 148–79, 295–8) and further affinities may be based, as it seems, solely on textual evidence, the research area indicated in this essay promises valuable findings when approached with interdisciplinary tools. The communicative potential of Donne's poetic cycles, such as *Elegies*, as well as early modern poetry as a whole, is still awaiting thorough investigation.

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