Bodily Boundaries Represented: the Petrarchan, the Burlesque and Arcimboldo’s Example*

The purpose of the following study is to expand along chronologic and thematic lines the claims made by Elizabeth Cropper in an essay published in 1986 entitled “The Beauty of Woman: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture.” In it, Cropper analyzes the relationship between women’s portraits and courtly love poetry in Renaissance Italy and reaches a notable conclusion with respect to the role of the female subject in both these domains. She recognizes that Renaissance women’s portraits contain nothing natural or even naturalistic vis-à-vis their subject, much like love poetry of the period, in which (to use D. Gareth Walters’ characterization) “the mode of detailing the lady’s qualities is a highly stylized one . . . . She represents an ideal beauty, a symbol of perfection” (73). Neoplatonic tendencies went, obviously, hand in hand with this trend, so that the various poetical descriptions of physical (i.e., bodily) details render the beloved woman even less real and more ideal. However, Cropper goes one step further by asserting that the ultimate goal of literary and visual portraits of beautiful women did not consist in the celebration of beauty in its purest form, but in the praise of the male artist’s ability to represent it. Consequently, the subject of these representations is male narcissism, while their object is the absent woman (190).¹

The intent of the present paper is twofold. On the one hand, I would like to expand my analysis to the poetical production of the Baroque period, in Spain as well as in Italy (with some examples from France and England, too). On the other, I contend that a careful consideration of the burlesque poetical production of the times could yield fruitful results in the current effort of mapping the representational strategies at work in the poetical and visual portraits in early modern culture.

My claim is that in the Baroque period there is a notable convergence of representational strategies between the lyrical and the burlesque domains; in particular, both utilize the clichés and patterns inherited from the previous literary production but do so only superficially. In other words, the pre-existent poetical forms are filled with new “contents,” that are particular to the Baroque period itself and that cover a larger domain than the Renaissance ones.

Within the Petrarchan tradition of lyrical poetry, a cursory analysis of a few

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sonnets of the Baroque period reveals a striking tendency towards inorganicism in the descriptions of the beauty of the beloved. In Góngora’s “Ya besando unas manos cristalinas” (445), not only are the amada’s hands crystalline, but her hair has been extracted by “Amor... entre el oro de sus minas” [“Love from his golden mines”], her teeth are “perlas finas” [“fine pearls”] and her lips dispense kisses that are “purpúreas rosas sin temor de espinas” [“purple roses free from the fear of thorns”]. In Quevedo’s love poems, we encounter lips that are rubies (“Bastábale al clavel” 151), smiles that are “relámpagos... de púrpura” [“flashes of purple”], hair defined as “oro de tu frente” [“gold of your brow”] (“Al oro de tu frente” 156), and an entire description of the face of the amada in which the only organic elements are yet again, roses and carnations:

Crespas hebras, sin ley desenlazadas,
que un tiempo tuvo entre las manos Midas;
en nieve estrellas negras encendidas,
y cortésmente en paz de ella guardadas.
Rosas a abril y mayo anticipadas,
de la injuria del tiempo defendidas;
auroras en la risa amanecidas,
con avaricia del clavel guardadas. (169)

[Curly fibers, untied in a discomposed manner,
Once held by Midas’ hands;
Black stars on fire in the snow,
Kept safe from it with gallantry.
Roses advanced to April and May,
Protected from the offense of time;
Dawns appearing from your laughs,
Watched over by a carnation, with cupidity.]

Parallel descriptions can be found in the Italian production in Marino’s sonnets. In “Donna che si pettina” (Getto 1.224) the woman’s hair is “onde dorate” of an “aureo mar” combed by a “navicella d’avorio” (the comb) held by “una man pur d’avorio” — where it is noteworthy that for the poet, there is no difference in texture or material between the tool and the lady’s hand. In “Pianto e riso” (Getto 1.226) the eyes (“l’umidette stelle”) claim their primacy over the mouth by asserting that from them flows “di vive perle oriental ricchezza,” yet the latter maintains its superiority by merely “disserrando quelle / porte d’un bel rubino in duo diviso.”

Albeit inorganic elements such as those highlighted above are original to this kind of poetry, in their earlier usage they tended to be linked to the cruelty expressed by the lady vis-à-vis the unacknowledged or rejected lover-poet. In the early seventeenth century, however, this parallelism crumbles, so that the inor-
ganic images traditionally associated with rejection, coldness and cruelty are now employed independently of the situation for which the poem was composed. A clear instance of this is Góngora’s already cited sonnet “Ya besando unas manos cristalinas,” where the white, polished neck and crystal-like hands are praised in an **aubade**: precisely at the moment when the poet is kissing his beloved’s hand and neck

... oh claro Sol invidioso  
... tu luz hiriéndome los ojos,  
mató mi gloria y acabó mi suerte. (445)

[Oh, bright, envious Sun,  
Your light, wounding my eyes,  
Killed my glory and sealed my fate.]

A similar observation applies to the cosmological elements of Neoplatonic ascendance that are traditional in Petrarchan poetry and that can still be encountered in Baroque times. A single example will suffice to delineate the extent of the hollowness of these stereotypical images in Marino’s poetry: the fictional “I” of the sonnet saw

... nel sol de le luci uniche e sole  
intento, e preso dagli aurati stami,  
volgersi quasi un girasole il sole. (Getto 1.215)

This tercet is filled with those seemingly empty paronomasiae, polyptotons and antistases which contributed powerfully to the defamation of Baroque poetry, altogether common until at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Overall, then, we are faced with a series of clichés that was readily available to the poets in the Petrarchan tradition, but that had been depleted of much of its original meaning and relevance. What is left is the silhouette of these traditional metaphors and metonymies, which poets could then fill with any new meaning they saw fit.

A similar situation emerges from another tradition of lyric poetry that had tremendous following in the Baroque period: the burlesque. If we keep in mind Cropper’s contention that Renaissance portraiture and love poetry aim at glorifying the author’s art and at erasing the woman (no longer the subject, but the object of the painting or of the poem), then it becomes clear that the burlesque was a highly attractive poetic mode for any artist aspiring to his own aggrandizement. The uglier, or the least canonical, the object of representation, the bigger the challenge for the artist to legitimize it by portraying it in painting or poetry, and consequently, the higher the reward for the artist succeeding in this task. The Renaissance vogue of burlesque poetry converges with a rediscovery of classical
adoxology (or mock encomium) (Martín 48-49) to provide the Baroque period with plenty of opportunities and justifications for engaging in this poetic endeavor.

There are various degrees to which Baroque poets adapted Petrarchan clichés to eccentric topics. In Marino’s poetic corpus we find a sonnet devoted to extolling the beauty of a slave woman. What makes this subject matter particularly suitable for a representation along, as well as against, Petrarchan lines — and therefore especially challenging to the poet — is the fact that the slave under examination is black. The Petrarchan bric-à-brac of lily white skin, golden blond hair and marble-like neck has to be reversed (as emerges from the forceful adversative conjunction ma, in the very first line), thus making the praise all the more difficult for the poet to achieve and for the audience to accept.

Nera sì, ma se’ bella, o di natura  
fra le belle d’amor leggiadro mostro;  
fosca è l’alba appo te, perde e s’oscura  
presso l’ebeno tuo l’avorio e l’ostro.  
Or quando, or dove il mondo antico o il nostro  
vide sì viva mai, sentì sì pura  
o luce uscir di tenebroso inchiostro,  
o di spento carbon nascere arsura?  
Serva di chi m’è serva, ecco ch’avolto  
porto di bruno laccio il core intorno,  
che per candida man non fia mai scioltto.  
La ’ve più ardi, o Sol, sol per tuo scorno  
un Sole è nato; un Sol, che nel bel volto  
porta la notte, ed ha negli occhi il giorno. (Croce 105)

Marino cites many common attributes of the Petrarchan amata only to deny them in the case at hand; in particular, we ought to notice that the emphasis is clearly on the opposition light-darkness, and on the paradoxical assertion that this black woman gives more light to the poet and to the world than the sun itself — a sharp antithesis to the numerous claims of previous Petrarchan poetry in which the fair complexion and the eyes of the beloved were the source of all light for the enamored poet, as well as the center of his universe. The tone of Marino’s sonnet, however, is far from being derisive: the slave is, after all, a “leggiadro mostro” (1.2), i.e. an object worth observing, a thing of beauty and leggiadria. Properly speaking, then, this is not a burlesque poem, but simply one where the author stretches ready-made topoi to express his fictional feelings.

Another challenging and popular subject matter for burlesque poetry in the Baroque period are old women. Diego Hurtado de Mendoza wrote a caudate sonnet about “una vieja que se tenía por hermosa” [“an old hag who reputed herself beautiful”] which is a deformed description rather than an attempt at using Petrarchan clichés in a creative, novel way. Indeed, the representation of this old
woman is far from being subsumed in the same glorifying tone that clearly emerges in Marino’s sonnet on the black slave. Hurtado de Mendoza instead gives us a long list of elements that characterize the old woman under scrutiny, in an openly mocking tone: she has “tres cabellos no mas, y un sol diente, / los pechos de zigarra propriamente, / en que ay telas de arañas y de araños” [“Three strands of hair, and no more, and only one tooth, / Breasts fit more for a grasshopper, / Where are to be found cobwebs and scratches”] (II.2-4); her brow is filled with “tantas rugas” [“so many wrinkles”] (1.6), while her mouth is empty and oversized (II.7-8); even her smell elicits a negative and scoffing remark (1.12) (Martín 198).7 Indeed, the last tercet crowns the sonnet by accentuating the fact that the poet (in fact, anybody who were to look carefully at her) cannot decide which single element is responsible for the old woman’s lack of beauty:

deto todo quanto oys no ois falta cosa:  
dezid que os falta para ser hermosa.

[Of all you hear you lack nothing:  
Tell us then what you lack to be beautiful.]

A typically laudatory line (the second to last one) is rendered ironic by the preceding enumeration, and the crowning touch comes from the repetition of falta. It is the old hag herself who receives the task of choosing the elements that bar her entry into the domain of Petrarchan beauty.

Hurtado de Mendoza’s sonnet is much more blatant in its indictment of its subject matter than Quevedo’s love poems on viejas. One of the reasons for this clear difference in tone is the fact that Hurtado de Mendoza’s poem addresses the old woman directly, while Quevedo’s usually avoid this. In the latter’s production, then, the subject matter is spared the open jeers of the author, but she becomes, in turn, more transparent, more inconspicuous, that is, more absent. Two sonnets come to mind: the one entitled “Pinta el ‘Aqui fue Troya’ de la Hermosura” [“He paints the ‘Here Troy used to stand’ of Beauty”] (203), and the quatrains of the one starting “En cuévanos, sin cejas y pestanas” (211-12).

In the first one, Quevedo teases an old woman’s attempts to look younger by way of an excessive amount of cosmetics. Even if some of the usual Petrarchan attributes are present — her face is “blanca nieve” [“white snow”] (1.1), for example — they are linked with some of the traits already encountered in the Burlesque tradition: her hair is silver (1.4) and her complexion is likened to “clavel almidonado de gargajo” [“carnation starched with phlegm”] (1.8), thus fusing together a perfectly acceptable element of Petrarchan description (the carnation) with the element of artificiality (the cloth with which the manmade flower is made is starched, so that the old woman can maintain the pretense of her beautiful skin) as well as with a repulsive term, inappropriate in the Petrarchan tradition
(the gargajo, or phlegm). In "En cuévanos," however, the criticism is much more direct and pointed:

En cuévanos, sin cejas y pestañas,
ojos de vendimiar tenéis, agüela;
cuero de Fregenal, muslos de suela;
piernas y coño son toros y cañas.
Las nalgas son dos porras de espadañas;
afeitáis la cara de chinela
con diaquilón y humo de la vela,
y luego dais la tet a las arañas.

[As on the bottom of baskets, without eyebrows or eyelashes,
You have, old hag, eyes fit for a grape harvest;
Skin from Fregenal, thighs of tanned leather;
Your legs and cunt are fit for bulls and look like reeds.
Your buttocks are two clubs made of reed-mace;
You shave your slipper-like face
With plaster and candle smoke,
And readily you give your breast to the spiders.]

The direct address in line two soon gives way to an impersonal description: the old hag’s head is deprived of hair, her eyes are dark and possibly showing signs of drunkenness; her skin is as hard as leather, and her thighs are far from flexible and supple. Even bodily parts accurately avoided by love poets (buttocks and breasts, which are not designated as such but with a more colloquial and offensive equivalent) surface here and are accurately observed, so as to make the whole portrait more bizarre and less canonical.

That the mocking portrait of the old woman had become largely a cliché, rather than a casual disruption of a Petrarchan commonplace, is attested by John Donne’s Elegy 9, “The Autumnall.” In spite of the fact that Mario Praz construed this composition as one of the last examples in this poetical trend (115), we can conversely see it as an example of the early vitality of the burlesque exploitation of Petrarchan modes. Although this elegy was “first printed and thus entitled in 1633” (Donne 152), the group of poems to which it belongs “are often thought to have been composed in the mid-1590s” (Donne 135). Consequently, “The Autumnall” can be legitimately viewed as an early attestation of the exploitation of Petrarchan topoi in poems other than love ones.

The tone of Donne’s elegy 9 can be easily gathered from its last sixteen lines:

If transitory things, which soone decay,
Age must be loveliest at the latest day.
But name not Winter-faces, whose skin’s slacke;
Lanke, as an unthrits purse; but a soules sacke;
Whose Eyes seeke light within, for all here's shade;
Whose mouthes are holes, rather worne out, then made;
Whose every tooth to a severall place is gone,
To vexe their soules at Resurrection;
Name not these living Death-heads unto mee,
For these, not Ancient, but Antique be.
I hate extreames; yet I had rather stay
With Tombs, then Cradles, to weare out a day.
Since such loves motion natural is, may still
My love descend, and journey downe the hill,
Not panting after growing beauties, so,
I shall ebbe out with them, who home-ward goe. (154)

The old woman's description is here endowed with a transcendent meaning, so
that the tone, far from being mocking and derisive, reflects Donne's concerns
with morality and mortality. The fact that the woman's skin is no longer taut is
not derided by Donne as in the sonnets by Diego Hurtado de Mendoza and
Quevedo, since outward appearance is not his main concern; the skin, after all, for Donne is "but a soules sacke" (l.38). If the old woman described in "The Autumnall" is appreciated for her inward substance rather than for her outward
appearance, still she tends to become transparent and inconspicuous: seemingly
not to benefit the poet's own art, but ad majorem Dei gloriام, so to speak.9

It is also interesting to notice that "a few MSS provide titles such as 'A
Paradox of an ould woman'" for this elegy (Donne 152); this could corroborate
the interpretation that Donne's usage of Petrarchan clichés vis-à-vis an old
woman was eccentric for his contemporaries, who could only read these poetic
compositions along the lines of the burlesque and the paradoxical. Indeed, paradoxical portraits of the beloved woman surface fairly early in the Italian
sonnet tradition, and had a following in the Spanish Baroque production. I am of
course alluding to Francesco Berni's "Sonetto alla sua Donna," a precocious
example of paradoxical usage of many Petrarchan clichés of the beloved:

Chiome d'argento fino, irtre e attorte
Senz'arte intorno ad un bel viso d'oro;
Fronte crespa, u' mirando io mi scoloro,
Dove spunta i suoi strali Amor e Morte;
Occhi di perle vaghi, luci torte
Da ogni obietto diseguale a loro;
Ciglia di neve, e quelle, ond'io m'accoro,
Dita e man dolcemente grosse e corte;
Labra di latte, bocca ampia celeste;
Denti d'ebeno rari e pellegrini;
Inaudita ineffabile armonia;
Costumi altèri e gravi: a voi, divini
Servi d'Amor, palese fo che queste
Son le bellezze della donna mia. (Martín 190)

The tone is again different from that characterizing the poems we have examined so far. Since the woman described by Berni is admittedly his beloved (1.14), the sonnet aims at describing her using Petrarchan topoi that at first sight look completely plausible. All the canonical features are taken into consideration and expounded: hair, brow, eyes, eyebrows, hands, fingers, lips, mouth, teeth, and her general demeanor. Furthermore, most sanctioned attributes are present here: silver and gold, pearls and snow, milk, a pale blue color, ebony. Berni’s innovation consists in the fact that he bestows on each physical feature an attribute that is unusual in the Petrarchan vein; this way, he builds a paradoxical portrait of his amata, one that is indeed difficult to visualize in the reader’s mind.

Berni utilizes yet another strategy with respect to direct address of his implied audience. He identifies the latter in the coterie of his friends, all devoted to Love and to loving similar beauties. More than a criticism of the object of the sonnet, “Chiome d’argento” can be construed as a direct attack against the Petrarchan school of love poetry and as an attempt to legitimize its alternative, the so-called “berneschi.”

It is not by coincidence, I believe, that a Spanish poet of the siglo de oro was intrigued by Berni’s sonnet to the point of translating and adapting it into Castilian: I am referring to Baltasar del Alcázar’s “Cabellos crespos.” The elements are largely similar to Berni’s, but what is remarkably different is once again the tone. “Chiome d’argento” is a tongue-in-cheek raillery of his beloved, arguably aimed more at the Petrarchan tradition than at the object of his description, as can be gathered from the abstract terms on l.11 and, in general, the last tercet; “Cabellos crespos” falls more clearly in the burlesque category by virtue of its last two lines:

Si lo que vemos público es tan bello,
¡Contemplad, amadores, lo secreto! (Martín 202)

[If what we see openly is so fair,
Contemplate, lovers, the secret part!]

Baltasar leaves much unsaid, and not because he has run out of lines if he is to respect the sonnet form; instead of ending the composition on a light, yet sympathetic tone like Berni, Baltasar turns the poem into something very similar to the mocking descriptions of viejas by Quevedo and Hurtado de Mendoza. In any case, both in “Chiome d’argento” and “Cabellos crespos” Petrarchan clichés are exploited to form an absurd, paradoxical picture, one that does not seem to have a possible visualization. We seem to be able to reach the same conclusion for the burlesque tradition as with Petrarchan poetry proper: these female images de-
scribe only the outline, the silhouette of their object, so that the poet is free to fill them with any elements he deems poetic, or mocking, enough.

Just as Cropper points out the discrepancies between portraits and sitters in the Italian Renaissance, in the later poetic tradition we detect a gap (indeed, in the case of the burlesque, a chasm) between the woman-object and her representation in poetic compositions. However, in the Baroque period the series of poetic and pictorial portraits that maintain the contour of the object of description while filling it with various and sundry elements is not limited to female subjects. The most blatant example in literature is the description of the infamous warden Cabra in Quevedo’s *El Buscon* (book 1, chapter 3):

El era un clérigo cerbatana, largo sólo en el talle, una cabeza pequeña, pelo bermejo (no hay más que decir para quien sabe el refrán), los ojos avvecindados en el cogote, que parecía que miraba por uévanos, tan hundidos y escuros, que era buen sitio el suyo para tiendas de mercaderes; la nariz, entre Roma y rancia, porque se le había comido de unas búsas de resfrío, que aun no fueron de vicio porque cuestan dinero; las barbas descoloridas de miedo de la boca vecina, que, de pura hambre, parecía que amenazaba a comérsele; los dientes, le faltaban no sé cuántos, y pienso que por holgazanes y vagamundos se los habían desterrado; el gaznate largo como de avestruz, con una nuez tan salida, que parecía se iba a buscar de comer forzada de la necesidad; los brazos secos, las manos come un manjero de sarmientos cada una. (97-98)

[He was a peashooter-scholar, notable only in his length; he had a small head and red hair (I do not have to add anything for those who know the proverb). His eyes were so sunken in his head that he seemed to look out of deep baskets, so profound and obscure they were; they would have been fit for the awnings of a tradesman’s shop. His nose was between the Roman and the French type, having been eaten away by rheum (but it could not have been vice, as it costs money). His beard was white with fear of the adjacent mouth, as the latter looked ready to eat it out of pure hunger. He was missing I do not know how many teeth, banished in my opinion for being lazy and vagabonds. His neck was as big as an ostrich’s, and his Adam’s apple was so prominent that it looked as though it was straining forward to find some food. His arms were withered, and each hand looked like a bundle of twigs.]

Since Quevedo in this novelistic passage is remarkably free of clichés to follow, contrary to love poetry, his fancy depicts Cabra in much more imaginative terms than what we have seen so far. Truly, what the reader “sees” is the outline of a head and neck, filled with disparate objects: the merchants’ tent that shadows Cabra’s eyes; his mustaches, embodied and fleeing from the mouth for fear of being eaten; his teeth, so few and far in between that the rest must have been exiled; his Adam’s apple prominent as if looking for food outside the neck; and so on. It is also worthwhile noticing that Cabra’s portrait by no means stops at the neck; similar equivalents are given for his gait, his hat, and his clothes, among
others. It is unclear, however, if this is a function of a different subject matter for the description (a man, instead of the Petrarchan lady) or of the different genre to which this description belongs.

In Quevedo’s passage, then, the whole body is invested with the deforming tendency we identified in the poetic traditions. It is worth mentioning that one more domain could be fruitfully exploited to garner more examples of this trend, besides poetry and portraits: staged performances. Mark Franko has recently studied the phenomenon of courtly ballets at the French court, and in the case of burlesque ballets he describes dancers garbed in costumes that highlighted, expanded and “reduced the body [of the dancer] to one anatomical feature, such as an enormous head or legs walking without a trunk” (80). We witness here an opposite, yet corresponding, trend to the one observed in lyrical and burlesque poetry: instead of preserving boundaries while filling them with disparate elements, in French burlesque ballets the boundaries are erased so that one element can gain the upper hand on all the others. Almost naturally, Quevedo’s sonnet “A un hombre de gran nariz” [“To a man with a big nose”] comes to mind:

Érase un hombre a una nariz pegado,
érase una nariz superlativa,
érase una alquitrara medio viva,
érase un peje españa mal barbado;
era un reloj de sol mal encarado,
érase un elefante boca arriba,
érase una nariz sayón y escriba,
un Ovidio Nasón mal narigado.
Érase un espolón de una galera,
érase una pirámide de Egito,
los doce tribus de narices era;
érase un narícismo infinito,
fríson archinariz, carátulera,
sabañón garrafal, morado y frito. (188)

[There was a man stuck to a nose,  
It was a superlative nose,  
It was a half-alive alembic,  
It was a swordfish with an ugly beard;  
It was a sundial with an ugly face,  
It was an elephant with a high mouth,  
It was a nose-executioner and a nose-scribe,  
An Ovid Naso with an ugly nose.  
It was a galley’s ram,  
It was an Egyptian pyramid,  
It was the twelve tribes of noses;  
It was an infinite nosism,
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A Phrygian arch-nose, maker of masks,
A tremendous chilblain, purple and fried.)

In the case of the French burlesque ballets the object of representation can be either male or female, without the gender limitations that mark Petrarchan poetry and that are already much less fixed in the burlesque domain, as proven by Quevedo’s sonnet about the man-nose.11

In order to come to some general conclusions with respect to the entire field covered by Cropper’s essay, it is necessary that we consider some portraits that can be deemed contemporaneous to the Baroque poetical production that has constituted the core of our analysis so far. There is one artist whose production deserves such sustained attention: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, official portraitist of the imperial court in Prague in the years 1562-87. His “Vertumnus” (which is also a portrait of Emperor Rudolph II, sent to him in Prague in 1591) is, according to Mario Praz, an appropriate emblem for the transitional phase between the late Renaissance and the Baroque:

Se una figura mitologica è atta a rappresentare emblematicamente quella fase della cultura che sta tra l’ultimo Rinascimento e il barocco, questo è Vertumno. Di Proteo egli ha la mutabilità, ma Proteo è già mutabilità assoluta, pieno gioco di forme, essenza del barocco; Vertumno è meno sfrenato, esperimenta mutazioni in vista d’un fine, cambia più volte la sua figura per entrare nelle grazie della bella ninfa Pomona, cioè personifica il mutare delle culture per ottenere la fertilità dei campi raffigurata in Pomona, la dea dei frutti. E così l’età che egli è atto a impersonare è caratterizzata da una serie di tentativi, di atteggiamenti, di assaggi di nuovi accordi, che preludono a quella che sarà poi la piena orchestra del barocco. Vertumno è un personaggio di Arcimboldi. (33)

If Praz emphasizes, in the subject matter of Vertumnus, the aspect of mutability — in keeping with traditional interpretations of the Baroque — a more fruitful analysis needs to address the distinctive characters of Arcimboldo’s paintings. Over a Foucaultian and hermetic exegesis of his composite portraits, proposed by Massimo Cacciari in a 1987 article, my analysis favors Roland Barthes’s linguistic approach as more productive in this context. According to his interpretation, Arcimboldo bestows on painting the multiple articulation that is distinctive of language. Just as in the latter we identify an increased complexity and meaningfulness from phonemes to words to poems (or literary works in general), so in Arcimboldo’s work we witness the progress from points to objects to portraits. It is therefore possible for the painter to work with metaphors, metonyms, and any other poetic tropos as poets do (24-26). Consequently, in Barthes’s analysis, Arcimboldo’s portraits yield a richer harvest of meaning to their viewers than a conventional, realistic (yet, as Cropper has shown, idealized) one.12

It is worthwhile noting that while Arcimboldo’s followers repeated his figurative schemes or transposed them to landscape painting (thereby virtually reverting to the antecedent tradition),13 his approach revolutionizes the field of portrai-
ture, a much more sensitive domain, precisely because it was associated with a long philosophical and iconographical tradition. Arcimboldo presents us with the unusual case of a courtly artist, the official portrait painter of the Hapsburg court, who plays with the expectations of his patrons. According to Giancarlo Maiorino, author of the most recent monograph on Arcimboldo, the Milanese painter was responding in a remarkably personal way to a tension running through his times:

To maintain some sense of order, knowledge often was reduced to an inventory of reality that was stored in the only frame of order: the canvas itself. Form became catalogue, which would present unusual things without having to interpret them. In Arcimboldo’s art, man is not an idea but a shape, and a grotesque one at that. As an anatomical vessel, man would take in a heap of objects. (58)

We should keep in mind that these are also the times of the popularity of Wunderkammern and studioli; according to Maiorino, then, Arcimboldo’s portraits are primarily tools to make sense of and envision a new order for the world and its objects. If this assertion seems to strengthen Cropper’s contention that Renaissance portraits aimed at glorifying their authors while erasing their object, Maiorino insists on man as the foremost subject matter of Arcimboldo’s work, a rather objectionable assertion. Along with the already mentioned Vertumnus, one of Arcimboldo’s most successful portraits is that of Flora, the goddess of greenery. Both paintings are praised in Gregorio Comanini’s dialogue Il Figino overo del fine della pittura, the first document of Arcimboldo’s popularity and appreciation among his peers and contemporaries. The fictional character Giovanni Ambrogio Figino, a painter in real life, asks Stefano Guazzo, a cavalier and an expert of literature, if Arcimboldo’s paintings can be considered as expressing “fantastica imitazione”:

E perché no? anzi, ingegnissimo pittor fantastico e commendabile sommamente. Ché se bene la favola, così di Flora come di Vertunno, gli è stata somministrata di fuori, e da poeti che l’hanno imitata col verso, e da altri pittori che l’hanno dipinta; capriccio et invenzion sua nondimeno è stato il formare una donna che tutta sia fiori, et un uomo che tutto sia frutti; cosa che non aveva l’essere in alcun altro intelletto. (257)

Comanini, through the words of Guazzo, recognizes that Flora, which later became part of one of the Seasons series as “Primavera,” is by no means an innovative topic for a painting; however the originality is clearly present in the treatment of the mythological figure. Comanini cannot avoid citing a poetic composition that he himself had written à propos of the painting and that had accompanied it to Prague in 1589:
Son io Flora, o pur fiori?
Se fior, come di Flora
Ho col sembiante il riso? E s’io son Flora,
Come Flora è sol fiori?
Ah non fiori son io, non io son Flora,
Anzi son Flora e fiori.
Fior mille, una sol Flora,
Però che i fior fan Flora, e Flora i fiori,
Sai come? I fiori in Flora
Cangiò saggio pittore, e Flora in fiori. (258)

This poem, with a distinctive Marino-like usage of puns and verbal recurrences, furthers Arcimboldo’s attempt at disguising a natura morta as a lively (or living) subject for his portrait; one that is necessary if the painter (dubbed “wise” in the last line of the lyric) is to pursue the traditional representation of Flora as ideal beauty.

It is interesting to notice that the materials that compose the portrait of Flora are organic, precisely to further the metonymy fiori-Flora, hence in this respect fundamentally different from the inorganic ones which we encountered in poetic production. However, Arcimboldo is twisting clichés in much the same way as lyric or burlesque poets: he literalizes them, showing on canvas all their impact. What accounts for the grotesque quality of Flora’s portrait is the lack of correspondence res-verba; what would go almost undetected in a poem (other than a footnote reference to yet another topos) is forcefully effective when depicted on the canvas.

One could simply espouse Maiorino’s conclusion that Arcimboldo’s portraits move towards a form of relativism in taste: “Whereas cosmos rests with the proportional order of beauty, chaos thrives on clashes between beauty and ugliness, thus opening the door to a plurality of standards” (126). Indeed, this conclusion echoes perfectly at least some of the preceding observations on lyric and burlesque poetry: having observed a convergence between lyric and burlesque poetry, based on their respective usage of traditional images depleted of their original content, we can easily further the parallel between poetry on the one hand and Arcimboldo’s paintings in the other. In the latter case, too, the silhouette of the object represented is respected, yet it is filled with other elements. These, to further Maiorino’s claims, are manifestations of the tendency of the times towards a plurality of standards of beauty, based on chaos and confusion. Once again we would have reached a conclusion fitting the traditional belief of a Mannerist or Baroque period that proceeds to dismantle all the cherished tenets of the Renaissance, among which, of course, female beauty ranks high.

However, I would like to emphasize a parallel point made by Nancy Vickers
with respect to Petrarch’s lyrics and by Maiorino vis-à-vis Arcimboldo’s portraits. In the former’s words,

Petrarch’s particularizing mode of figuring [Laura’s] body, the product of a male-viewer/female-object exchange that extends the Actaeon/Diana exchange, thus reveals a textual strategy subtending his entire volume: it goes to the heart of his lyric program and understandably becomes the lyric stance of generations of imitators. (107)

In other words, in order to better, more easily possess Laura and her body, Petrarch and his followers scatter her limbs — i.e., they only describe parts of it so that the full image never emerges. We face a literalization of the Roman adage applied to the body politics: divide et impera. This “particularizing mode of figuring that body” derives from a specific way of looking, which is aggressive and possessive, in other words, well suited to a male gazer vis-à-vis his prized possession. This remark converges unmistakably with Maiorino’s observation, made almost in passing, that

in spite of an extravagant assemblage of natural and artificial objects, Arcimboldo’s profiles are set against aperspectival backgrounds. The shapes making up the anatomical whole\(^\text{20}\) preserve their depth, but the predominant effect is that of a crowded plane on which shallowness of foreground and flatness of middle and background test ambiguity. (31-32)

As in Petrarchan poetry the gazer concentrates on one limb or feature at a time, so in Arcimboldo’s portraits the viewer is aware of the different elements composing the sitter’s profile as well as of the décalage between the foreground and the background of the painting. In both instances, the viewer’s possession of the object of vision is furthered and completed by the disjointed way in which the beloved is presented to view.

In conclusion, we witness a remarkable convergence of representational strategies in the case of lyric and burlesque poetry as well as portrait painting in the period variously described as late Renaissance or mannerism, and continuing into the Baroque proper. If such strategies emerge from the historical antecedents of Petrarch’s own Canzoniere (as Vickers has shown) and of Renaissance portraiture (as demonstrated by Cropper), they become more radical and more widespread in the period under our scrutiny. Is this trend a consequence of the exhaustion of poetic and figurative clichés? Or is it rather one of the marks of the earlier of the “deux discontinuités dans l’épistémé de la culture occidentale” (13), according to Foucault? Or is it evidence, to follow Cacciari, of a crisis in the hermetic belief of the centrality of man? Or does it reflect a positive view of nature, much like Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, to espouse Maurizio Calvesi’s opinion? The representational strategies expounded in the present study accommodate themselves to all these interpretative approaches, and possibly many more. Truly, they are a strangely neglected monstrum. Held to our view (if the term come from
monstrare) as an admonishment (if it come from monere, instead) to our blindness, still they have gone undetected for centuries, transparent to our rhetorically trained eyes. And so they have fostered the very aim of Renaissance and Baroque artists: a keen awareness of their art, emptied of any reference to its object and its medium.

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NOTES

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1 Giovanni Pozzi's remarks seem to corroborate the possibility of such an exegesis: "I legami tra i componenti del sistema [letterario] si rinserano in tal modo che il congegno sembra funzionare in sé e per sé, senza che si renda necessario un rapporto con la realtà percettiva o sperimentale che rappresenta. . . . La letteratura elabora i suoi simboli per designare la bellezza, la forza, il piacere senza interessarsi gran che degli esseri in carne ed ossa che ne oggettivano più o meno intensamente i dati. La compattezza del tema si basa sulla coerenza del sistema che viene elaborato in rapporto alla materia da descrivere e non su un riferimento al reale" (398-99). It is not that, according to Pozzi, any attempt at mapping representational strategies becomes void and useless, as no representation stricto sensu ever takes place in literature. Rather, he offers a necessary counterpart to any dull referential school of criticism, such as the neoclassical one attacking John Milton's use of language (see chapter 5 in Empson, especially 153-54). Maybe Cropper's most relevant contribution will turn out to be precisely a revamping of this debate among scholars of literature.

2 All the translations are by the author; they strive to render the original closely, and not to reproduce stylistic effects.

3 Nancy Vickers emphasizes this character of lyric poetry in Petrarch's own works: "Her textures are those of metals and stones; her image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful dissociated objects" (96). A representative list of oppositional clichés in early Italian poetry can be found in Pozzi (413-14), while Forster's classical study offers a short roster of Petrarchian topoi (9-10).

4 "The classic petrarchist situation is that the lady is hard-hearted; love has struck the poet alone but spared the lady, and he begs that love should strike her too. The lady is often shown as enjoying the lover's pain; she is crueler than a tiger" (Forster 15).

5 The best overview of the birth of the twentieth-century notion of "Baroque" is still Wellek's.

6 Earlier than the examples we have just mentioned, approximately in the years 1550-65, Pierre de Ronsard found another method for portraying his beloved in inorganic terms: as Jean Adhémar put it, "Pour lui, les femmes ne sont pas des êtres vivants, des êtres de chair, mais des statues ou des peintures comme il en voit autour de lui" at Fontainebleau castle (344). However, it is worth noticing that his corpus contains far fewer descriptions of the beloved than earlier, contemporary or later examples. Moreover, Ronsard tries to account for bodily parts of his aimée that are usually neglected in love poetry: a wild oak reminds him of Marie's waist and hips (1.122); the branches of an elm covered with ivy are a figu-
ration of her arms embracing him (1.170); even her breasts, her legs and her feet arrest his observation for a while (1.348-49).

7 “Oleys come a pescado remojado” [“You stink like pickled fish”] is diametrically opposite to Ronsard’s description of Cassandre’s breath (sonnet 143): “Du beau jardin de son jeune printemps/ Naist un parfum, qui le ciel en tous temps/ Embmsmeroit de ses douces haleines.” (1.61)

8 The issue of the circulation of Donne’s poems before they were printed is explored in detail by Marotti in the preface and introduction to his John Donne, Coterie Poet, an extensive study of the relationship between Donne’s poetic production, the social and intellectual settings within and for which it was generated and by which it was influenced, as well as the generic constraints and expectations that ruled over it.

9 An interesting text on this topic is Tayler’s. Although it considers directly only the Anniversaries, a much less descriptive series of poems, its first chapter is useful in order to gain a better understanding of Donne’s and his contemporaries’ concept of “idea” and idealized description of, especially, women.

10 I will only mention in passing the consequences of such deforming costumes (some of which are reproduced in Franko’s text) on the freedom of bodily movements for the dancers involved in the ballets. Clearly, there exists a tension between bodily movements as conceived by the choreographers and those possible donning those costumes. In Franko’s interpretation, costumes were of paramount importance to establish the identity of the staged bodies: “Unlike plays that develop character and action through dialogue, burlesque ballets attempt to communicate principally through the dancer’s appearance” (79). Even in the openly Platonic setting of British masques, costumes play an important function. Their architect and designer Inigo Jones frankly acknowledges the goal he pursues: “his elaborate costume for Queen Henrietta Maria in Townshend’s Tempe Restored has been devised, he said, ‘so that corporeal beauty, consisting in symmetry, color, and certain unexpressable graces, shining in the Queen’s majesty, may draw us to the contemplation of the beauty of the soul, unto which it hath analogy’” (Orgel 369). In some sense, both these strategies are akin to those employed in Renaissance portraiture, as analyzed by Cropper, and in the paintings that will form the core or our analysis in the rest of the present work. In the specific case of Queen Henrietta Maria, moreover, it is worth remembering that “kings and queens . . . possess two bodies, one their own, the other belonging to the State over which they rule. It is the latter that interests portrait artists worthy of their royal commission” (Brilliant 102) — an important element to be recalled later in our discussion of Arcimboldo’s imperial portraits.

11 In one canovaccio of the commedia dell’arte, Pulcinella offers a long tirade in praise of his beloved Checca that bears witness to the pervasiveness and longevity of such clichés (the manuscript is dated 1734) as well as to an indirect (i.e., in non embodied, evocative form) stage usage: “Chiavo gioia mia amata / De Napole tò sei la bella Fata / Tò sij la strata de Toleto / addove Ammore terato dalle Grazie ba ‘ncarozza / ss’ vocchie uno è la strata dali Lanziere, e l’anto delli spatare / lo miezzo de ssà faccia è propeo la chiazzia dell’Armire / ssà vocca, laura, e diente, è chiazzia larga delli Arefece / ssò Pietto è la Doana addò s’mballa la farina / ssè rizie è chiazzia d’Arco addò se venneno le Recotte / ssò ventre è lo Mercato / Chiù sotto pò ngè stà lo Lavenaro / ora suffece, cà la Vena mia / non pò jire chiù ‘nante aveno dato / de pietto allo non presuto / delle doie Colonne d’Ercole, che sò le belle cosecelle tuie: / ora aie da sapere cà aggio / nò frate assai temmerario, e resoluto, / e chisos è sciuo da Porta Caputo, / e non bole autro lo Poveriello scuro / cà avè na casa à chiso Pisciaturo: / mà siente nó lo trattare da Vozzaco / co’ darele Chiazza Larega, ó lo mantracchio. / Cà chiso pò à Maggio sfratta com’è l’uso, / e vene ad abetà dereto à lo Pertuso” (Thérrault 152).
12 It then becomes possible to advance a variety of exegeses, including the recent one by Claude Gandelman according to which Vertumnus would be a direct inspiration to Hobbes’ idea of Leviathan: “A tradition diverging from the classical foregrounded one single part of the body. This was the Hobbesian tradition with its concept of the king as a sort of devouring stomach constituted by the digested bodies of his subjects. The body of the Leviathan-king was crystallized in an etching that served as the frontispiece of the first edition of Hobbes’ Commonwealth. This latter tradition stemmed from sixteenth-century mannerism. The picture of Rudolph II as Vertumnus, the Roman god of spring, was well known . . . . Arcimboldo represented the king as a conglomerate of all the fruit that gets its start in spring. In doing so he was following the precept set down by his friend Comanini, the philosopher, who was also patronized by Rudolph. ‘The duty of the painter,’ Comanini wrote, ‘is to reveal the face of the King that is hidden in all things.’ Rudolph as Vertumnus is not far away from Leviathan in the Hobbesian conception and, in fact, may have inspired it. Both are composite images, with the essential difference that Vertumnus is constituted by the fruit he has digested, whereas the Leviathan is formed by human bodies. Hobbesian ideology thus may be regarded as a product of the philosophical aesthetics of mannerism, and the representation-directing homunculus may be said to have been translated by painters into the composite mannerist homunculus à la Arcimboldo” (78). If Gandelman’s interpretation seems to go a little too far, Thomas Kaufmann’s fine study of Arcimboldo and his relation with the Hapsburg court establishes that the season cycle was replete with references to the Holy Roman Empire in general and to the Rudolphian court in particular. In the Prague setting, these paintings, culminating with Vertumnus, would be clearly perceived as “allegories made with a specific political content, and an intentional message” (102). Indeed, in general, “public figures are always defined to some degree by the distance necessary to stage the roles they play for a sizeable audience. Allegorical portraiture, by its very nature, tends to make observation abstract, to displace perception from its objects, and to engender emblematic images which transmute the substance of a person into ideas, words and conceits, gathered around a named persona” (Brilliant 104).

13 Forster reproduces a 1627 etching of “La belle Charité” (plate 3), which is indeed very different from Arcimboldo’s production, and, in any case, much posterior to it. It is however interesting to remark that the text which this etching accompanies is parodic in nature (Sorel’s Le Berger extravagant); and that its author calls such a depiction “un portrait fait par Metaphore” (Forster xii), thus anticipating Barthes’s exegesis.

14 Extant documents and evidence of Arcimboldo’s earlier work, prior to taking up residence in Vienna, do not seem to indicate any grotesque, bizarre, or otherwise irregular production. In 1549, when Arcimboldo is twenty-two, his name appears in the Annali della Fabbrica del Duomo in Milan, where he worked on stained glass windows; in 1558, his activity moves to Como, where he works on preparatory designs for a fresco painting in the local cathedral. Only four years later, in 1562, does Arcimboldo move to Vienna, and already the following year he paints his first Seasons series.

15 A well-documented and highly comprehensive study of these phenomena is to be found in Lugli.

16 This is also the interpretation offered by Raimondi: “A mano a mano che entra nel mondo letterario e, per così dire, si secolarizza, la cultura platonica educa il nuovo gusto rinascimentale a un’idea di naturalezza che sia insieme decoro, e mentre propugna la libertà dell’immaginazione, di una sapienza stilistica convertita in una sorta di grazia, diviene anche un Principio d’ordine, in quanto postula in ogni opera d’arte un organismo unitario, governato, come l’universo, dai segreti rapporti delle forme vive e fluenti” (9).

17 Held’s article provides a broad overview of the treatment of this subject from the fifteenth century onward — one from which the originality of Arcimboldo’s treatment of this topic emerges astonishingly. A background study on a particular (and telling) exploitation of the
image of Flora is provided in the section entitled “The Mythological Guise: Flora and Leda” in Lawner.

18 The connotations of the Italian phrase are much gloomier and negative than the corresponding English one of “still life.” A comparative analysis of this phrase in various languages has not been attempted before, to my knowledge, but could perhaps shed some light on pictorial conventions throughout various times and places. In any case, Arcimboldo’s claim is simply that he “cangiò” one living element into another, an appropriate claim for his highly personal representational strategies, yet remarkably different from Góngora’s contention that El Greco “díÓ espíritu a leño, vida a lino” [“gave soul to wood, life to cloth”] (502).

19 On the topic of the effectiveness of images, the seminal work is Freedberg, especially chapter 4: “The Myth of Aniconism.”

20 These “wholes” are far from comprising the entire body of the portrait sitter, whether male or female; correctly, Maiorino refers to them earlier in the same passage as “profiles,” since that is what they are: silhouettes of faces and shoulders.

WORKS CITED


Bodily Boundaries Represented