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"Your Painted Counterfeit". The paragone *between portraits and sonnets in Shakespeare's work*

Camilla Caporicci

1 In his famous and often quoted *Defence of Poesy*, Sidney defines poetry as an "art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis* – that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth – to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture".[1] This is not the only point at which Sidney associates the art of poetry to that of painting,[2] nor is he the only Renaissance intellectual who does so. Horace's *ut pictura poesis* was certainly not unknown to sixteenth century artists and poets, and it was in fact one of the cornerstones of the lively Renaissance debate about the true nature and function of art.[3] In fact, as Jean H. Hagstrum writes, "so frequently was Horace's dictum repeated that a literary historian has said that *ut pictura poesis* may be considered 'almost the keynote of Renaissance criticism.'"[4] This idea of poetry as a "picture" assumes a peculiar significance when referred to a particular kind of poetry, that is, the eulogistic, celebrative one: if writing poetry is painting, then is not composing a poem to celebrate the beauty of a woman or a man to draw her or his portrait?

2 In this essay I will analyze the way in which Shakespeare receives and elaborates the traditional association established between painting and poetry, with particular attention to the ambiguous affinity, both theoretical and practical, between the art of drawing portraits and that of verbal praising, and specifically of writing sonnets. I will first analyse Shakespeare's highly complex reflection on this rhetorical and conceptual *paragone* as it appears in his sonnet sequence. Then, I will move from the page to the stage, in order to show how this reflection operates within the dramatic action: in particular, I will discuss the way in which Petrarchan language and visual portrayal compete to depict the beloved's portrait in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Love's Labour's Lost*.

3 The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed an amazing flourishing in the production of portraits.[5] A symbol of power, and simultaneously a display of wealth and of taste, the

portrait was an expression of the excellence of the sitter, whose everlasting memory was entrusted to the painter's hands, crystallized in the beautiful image that "as a mirror" was supposed to capture and reflect the very nature of its subject. Together with portraiture, another artistic form, usually devoted to the celebration of a patron or a mistress, can be said to have triumphed in the early modern period: eulogistic poetry, especially in its most famous renaissance form, that is, the sonnet. The established association between painting and poetry, founded on the idea that any truthful and effective representation of reality has to be based on a visual kind of imagination, acquires further importance in the specific field of the sonnet tradition, as the sonnet defines itself – at least officially – as a sort of "monument" devoted to the representation of a worthy and beloved subject. A subject whose image will consequently become immortal (not accidentally the Italian word *immortalare* means "to portray" as well as "to eternize").

4 This association between writing sonnets and drawing portraits is not only a conceptual kind of consideration elaborated by critics. In fact, it was actually perceived and reflected upon by renaissance poets themselves, who not accidentally used the language of painting in their own sonnet sequences, more or less explicitly linking their verbal celebration of the beloved to the visual, specifically painted, representation of him/her. This use of the language of painting reflects first of all the poet's will to equate his own form of representation to that based on the visual *mimesis*, in order to highlight his own power to truthfully represent the reality of things and of beings. A method that perfectly exemplifies what Roland Barthes describes as the easiest and most common way to create a sense of "realism."[6] The assumption upon which this equation is based is therefore an implicit admission of the supremacy of painting over poetry, at least when concerning the mimetic power of art. An idea not uncommon in the Renaissance.[7]

5 Given the association established between drawing portraits and writing sonnets, it is not surprising that the Shakespearean work in which we find the highest incidence of the *paragone* motif is the *Sonnets*, where the poet's reflection on the parallel between the visual art of the painter and the poet's verbal one appears to be very complex and ambiguous. Central in the sonnet sequence is the poet's deep meditation on the ethical problem posed by the celebrative praise and by the language through which this praise is conveyed, that is, the implicit act of dishonesty that the Petrarchan language performs in the moment in which it gives birth to idealized figures, totally abstracted from the real objects they pretend to represent. A problem linked to what Heather Dubrow calls "the slippage of praise into flattery,"[8] but deeper, as it involves not only the idea of the poet's sincerity in his verbal relationship with his beloved, but also the honesty of the writing itself, considered in relation to the nature of the beloved object. The artistic betrayal of the natural truth represents, to "a writer so alert to the ethical implications of his art,"[9] as John Kerrigan writes, a serious sin and a deep source of pain. As Alessandro Serpieri affirms, in the *canzoniere* there is a profound "twine of the ethical and the aesthetical problem, because in both cases the fundamental issue is that of truth. [...] If someone appears different from what he is, the deceit is a moral question; if the art addresses a false beauty, or falsifies with the 'painting' of the false rhetoric an authentic beauty, then that art is morally ambiguous, corrupted."[10] It is as part of this meditation that the *paragone* between painting and poetry emerges, especially in the first section of the sonnet sequence – the one dedicated to the *Fair Youth*, and particularly inclined to engage

in meta-poetical discourses –, reflecting in its ambiguous complexity the problematic nature of the question itself.

6 On the one hand, we find an explicitly negative association between the flattering character of Petrarchan praise and the idea of a likewise falsifying visual representation of the beloved. In particular, the "false painting", clearly equated with the false rhetoric of the rival poets, is directly opposed to the natural and therefore truthful beloved's appearance. The poet asks: "Why should *false painting imitate* his cheek / And steal dead seeming of his living hue? / Why should poor beauty *indirectly* seek / Roses of *shadow*, since his rose is true?"[11] The act of visual imitation appears here to be negative in itself because inextricably connected with the idea of falsification implicit in any *indirect* visualization of reality; a *medium* generating a mere shadow of the actual beauty. "Their gross painting" – writes again the poet, subtly associating the idea of painting with that of flattering rhetoric as well as falsifying cosmetics[12] – "might be better used / Where cheeks need blood: in thee it is abused" (82.13-14). The visual ornament that the act of painting appears to produce corresponds in this sense to the verbal ornament of the Petrarchan poetry, and it is peremptorily rejected by the poet, who resolutely distances himself from the rival poets who make use of it: "I never saw that you did painting need, / And therefore to your fair no painting set" (83.1-2).

7 On the other hand, the poet cannot avoid using himself that imagery linking nature, painting and poetry, as he appears to find in it – like many of his predecessors – an effective instrument to assert the truthfulness of his beloved's wonderful nature. This impulse, Sidney Lee suggests, might also spring from the frequency with which the Earl of Southampton – the noble youth who, according to Lee, is the sonnets' addressee, and to whom Shakespeare dedicated *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* – sat for his portrait.[13] Southampton's portraits, and in particular the Cobbe portrait[14] and Hilliard miniature[15] – which present us an image of the youth, maiden-faced and with long feminine curls, which we cannot help but compare to the androgynous "master-mistress" of the sonnets – could be considered one of the reasons for the marked presence of the painting-related imagery in the *Sonnets*' first section. However, it is important to notice that the poet's interest is not focused on the actual description and celebration of the portraits, nor on any direct equation of his art to the visual one. Instead, the reference to painting is mainly used to reflect on the complex relationship between art and nature. In fact, Shakespeare seems willing to distinguish in a clear way the falsifying rhetoric/painting of the rival poets and his own truthful portrayal of the beloved, supposedly based not on the flattering ornament, but on an approach to reality implying an honest representation of nature, an exact and not improved copy of it.

8 Opposing the idea expressed in Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* – according to which true poets, exactly as the best painters, must not portray the "faces as are set before them,"[16] but draw pictures superior to those created by nature, giving thus verbal and visual representation to the ideal[17] –, Shakespeare affirms that the only way to do justice to the beauty of his beloved is to copy what nature has made him like: "he that writes of you, if he can tell / That you are you, so dignifies his story. / Let him but copy what in you is writ, / Not making worse what nature made so clear" (84.7-10). This statement, innovative as it might appear, is however not enough to define Shakespeare's sonnets as non-idealistic and non-Petrarchan, specifically for what concerns the kind of verbal depiction the poet makes use of. This sort of assertion – rejecting the flattering falsification inherent in the eulogistic sonnet and affirming instead the adherence of

poetry to the true nature of the beloved – was in fact not unusual in the sonnet sequences of the period. Indeed, it was part of that same system it apparently rejected. A contradiction that, not accidentally, we also find in Renaissance portraiture.

9 The common idea of the painter as "holding a mirror up to nature" – to put it in Shakespeare's words – is in fact quite ambiguous, and, in the specific case of portraiture, complicated by the sitters' subtly conflicting expectations. As Joanna Woods-Marsden writes, in the Renaissance sitters habitually gave instructions to be portrayed "*al naturale* ", and the resulting portrait was routinely characterized as a "true likeness". These "true likenesses", however, were acceptable only when presented under an idealized guise. A tension existed between the conventions within which sitters articulated their needs and actual practice: their exaltation of naturalism implied that all the artist had to do to achieve success was to hold up a mirror to created nature and produce a one-to-one pictorial offset of the person before him, but in practice the sitters' lack of confidence in what "creating nature" had actually produced obliged them to exercise control over the image being effected of their features.[18] This was particularly true in Elizabethan England. While the perfecting of naturalism was beginning to assert itself as the dominant mode in the Italian and Flemish visual arts, the mainstream of English sixteenth-century portraiture was decidedly anti-naturalistic and less concerned with representing the truth than with highlighting the sitter's real or imagined qualities. Moreover, as Roy Strong writes, the cult of *Imprese* and other allegorical devices "reinforced the anti-naturalistic tendencies already inherent by emphasizing the essentially symbolic nature of all painted images."[19]

10 The perfect example of this kind of anti-naturalistic, symbolic and flattering portraiture is found in Queen Elizabeth's portraits. In fact, the need for a powerful and idealized royal image that could be used as focus of loyalty to the state was satisfied by Nicholas Hilliard's sublimating style. It was mainly through his flattering portraits depicting Elizabeth as Cynthia and "Queen of Flowers", endowed with an ever-young visage – later to be known as "mask of youth" –, that the myth of the Virgin Queen was actively propagated, becoming a source of influence for the aesthetics of an entire age.[20] Elizabethan ladies, exactly as their queen, wanted to be portrayed in an idealized fashion, but at the same time desired the portrait to be considered as a perfect copy of their appearance. The image resulting from this process of idealization was thus, paradoxically, approved and welcomed because of its beautifying character, its superiority to the actual model, but at the same time celebrated as "true likeness" of the person glorified through it.

11 A similar ambiguity can be found, significantly, in the sonnet. The evidently idealized figure emerging from the sophisticated Petrarchan rhetoric acquired in fact part of its value – especially from the addressee's point of view – in the moment in which the poet contextually affirmed it to be nothing but the exact, or even inferior, copy of the real thing. Again, the subject of the artistic celebration was happy to discover in his poetic image a paragon of perfection, but at the same time desired it to be openly celebrated as a "true likeness" of himself, causing thus the traditional *topos* of the artist as "equal to nature" to become a sort of fixed *leitmotif*, inscribed with a precise function in the very code of the sonnet tradition. This is for example what Sidney does after having presented us with a sublime image of his beloved Stella, a starry-eyed goddess made of gold and alabaster, whose poetical perfection is however immediately affirmed to be but a mere copy of the original: "all my deed / But copying is, what in her nature writes".[21]

12 The fact that Shakespeare affirms that the poet describing the *Fair Youth* should only copy what nature has created, does not then guarantee the actual non-idealizing character of the sonnets dedicated to him; and indeed, the figure emerging from the first section of the *canzoniere* is similar to the idealized beloved of the sonnet tradition in many respects. The poet seems bound to celebrate his powerful patron – whether Southampton or Pembroke – through a praise that cannot avoid making of him, though not without some more or less intentional inconsistencies, a sort of "incarnate miracle."[22] A miracle that the poet, as the painter of flattering portraits, has to define as a truthful copy of the wondrous original.

13 But even though Shakespeare's celebration of the *Fair Youth*'s value appears to be not radically different from that found in many sonnet sequences of the period, the particular attention that the poet dedicates to the aesthetical and ethical problem of art and its relationship with nature represents a quite original aspect of these sonnets, implying, among other things, a specific use of the *paragone* between painting and poetry. After having rejected the "false painting" of the rival poets, and having declared that he, a "true-telling friend," (82.12) will never use it in his own celebration of the *Fair Youth*, Shakespeare finds himself facing a difficult question. On the one hand, he wants (for socio-economical or sentimental reasons we cannot tell) to celebrate in eulogistic terms his noble patron, and meta-poetically exhorts his Muse to do her office – that is, to have him "praised of ages yet to be" – and not to "excuse silence" by saying that "Truth needs no *colour* with his colour fixed, / Beauty no *pencil* beauty's truth to lay, / But best is best if never intermixed" (101.6-12). On the other hand, he cannot deny the falsifying nature not only of the evidently flattering aesthetic of a particular kind of poetry and of painting, but also of any "indirect" visualization of reality – that is, of any representation of nature based on a fictitious equalization of visual and verbal portrayal. In fact, not only the same Muse is said to be not "Stirred by a *painted* beauty to his verse" (21.2), but the *Fair Youth*'s poetic image, significantly defined as "your painted counterfeit", is clearly pronounced to be insufficient, the "barren rhyme" (16.8) that produces it being mimetically inferior to that creative act that only nature can perform:

> [...] many maiden gardens yet unset,
> With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers,
> Much *liker* than your *painted counterfeit*.
> So should the lines of life that life repair
> Which this time's *pencil* or my pupil *pen*
> Neither in inward worth not *outward fair*
> Can make you live yourself in *eyes* of men.
> To give away yourself keeps yourself still,
> And you must live *drawn* by your own sweet skill.
> *The Sonnets*, 16.6-14

14 The *paragone* between art and nature is thus resolved in the somehow tautological statement affirming true *mimesis* to be achieved only by Nature herself, the sole artist able to create the original as well as a truthful copy of it (11.13-14). Those terms referring to the semantic field of the visual arts, and specifically of painting, shift then from the poet to Nature, which *draws* the *Fair Youth*'s "outward fair" and paints his beautiful face with her own hand – "with nature's own hand painted" (20.1).[23] The visual memory of the *Youth* – and that it is a specifically visual memory it is suggested both by the set of words referring to painting and by the fact that this memory should live in men's *eyes* – is therefore a portrait that no art but nature's can paint. Consequently, the mirror able to show a face as beautiful as the original is no longer the metaphorical one held by the

artist, but only an actual mirror, producing the sole possible visual copy of the beloved: "Look in your glass and there appears a face / That overgoes my blunt invention quite" (103.6-7).[24] A face fruit not of an artistic creative process, but of a properly optical phenomenon, perceived through an actual visual *medium*.

15 The poet's scepticism towards the mimetic possibilities of a verbal representation based on a visual approach to reality, leads, if not to a general rejection of the Petrarchan kind of praise, at least to a limited presence of actual physical descriptions in the *canzoniere*. When the visual elements related to the youth's appearance emerge, they tend not to be directly descriptive – and therefore not directly aimed at creating a visual image of the beloved – but conveyed through metaphors, which in their own nature deny the attempt to univocally reflect the object they are meant to signify.[25] In this way, Shakespeare avoids the risks inherent in the attempt to re-create the visual image of his beloved through poetry – an attempt necessarily doomed to failure – and concentrates instead on an imagery that, though expressing the solar magnificence of the *Fair Youth*, does not approach it through a primarily visual point of view. In other words, it does not approach it as a mirror. As we have said, the only mirror that can possibly re-produce a perfect copy of the original is a real mirror, through an actual optical phenomenon. And it is in accordance with this concept that the only "true image" that the poet/painter can metaphorically produce is that obtained through and by the eye:

> Mine eye hath played the painter, and hath steeled
> Thy beauty's form in table of my heart.
> My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
> And perspective it is best painter's art;
> For through the painter must you see his skill
> To find where your true image pictured lies,
> Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still,
> That hath his windows glazèd with thine eyes.
> Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
> Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
> Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
> Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee.
> Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art:
> They draw but what they see, know not the heart.
> *The Sonnets*, 24

16 In this highly complex sonnet, entirely based on a multiple mirrors effect, the visual element represented by the "portrait" of the beloved is inserted in a properly optical game of reflections, in which the eye becomes both the active agent of the portrayal and the instrument through which the portrait, as well as the original, is perceived. In fact, the two functions significantly coincide: the eye, functioning as a proper mirror, re-creates the "true image" of the *Fair Youth* in the very moment in which it sees it, as an actual reflection,[26] resolving thus the problem inherent in an indirect representation of reality by making this representation, fundamentally, direct. The poetic *topos* of the beloved's portrait as painted upon the lover's heart, metaphorically transformed into a "table", is on the one hand strengthened by stretching the metaphor beyond its traditional limits, and creating a whole coherent imagery that involves, besides the painter (the eye) and the table (the heart), a specific painting skill (perspective), a frame (the body), a shop (the bosom) with windows (the beloved's eyes), and an external observer (the sun). On the other hand, the properly optic, and not artistic, nature of the process through which the portrait is said to be painted, subtly changes the heart of the

metaphor, that cuts out the artistic (both poetical and pictorial) element to concentrate on an entirely visual game of mirrors. In this way, not only is the purely visual approach to reality explicitly said, in the final couplet, to be insufficient because it is unable to express the complexity of the subject it represents, but it is also implicitly affirmed to be only possible through a direct kind of visual *medium*.

17 It is because of this reason, I believe, that the praise the poet devotes to the *Fair Youth*, celebrative as it is, avoids any attempt to create a precise visual image of the beloved through specifically descriptive language. What poetry can express, Shakespeare seems to say, is at the same time more and less than a "picture"; something that does not find its vehicle and final addressee in the eye. Drawing portraits is not what poetry is for, and if it tries, it will necessarily fail: the beloved's "painted counterfeit", though most skilfully pictured, will always end up by being nothing more than a mere shadow.

18 Shakespeare's reflection on the *paragone* between painting and poetry, far from restricting itself to the *Sonnets* alone, is also brought to the stage in some of his dramatic works, where it is complicated by its interaction with the properly visual aspect of the theatrical *medium*. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, Shakespeare refers again to the aforementioned idea of a hierarchical ladder upon which the arts are organized according to their proximity to nature. When Bassanio, opening the laden casket, discovers Portia's "picture in little", he celebrates thus, according to a quite codified rhetorical *topos*, its amazing verisimilitude and the semi-divine nature of the artist who has produced it:

> What find I here?
> Fair Portia's counterfeit. What demi-god
> Hath come so near creation? Move these eyes?
> Or whether, riding on the balls of mine,
> Seem they in motion? Here are severed lips
> Parted with sugar breath. So sweet a bar
> Should sunder such sweet friends. Here in her hairs
> The painter plays the spider, and hath woven
> A golden mesh t'untrap the hearts of men
> Faster than gnats in cobwebs. But her eyes –
> How could he see to do them? Having made one,
> Methinks it should have power to steal both his
> And leave itself unfurnished. Yet look how far
> The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow
> In underprizing it, so far this shadow
> Doth limp behind the substance.
> *The Merchant of Venice*, III.ii.114-129

19 The traditional "*topos* of the artist as nature's ape, whose works are so lifelike that they appear to be on the verge of breath, speech or movement"[27] – also used by Shakespeare in *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and, though in a more complex and ambiguous context, in *The Winter's Tale*[28] – presents, in the case quoted here, nothing significantly original. In fact, the author's purpose appears to be far from polemical, as he primarily aims at expressing the positive preciousness of the prize Bassanio has won – a prize that is at the same time the lady and the painted jewel that is her objective counterpart. The eulogistic language through which Bassanio praises the miniature is the same he would use in praising the lady herself, and the preciousness of the images that this language modulates – the "sugar breath", the eyes so beautiful that steal those of the artist, the golden hair entrapping like a net men's hearts – defines itself as exemplary of the Petrarchan language. However, even though Shakespeare implicitly highlights the

affinity between the miniature's aesthetics and that of Petrarchan poetry, in the particular case of Portia's miniature he does not seem interested in analysing the problem inherent in the intentional idealization process through which the artistic *medium* transforms the natural creature. The poet's discourse appears in fact to reinforce the canonical Petrarchan assumption that the artist cannot properly represent the beloved not because the eulogistic language betrays the natural creature in making it better than what it really is, but, on the contrary, because the beloved's nature will always be too sublime to be fully represented by the poet/painter, no matter how flattering the praise/portrait is. In other words: Portia's miniature, exactly as Bassanio's description of it, is different form the actual Portia not because the real person cannot actually have hair of pure gold and so on, but because she is even more precious than the painted jewel that represents her. Moreover, Shakespeare appears to reflect on the relationship between nature and art in a quite traditional way, building a clear hierarchy in which the visual art – painting or limning – is considered superior to poetry because of its higher mimetic power. Poetry emerges – also thanks to the carefully arranged chiasm according to which the Neo-platonic terms "substance" and "shadow" are organized – as a second-hand copy of nature, being the copy of a depicted copy of reality.

20 However, despite the apparent clarity of this assertion, the discourse proves to be more complex, confirming Richard Meek's description of Shakespeare as "a writer who repeatedly presents us with several different modes of mimesis, sometimes implying that one mode of representation is better than the other, but always with an eye to beguiling, or even conning, his audiences and readers."[29] In fact, by choosing a miniature rather than a full-scale painting, the poet is able to play on the fact that the public cannot see the portrait, and is thus obliged to rely entirely on his *ekphrastic* description of it. This ambiguity necessarily calls into question the hierarchy the poet proposes, in the moment in which we realize that it is actually the verbal element that is creating the image it contextually celebrates as its superior, and that, moreover, the physical visual act supposed to reveal this supremacy – "Yet *look* how far / The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow" – is in fact impossible to perform, and therefore used as a mere rhetoric element. One of the main reasons why Shakespeare's audience is not able to see the artwork is because the poet's interest is not so much in the visual arts *per se*, as in the relationship between different types of mimesis, and in the question of whether language can "make us see". He wants to stimulate what Renaissance commentators on rhetoric referred to as the *oculis mentis* while implicitly highlighting the power of verbal portrayal, thus confirming John Hunt's idea that "all visual descriptions in poetry ambiguously honor their own medium as much as that of the visual art they offer to represent."[30]

21 On the other hand, the miniature's passage is functional in a subtle meta-dramatic discourse that finds a means to strengthen the public's suspension of disbelief in the interplay between different modes of mimesis. Shakespeare highlights the artificial and somehow fictional character of both the verbal and visual portraits of Portia by explicitly contrasting them with the actual person on stage. By doing this, Shakespeare subtly leads the audience to perceive the actor playing Portia as the thing itself, the "substance", and to forget that he is also part of an artistic make-believe, he is also a "shadow" (a term elsewhere used by Shakespeare to mean "actor"[31]). The mimetic competition between poetic language and visual portrayal proves to be a perfect device to hide the fictional nature of the third mimetic art competing on stage, the theatrical one, which emerges from the contest as the one true winner.

22 Even if the affinity between miniature portraiture and the Petrarchan sonnet is not openly criticised in *The Merchant of Venice*, the problem of the lady's portrait as ideally linked to a specific kind of representation (the idealising aesthetic at the foundation of both celebrative portraiture and the eulogistic sonnet) is taken by Shakespeare into more complex territory when it is part of a discourse more or less focused on the Petrarchan model. This can be seen, for instance, in another Shakespearian comedy, featuring a markedly anti-Petrarchan lady, *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which a negative view of the painted image of the lady, born from the association between celebrative portraiture and Petrarchan language, is clearly expressed. The explicit anti-petrarchism of the play – that ridicules the Petrarchan language used by the king and his young friends in courting the ladies of France – is in fact conveyed through a reference to *painting*. Not only is the falsifying nature of the praise immediately defined by the princess (according to a *topos* not uncommon in the poetry of the period) as "painted" – "my beauty, though but mean, / Needs not the painted flourish of your praise" (II.i.13-14) –, but the very climax of this falsification is expressed through a parallel between the idealizing, and therefore falsifying, rhetoric of the Petrarchan language, and the art of drawing portraits. Rosaline, a dark lady "[w]ith two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes" (III.i.192), "one that will do the deed / Though Argus were her eunuch and her guard" (III.i.193-194), is the farthest lady of all from the Petrarchan ideal, and therefore the most heavily falsified by a "fair praise" that betrays the very essence of her appearance: her darkness[32]. Although Berowne affirms that his beloved does not need any "painted rhetoric" – "Fie painted rhetoric! O, she needs it not" (IV.iii.237) –, he is in fact far from ready to acknowledge her dark unconventional beauty, and consequently celebrates her by re-creating her image according to the canonical ideal, and giving thus birth to a picture that does not in the least correspond to the lady's actual figure. Rosaline has thus to read a sonnet in which she is described, or *portrayed*, as "the fairest goddess on the ground" (V.ii.36) and, with an unmistakeably polemical as well as ironical tone, affirms: "O, he hath *drawn* my *picture* in his letter" (V.ii.38). "Any thing like?" (V.ii.39) asks the princess. "Nothing in the praise," (V.ii.40) answers Rosaline, but only in the black colour of the ink.

23 The rejection of the Petrarchan representation – or maybe we should say *mis* representation – of the beloved appears then to be linked to the idea of a distorted visual portrayal, corresponding to a particular kind of flattering portraiture.[33] This link is further highlighted by Shakespeare, who shifts from the metaphorical to the physical plane in order to offer the visible equivalent of the poetic portrait to the public. The verbal picture drawn by the suitor's Petrarchan language finds its objective counterpart in the gift that accompanies the king's praise of the French princess. While all the men send jewels along with sonnets, the king chooses a particularly significant one, which epitomizes the symbolical as well as practical nexus between precious portrait and Petrarchan ideal: "a lady walled about with diamonds" (V.ii.3), in other words, a lady's miniature.[34] As the rich Petrarchan lines intend to praise the lady by turning her into a jewel, so this jewel-like miniature portrait, in its immediate concreteness on the stage, aims to signify the same metaphor. By using actual or metaphorical precious materials, both forms of representation create an image of the lady as a perfect ideal, far from her true nature and appearance. For this reason, the ladies of France laugh at both the verbal and visual portraits offered by their suitors: because they can see perfectly that they do not resemble them at all. The mimetic competition between Petrarchan language and

visual portrayal results in a negative competition here, where both forms of art appear to fail in their attempt to depict the beloved's portrait.

Conclusion

24 Writing in a period in which Horace's *ut pictura poesis* was one of the cornerstones of the debate about the nature and function of art, Shakespeare, through his reflection on the mimetic competition between painting and poetry, demonstrates a special awareness of the multifaceted implications of this rhetorical as well as conceptual *paragone*. In particular, in the *Sonnets* and in some of his dramatic works, the poet's attention appears to be focused on a specific genre of painting and poetry, both extremely in vogue in sixteenth-century England: the portrait and the sonnet. The affinity in function between celebrative portraiture and Petrarchan sonnet – both aimed to immortalize and celebrate the sitter/addressee – corresponds to a similarity in the idealizing and sublimating aesthetics at the base of both forms of art. Perceiving this correspondence, Shakespeare uses the comparison between the art of drawing portraits and that of writing sonnets in order to reflect on the power and limits of different artistic *media* and aesthetic models. On the one hand, his reflection on the relationship between verbal and visual portraits proves to be a means to meditate on the mimetic power of the two forms of representation. On the other hand, he highlights the affinities between Petrarchan rhetoric and a specific kind of flattering portraiture in order to discuss the nature and limits of the idealizing aesthetics dominant in Elizabethan visual and poetic arts.

25 In the *Sonnets* Shakespeare, as lyrical poet, reflects on the *paragone* between portraits and sonnets from the inside, revealing the limits of a poetry that tries to borrow visual immediateness from a different artistic form. On the one hand, Shakespeare transforms the term "painting" into a synonym of falsifying, thus establishing a link between the visual and the literary "ornament" and condemning both as instruments of a most treacherous betrayal of the natural truth. On the other hand, the limited presence of actual physical descriptions in the *Sonnets*, combined with a complex reflection on the failure of any indirect form of visualization, reveals the poet's skepticism towards the mimetic possibilities of a verbal representation based on a visual approach to reality. When the poet's reflection shifts from the page to the stage, the comparison between painting and poetry is complicated by its interaction with the theatrical *medium*. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the eulogistic language through which Bassanio ekphrastically praises Portia's miniature clearly links the Petrarchan sonnet and the miniature as two forms of art following the same aesthetic principles. At the same time, the mimetic competition between painting and poetry, which Bassanio affirms to be won by the former, is complicated by the fact that the portrait, too little to be seen by the public, is in fact visualized by the audience only through an *ekphrastic*, verbal description of it. Moreover, the interplay between different modes of mimesis proves to be a meta-dramatic means to hide the artificial and fictional character of the dramatic representation, which emerges as the most powerful mimetic art. The idealizing aesthetics at the base of the *paragone* between celebrative portraiture and Petrarchan sonnets is more clearly called into question in *Love's Labour's Lost*, a work focused on the discussion of the Petrachan model. Here, Shakespeare links the explicit rejection of the Petrarchan representation of the beloved to a specific kind of visual portrayal, epitomizing the nexus between sonnets and

miniature portraits in the highly symbolic image of the "lady walled about with diamonds".

26 Shakespeare's reasoning on the *paragone* between painting and poetry proves not only a meditation on an extremely popular Renaissance concept but, most importantly, also a means to investigate the power and limits of his own art. It is by reflecting on the mimetic possibilities inherent in different forms of representation – visual, dramatic and poetic – that Shakespeare could determine the true nature of each specific *medium*, and consequently use his own in the most effective and successful way.

NOTES

1. Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, in Philip Sidney, *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 217. As Leonard Barkan writes, Sidney's image of poetry as a speaking picture "stands as the emblem of a kind of utopian poetics, a dream that poetry can do just about *anything*" (Leonard Barkan, "Making Pictures Speak: Renaissance Art, Elizabethan Literature, Modern Scholarship", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 48.2, Summer 1995, p. 326-327).

2. Whenever he speaks of the nature of poetry, when not directly explaining it through a parallel with painting, we encounter in fact such terms as "picture", "image", "painted", "colours", and so on.

3. As Alison Thorne writes: "It is well documented that the interconnectedness of the arts was taken to be an axiomatic and unquestionable truth across much of Western Europe from the fifteenth through to the eighteenth century. Historians of both literature and the visual arts have demonstrated just how relentlessly the implications of the Horatian dictum *ut pictura poesis* or Simonides's assertion that 'Painting is a dumme Poesie, and Poesie a speaking picture' were explored and codified during this period" (Alison Thorne, *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare. Looking through Language*, Houndmills and London, Macmillan, 2000, p. xii).

4. Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts*, *The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, p. 61-62. The literary historian quoted by Hagstrum is Joel Elias Spingarn, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1920, p. 42.

5. As both Barkan ("Making pictures Speak", *op. cit.*) and Margaret Farrand Thorp ("Shakespeare and the Fine Arts", *PMLA*, 46.3, September 1931, 672-693) affirm, in England portraiture was by far the most collected and practised painting expression.

6. Barthes, in *S/Z,* discusses the way in which writers use conventions and codes borrowed from the visual arts in order to describe things, as it is easier to create a sense of "realism" by representing other modes of representation than it is to represent the "real": "Thus, realism (badly named, at any rate often badly interpreted) consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real: this famous *reality*, as though suffering from a fearfulness which keeps it from being touched directly, is *set farther away*, postponed, or at least captured through the pictorial matrix in which it has been steeped before being put into words: code upon code, known as realism" (Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York, Farran, Straus and Giroux, 1974, p. 55).

7. Leonardo da Vinci, for instance, writes: "If you, historians or poets or mathematicians, had not seen things through your eyes, you would only be able to report them feebly in your writings. And you, poet, should you wish to depict a story as if painting with your pen, the painter with his brush will more likely succeed. [...] The works of nature are far more worthy than words, which are the products of man, because there is the same relationship between the works of man and those of nature as between man and god. Therefore, it is nobler to imitate things in nature, which are in fact the real images, than to imitate, in words, the words and deeds of man" (Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*, ed. and trans. M. Kemp and M. Walter, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1969, p. 20-21).

8. Heather Dubrow, *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 226.

9. John Kerrigan, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan, London, Penguin, 1986, p. 29.

10. Alessandro Serpieri, "Introduzione" to William Shakespeare, *Sonetti*, ed. Alessandro Serpieri, Milano, Rizzoli, 1991, p. 50.

11. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 67, lines 5-8, *The Sonnets and "A Lover's Complaint"*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery, 2nd ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. All quotations from Shakespeare are from this edition. Here and elsewhere in quotations from Shakespeare, the emphasis is mine.

12. As David K. Weiser writes: "cosmetics and rhetoric are kindred evils throughout the sonnets in that both falsify reality. The poet who 'painted beauty' must paint his language with the false colors of rhetoric". David K. Weiser, *Mind in Character*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1987, p. 46.

13. Sidney Lee, "Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton", in Sidney Lee, ed., *The Dictionary of National Biography*, 63 vols, New York, Macmillan, 1909, vol. 21, p. 1055-1061.

14. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d5/Cobbe_Portrait_of_Southampton.jpg

15. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c5/Miniature_of_Henry_Wriothesley,_3rd_Earl_of_Southampton,_1594._(Fitzwilliam_Museum).jpg

16. Stressing the parallel between the art of writing poetry and that of painting, and particularly of drawing portraits, Sidney affirms that between those poets who write about philosophical, natural, moral, historical etc. issues, and the "true poets", there is "such a kind of difference as betwixt the meaner sort of painters, who counterfeit only such faces as are set before them, and the more excellent, who having no law but wit, bestow that in colours upon which is fittest for the eye to see [...] to imitate borrow nothing of what it is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be"(Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, *op. cit.*, p. 218).

17. "Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection [the imitation of nature], lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature [...] Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (*Ibid.*, p. 216).

18. Joanna Woods-Marsden, "'Ritratto al Naturale': Questions of Realism and Idealism in Early Renaissance Portraits," *Art Journal*, 46.3, Fall 1987, p. 209.

19. Roy Strong, *The English Renaissance Miniature*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1983, p. 95.

20. See for instance: Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1977.

21. Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, 3.13-14, in Philip Sidney, *The Major Works*, *op. cit.*

22. With these terms Wilson Knight defines Shakespeare's *Fair Youth*. Cf. George Wilson Knight, *The Mutual Flame: On Shakespeare's* Sonnets *and the* Phoenix and the Turtle, London, Methuen, 1955.

23. As Katherine Duncan-Jones writes, this image presumably contrasts with the "painted beauty" of the following sonnet (21), artificially and falsely painted both with cosmetics and flattering rhetoric. Cf. Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed., William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 2006, p. 152.

24. We can find again this motif in the final couplet – "And more, much more, than in my verse can sit / Your own glass shows you, when you look in it" (103.13-14).

25. Joel Fineman is right when he highlights the specifically visual ideality in the young man sonnets – contrasting it with the properly verbal, non visual, language of the *Dark Lady* section –, affirming that if these sonnets are suspicious of their visual imagery, this is not a suspicion that they put directly into words (Joel Fineman, "Shakespeare's 'Perjur'd eye'", *Representations* 7, Summer 1984, p. 59-86). However, the visual imagery characterising the idealistic representation of the youth is not used to "draw" a precise portrait of him, but it is instead founded on a metaphorical visual world made of flowers, jewels and stars, conveying a visual impression of beauty and preciousness but not aimed at "reflecting" the youth's appearance.

26. This idea of the act of vision as generating a "picture" of the beloved is also found in sonnets 46 and 47.

27. Alison Thorne, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

28. In *Lucrece* the praise is devoted to the piece of painting representing the fall of Troy (1364-1568), and in *The Taming of the Shrewd* to the "wanton pictures" featuring the loves of the gods (I.i.48-59). In *The Winter's Tale*, the reference to the exceptional verisimilitude of Queen Hermione's statue, supposedly created by Giulio Romano, is made more complex and ambiguous by the fact that the sculpture is actually no sculpture, but the flesh and blood queen herself (V.ii.93-101; V.iii.10-103).

29. Richard Meek, *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare*, Farnham (UK) and Burlington (USA), Ashgate, 2009, p. 27.

30. John Dixon Hunt, "Shakespeare and the Paragone: A Reading of *Timon of Athens*", in *Images of Shakespeare*, ed. Werner Habicht, D.J. Palmer, Roger Pringle and Philip B. Brockbank, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1988, p. 50.

31. See for instance *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended" (V.ii.1-2).

32. Rosaline's darkness is indeed her main physical trait, the feature that characterizes her in her very essence, and also the character that makes her so positively anti-Petrarchan. It is exactly because of this reason that the betrayal of reality operated in Berowne's sonnet – in the *portrait drawn* by him – is so serious and despicable.

33. This concept is also found in *As You Like It*, in which ironical criticism towards the hyperbolical nature of the sonnet praise is again expressed through a comparison with well limned "pictures": "All the *pictures* fairest *lined* / Are but black to Rosalind" (III.ii.90-91).

34. See David Bevington and David Scott Kastan, eds. *Three Early Comedies. Love's Labour's Lost. The Two Gentlemen of Verona. The Merry Wives of Windsor*, New York, Bantam, 2009, p. 119, and Henry Woudhuysen, ed., *Love's Labour's Lost*, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 2000, p. 235.

ABSTRACTS

My work analyzes the way in which Shakespeare elaborates upon the traditional association established between painting and poetry, with particular attention to the ambiguous affinity between the art of drawing portraits and that of verbal praising – specifically in the writing of sonnets. In the *Sonnets* Shakespeare establishes a link between the visual and the literary falsifying "ornament", while revealing the limits of a poetry that seeks to borrow visual immediacy from a different artistic *medium*. In the dramatic works, the comparison between painting and poetry is complicated by its interaction with the theatrical *medium*. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the mimetic competition between the two arts expressed in Bassanio's praise of Portia's miniature, while linking the Petrarchan sonnet and the miniature, is complicated by the fact that the portrait is visualized only through its ekphrastic description. In *Love's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare conveys the anti-petrarchism of the play with a reference to painting, epitomizing the nexus between sonnets and portraits in the image of the "lady walled about with diamonds".

Mon travail analyse la manière dont Shakespeare a élaboré l'association traditionnelle entre peinture et poésie en portant une attention particulière aux similitudes, d'un point de vue théorique et pratique, entre l'art de la représentation des portraits et l'art de la louange, notamment dans l'écriture des sonnets. Dans les *Sonnets*, Shakespeare établit un lien entre l'ornement visuel et littéraire, tout en relevant l'insuffisance de la poésie qui cherche à emprunter une immédiateté visuelle à une autre forme d'art. Dans les œuvres dramatiques, la comparaison entre peinture et poésie est complexifiée par l'interaction avec le *medium* théâtral. Dans *Le Marchand de Venise*, la compétition entre les deux arts exprimée par Bassanio dans son éloge sur le portrait de Portia, en reliant forme pétrarquiste et miniature, est compliquée par le fait que le portrait est visualisé seulement par une description ekphrastique. Dans *Peines d'amour perdues* Shakespeare exprime l'anti-pétrarquisme de la pièce grâce à la peinture, en illustrant la lien entre sonnets et portraits par l'image de la « dame toute incrustée en diamants ».

INDEX

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