

Flower Girls and Garbage Women: Misogyny and Cliché in Ronsard and Herrick

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The dump is full
Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
The bouquets come here in the papers. . . .
—how many men have copied dew
For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
One grows to hate these things except on the dump.
(WALLACE STEVENS, “Man on the Dump”)

EMILIA. I have a thing for you.
IAGO. A thing for me? It is a common thing—
EMILIA. Ha!
IAGO. To have a foolish wife.

(WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Othello*)¹

Since the beginning of time, critics have complained about clichés, those reified, imagination-killing linguistic deadweights that the sociologist Anton Zijderveld defined as “lapidary chunks of stale experience.”² In his 1929 essay “The Language of Flowers,” Georges Bataille reminds us of one such chunk, the semantic unit that combines women, flowers, and

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1. Wallace Stevens, “Man on the Dump,” lines 3–5, 16–20, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 2002). William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.3.303–6.

2. Anton Zijderveld, *On Clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1979), 15.

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love: “Many things can be altered in human societies, but nothing will prevail against the natural truth that a beautiful woman or a red rose signifies love.”³ Nothing, that is, except Bataille’s powers of demystification. For, when we look closely enough, there is nothing lovely about flowers:

even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centers by hairy sexual organs. Thus the interior of a rose does not at all correspond to its exterior beauty; if one tears off all the corolla’s petals, all that remains is a rather sordid tuft. . . . In fact, after a very short period of glory the marvelous corolla rots indecently in the sun, thus becoming, for the plant, a garish withering. Risen from the stench of the manure pile—even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity—the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor: the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure. For flowers do not age honestly like leaves, which lose nothing of their beauty, even after they have died; flowers wither like old and overly made-up dowagers, and they die ridiculously on stems that seemed to carry them to the clouds.⁴

Bataille sums up this whole drama with what he calls “this nauseating banality: *love smells like death*.”⁵ Nauseated though he may be, Bataille finds a delicious irony in that flowers—which are, as anyone can see, imperfect in appearance, prone to indecent rot and ridiculous death—would come to symbolize, ideally and endlessly, ideal beauty and endless love. Why would such a cliché as the flower (or, interchangeably for Bataille, “a beautiful woman”), ageless in its cultural application, age so poorly in its natural life?

The critique of this long-standing cliché itself goes back a long time. Even in the Renaissance, a literary period characterized by an enthusiastic embrace of the “commonplace” as a pedagogical tool and rhetorical and poetic building block, a similar refusal of lapidary chunks of sanitized aesthetics can be seen in the iconoclastically unsentimental love poems known by the tag “ugly beauty,” of which the most famous are Shakespeare’s declarations of affection for his foul-smelling mistress.⁶ More surprising is how

3. George Bataille, “The Language of Flowers,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 12.

4. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

5. *Ibid.*, 12.

6. For discussion of the “ugly beauty” tradition, see Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), chap. 5. Important arguments for the centrality of commonplaces in Renaissance intellectual and literary culture include Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton University Press, 1993); Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought*

decomposing floral corpses also litter the works of more conventional Renaissance love poets who, in rejecting the courtly love cliché of idealized female beauty, take up another cliché, that of deidealized female beauty, in a rhetorical countercurrent that can often scarcely be distinguished from the current in the first place. By the sixteenth century, it was common poetic coin to point out that flowers, just like young and uncooperative women, lose their luster as soon as, or soon after, they bloom. In this very association of the poetic commonplace with the commonness of short female shelf lives, the high valuation of the former becomes contaminated by the latter. Catherine Nicholson draws attention to a similar paradox in her discussion of commonplaces about female sexuality: “If women are desirable only so long as they resist use by men, commonplaces are valuable insofar as they are used by as many men as possible.”⁷ A “common thing,” as Iago puts it in suggesting his wife’s wide sexual availability, is worth nothing; a commonly held view is worth something. Yet Iago, revising his sex joke into a winking reference to the proverbial commonness of female foolishness, equates the two. Part of what turns a commonplace into the more pejorative cliché is precisely its association with women, themselves associated with wearing out through use.

In two related Renaissance genres that rely heavily on commonplaces, there is an understudied pattern of women being reduced to what Bataille calls “aerial manure,” where lyrical flights are redolent with rot from the start, and commonplace starts to stink of cliché: Petrarchism, where the lady is invoked as a cruelly indifferent ice queen; and *carpe diem*, in which the coy mistress is instructed to sleep with the speaker immediately, before she gets gross, which will be any second now. As Heather Dubrow and others have pointed out, Petrarchism can easily slide into “anti-Petrarchism,” with the glacially distant beloved thawing seductively or grotesquely (or both) before the speaker’s very eyes.⁸ But to maintain some distinctions provisionally, in Petrarchan poetry the supposed singularity of the beloved becomes almost comical when her traits—including her singularity itself—are relentlessly reiterated by, in Gordon Braden’s phrase, such “serial Petrarchists” as Pierre de Ronsard.⁹ As for *carpe diem*

(Oxford University Press, 1996); and Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

7. Catherine Nicholson, “Commonplace Shakespeare: Value, Vulgarity, and the Poetics of Increase in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Troilus and Cressida*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare’s Poetry*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post (Oxford University Press, 2013), 200.

8. Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire*, 6. Dubrow notes that Petrarchism was more or less the air all Renaissance poets breathed, “a basso continuo against which arias in different styles and genres are sung” (7).

9. Gordon Braden, *Petrarchan Love and the Continental Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 116.

poetry—whose identification of both women and mortality with flowers made “carpe diem” synonymous with “carpe florem,” and whose most-repeated motto is Robert Herrick’s “gather ye Rose-buds while ye may”—breaking new thematic ground is equally beside the point.¹⁰ The poems I will discuss here, by Ronsard and Herrick, reiterate clichés central to both traditions—woman as scattered assortment of parts, and woman as flower—in ways that collapse the presumed difference between commonplace and cliché, as well as that between the refined, high-canonical French love poet and the somewhat buffoonish English country preacher.¹¹ In my analyses of both these poets, the association of women with cliché itself suggests a “nauseating banality”: a woman, no matter how she may appear, is literally garbage.

I mean “literally” literally: women who are figured as flowers are at the same time, implicitly or explicitly, disfigured into garbage, into litter and into literality. These clichés have the function, I will argue, of turning women (and, by extension, poetry itself) into trash, but the kind of trash that, despite being disgustingly quick to decay, refuses to decompose completely, inspiring admiration and envy as well as contempt for its ability to signify exhaustion with such obstinacy.

MISOGYNIST “HODGE-PODGE”

My reading of Ronsard and Herrick’s mild but persistent disgust with their subject matter is not quite the feminist reading, often associated with Nancy Vickers, that characterizes Petrarchan poetry’s piece by piece cataloging of the female body as a form of dismemberment that dehumanizes women.¹² I am less interested in any violent fantasies of mutilation and

10. Robert Herrick, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” (H-208), in *Hesperides*, in *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. J. Max Patrick (New York University Press, 1963). Hereafter Herrick’s poetry is cited parenthetically by poem number.

11. Women are not the only ones compared to flowers in classical and Renaissance literature: notable exceptions include the fallen soldiers Gorgythion in the *Iliad* and Euryalus in the *Aeneid*, who die like delicate poppies; Shakespeare’s young man in the procreation sonnets, compared to a flower in urgent need of distillation; Ronsard’s comparisons of himself to the metamorphosed Narcissus and Hyacinthus, and to flowers scorched or drowned by love; and countless melancholy acknowledgments of the fleeting nature of all mortal things. The male-gendered cases have in common their exceptionality: they are relatively rare, and when man-flowers die, it is usually violent or tragically sudden, rather than natural and expected.

12. The most frequently cited example of this reading is Nancy J. Vickers, “Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 265–79. These citations can be misleading, as this essay is more about poetic tradition and the male psyche than the female body as such. For Vickers, Petrarch’s “scattering” of Laura’s body is motivated not by misogyny but by his obsession with Ovidian myth: seeing himself as an Actaeon caught by a Diana, “his response to the threat of imminent dismemberment is the neutralization, through descriptive dismemberment, of the threat. He transforms the visible

control in Ronsard and Herrick than in their deliberate performances of inattention toward female figures, or when they pay them attention only to remind them, repetitively and at length, that they are not worthy of such attention. Recently, critical studies of Petrarchism and related genres have moved away from gender as an analytic, sometimes explicitly dismissing feminist criticism as not quite speaking to our times. Such studies suggest that we have indulged the idea of Petrarch as amateur anatomizer long enough; now we can get back to serious subjects, like poetics, philosophy, or politics.¹³ These studies have shown that Petrarchan and *carpe diem* poetry have much to say about those subjects, and that these poems meditate on time, mortality, and the limitations of human experience with implications beyond the female body.¹⁴ At the same time, the critical dismissal of gender as if it were passé and beside the point obliquely reflects this poetry's tendency to acknowledge women only to cast them aside.

The fact that women, flowers, and rotting garbage can go together quite nicely in a certain strain of love poetry—of which, this essay will argue, poets as disparate as Ronsard and Herrick are paradigmatic examples—suggests that Bataille's polemic in "The Language of Flowers" is less exposing a juicy contradiction than participating in the very tradition in which such a contradiction is easily sustained. In this tradition, it is axiomatic that appearances are deceiving and what is attractive soon becomes repellent, and what better metaphorical vessel to contain and disseminate

totality into scattered words, the body into signs" (273). Though she closes with a brief acknowledgment that Petrarch "suppresses a voice" and "casts generations of would-be Lauras in a role predicated upon the muteness of its player" (278–79), Vickers's primary focus throughout the essay is on the signifying play produced by literary self-consciousness, not on violence against women.

13. Wendy Beth Hyman's recent book makes frequent reference to how even the most philosophical erotic poetry was about gender in some sense, relying on the Aristotelian hylomorphism that coded form as masculine and matter as feminine, and to how the misogyny in Renaissance erotic poetry more generally is "obvious" and "long-recognized" (*Impossible Desire and the Limits of Knowledge in Renaissance Poetry* [Oxford University Press, 2019], 28). But Hyman insists on multiple occasions that this poetry goes "far beyond" (113) or is about "more than misogyny" (126), distinguishing her own analysis from unspecified analyses that "stop there" (106). Cynthia Nazarian pushes back against what she sees as the "exclusive focus on the female body," rather than "the [male] *subject's* suffering," in the work of Vickers, Lynn Enterline, and others (*Love's Wounds: Violence and the Politics of Poetry in Early Modern Europe* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016], 82, 4).

14. For recent studies of English *carpe diem* poetry's engagement with metaphysics, temporality, and materialism, see Ramie Targoff, *Posthumous Love: Eros and the Afterlife in Renaissance England* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 164–92; and Hyman, *Impossible Desire*. Cathy Yandell's *Carpe Corpus: Time and Gender in Early Modern France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), which focuses primarily on French female writers but also considers male poets like Ronsard, offers a compelling case for understanding gender as integral to the problem of temporality in both *carpe diem* and *exegi monumentum* poetry.

this truth than a woman, whose proverbial paradox of appearance without substance inspired, in the Middle Ages, such catchy definitions of woman as *kalon kakon* (“beautiful evil” in Greek), “the painted tombstone that conceals a rotting corpse,” and “a chimney-top with garlands, crowns and gems set therein; nevertheless, nothing comes forth but foul smoke and temptation to lechery”; in other words, the rot that haunts gardens of letters, where the mixed metaphor of material rot and immaterial haunting is precisely the point.¹⁵ We might also think of the common image in Renaissance iconography of a beautiful young woman embraced by a skeleton, an embrace all the more intimate when we think of the skeleton as already inside the woman, the implied dénouement of a morbid striptease.¹⁶ As Valerie Traub puts it, glossing King Hamlet’s ghost’s warning that “lust, though to a radiant angel link’d, / Will sate itself in a celestial bed, / And prey on garbage”: “Women are imagined either as angels or whores as a psychological defense against the uncomfortable suspicion that underneath, the angel *is* a whore.”¹⁷

In early modern England, the charge that female beauty is a seductive surface to an unsound interior is perhaps most exhaustively expounded by Joseph Swetnam, whose 1615 *Araignment of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women* earned him the dubious honor of being named the father of modern misogyny in the *New York Times*.¹⁸ Swetnam’s pamphlet is a compendium of male complaints about women, gathered from folk wisdom and popular compilations of ancient wit to form something like an extended entry in a commonplace book, or a “red pill” subreddit *avant*

15. Page duBois, *Centaur and Amazons: Women and the Pre-history of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 114; John Bromyard, *Summa predicantium*, s.v. “ornatus,” quoted in G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), 396; John Waldeby, MS. Roy. 8. C 1, fol. 13, quoted in Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 392. Simone de Beauvoir credits Tertullian with another colorful definition of a woman, “Templum aedificatum super cloacam,” a temple built over a sewer (*The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chavallier [New York: Vintage Books, 2011], 186). This gem has since been often cited without an original source. Donna-Marie Cooper suggests that it is in fact a distortion of Tertullian’s quasi defense of women, in a ventriloquizing chastisement of Marcion’s misogynist disgust at pregnancy: “Come then, wind up your cavils against the most sacred and reverend works of nature; protest against all that you are; destroy the origins of flesh and life; call the womb a sewer of the illustrious animal” (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 3.11, quoted in Cooper, “Was Tertullian a Misogynist? A Re-examination of This Charge Based on a Rhetorical Analysis of Tertullian’s Work” [DPhil thesis, University of Exeter, 2012], 133).

16. Yandell, *Carpe Corpus*, 40.

17. Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30. See chap. 3 of Hyman’s *Impossible Desire* for an account of how the carpe diem poet casts young women’s beautiful appearances as “falsehoods he alone can unmask” through vivid descriptions of their future decay (80).

18. Nina Renata Aron, “What Does Misogyny Look Like?,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/08/style/misogyny-women-history-photographs.html>.

la lettre, dispensing harsh truths about how women really are. In addition to having hearts notable for their pumice-like porosity, women, Swetnam reports, “are also compared unto a painted ship, which seemeth faire outwardly & yet nothing but ballace within hir, or as the Idolls in *Spaine* which are bravely gilt outwardly and yet nothing but lead within them.” In case his readers somehow miss the point about deceptive appearances, he offers even more examples of the same phenomenon: “a woman which is faire in showe is foule in condition; she is like unto a glow-worme which is bright in the hedge and black in the hand; in the greenest grasse lyeth hid the greatest Serpents: painted pottes commonly holde deadly poysen: and in the clearest water the ugliest Tode.”¹⁹ As several female-authored responses to Swetnam pointed out, what most distinguishes this tract is its patchwork derivativeness, suggesting for these readers not a rich tapestry of cultural inheritance but a badly botched stitching job. These “bald and ribald lines, / Patcht out of English writers,” as Constantia Munda put it, amount to a “hotch-potcht work,” or, according to Rachel Speght, a “mingle-mangle invective,” a “hodge-podge of heathenish Sentences, Similies, and Examples.”²⁰ If a hallmark of misogynist discourse has been the association of women with inconsistency and incongruence, these are also defining features of misogynist discourse itself, which assembles analogies and mixes metaphors to produce a string of widely ranging, ill-matching clichés that nonetheless say only one thing: that female appearances and essences are ill matched. Centuries before Swetnam, in the debate surrounding the depiction of women in *Le roman de la rose*, Christine de Pizan was already complaining about the monotony of misogynist arguments: “Judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the orators, . . . it seems they all speak from one and the same mouth.”²¹

This is the context in which otherwise innovative poets persistently returned to the same old song when they trained their gazes on women, as if there were an inherent relationship between hackneyed verse and common, stale, and overused women—and, etymologically, there is: according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “hackney” was first used as a synonym for “prostitute” in 1579; by 1590, it came to mean an overused expression or phrase.²² When in *Twelfth Night* Orsino informs a cross-dressed Viola

19. Joseph Swetnam, *The Araignment of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women: Or the vanitie of them, choose you whether* (London, 1615), 3, 12–13.

20. Constantia Munda, *The Worming of a mad Dogge: or, A Soppe for Cerberus the Iaylor of Hell* (London, 1617), sig. A2r–v; Rachel Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomus, The Cynicall Bayter of, and foule mouthed Barker against Evahs Sex* (London, 1617), sig. B2r–v.

21. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 4, quoted in R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.

22. *OED*, s.v. “hackney, *n.* and *adj.*,” <https://www.oed.com>.

that “women are as roses, whose fair flower / Being once displayed, doth fall that very hour,” we enjoy the irony of a man unwittingly informing a woman, who appears to be a man (and is played by a boy), of the impermanence of female appearances.²³ In a seeming parody of humanist pedagogy, the poems I focus on here more explicitly purport to school women in their own commonness through the use of commonplaces. As the epistle to Swetnam’s pamphlet, directly addressed to women (specifically, “the common sort of *Women*”), suggests, early modern men were always trying to teach women a lesson about what they were—namely, nothing of any lasting significance—as if this were news to them.²⁴ And maybe it would be, if their lives were actually as short as a flower’s. But as it was, woman-as-flower was a tired cliché, a common thing, almost the moment it was made.

BOUQUETS IN THE PAPERS: RONSARD’S FADED FLOWERS

The trope of female and floral transience is at once universalizing—all flesh, after all, is grass—and restricted: not everything is as particularly prone to decay as women and flowers. Much of Ronsard’s *carpe diem* poetry, often celebrated (like other *carpe diem* poetry) as a defiant refusal of the Christian hatred of sensuality and the body, can also be understood as narrowing a general cultural obsession with *memento mori* so that it applies only, or most notably, to women.²⁵ In one poem, “Quand au temple nous serons” (When we are in the temple), the speaker chides his mistress for refusing to give in to all the things he wants (“je veux”) to do to her. Pretending to be devout in church is one thing, he explains, but why keep up the nun act (“Pourquoy . . . contrefais-tu la nonnain”) when they are alone?²⁶ Frustrated, he imagines encountering his prudish beloved in the underworld, taking her inventory from the neck up with a negative blazon that makes no bones about her condition: her head will have no more skin (“Ton test n’aura plus de peau”); nor will her beautiful face have any veins nor arteries (“Ny ton visage si beau / N’aura veines ny arteres”); she will have nothing but teeth (“Tu n’auras plus que les dents”). She is shorn not only of flesh but also, for the most part, of adjectives, the sole “si beau” appended to “visage” as if as an afterthought, the beauty of earlier stanzas

23. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, ed. Roger Warren and Stanley Wells (Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.4.37–38.

24. Swetnam, *Araignment*, sig. A2v.

25. Hyman, *Impossible Desire*, 89.

26. Malcolm Quainton is typical in joining Ronsard in scolding the mistress for “her nun-like refusal of life and pleasure” and euphemizing the graphic visualization of her disgust-inducing skeleton as an “epicurean plea” (*Ronsard’s Ordered Chaos: Visions of Flux and Stability in the Poetry of Pierre de Ronsard* [Manchester University Press, 1980], 186).

(her beautiful hair and breast, “tes beaux cheveux,” “ton beau sein”) forgotten and then remembered only to be taken away again, along with her circulatory system. Presumably his eyes, unlike hers, will be intact and functional enough for him to see her (“je te verrois”) and disavow their prior relationship (“je n’avou’rois / Que jadis tu fus m’amie”), and the sinner will repent for having been so cruel: “tu te repentiras / De m’avoir esté farouche.”²⁷ The matter-of-fact, repetitive description (“n’aura plus,” “n’aura plus,” “n’aura plus”) suggests a lack of pleasure or even real investment in the exercise, the tone as dead as the lady, the threat one of dismissal rather than of domination.

Such vindictive visions sometimes came in flowerier forms. In another poem, the speaker offers his beloved a bouquet that also serves, as flowers in these poems so often do, as a portable pedagogical tool:

Je vous envoye un bouquet de ma main
 Que j’ai ourdy de ces fleurs epanies:
 Qui ne les eust à ce vespre cuillies,
 Flaques à terre elles cherroient demain.

Cela vous soit un exemple certain
 Que voz beautés, bien qu’elles soient fleuries,
 En peu de tems cherront toutes fletries,
 Et periront, commes ces fleurs, soudain.

Le tems s’en va, le tems s’en va, ma Dame:
 Las! le tems non, mais nous nous en allons,
 Et tost seront estendus sous la lame:

Et des amours desquelles nous parlons,
 Quand serons morts n’en sera plus nouvelle:
 Pour-ce aimés moi, ce pendant qu’estes belle.²⁸

[I am sending you a bouquet that I have made from these blossoming flowers, which, if they had not been picked this evening, would fall limp to the ground tomorrow. Let this be a clear example to you of how your beauties, though flourishing now, will soon fall, withered, and perish suddenly, like these flowers. Time slips away, time slips

27. Pierre de Ronsard, “Quand au temple nous serons,” in *Œuvres complètes*, new ed., ed. Jean Céard, Daniel Ménager, and Michel Simonin, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993–94), 1:93. All translations of Ronsard are my own.

28. Pierre de Ronsard, *Les Amours (1552–1584)*, ed. Marc Bensimon and James L. Martin (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981), 171. The Pléiade version (Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:270) reflects that Ronsard later amended line 4 from the above version to “Cheutes à terre elles fussent demain” (They would have fallen to the ground tomorrow), perhaps to avoid the infelicitous echo of *cherroient* in *cherront* in line 7. But the initial version holds interest for me as a symptom of how returning to this theme seemed to have sparked a repetitive impulse in a poet not known for flat-footed verses.

away, my lady: alas! it is not time, but we who are slipping away, and will soon be stretched out under a tombstone, and the loves of which we speak will be forgotten when we are dead. So love me now—while you are still beautiful.]

When the speaker offers his beloved these freshly picked flowers, flowers that would die by tomorrow anyway, it is explicitly marked as an “exemple” of how her charms will be “fletries” not long after they are “fleuries,” the minor orthographic difference between these opposites highlighting how perilously close “withered” is to “flowered”: “fleuries” reads like a misprint, quickly corrected in the next line into the more properly descriptive “fletries.” If, as the sonnet goes on, it is implied that time afflicts male lover and female beloved equally in a basic sense—they will both be entombed—she is the only one whose putrefaction is graphically imagined. In Cathy Yandell’s formulation, the female beloved in poems like these is a “body double” onto which all the male poet’s anxiety about his own inevitable decay is displaced.²⁹ He will die, but—unlike Bataille’s feminized flowers—he will not die ridiculously.

This poem thus figures women and flowers as expendable, affording them subjectivity only for them to revert immediately into their proper objecthood, as if their agency were a joke, or a bad pun. In a later elegy that expands, exhaustively, upon the same floral theme and begins again with the conceit of the poet having gathered a bouquet to honor (or rather, instruct) his mistress, Ronsard praises the youth, beauty, and pleasant aroma of both the lady and one of the flowers he has selected for her. As it happens, they have much in common: both smell good; both are young; both are perfect; both have a good balance of red and white coloring. As the praise winds down, however, we are reminded where this is all headed: back to the manure pile. This is so obvious it almost need not be said, but he will, near the end of the elegy, say it anyway:

Plus il ne reste à vous dire, maistresse,
 Que tout ainsi que ceste fleur se laisse
 Passer soudain, perdant grace et vigueur,
 Et tombe à terre atteinte de langueur
 Sans estre plus des Amans désirée,
 Comme une fleur toute defigurée;
 Vostre âge ainsi verdoyant s’en-ira,
 Et comme fleur sans grace perira.³⁰

[There is no more to say to you, lady, except that just as a flower suddenly lets itself go, losing its grace and vigor, and falls to the ground overwhelmed by lassitude, no longer desired by lovers, like a disfigured

29. Yandell, *Carpe Corpus*, 60.

30. Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:354–55.

flower, so too will your verdant youth abscond, and perish gracelessly like a flower.]

Just as a flower will soon droop and fall, like a defaced flower—or, to put it another way, like itself—so too will her beauty fade, like a flower. Here, a woman being like a flower is equally axiomatic as a flower being like a flower: a flower that at some point had a face (*figure*), and now does not, that is “desfigurée,” that was humanized only to be immediately dehumanized, that was already figured as disfigured before it was even revealed to be a figure for anything in the first place.

The smoothness of the female beloved’s transition from vibrant matter to rotting trash, in contrast to the melodramatic shattering of male speakers by Cupid’s arrow or the “murderous mirrors” (*micidiali specchi*) of Laura’s eyes, is remarkable in its unremarkableness.³¹ If the fabled incorruptibility of Petrarch’s laurel is extraordinary in the botanical world, nothing could be more natural than the decay of such fragile organic material as a flower, and yet, at the same time, nothing seems to have been deemed more worthy of discussion in the lyric traditions in which Ronsard participates.³² The limp petals and stripped corollas conjured by these poems make the original flowers seem originally obsolete. The women thus figured are not so much living flowers as anachronisms, or impossible subjects, already disfigured and yet somehow still figuring.³³

Perhaps Ronsard simply could not resist continuously comparing women to flowers because it was too easy: flowers are just sitting there, sessile, waiting to be transplanted into a poem.³⁴ For Claudette Sartiliot, flowers’

31. Petrarch, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The “Rime sparse” and Other Lyrics*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 113.

32. This reliance on clichés that were already old hat by the sixteenth century seems to me an early example of what Joshua Scodel sees in male “libertine” poets of the late seventeenth century, who followed their Cavalier predecessors in celebrating female coyness “with a stale repetitiveness, indeed, that belies the poets’ alleged desire to escape satiety” (“The Pleasures of Restraint: The Mean of Coyness in Cavalier Poetry,” *Criticism* 38, no. 2 [Spring 1996]: 272). Louis Salomon, after a lengthy discussion of anticourtly love poets’ comparisons of women to withering flowers, wearily begs off providing more examples: “Since a very little botanical lore will suffice to satisfy the reader that roses fade, he may be spared a score or so of reminders” (*The Devil Take Her: A Study of the Rebellious Lover in English Poetry* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931], 275).

33. Following Mary Douglas’s influential conceptualization of “dirt” as “matter out of place” in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 36, recent theorists of waste have defined it as matter out of time. As Brian Thill puts it: “To talk about any object at all is to gesture toward its ultimate annihilated state. Waste is every object, plus time” (*Waste* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2015], 8).

34. As Jacques Derrida puts it in his taxonomy of metaphors in “White Mythology,” “Those which primarily are *encountered* in nature demand only to be picked, like flowers” (*Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass [University of Chicago Press, 1982], 220 n. 21).

to-be-looked-at-ness, or to-be-plucked-ness, takes root in the Renaissance, when “flowers had become, on the one hand, the object of scientific study and on the other, mere literary emblems with fixed meanings.”³⁵ Elaine Scarry finds this amenability of flowers to be a virtue, because they help us imagine imagination itself by being accommodating enough to fit comfortably between our eyes.³⁶ At the same time, the commonplace assignment of flowers to women in the literary imagination—with their associations of deception and frivolity—might invite us to reinlect Scarry’s rosy account by considering what Anne-Lise François calls “the special capacity flowers have not to be special—not to tax but to remain adequate to imaginative powers.”³⁷ In light of, as François puts it, “the common association of flowers with promiscuity, easy availability, whoredom, transience, and commonness itself”—none of which, to be clear, François thinks is necessarily bad—Scarry’s rhapsodizing about the ease with which we incorporate flowers into our minds, even (or precisely because) this helps us to imagine less common and easy things, relies on a cultural sense that flowers, and what they represent, are memorable for being forgettable.³⁸ Or maybe not quite forgettable enough. If only flowers moved as seamlessly from the material to the immaterial as Scarry suggests: once plucked, their withered or waterlogged postmortems can be, as Bataille reminds us, sticky, smelly, and annoyingly material.

THE DUMP OF IMAGES: HERRICK’S GARBAGE COLLECTION

In the most explicitly misogynist poem I consider, Herrick’s “Upon Some Women” (H-195), the woman’s narrow window of desirability—what François has called, in the botanical context, “the flower hour”—becomes an outright impossibility.³⁹ Herrick, again, is best known for instructing virgins to “gather ye Rose-buds while ye may” (or else). He is notable elsewhere in his oeuvre for announcing that “Whatsoever thing I see, . . . ’Tis a Mistresse unto me” (H-750) and for reminding virgins that resistance is futile: just

35. Claudette Sartillot, *Herbarium/Verbarium: The Discourse of Flowers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 3.

36. Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 46–49.

37. Anne-Lise François, “Flower Fisting,” *Postmodern Culture* 22, no. 1 (September 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2012.0004>.

38. *Ibid.* Sartillot comes to a stronger conclusion about flowers’ power: their mimicry and metamorphoses, their “polyvalent and extravagant nature,” mean that “the floral dimension of texts often subverts not only linearity but identity as such, and gender in particular” (*Herbarium/Verbarium*, 2, 4).

39. Anne-Lise François, “In the Cowslips Peeps I Lye’: Romantic Botany and Telling the Time of Day by the Light of the Anthropocene” (lecture, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, October 11, 2018).

as being locked in a tower failed to protect Danae from Jupiter, he warns in one poem, it is inevitable that “Love will win, / Or else force a passage in: / And as coy be, as you can / Gifts will get ye, or the man,” the shrugging “ors” making rape sound like the effective equivalent of romance (H-297). In poems like these, the juvenile hyperbole of Herrick’s sexual innuendoes and his market-based tips for getting women to give up the goods make him sound like an early modern pickup artist. We might be kinder to Herrick by recognizing that he often made self-deprecating reference to the silliness of old men’s attempts at seduction; his aim in these poems, after all, is to persuade women to get married to other people, not to have sex with him.⁴⁰ But part of my point is that the same misogynist logic animates both lighthearted, impersonal Anacreontic verses and the thinly veiled direct threats—“this is what will happen if you don’t sleep with me”—of more straightforward seduction poetry like Ronsard’s. If Herrick’s lyrics are sometimes charmingly anodyne—“How rich and pleasing thou my *Julia* art / In each thy dainty, and peculiar part!” (H-88)—in other moods, he recasts each dainty and peculiar part as a piece of rubbish:

Thou who wilt not love, doe this,
Learn of me what Woman is.
Something made of thred and thrumme;
A meere Botch of all and some,
Pieces, patches, ropes of haire;
In-laid Garbage ev’ry where.

40. There are many compelling analyses of both Herrick’s style and his *carpe diem* philosophy as something other than childish cruelty toward women. Gordon Braden describes the *Hesperides* as “a very long book of very short poems, the image of a long life of short moments, of a poetic impulse quickly roused and quickly expended,” which sounds like a potentially charming way of dealing with the material world in general, if one becomes uncomfortable when thinking about how it applies to women’s bodies (*The Classics and English Renaissance Poetry: Three Case Studies* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978], 154). Katharine Eisaman Maus and Leah Marcus both find the pleasure in the collection to come from the poems’ frequent suspensions, deferrals, repetitions, and nonteleological attitude toward sexuality, describing female bodies delightfully randomly—some “erring lace” here, some “confused ribbons” there—and in no hurry to get anywhere; see Maus, “Why Read Herrick?” and Marcus, “Conviviality Interrupted or, Herrick and Postmodernism,” both in *“Lords of Wine and Oile”: Community and Conviviality in the Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. Ruth Connolly and Tom Cain (Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199604777.001.0001>. Scodel explores at length Cavalier poets’ celebration of such amorous delay as a technology for increasing both poetic and erotic pleasure, noting that this is not necessarily a prescription for sexual liberation (at least, not everyone’s). Herrick deems women’s oft-maligned inconsistency to be praiseworthy, but only “on the condition that he alone can control it,” and the perpetual wedding night the speaker describes in “*Julia’s Churching*” not only uses virginity to think through serious questions about mutability but also stages a situation in which a husband’s continued sexual pleasure is predicated on his wife’s unabated fear (“Pleasures of Restraint,” 262, 266).

Out-side silk, and out-side Lawne;
 Sceanes to cheat us neatly drawne.
 False in legs, and false in thighes;
 False in breast, teeth, haire, and eyes;
 False in head, and false enough;
 Onely true in shreds and stuffe.

(H-195)

This clearly does not even pretend to be a love poem—despite the basic structure of Petrarchan blazon—or to be addressed to women at all. The origins of such libido-sapping advice for men can be traced to Ovid's *Remedia amoris*.⁴¹ But this rhetoric also draws on the less poetic and more essentializing rhetoric of Swetnam's *Araignment*, where the repeated invocations in the introductory epistle of "some women"—"I being in great choler against some women"; "all the bad conditions that [are] in some women"; "these monstrous accusations which are here following against some women"—soon begin to encompass all women.⁴² As the pseudonymous Ester Sowernam complained in her response to Swetnam, "where the Author pretended to write against lewd, idle, and unconstant women, hee doth most impudently rage and rayle generally against all the whole sexe of women."⁴³ In Herrick's poem, the titular "some women" are, by the second line, replaced by the universal "Woman." For R. Howard Bloch, this essentializing move is integral to the misogyny that also pervades medieval love lyric, exemplified by a canso by Bernart de Ventadorn in which the speaker concludes that he must renounce not only a particular woman but all women, "for I know very well that they are all alike."⁴⁴ Despite the premise of courtly love that the beloved lady is beyond compare, on

41. Ovid does not, however, limit his potential audience to men. He boasts near the beginning of the poem that had such famously love-addled women as Phyllis, Dido, Pasiphae, Phaedra, and Scylla (along with a similar roster of men) read his verse, much pain could have been avoided. See Ovid, *Remedia amoris*, lines 55–68, in *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, trans. J. H. Mozley, Loeb Classical Library 232 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). He also restricts his trash-talking to the individual women he or his reader might be trying to get over, rather than implicating the entire gender: "Profuit adsidue vitiis insistere amicae, / Idque mihi factum saepe salubre fuit. / 'Quam mala' dicebam 'nostrae sunt crura puellae!'" (It helped me to harp continually on my mistress's faults, and that, when I did it, often brought me relief. "How ugly," would I say, "are my girl's legs!") (lines 315–17), the speaker informs us, before launching into a comprehensive program (lines 325–48) of ways to accentuate a variety of flaws a particular woman might have.

42. Swetnam, *Araignment*, sig. A2v, A3r.

43. Ester Sowernam, *Ester hath hang'd Haman: or, An Answere to a lewd Pamphlet, entitled, The Arraignment of Women* (London, 1617), sig. A2r.

44. "De las domnas me dezesper . . . car be sai c'atretals se son" (Bernart de Ventadorn, quoted in Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny*, 148).

a pedestal high above the vulgar female masses, Bernart here suggests that she is just like all the others, and just as worthy of being thrown aside.

Herrick's use of misogynist tropes, more explicitly than Ronsard's, puts the "common" back in "commonplacing": far from the humanist practice of collecting and glossing classical tropes for creative reuse, Herrick, like Swetnam in his *Araignment*, simply puts the used-up wares on display, his *Hesperides* devolving from a garden to a yard sale. This embrace of trash collection can be contrasted with Philip Sidney's self-conscious distinction between his own inspired lines and those of his derivative peers in his contemptuous dismissal of "*Pindars* apes," "enam'ling with pied flowers their thoughts of gold." If in the final line of that sonnet Sidney defines his poetry as the "copying" of his beloved Stella's beauty, it is also radically original, because there has never been a woman like Stella (this insistence on novelty is, of course, the oldest trick in the book of love poetry).⁴⁵ In "Upon Some Women," by contrast, the only singularity is grammatical: that of the common, generic "Woman."

Herrick's repetitive lines ("false . . . false . . . false . . . false . . .")—unlike Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets, for example—are refigured by no closing couplet to give a redemptive gloss, such as, "she may be trash, but I love that darling garbage heap." This trash is so straightforwardly disposable that it cannot be said to symbolize anything, a jumbled junkyard not only of female virtue but also of *poiesis* itself.⁴⁶ The pieces of "garbage" Herrick describes as essential to womanhood, and opposes to the expensive materials of "silk" and "lawn" that women wear as disguises, are the discarded byproducts of textile manufacture—thread, thrum, pieces, patches—that were typically gathered up and repurposed to make paper, including the page on which the poem was printed.⁴⁷ Herrick's identification of women with trash, and trash with the stuff of which poems are made, recalls Rachel Speght's comparison of Swetnam's *Araignment* to a similar "meere Botch": "his pestiferous obtreaction is like a Taylers Cushion, that is botcht together of shreddes."⁴⁸ In both Herrick and Swetnam, misogynist discourse formally echoes the object of its disdain, so that the literary forms of the posy (the figurative bouquet of flowers that punned on

45. Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), sonnet 3, lines 3–4, 14, in *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler Jr. (Oxford University Press, 1962).

46. I am grateful to Joanna Picciotto for her thoughts about Herrick's poem as an *ars poetica* (email message to author, May 22, 2019).

47. As Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass put it, "Paper retains the traces of a wide range of labor practices and metamorphoses" in the early modern period, from the textile residue collected by ragpickers to the greasy grocery wrappings that many book pages eventually became ("The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44, no. 3 [Fall 1993]: 280).

48. Speght, *Mouzell for Melastomus*, sig. Flr–v.

“poesy”) or the anthology (rhetorical “flowers” carefully plucked and arranged into sweet displays), or Herrick’s own *Hesperides* (named after the mythological garden), are all parodied as a compost heap that fails to fertilize, an inventory of scrapped parts.⁴⁹

According to the logic of “Upon Some Women,” women do not metamorphose into garbage at the moment of their refusal, as they do in Ronsard’s poems; they already are and always were refuse, masquerading as human women. Specific human body parts—legs, thighs, breast, teeth, hair, eyes, head—are disposed of as false figures for what a woman really is: a vague “something,” made of “stuffe.” Only when adorned with “garbage,” another definition of which was animal entrails,⁵⁰ does a woman succeed in matching her exterior to her interior, dispensing with the proverbial garlands over the chimney top and making Herrick’s metaphor more of a gross literalism.

PEONY ENVY

Carpe diem poems offer women flower-sized lessons that fit between their eyes, custom-made, precisely in their commonness, to fit any given woman. Ronsard’s lessons are barely quaint enough to teeter just on this side of insult: he is not saying (as is Herrick in his admittedly very different poem) that the lady is false now, only that the current happy coincidence of inner and outer perfection will soon tilt in an unfavorable direction. The present is thus a false appearance of the future: the living flower is essentially trash, but trash that has not yet come into consciousness, that does not yet know itself to be trash. My argument is that bitterly misogynist lyrics, including those that are, like Herrick’s, in the “remedy for love” tradition, are not so different in their implications from epicurean seduction poetry like Ronsard’s. What one critic called a “wide difference” between hateful invective (that reminds women they are getting old and disgusting) and flirtatious cajoling (that reminds women they are getting old and disgusting) is not necessarily very wide of a difference at all.⁵¹ The casual misogyny we are invited to participate in by acknowledging, with Bataille, that flowers die as ridiculously as old, overly made-up women also asks us to acknowledge that even a young

49. The homonyms posy/poesy have afforded such titles as Isabella Whitney’s *A Sweet Nosgay or Pleasant Posye, Contayning a Hundred and Ten Phylosophicall Flowers* (1573) and George Gascoigne’s *A Hundreth sundrie Flowers Bound up in One Small Poesie* (1573). “Anthology” is from the Hellenistic Greek ἀνθολογία (anthologia), “flower-gathering” (*OED*, s.v. “anthology, n.”).

50. *OED*, s.v. “garbage, n.”

51. Salomon, *Devil Take Her*, 260.

woman is already as good as dead.⁵² In the passage from “The Language of Flowers” with which I began, Allan Stoekl’s translation renders as the somewhat redundant “old . . . dowagers” what is in Bataille’s original “mijaurées vieillies,” which means something more like, paradoxically, “aging young coquettes”—women who are at once “fletries” and “fleuries,” or who are under the tragic misconception that they are still young girls in flower. These “mijaurées,” like the coy mistresses of lyric, are no sooner named than they age out of the category, suddenly “vieillies et trop fardées,” their overapplication of cosmetics a belated and inadequate attempt to correct the contradictions they have become.⁵³ The translation choice of “dowagers,” contracting whole careers of coyness into one has-been word, eliminates the contradiction altogether by making them old from the start.

It is a commonplace that both *carpe diem* and Petrarchan poetry are about negotiating time, whether by living in the moment or by standing outside of time altogether.⁵⁴ For Ronsard and Herrick, though, figuring women as flowers or defiguring them as trash invites us not to enjoy or escape time, but to flatten it, wearing women down by telling them they already are worn down by the weight of their own overdetermined insignificance. But perhaps what these poets desire is precisely such a failure to signify, a relief from the obligation of significance. In a famous and beautiful sonnet, Ronsard’s speaker lets us in on some of his rape fantasies, including one in which he figures himself as Jupiter’s incarnation as a bull and his beloved Cassandre as a flowerlike, flower-picking Europa giving

52. Traub’s analysis of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *The Winter’s Tale* leads her to conclude that the male characters in those plays, anxious to contain female erotic power, would like to insist that “early modern woman is always already dead” (*Desire and Anxiety*, 47).

53. Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–88), 1:176.

54. I should note that though both Herrick and Ronsard often contrast their own immortality to female ephemerality, they both also immortalize women (sometimes by way of a threat not to immortalize them) and can display a healthy sense of their own mortality. Noting that Ronsard tends to tire of his mistresses after about seven years, also the expiration of bondage for slaves under Mosaic law, David Quint argues that Ronsard’s willingness to move on after a set amount of time (as in sonnet 7 in bk. 2 of *Sonnets pour Hélène*) is an acceptance of his own transience and of natural cyclicity. Quint thus contrasts Petrarch’s idea of everlasting love to how Ronsard and other lapsed Petrarchists “suggest the discontinuity of interior consciousness, the succession of love objects and the capacity of psychic wounds to heal, our ability to forget or our inability to recapture emotions after enough time has passed: the return of experience to the quotidian and the routine” (David Quint, “Petrarch, Ronsard, and the Seven Year Itch,” *MLN* 124, supplement to no. 5 [2009]: S147, S150). I find this a useful corrective to claims about Ronsard’s tendency to arrogate immortality for himself and leave the messy parts of death to women. But it is still the case here that female obsolescence is the particular occasion on which men meditate on transience more generally: Ronsard’s philosophical submission to natural law comes from his relief that the women he thought were his eternal torturers are, in fact, disposable.

a thousand other flowers the same obliterating treatment Ronsard dreams about giving her:

Je voudroy bien richement jaunissant
 En pluye d'or goutte à goutte descendre
 Dans le giron de ma belle Cassandre,
 Lors qu'en ses yeux le somne va glissant.

Puis je voudroy en toreau blanchissant
 Me transformer pour sur mon dos la prendre,
 Quand en Avril par l'herbe la plus tendre
 Elle va fleur mille fleurs ravissant.

Je voudroy bien pour alleger ma peine
 Estre un Narcisse, et elle une fontaine,
 Pour m'y plonger une nuict à sejour:

Et si voudroy que ceste nuict encore
 Fust eternelle, et que jamais l'Aurore
 Pour m'esveiller ne rallumast le jour.⁵⁵

[How I wish I could rain down in a shower of gold, rich and yellow, drop by drop, into the lovely lap of my beautiful Cassandre, as sleep slips into her eyes. How I wish I could turn into a white bull to take her on my back, when in April she walks through the most tender grass, a flower ravishing a thousand flowers. How I wish, to ease my pain, that I could be a Narcissus, and she a fountain, so I could plunge into it all night. And I so wish that this night was eternal, and that Aurora would never light up the day again to wake me.]

Ullrich Langer notes that Ronsard's use in this poem and elsewhere in the *Amours* of the intensifier "mille," a number that Ronsard uses to mean "innumerable," contrasts with the singularity of the beloved and her specific features and gestures, her particularity ("fleur") set off against an indeterminate "mille fleurs."⁵⁶ While calling a woman one flower among many does in a way set her apart from the field, the repetition in "fleur mille fleurs" also invites us to blend the singular seamlessly into the trash pile of the many that succeed it: no sooner is our "fleur" named than a thousand others follow, and no sooner does she appear among the flowers than she again fades from view altogether, her flower hour come to a close, replaced by the poet's own narcissistic image.

55. Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:34–35.

56. Ullrich Langer, "'Fleur mille fleurs ravissant': Le déterminé et l'indéterminé dans la poésie amoureuse (Ronsard et Pétrarque)," in *Illustrations inconscientes: écritures de la Renaissance; Mélanges offerts à Tom Conley*, ed. Bernd Renner and Phillip John Usher (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014), 332–33.

With the image of Narcissus, though, Ronsard complicates the distinction between his own singular subjectivity and Cassandre's indeterminate objecthood. It is as if, after two comparisons of himself to Jupiter, Ronsard realizes that identifying with the king of the gods as he has his way with mortal women is not really doing it for him: the hopeless, impotent, death-driven Narcissus is more his speed.⁵⁷ Casting Cassandre as the fountain that gives Narcissus's reflection back to him, Ronsard not only projects his image onto her, but also hers onto him. The rapacious desire to possess a woman is replaced by an abject desire to drown his sorrows along with his identity in an oblivious pool, an inversion of his vision of pouring over her as a "golden shower." Here, the lady is the liquid, and it is the poet who is not only ravished but annihilated. This abrupt abandonment of a power trip and embrace of helplessness recalls Barbara Johnson's discussion, in her essay "Muteness Envy," of what she calls "the official structures of self-pity that keep patriarchal power in place," where male speakers, in lyric poetry and beyond, relinquish the role of aggressor and take on that of "the manipulative sufferer" to gain literary and cultural authority precisely through their victimhood.⁵⁸ But I find something slightly different to be going on here. The speaker is not arrogating power so much as halfheartedly complaining about it, as if desperate for a way out of both his suffering and the poem: the final lines nod off as anticlimactically as our sleepy speaker. Ronsard, it seems, is sick of having to do all this work, the work of seduction, the work of writing poetry, the work of being a subject.⁵⁹ How

57. For an account of a similar phenomenon in the poetry of Walt Whitman, see Jordan Lev Greenwald, "Limp Whitman and the Eco-poetics of the Neutral," *Arizona Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (Autumn 2020): 107–37.

58. Barbara Johnson, "Muteness Envy," in *Human, All Too Human*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1996), 147. Roland Greene has offered an explanation for why lyric—as opposed to epic, which David Quint has described in the dichotomous terms of imperial victory and defeat—is so often the genre where more complex power dynamics play out: "When victors do not see themselves as victors; when the vanquished imagine themselves as victors, or are so imagined by the victors themselves; and most often, when a member of one of these classes conceives a position for himself—moral, political, or emotional—that varies from the standpoint of the class, the most available medium will often be lyric" (*Unrequited Conquests: Love and Empire in the Colonial Americas* [University of Chicago Press, 1999], 3–4). For the distinction between the winners and losers of epic, see David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 8–9.

59. While many readers find in Ronsard an unabashed embrace of sensuality, Lawrence Kritzman sees poems like this as demonstrations of how "the fiction of amorous conquest is nothing more than a charade that dissimulates a profound sexual ambivalence" (*The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 113). Kritzman's reading of this poem, though, is ultimately more triumphant than mine. While he sees the dissolution of the physical body as necessary for the birth of the poetic corpus—"From the metaphorical death of this desiring body surge forth the flowers

nice it would be to be able to dissolve the self, to be, in other words, like a woman, or a flower. For Narcissus, after all, being a flower is quite literally as good as being dead. And Ronsard here expresses a wish not to be “Narcisse,” but “un Narcisse,” as if proleptically leaning into the youth’s ultimate metamorphosis into a flower, one daffodil among many.

We can see a similar weariness with the demands of poetic subjectivity and a similar fantasy of floral oblivion in Herrick’s “A Meditation for His Mistress” (H-216). This poem stages a series of numbered flower deaths, each memorialized as unmemorable, where the very brevity of the flower’s life is meant to make a lasting impression on the female student:

1. You are a *Tulip* seen to day,
But (Dearest) of so short a stay;
That where you grew, scarce man can say.
2. You are a lovely *July-flower*,
Yet one rude wind, or ruffling shower,
Will force you hence, (and in an hour.)
3. You are a sparkling *Rose* i’th’bud,
Yet lost, ere that chaste flesh and blood
Can shew where you or grew, or stood.
4. You are a full-spread faire-set Vine,
And can with Tendrills love intwine,
Yet dry’d, ere you distill your Wine.
5. You are like Balme inclosed (well)
In *Amber*, or some *Chrystall* shell,
Yet lost ere you transfuse your smell.
6. You are a dainty *Violet*,
Yet wither’d, ere you can be set
Within the Virgins Coronet.
7. You are the *Queen* all flowers among,
But die you must (faire Maid) ere long,
As He, the maker of this song.

His mistress, figured as successive flowers, sometimes survives for two lines, sometimes one, before being cut down by the remainder of the tercet. A feminine “You” withers and dies seven times before being joined by “he, the maker of this song,” in death. Nothing, to repeat Bataille’s platitude once more, is as common as floral and female beauty, except, of course,

of rhetoric” (126)—I see in the poem’s ending a desire for freedom from poetic production as well as sexual desire.

floral and female death, nothing so unremarkable and yet so remarked upon. It is true that Herrick is preoccupied throughout the *Hesperides* with the ephemerality of all life, as in the famous “To Daffadills” (H-316), where a universal human “we” has “as short a Spring” as the seasonal flowers, and we can see a similar wistfulness in certain poems by Ronsard. But this fails to translate, as both men’s poems about female aging tend to do, to any equation of bodies with used-up, worthless trash that lingers past its expiration date. In “A Meditation,” the death of the poet is set apart from the unextraordinary deaths of the flower-women, as a singular event—but a deflated one. While the decay of the mistress is insisted upon repeatedly, each iteration of the diachronic drama neatly packaged into a stanza to be stamped on the pupil’s mind as a mnemonic cliché—even if what is to be remembered is precisely insignificant, interchangeable iteration—the poet’s own death is an abbreviated afterthought, leaving us with less the monumentality of singularity than the statistical irrelevance of a single life and line that fails to signify beyond itself.

Or perhaps it only barely manages to signify, signifying just enough that it can actively be ignored, like irritatingly common female and floral beauty. In Herrick’s “To his Tomb-maker,” the poet thoughtfully provides a blueprint for his epitaph:

Go I must; when I am gone,
Write but this upon my Stone;
Chaste I liv’d, without a wife,
That’s the Story of my life.
Strewings need none, every flower
Is in this word, Batchelour.

As Joshua Scodel points out, the single word poets usually request to be carved into their tombstone is a version of their own name, while Herrick asks to be identified as a member of a whole class of people, bachelors, who happen to share their name with a class of flowers, bachelor’s-buttons, referring to any number of extremely common, nondescript wildflowers.⁶⁰ Unlike short-lived botanical bachelors, this one will be monumentalized in stone, stamped on the tomb as a reminder, perhaps, that even when poets do not want women or flowers, they want what they think women and flowers have: the immortality of being no one in particular.

60. Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 175.