

Dis[man]tling the blazon: the relationship of women and the poetic convention

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Originally used to signify a shield or a coat of arms, the term 'blazon' transformed its meaning through the description of virtues or positive attributes, usually of a woman, in late sixteenth century poetry. 'Blazon' can either denote a noun, signifying the actual list of virtues, or a verb, signifying the process of praising, adorning, describing, or boasting of.[1] Through poetry, the word transfigures its meaning depending on its relevance to the subject and its intended purpose. A blazon is frequently performed in relevance to the female form in an erotic admiration. However, through texts such as William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, his *Sonnet 130*, and Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, the convention of the blazon is blurred and nuanced in relation to its performer and its recipient, creating the argument that perhaps the blazon is more than just a poetic tradition.

Before it can be determined what exactly a blazon does, it would be poignant to consider what a traditional blazon would entail. Literary and cultural studies scholar Nancy Vickers looks at the original sonneteer, Francesco Petrarch, through a lens that is hypercritical of the execution of his blazons. Petrarch's oft-portrayed, absent, yet passionately loved Laura, is the object of his sonnets, admired and blazoned within the Petrarchan verse. Vickers claims that Petrarch always described his beloved as "a part of parts of a woman," as "a collection of extremely beautiful disassociated objects"[2]. This brings forth the question of the necessity for the blazon, and the discovery of why and how it came about. While the traditional blazon embellishes and celebrates in admiration and in awe, it almost literally dismembers a woman to mere parts or "objects." The purpose for this is almost entirely unclear: why pick apart each bit of a woman to celebrate

her? Why is she parts and not a whole? This could be a technique of divide and conquer, through which the beholder divides the beheld into parts easily mapped and easily understood through both looking or through verse, and by doing so masters each of the fragmented territories. The blazon could more innocently be a distribution of attention and reverence across the body rather than focusing on a single part (commonly sexual), leading the blazon to become a more celebratory style of beauty instead of a conquest of man.

Nonetheless, the blazon exists in different forms between poetry and drama. As Petrarch's blazon first solidified, the lover became an absent character, one who was unattainable and frequently ignorant or unaware of the love. The poetic blazon is lyrical, imaginary, and entirely up to the reader to illustrate within his mind's eye. Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* is a typical example of a poetic blazon: "If sapphire, lo, her eyes be sapphires plain; If rubies, lo, her hips be rubies sound; If pearls, her teeth be pearls, both pure and round; If ivory her forehead ivory ween; If gold, her locks are finest hold on ground; If silver, her fair hands are silver sheen..."[3] Spenser inventories his love's attributes, drawing her into an amalgam of precious jewels, reminiscent of Vicker's criticism of Petrarch's blazon of Laura. Spenser also compares her to a rose: Sweet is the rose, but grows upon a briar Sweet is the juniper, but sharp his bough..." Spenser here acknowledges the dangerousness of her beauty and compares her to a beautiful but guarded thing, a thorned rose, acknowledging her unattainability and the unrequited nature of his love. In *Astrophel and Stella*, a sonnet sequence, author Sir Philip Sidney acknowledges the Petrarchan model and rhyme scheme along

with the traditional atmosphere of admiration and desire. Sidney's ninth sonnet exemplifies the blazon by including the adage of the typical Petrarchan love poem. Sidney's blazon of Stella, however, does not go past her face, an anomaly as the blazon is commonly erotic. There is her golden "covering" (hair), alabaster "front" (forehead), her "door" (lips), "lock" (teeth), and "porches" (cheek)[4]. Although this is a typical, albeit miniature, blazon style, there is a certain unconventionality in the tone that Sidney takes. Stella's mouth only "sometimes" allows grace, and her eyes are dark, reminiscent of a "touch" - a glossy black stone, an image that complicates the typical blazon theory of admiration.

This compliment-not compliment style calls to mind Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, commonly called the "anti-blazon." From "my mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun," to "my mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground" (as opposed to in the heavens with the goddesses), Shakespeare uses negatives to oddly insult the focus of his sonnet. But both Sidney and Shakespeare still utilize the blazon, not to insult, but to define their beloveds as more realistic than any other women "belied with false compare"[5]. Sidney and Shakespeare decide that earthly beauty, of a "heavenly guest" and a woman who "treads on ground" rather than a goddess in the sky, is just as passion-inducing. Sidney concludes that nothing as far as Stella's eyes can see is more beautiful than she is, whereas Shakespeare swears that his love is "as rare" than any others who lie to their beloveds or compare them falsely. While he does compare his love to unfavorable things there is no question that his love is both strong and passionate still. In the poetic

tradition, readers are forced to imagine a golden-locked, blue-eyed woman. The visual aspect of poetry is necessary in validating the beloved's beauty. However, in drama, there is an impossibility of the absence of the beloved, as the actors are presented in physical bodies for the performances of the blazons. There is a difference in the actual demonstration of the blazon; whereas Petrarch writes for his unrequited lover, actors either speak to their lovers or about their lovers in front of an audience of spectators. The immediacy of the physical presence introduces a third party: those to whom the beloved is displayed. The form of the blazon idealizes a figure that an audience member does not have to imagine, and the physical existence presents a straightforward interaction between the loved and the lover.

Whereas in poetry the reader is the middleman, the audience directly witnesses an emblazoning of a character by another in drama. Nevertheless, the theater has taken the question of blazon in stride and manipulated it in many ways. Olivia of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* appropriates the blazon in a freewheeling complication of gender roles and mastery versus submission. However, while the traditional blazon is to or for a certain person, Olivia blazons herself in a strategy of mockery. "I will give out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried and every particle and utensil labeled to my will: as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two grey eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth" (1. 5. 230-235)[6]. Olivia sorts through her facial features in an "inventory," both taking ownership of her own features whilst labeling them in a marketing fashion. Her reference to her will could have a double, or a triple, meaning: will as in her own free will;

will as in the legal document written prior to death; or will from the subtitle of the play *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will*. She recognizes sovereignty at this moment, which unbeknownst to her, is a short-lived segment of bodily autonomy, as her own body will be put on display in the following act. Olivia satirizes the significance of worth based on her attributes, in a way mocking the blazon itself, but then employs the same pattern when speaking of Cesario. “Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit Do give thee fivefold blazon” (1. 5. 279-280)[7]. Besides the irony of Viola cross-dressing as a fake Cesario, making a female still the recipient of the blazon, Olivia harks back to the original meaning of the word. The blazon she refers to, juxtaposed with a dramatic blazon, is the shield mentioned in the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary. Not only is Olivia listing Cesario’s physical attributes, but she is referencing the significance of physical attributes. His appearance is a blazon, a trumpet, of his status and birth. The use of the blazon as a signifier of his place in society acknowledges the coat of arms featured on the original blazons, indicating a person’s family and heritage. This moment between Cesario and Olivia also brings about a certain sense of clarity in the sense that the gender questions that have been posed and deepened throughout the play are suspended. There is little confusion of, or perhaps little care for, who belongs to which gender affiliation. Olivia is simply admiring a person, performing a blazon on “him,” – creating an exchange between the beholder and the beheld in an appreciation of beauty. Is this not exactly what the blazon is meant for? Furthermore, Cesario embodies the idea of the remote, absent lover, as Cesario is not actually a real person. A disguise of Viola, Cesario is fictional,

making Viola a vehicle by which Olivia expresses a love that is most certainly unrequited simply by the fact that Cesario does not exist.

In the second act, Maria introduces audiences to a different interpretation of the blazon - one used to her advantage over unsuspecting and vulnerably smitten Malvolio. " I will drop in his way some obscure epistles of love, wherein by the color of his beard, the shape of his leg, the manner of his gait, the expresse of his eye, forehead, and complexion, he shall find himself most feelingly personated" (2. 3. 145-147)[8]. In this passage, Maria outlines the exact desire of Malvolio to be admired by Olivia, and performs an unintentional blazon of his attributes after having just called him something quite different: " The devil a puritan that he ism or anything constantly but a time-pleaser; an affectioned ass that cons state without book and utters it by great swaths; the best persuaded of himself, so crammed as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him" (2. 3. 136-140)[9]. In a strange juxtaposition of Malvolio's flaws and his values, Maria both mocks and celebrates the blazon, regardless of her intentions. Because Malvolio's fantasy of Olivia's love is so great, it is easy for Maria to manipulate him, and he falls vulnerable to the device of the feigned blazon. The letter, perfected with Olivia's seal, begins with " to the unknown beloved" (2. 5. 86), harking back to the clandestine emotions the lover has for his beloved, like Petrarch to his unknown beloved, Laura.

Olivia is a Petrarchan lover in many ways, though her reconfiguration and reapplication of the blazon complicates the traditional relationship between

the lover and the beloved. The female characters in *Twelfth Night* perform the blazons on male characters: Cesario sincerely and Malvolio facetiously. This begs the question of power. Who has the upper hand, the lover or the beloved? To return to the theory of divide and conquer, he who performs the blazon separates his lover into easily comprehensible parts. The blazon, therefore, is not only a poetic convention about desire, but also about romantic and social advantage over another. If the traditional forms of blazon are penned by men, and the entirety of *Twelfth Night* is a complexity of gender intricacies and nuances, this intensely complicates the definition of the blazon. The play serves primarily as a satire on the popularized ideas of love and romance according to Petrarch. This, coupled with the notion of gender fluidity, enlightens the true meaning of a satire: comedy with undeniable truth. The blazons remind audiences of the social convention they hold, ironically, as homosexual relationships are unwittingly pursued – another reminder of social conventions.

Though the blazon is poised to make fun of the Petrarchan conventions on a backdrop of forbidden relationships, it has serious undertones worth recognition and consideration. Though Olivia truly does love Cesario, as we can tell from her blazon of admiration, she easily confuses him with Sebastian. The play apparently involves love, yet superficially. In juxtaposing traditional blazons with the “anti-blazons” of Shakespeare and Spenser, as readers we are forced to recognize the actuality of what it means to love publicly, either through drama or literature, and the implications involved

with admiration versus actuality. The blazon is not only a poetic convention, but also a tradition of gender roles, power, and the social structure of love.

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. B. New York: Norton, 2005. Print. Vickers, Nancy. *Dianna Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme*. Print.

[1] Oxford English Dictionary [2] Vickers, Nancy. *Dianna Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme*, 94 [3] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B [4] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B, 1086-1087. [5] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B, 1184 [6] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B, 1202 [7] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B, 1202 [8] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B, 1210 [9] *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume B, 1210