

# The concept of femininity in poetry of the early modern period

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*Abstract: In this article issues concerning gendered identities in literary representations from the Early Modern Period are discussed. On the basis of examples from the English poet John Donne (1572-1631) and the Dutch poet Pieter Cornelisz Hooft (1581-1647), two celebrated icons of the Western European Renaissance elite, it is argued that an analysis of the love poetry written by these male authors shows how the concept of femininity was modelled in those days and how this concept can be related to notions of 'the sacred' and 'the profane'. Although both Donne and Hooft have the reputation of being true representatives of their time, there are substantial differences in their poetic attitudes towards women. In their love poetry they share a great deal of the generally accepted conventions (which all have to do with craftsmanship and cleverness, and the notion of 'art as play'), but at the same time Donne and Hooft show divergent views of femininity. Hooft's work is rather homogeneous in this respect. It is linked with the sublime, if not sacred, identity of the beloved and shaped along the lines of Petrarch and the Neo-Platonists. Donne's poetry, on the other hand, is more heterogeneous; the hybrid and paradoxical representation of women, the mixing of the sacred and the profane, stem from a focus on wit and conceit, combined with a touch of drama. The result is a portrait in verse of the beloved in terms of devotion and cynicism, as well as platonic love and lechery. The differences between Donne and Hooft are striking. Partly they must be attributed to more 'fundamental' views – whether genuine or not – but to a great extent the chosen mechanisms in the literary domain should be held responsible. In exploring this domain, the distinction between 'use of argument' and 'imagery building' in this type of text proves to be a well-suited tool for making the gender issue more specific. In the case of Donne, reasoning seems to be primary, as in Hooft's work evocation of images is a dominating feature. Following this taxonomy, the articulation of gendered identities can be positioned in a non-trivial way.*

## 1. Introduction

From the year of publication of Jacob Burckhardt's famous book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) onwards much has been said and written about gender and identity in the historical context of the Early Modern Period. There are indeed many intriguing aspects that are connected with gender issues and the study of the image of

women in the Renaissance has proved its worth, particularly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The rather positive view of Burckhardt was sometimes met with moderate approval, but his interpretation of seventeenth century ideas of womanhood also evoked serious criticism. One representative and balanced example will suffice here. Ruth Kelso, author of *Doctrine for the lady of the Renaissance* (1956), has shown that a firm concept of the identity of the lady is lacking in this glorious episode of our history. The many treatises written in those days by leading humanists and other scholars all depict the essence of the ladylike femininity in terms of the various forms of relationship to men. In short, Burckhardt's generalizations with regard to the roles and identities of the women of the Renaissance are at least one-sided, if not biased.

Burckhardt's perspective on matters of gender and the critical responses that followed in the course of time, are reflected in a striking parallel on a smaller scale in the realm of the discussion about the Dutch Golden Age. In 1987 Simon Schama's great overall synthesis *The embarrassment of riches* was brought out, including a comprehensive and somewhat provocative chapter on 'the question of women'. In the 1990s Schama's anthropological view of the Dutch culture in the Golden Age and, consequently, his approach of the issue of the feminine, induced a group of scholars – under the skilful leadership of Els Kloek – to start an international debate on women in the seventeenth-century Holland, England and Italy.

The quest for the ultimate insight into the very selfhood of women living four centuries ago seems to be a difficult one and the majority of the participants in the debate apparently prefer to see it as a guiding principle in a vast research programme. Of course, there are some short cuts, and Helen Wilcox is quite right when she claims "The key to understanding seventeenth-century women's lives and attitudes is autobiographical writing like Anne Halkett's" (1994: 154). In fact, the domain of the so called ego documents, including diaries and memoirs, as well as familiar letters, serves as a perfect hunting ground for this sort of enquiry, as Rudolf Dekker has demonstrated on many occasions.

In the case of gendered identities, however, the unavoidable opposition between the masculine and feminine element has to be taken into consideration too. The analysis of ego documents written by male contemporaries will also, no doubt, shed some light on gender issues, as the ideas and experiences of the authors are part of a mental world that comes as close as possible to ordinary life. The view on women as expressed by Samuel Pepys in his well-known *Diary*, reveals a lot about his personal concepts and standards, but clarifies at the same time aspects of womanhood as products of their age.

## 2. P.C. Hooft as a bench-mark

The step from Pepys's diary to the correspondence of P.C. Hooft (1581-1647) is superficially only a small one, but from a methodological point of view quite a leap. Hooft's letters, including the familiar and personal notes, constitute a large but heterogeneous corpus. Unlike Pepys, Hooft shows a fair amount of self-restraint and even the thought of certain amorous entanglements is far beyond the scope of his letter-writing. The most complicating element in this fascinating series of letters is, however, Hooft's deeply rooted, perhaps even entrenched, inclination to mix the facts of his personal life - every day life as well as highlights or trials and tribulations - with literary ingredients. A considerable number of letters should be seen in the Erasmian light of the genre of epistolary art with its emphasis on stylistic niceties and thematic references to the body of ideas that dominated the Renaissance. Admittedly, some of Hooft's letters seem to have been written with an eye to possible circulation amongst close friends, others clearly show the features of a very personal intention. But even in this last category, in which his love letters make up an important group, the literary elements are definitely there, smoothly but in a robust way interwoven with the text.

In the case of P.C. Hooft, ideas about womanhood are therefore embedded in literary conventions. Broadly speaking, this literary frame of images, metaphors and analogies, can be seen as a format for the design of a major aspect of the male concept of womanhood. So, literary texts written by male authors may yield parameters that are instrumental in the construction of the gendered view of the identity of women. It goes without saying that research along these lines should be quite promising. In this vein Agnes Sneller published about Jacob Cats, a Dutch moralistic writer in the Golden Age, and Giesela van Oostveen about the popular playwright Bredero. It remains to be seen whether Dutch lyrical poetry of the Early Modern Period, and more in particular love poetry in all sorts of varieties, will be suitable material for the determination of a general picture of projected gender relations and gender identity. Narrowing down the Dutch literary landscape at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to just one figure, that is to say P.C. Hooft, would eliminate a couple of complicating factors and would do justice to the genre, as Hooft is considered to be the most prolific writer of love poetry of his age. Over the years, Hooft managed to keep his poetry on the same high level, consistent in his imagery and faithful to his elegant style. In a way he is a bench-mark for Renaissance poetry in the Low Countries.

The love poetry of P.C. Hooft, consisting of a large number of *Songs* and over fifty *Sonnets*, fits for the greater part in the Petrarchan tradition, so well defined in Leonard Forster's masterwork *The Icy Fire* (1969). In the opinion of Sir Herbert Grierson Hooft "did

for Holland something of what Wyatt and Surrey attempted and Sidney and Spenser achieved for English poetry – grafting and naturalizing the elegant, dignified, and musical poetry of the Renaissance” (1936: 8). Looking at the delicacy of touch in his lyricism, the aesthetic discipline and the meticulous treatment of syntax and word order, a certain resemblance comes to mind with the English poet Herrick, who certainly, just like Hooft, is gifted with a faultless ear. It has been argued by Van Dorsten (1981) that on a deeper level of analysis Hooft’s poetry is lacking a layer of substance and, therefore, doesn’t show any real expression of personality. This may be true, but on the other hand Hooft is part of the cultural context of an era in which the notion ‘art as play’ is highly relevant. The same goes for the significance of the concept of craftsmanship and the idea of cleverness that follows from this naturally. So the gendered identity of the beloved or mistress is moulded in the Petrarchan manner, although the simple codification of the lady’s beauties is usually absent in Hooft’s work. More often than not a keen and subtle representation is given of a mental picture in visual terms of the effect of the beloved on the persona of the poem, with a starting point ranging from a single feature of the beloved to a detailed description of a landscape or an imaginary event. In Hooft’s sonnets echoes of Ronsard are unmistakably turning up and the dazzle of the sun combined with a sensuous enjoyment of life are reminiscent of an Italian mood. Mythological allusions are used frequently in a functional way, but this is to be expected within a Renaissance framework. To a lesser extent topics taken from the bible or from Christianity in general are also present, but it is conspicuous that Hooft treats them in the same way as motifs from classical antiquity. The lady’s assimilation to the divine does occur in Hooft’s love poetry, but it is not realized through mythology or Christianity or the mechanics of the Petrarchan paradigm in isolation. The link with the sublime, if not sacred, identity of the beloved is accomplished by a firmly-fixed combination of Petrarchistic imagery and Neoplatonic ideas. The imagery building by means of the introduction and elaboration of a network of Petrarchistic similes is the outer shell of the poem, the more implicit use of Neoplatonic thought is the inner core. It is obvious that there is no room for anti-Petrarchistic views in Hooft’s, up to a point at least, genuine state of mind and idea-driven verse, and, consequently, lines that can be found in Donne’s *Anagram* or Shakespeare’s sonnet 130 (‘My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the Sun’) are systematically absent in Hooft’s poetry.

As long as the level of Neoplatonic content is minimal, the image of the beloved remains within the limits of the secular or profane identity, be it that the Petrarchan manipulation of the subject matter is sometimes resulting in a high profile of gendered womanhood. It is no exception that the lover’s soul is lost in some strongly magnified and intensified feminine facets. Just like Petrarch himself had written poetry on Laura’s eyes, Hooft tries his hand successfully at a description of the eyes of his mistress in terms of

'lodestars': "Lodestars of all my hope" ("Leidsterren van mijn hoop"). Those lodestars "were locked within so limited a keep." But in the last lines of the sestet of this sonnet the reversal takes place in a well-known existential turn, showing the power of the feminine strength over the masculine striving:

(...) *It only seems so small*  
*For those outside; inside its depth can swallow all:*  
*My tortured soul was lost within that boundless deep.*<sup>1</sup>

Very often Hooft manages adroitly narrative elements or extended similes in order to reach a point of culmination, which amounts to a close contact of souls or even a fusion of the soul of the lover and the soul of the mistress. A good example of the intertwinement of biblical simile, Petrarchan imagery and implicit Neoplatonic ideas is the sonnet "When, from the world's true light, the boy who was born blind" ("Wanneer door 's werelts licht"). Hooft refers three times to the concept of light: 'the world's true light' i.e. Christ, 'that godly light, the heavenly sun' i.e. the physical sun, and 'my Light' i.e. the beloved. In that setting the contact of souls takes place:

*And when my soul sees all your charms burst into view,*  
*My inner eye flames out to greet those charms in you*

It is interesting to note that the image of femininity has become rather faint at the moment the sublime gains the upper hand in the description. The identity shows no gender features, is highly abstract, though still profane. The gap between profane and sacred identity is, nevertheless, only relative in Hooft's poetry. By increasing the level of Neoplatonic load, Hooft easily arrives at the divine status of the lady. In his song "Sanctifying love" ("Alsalignende Liefd") all the well-known Neoplatonic notions like love, goodness, wisdom and beauty co-occur under the control of a deity - which is not referred to by the word 'God' - in the perspective of a universal, even cosmic dimension. The idea of infinity (' T oneindelijck mij voor eijndelijcke' oogen stelt') is counterbalanced by the introduction of a couple of codified Petrarchan features: blond braids ('blonde vlechten') and ivory breast ('yvooren borst'). In the last stanza the lady is finally addressed as a goddess ('Godin') and thereby divinized. The service to the lady in the last lines, the so called servitude, complies with the Petrarchan view on the sublime position of the

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<sup>1</sup> Translations taken from Ten Harmsel (1981).

mistress, but the element of servitude is also connected with the sacred domain of worshipping. So, gendered and sacred identities go hand in hand in this respect.

### 3. John Donne as a contrasting example

If from Hooft it is the conclusion that evocation of images and Neoplatonic facets together determine the concept of gendered womanhood in love poetry, the work of his great English contemporary John Donne (1572-1631) is in no similar way to be so clearly rounded off. Like Hooft, he is the author of *Songs and Sonets*, although the latter category hardly includes sonnets in the technical sense. Belonging to the same Western European Renaissance elite, they share a great deal of the generally accepted conventions relating to craftsmanship and sophistication. Just the same, Donne and Hooft show divergent views of femininity in their love poetry. Since the days of T.S. Eliot's essay on the Metaphysical poets and more in particular the nature of Donne's poetry, a lot has been written about Donne's concern with the literary expression of 'the question of women' in his work. As to be expected, from the 1980s onwards various authors of the feminist school of thought have contributed to interpretations of Donne's work from their point of view, with a leading role for Janel Mueller. In the course of time the theoretical framework was reinforced by the introduction of analytical tools from postmodernism and cultural criticism. The issue of Petrarchism in relation to Donne's love lyrics proved to be a knot that could not be disentangled easily, as Heather Dubrow (1995) comes to the conclusion that a clean-cut and unambiguous answer is unavailable. Even with the help of postmodern theories like the one proposed by Lyotard, Barbara Estrin (1994) has no easy job in matching Petrarchism and the female consciousness. Meakin's *John Donne's articulations of the feminine* (1998) can be seen as the outcome of an interesting research project in which the cultural criticism of Luce Irigaray is applied to a great number of Donnean texts. For good reasons the *Songs and Sonets* are not included in the examined material, so this corner stone of Donne still awaits further attention.

Comparing, then, Hooft and Donne in their endeavours at creating an image of womanhood, several factors should be taken into consideration. Some have to do with 'fundamental' views and attitudes towards life in general, others are more restricted to the mechanisms in the domain of literature. A crucial aspect in the mental make-up of Hooft is his personal commitment to Stoicism and scepticism; this detached trait goes along quite well with his fixation on aesthetic qualities. Ultimately his poetry is self-centered, the focus of attention shifting from the lady to the perception of the image of the lady. An amused sceptical aesthete is not likely to write with deep passion and ecstasies of joy, sorrow, grief and death seem to be mitigated and are represented in a

controlled manner. The evocation of desire, either female or male - a topic that has inspired so much scholarship recently as is evident from writings by Luce Irigaray and Pamela Anderson – is a rare phenomenon in Hooft's poetry and it is realized in a moderate tonality. Turning to Donne, one may observe that the general picture is just the opposite.

Having thus secured a foothold, the other factor, regarding the literary mechanisms, has to be discussed in some detail too. For obvious reasons all the characteristics of Metaphysical poetry cannot be considered here, and there is no need for this either since so many books and articles have been written on this subject, including those by Grierson, Helen Gardner, Leishman, Hunter, Warnke and Williamson. By far the most important element in Donne's lyrical poetry is the use of the metaphysical conceit, an intellectually contrived extended metaphor or simile in which tenor and vehicle can be related by ingenious pseudo-logic. Apart from craftsmanship and cleverness, metaphysical wit is needed in order to create unexpected associations that combine heterogeneous elements. Along with this intellectual aspect conceits show a certain terseness and this neat conciseness is seen as one of the qualities of this type of verse. Within the fabric of the conceit an "argumentative, subtle evolution" (Grierson 1921: xvi) takes place, and it is this argumentative aspect that counts as the most salient feature. Helen Gardner remarks in this respect: "Argument and persuasion, and the use of the conceit as their instrument, are the elements or body of a metaphysical poem" (1985: 22).

Following Helen Gardner's view on the twofold nature of the conceit, the use of argument and persuasion in Donne's love poetry can be taken as a starting point for the determination of the image of the beloved. Regarding persuasion it must be observed that the reasoning is aimed at the lady: the lover tries to win her over, while the lady apparently shows some resistance. One of the most well-known poems of Donne in which a conceit based on persuasion is developed at length is "The Flea". The conceit is complicated and uses the idea of the mingling the blood of lover and lady inside the flea. Finally the male voice comes to the ultimate conclusion, which is at the same time the definitive invitation:

*'Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee;  
Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee,  
Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.*

The image of the lady remains invisible; only the fact that she is unwilling and reluctant matters. In the line of reasoning there is no explicit counter argument coming from the

lady, as Donne doesn't let her speak. Conceits of persuasion seem to focus on strategies and not on evaluative descriptions of womanhood.

Argumentative conceits make up the majority in the *Songs and Sonets*. It seems that this type of reasoning was Donne's favourite way of handling the material. Just one example must suffice here: "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning". As Leishman has shown, "the argument is [...] inseparably blended with the substance of the poem" (1969: 233).

In fact, the reasoning is a string of propositions and arguments from analogy in a compelling repetition. Meanwhile, far-reaching similes are constructed, e.g. the soul of one of the lovers as the fixed point of a compass. The connection between the two souls is formulated as follows:

*Thy soule the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if the'other doe.*

Does this kind of literary representation reveal anything about the image of womanhood or the gendered identity of the lady? In cases like "A Valediction" the answer is a restricted 'no'. The poem seems to concentrate on the topic of love itself or the relational aspect of love. Conceits may even be devised that concentrate on the denial of love, as is the case in "Negative love". So argumentative reasoning is not likely to shape the image of womanhood. At best one quality is highlighted as the outcome of a line of argument, and in Donne's poetry that is not necessarily a positive quality. In "Twickenham Garden" or in "Womans Constancy", how different they may be, the unfaithfulness is the converging facet. Argumentative reasoning in this vein may result in mixing of sacred and profane, devotion and cynicism, platonic love and lechery. Yet, it is not a matter of identity, but rather a quality in an ingenious construction.

As it is, neither persuasion nor argumentation in the various conceits will yield much insight into the notion of gendered womanhood. Compared to Hooft, the range of possibilities and the extravagances connected with it, suggest a richer source of data, but it remains to be seen whether this material is really a 'perfectly washed tea cup'.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In their love poetry Hooft and Donne share a great deal of the conventions of the Elizabethan and 'Golden' period, but at the same time a different handling of the concept of femininity can be observed. Hooft's work is rather homogeneous in this respect and linked with the sublime, even sacred, identity of the beloved, which is shaped along the lines of Petrarch and the Neo-Platonists, whereas Donne's poetry shows a more

heterogeneous nature. Donne's hybrid and paradoxical representation of women, the mixing of the sacred and the profane, arise from his distinct preference for the use of conceits, resulting in a 'witty' portrait in verse of the beloved in terms of devotion and cynicism, as well as platonic love and lechery. As a consequence, in depth differences between the poetic work of Donne and Hooft occur on a large scale. Partly they must be attributed to more 'fundamental' views – whether genuine or not – but to a great extent the chosen mechanisms in the literary domain should be held responsible. In exploring this domain, the distinction between 'use of argument' and 'imagery building' in this type of text proves to be a well-suited tool for making the gender issue more specific. In the analysis given above it appears that in the realm of Donne's poetry reasoning is the most characteristic feature, as in Hooft's work evocation of images is the dominating mark. In this light the articulation of gendered identities in the Early Modern Period can be positioned in an interesting way, enabling further research beyond the scope of Hooft and Donne.

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