



Activity 3: Early Modern Blazons

A **blazon** is a poetic device in which the speaker of the poem catalogues each part of a woman's body. Typically, these body parts are compared to aspects of the natural world: teeth are compared to pearls, blonde hair to gold, etc. This device originated with an influential fourteenth-century Italian poet named Petrarch, but later spread across Europe.

The early modern period was a deeply **patriarchal** (male-dominated). Although the woman being blazoned is usually the love-interest of the speaker, many literary critics have seen the blazon as an attempt to control the woman described. She is no longer a person in her own right – instead she becomes a collection of beautiful objects to be described and enjoyed by the male speaker and his (usually male) readers. In addition, by comparing the woman's body parts to expensive objects, the speaker transforms her into a piece of valuable property.

Some literary critics have connected the blazon with the new, empirical methods of anatomy. Both strategies divide up the body in order to make sense of it. These have been seen as attempts to exert control over something that is potentially confusing and unintelligible. Some critics, like Valerie Traub, have also connected poetic blazons and anatomy with developments in cartography (map-making). In poetry, women's bodies are often imagined as physical territories that need to be colonized, charted, and divided up – much like the recently discovered New World of the Americas, or the cadaver on the anatomy table.

Task

1. Can you think of any contemporary examples of the blazon? (For example, music videos that compare body parts to objects.)
2. What objects are the different body parts compared to? What effect does this have on your impression of the person described?
3. Do you think that the blazon device is objectifying, or not? Can you think of an example of a male body being described in this way? Does the gender of the speaker (or singer) always matter?

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Here is a famous example of a literary blazon, **Shakespeare's Sonnet 130**. However, there's a twist! The poem is in effect a *negative* blazon, describing objects conventionally used in blazons (the sun, roses, perfume) only to reject any similarities with the woman's body. This makes the poem a **parody** (or mocking imitation) of the conventional blazon.

Read the poem and reflect on the thinking points below:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun*;
*dark, dull
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd*, red and white, *pink
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks*. *emits
vapour
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she* belied** with false compare. *woman **slandered

Tasks

1. Do you think that the poem is insulting or complimentary about the woman – or both?
2. Above I described the poem as a 'parody'. Do you think this term adequately captures the tone of the poem? Would you describe the poem as mocking? (And, if so, who is being mocked?)
3. When reading poems, it helps to think about their structure. Shakespeare's sonnets, here as elsewhere, end with a rhyming couplet. How does the final couplet here affect your experience of Sonnet 130? Does the fact that it's a rhyming couplet have any particular effects?
4. This poem is centrally concerned with the problem of *comparisons*, especially in the context of romantic relationships. How would you feel if someone you loved (in a romantic sense) compared you to something else? Are comparisons always problematic in this context?