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Karolina Lebek

The Secrets of Nature, Ownership and Ornamentation in Robert Herrick's "Upon Madam Ursly. Epig."

For ropes of pearle, first Madam Ursly shows
A chaine of Cornes, picked from her ears and toes:
Then, next, to match Tradescant's curious shells,
Nailes from her fingers mew'd, she shows: what els?
Why then (foresooth) a Carcanet is shown
Of teeth, as deaf as nuts, and all her own.¹

"Upon Madam Ursly" belongs to Robert Herrick's *Hesperides*, a book of over 1,400 poems published in 1648. The majority of the poems are devoted to a variety of tiny and trivial objects or to body parts and attributes that, at the same time, stand for and replace the wholes they metonymically represent. Among *Hesperides'* scattered and mosaic-like object-matter are, for example, flowers, gems, cherries, cuffs, gowns, expensive fabrics, exotic spices, an hour-glass, bubbles, sea-horses, remoras, legs, hair, nipples, lips, tongues, and a profusion of smells, with almost a tangible intensity. Herrick's poetic imagination here revolves around the fragmentary, the material and the wondrous, caught in fleeting moments of sensuous experience (usually a glimpse or a smell) and instantaneously preserved in the amber of a poem.

This also concerns Herrick's portrayals of women who literally crowd the pages of *Hesperides*. It is not just the conventional blazoning of a particular body that takes place within the frames of a single sonnet, for instance. It is a blazoning whose subsequent stages occur throughout the whole collection and are interspersed among other blazoned parts

¹ Robert Herrick, "Upon Madam Ursly, Epig.," in *Hesperides or Works both Human and Divine by Robert Herrick. Together with his Noble Numbers or his Pious Pieces* (Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. LTD: London, 1920), p. 251. All Herrick's poems in this paper are quoted from this edition.

belonging to someone else. Then the body part may itself be hidden behind or represented by an ornament, a smell, or a sound. In this case, the reader faces a deferred reference, or a form of referential displacement: an object in the first place alludes to the body part that it covers or adorns, not to the person whose body undergoes blazoning. Yet the independence of objects or parts in such fragmentary portrayals is further perpetuated by the fact that they themselves are dispersed by poems devoted to Herrick's other fascinations. So the reader encounters a kind of a female Laocoön tangle (with more benevolent birds or bees instead of the deadly serpents) cut into small puzzle pieces. Those pieces are then thoroughly mixed with other puzzle sets that, if solved, would depict, for instance, pastoral landscapes, mythical themes, a vanitas, Breugel-like portraits of the lower classes, a family picture, or Herrick's self-portrayal as a poet and lover. This complexity, according to Thomas Moisan, with its "fetishistic attention to the part threatens to displace what we might think the part ostensibly represents."² Paradoxically then, the voyeuristic attention and the acute sense of observation that underlie the poetical foregrounding of bodily parts and female appurtenances result in the impediment of vision where the subject in its entirety cannot be discerned, accessible and knowable. Such fragmentariness thus invites secrecy and hiddenness.

Madam Ursly appears only twice in *Hesperides* but still she features prominently among Herrick's bevy of poetically mutilated mistresses. Most obviously, due to her mocked coquetry, emphasised ugliness and signs of old age, Ursly functions as an anti-ideal highlighting the beauty and freshness of Julia, Prenna, Corrina, Silvia, Anthea and others. Yet, as this article sets out to show in what is to follow, a close reading of "Upon Madam Ursly" may reveal a more intricate weave of meanings in her silent display. Firstly, the poem covertly refers to the Tradescants' curiosity cabinet and, therefore, to a specific form of culturally conventionalised form of displayable ownership. Secondly, it dwells on the practice of ornamentation, where ornaments again point to *Wunderkammern* with their itemisation of nature as the material foundation for natural philosophy. The function of curiosity museums was to display nature's secrets, which, although dazzling and wondrous, were still open to the patient scrutiny of the mind and could lead to social recognition for their owner. The function of ornaments, which features prominently in Herrick's poetry, was to embellish and camouflage the wearer thus arresting the gaze of the observer. In such

² Thomas Moisan, "Herrick, Hollar, and the Tradescants: Piecing Together a Seventeenth-Century Triptych," *Criticism*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2001), p. 311.

a way, the wearer becomes a subject-behind-objects, and, as she cannot be known other than through them, undergoes reification. Those two seemingly opposing movements/positions, of acknowledgement/subjection and invisibility/objectification, work together in Herrick's poem as a potential source of ambiguities.

What Ursly does is rather explicit and the poem hints at the most probable sequence of her activities. First Ursly assembles the selected bodily waste matter, the material signs of her decomposition – patches of old and dry skin from her ears and toes, cut-off nails and fallen-out teeth. Then apparently, those pieces have to be preserved somewhere and rearranged to be presentable, functioning as both strange natural artefacts, and curious ornaments. Finally, her collection, because this is what her abjected matter has now become, is successively displayed, blurring the border between the private and the public. Ursly's behaviour is portrayed as the mimicry of a knowledgeable collector of rarities displaying his treasures for genteel, connoisseur visitors to manifest *ownership*.

In England, one of the most famous and visited collections, open from the early 1630s to 1662, was the so-called Ark, for it was believed to encompass most of nature's curiosities. The Ark was established near London and successively enlarged by the two John Tradescants, father and son, to which Herrick's poem alludes. Thus Ursly assumes a masculine role as a form of self-fashioning which began at the moment when the innumerable natural specimens, ingenious artefacts, antiquities, metalothecas or exotic cultural artefacts astounded the viewer in a carefully designed exhibition. The rarity of the objects gathered was symbolically attributed to their owner, which helped to build his reputation as a virtuoso.³ Thus, such a cultural consumption

³ The relation between the subject and objects here should not be interpreted in Burckhardtian terms as real control of the pre-given shaped subject over the object. As Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass show, tracing the etymology of the terms in their introduction to *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, the "ob" in the word "object" means "before" and thus a prior status should be given to the object as that which *comes before*. Later on they continue: "So defined, the term renders more apparent the way material things [...] might constitute subjects who in turn own, use, and transform them. The form/matter relation of Aristotelian metaphysics is thereby provisionally reversed: it is the material object that impresses its texture and contour upon the noumenal subject. And this reversal is curiously upheld by the ambiguity of the word 'sub-ject', that which is *thrown under*, in this case – in order to receive an imprint." Original emphasis. (Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass eds., *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 5.) Thus, in the context of cabinets of curiosity, the imprint of the object on the subject is manifested through possession,

of, for instance, dried fish or unusual pieces of coral allowed for a social empowerment within the frame of virtuosity and collecting. Supposed intellectual as well as physical mastery over incredible or puzzling objects was the primary condition of a consistent and convincing identity.⁴

Although judged by his possessions, a collector's identity still depended on an unambiguous distinction between the possessing virtuoso and the possessed items. That is why it is vital for Ursly to distance herself as a subject from her bodily matter in order to sustain the impression of separateness. The mimicry of *Wunderkammer* exhibitions is to facilitate this separation. Consequently and paradoxically, she hopes to use the double ambiguity of positions: between the abject and object, and between the objects and the subject, to achieve an impression of separateness that will allow her to pass first and foremost for an owner.

Thus, as yet irrespective of the issue of what her offal is to imitate, we encounter at this point a couple of significant shifts. Madam Ursly, to demonstrate possession, reincorporates the abject into the symbolic order, so that it becomes a "something" recognized as a thing.⁵ Appropriated by the practice of collecting, these now somethings become collectible objects⁶ and therefore should be substantially re-evaluated and gain new cultural connotations and capital. And what should be stressed at this point is that this re-evaluation is supposed to occur not because her offal turns into pearls, shells, or gems, but because it has been used to imply a specific cultural practice. Ursly does this by gestures, a stage performance in which she plays the threefold part of the collector/owner, the objects collected, and the space of the museum due to the ornamental purpose of the objects. The poem turns

where the collector's status depends on the culturally ascribed level of 'strangeness' of the objects in his collection.

⁴ The Tradescants' collection is widely discussed in Prudence Leith-Ross, *The John Tradescants. Gardeners to the Rose and Lily Queen* (London: Peter Owen: 2006). Marjorie Swann devotes Chapter I and a part of Chapter II of her book to the Tradescants and the culture of virtuosity respectively. See: Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts. The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

⁵ I paraphrase here Julia Kristeva's words describing the abject as "[a] 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing." (Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press 1982), p. 2.).

⁶ Jean Baudrillard makes a clear distinction between a thing and an object, stating that objects appear when a thing causes passion. In other words, objects entail desire. See: Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardomal (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), p. 7.

the distinction between the subject, the object and the space of their meeting (exhibition) into an act, staged in the moment of possessive display.

Why is then this illusion of possession important? What does this momentary ambiguity try to hide? And what does Ursly's mimicry actually tell us about cabinets of curiosity in Herrick's view? All those questions can be addressed when we place Madam Ursly against selected representations of Julia, because the ornaments mentioned in the poem immediately bring her to mind. Among Herrick's numerous ladies, it is Julia who most often appears, or rather disappears, accompanied by a specific group of natural creations called *lusus naturae*, jokes of nature, within which natural philosophers and collectors included, for instance, gems, pearls, shells, flowers and corals. Looking at those objects from the vantage point of natural philosophy may provide us with some less obvious links between nature, ornamentality and cabinets of curiosity, which, in turn, should justify the juxtaposition of the two ladies. Firstly then, focus on the idea of *lusus naturae* and then compare how its representatives are employed in Julia's and Ursly's respective depictions.

Within naturalist discourse objects such as shells, gems, pearls, flowers and fossils posed serious problems of classification but partly because of that, they were also sources of aesthetic delight. These classificatory difficulties stemmed from the fact that *lusus* defied the Aristotelian postulate that each form must have its cause and purpose. Their purpose was unknown because their formal excess had no apparent practical application. In the case of gems and crystals, for instance, the multiplicity of shapes was seen as the result of nature's mathematical play. Athanasius Kircher, a Jesuit and an ardent collector, whose museum in Rome was famous throughout Europe, commented on this point extensively: "And numerical nature plays [...] with crystal, topaz, amethyst, and other precious stones, some of which Nature has composed as triangles others as tetrahedrons, and still others as hexahedrons, dodecahedrons, and icosahedrons."⁷ Why such diversity? Kircher had no other answer than nature's drive to play.

Lusus thus could not be an object of knowledge in Aristotle's understanding. *The Posterior Analytics* [71b10–16] defined *scientia/episteme* as the awareness of "both that the explanation because of which

⁷ Athanasius Kircher, *Arithmologia* (1665). Quoted in Paula Findlen, "Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe," *Renaissance Quarterly*, no. 43 (1993), pp. 298–300.

the object is, is its explanation, and that it is not possible for this to be otherwise.”⁸ Here causes, that is, the explanations of the formal excess of those object, were unknown and could not be demonstrated. Some *lusi* further breached the borders between species – coral for example was believed to have plant, animal and stone phases. Thus, to classify these secrets of nature, unexplainable cases of her fecundity, naturalists used the term *lusus* and, in that way, created “an *anti-definition*, that is a means of explaining something that would otherwise have been without explanation.”⁹ Within this anti-definition, aesthetic factors were quite prominent, so that *lusi* became understood as sites where scholars could find traces of *natura picatrix* – an artist who adorned God’s work. To quote Pamela Findlen again, jokes expressed nature’s “ability to diversify; in this fashion (shells, for example) added colour and shape to the world outlined by God [...] they were seemingly random examples of nature’s ability to be both artist and canvas.”¹⁰ This sense of nature’s aestheticised playfulness was further enhanced by the etymological links between *ludere* and *illudere*, emphasising nature’s ability to deceive.

If the precious stones, pearls and shells were the jocular and ornamental products of nature, hidden and growing in the depths of her body (earth/sea) to be retrieved and admired, then we might find certain similarities between Julia and *natura picatrix* in Herrick’s employment of imagery in “The Rock of Rubies, and the Quarrie of Pearls” and in “To Julia.”

The Rock of Rubies, and the Quarrie of Pearls:

Some ask’d me where the *Rubies* grew?
 And nothing I did say:
 But with my finger pointed to
 The lips of *Julia*.
 Some ask’d how *Pearls* did grow, and where?
 Then spoke I to my Girle,
 To part her lips, and shew’d them there
 The Quarelets of Pearl.¹¹

⁸ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* [71b10–16], trans. Jonathan Barnes, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), vol. I, p. 115.

⁹ Paula Findlen, “Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge,” p. 293. Original emphasis.

¹⁰ Paula Findlen, “Jokes of Nature,” p. 297.

¹¹ Herrick, “The Rock of Rubies, and the Quarrie of Pearls,” *Hesperides*, p. 23.

To Julia

How rich and pleasing thou, my *Julia* art,
 In each thy dainty, and peculiar part!
 First, for thy *Queen-ship* on thy head is set
 Of flowers a sweet commingled Coronet:
 About thy neck a Carkanet is bound,
 Made of *Rubie*, *Pearle*, and *Diamond*:
 A golden ring, that shines upon thy thumb:
 About thy wrist, the rich *Dardanium*.
 Between thy Breasts (then Doune of Swans more white)
 There playes the *Saphire* with the *Chrysolite*.
 No part besides must of thy selfe be known,
 But by the *Topaze*, *Opal*, *Calcedon*.¹²

In the first case, the persona of the poem points to his Julia's lips as the place where the raw "rubies grow"; when the lips are parted, we can further detect the site of the origin of pearls. In the second example, where Julia forms, to quote Marjorie Swann, "a kind of human Christmas tree,"¹³ rich jewellery and singled out gems are integral to her body, so that she cannot and should not be known other than through them. In both cases then, Julia's body merges with precious stones, she constitutes a secret behind ornaments, which in a sequence substitute her blazoned body parts. She then may be interpreted as both a natural ornament and as a manifestation of the theatre of the living, breeding nature *in situ*. This natural cabinet, nevertheless, is gathered and exhibited by its owner, the prominent "I" of the poems. As a strongly felt presence, he plays the part of a host revealing to the reader the secrets of nature by bidding Julia to part her lips. Or, as in the second example, as a connoisseur, he devotedly admires the lady who, passive and motionless, is represented as "a conglomeration of bejewelled objects."¹⁴

Juxtaposed with Julia's passivity, Ursly's active and self-conscious display as a collector and owner seems quite unusual. Her dried skin, nails and teeth will never be transformed into pearls, shells or gems. Yet, by staging possession and ornamentality, her generous display may be read as a form of compensation for the loss implied by abject – the fallen-off matter, the sign of the future Ursly-as-cadaver. Or, it may be masking the dangerous ambiguity of the offal to heal the disturbance in

¹² Herrick, "To Julia," *Hesperides*, p. 27.

¹³ Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, p. 192.

¹⁴ Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, p. 197.

her identity caused by the abject.¹⁵ In contrast to Julia, Ursly symbolises dying away, and as such her body cannot form a microcosmic parallel to the living macrocosm as Julia's can. What the distasteful spectacle exposes then is Ursly bare and de-composing, ugly and without a secret. To quote Patricia Fumerton interpreting King Charles I's theatrical behaviour in the moment just before his execution, Ursly's gestures may exemplify strategies of "self-memorialization" through "self-dramatisation."¹⁶

On the other hand, Ursly herself and her bodily waste may at the same time represent the space of a cabinet display. As often crammed with cadavers – variously preserved examples of "nature's excremental pieces, and not always the prettiest ones"¹⁷ – such spaces were filled with abjected matter which, properly arranged and prepared, was to give aesthetic, or at least intellectual, pleasure. Ursly's slightly derided pride in her collection may be an indirect mockery of the seventeenth-century virtuosos who, as the anonymous author of *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696) claimed, "abandon'd the Acquaintance and Society of Men for that of [collected] *Insects, Worms, Grubbs, Maggots, Flies, Moths, Locusts, Beetles, Spiders, Grashoppers, Snails, Lizards and Tortoises.*"¹⁸ Thus Julia and Ursly may be read as two different metaphoric visions of nature and of two different practices of admiring its treasures: *in situ*, which seems to offer secrets, pleasure, and aesthetic delight, and in the museum, where only its dead remnants can be wondered at and examined.

¹⁵ Kristeva writes: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, p. 4.).

¹⁶ Patricia Fumerton, *Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 14.

¹⁷ Thomas Moisen, "Herrick, Hollar, and the Tradescants," p. 317.

¹⁸ Quoted in Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, p. 79.

Karolina Lebek

**Sekrety natury, kolekcjonowanie i ornamentyka
w wierszu Roberta Herricka *Upon Madam Ursly. Epig.***

Streszczenie

Artykuł bierze sobie za cel odczytanie sześciowersowego wiersza Roberta Herricka *Upon Madam Ursly* w kontekście szerszego kulturowego zjawiska, jakim były XVII-wieczne kolekcje osobliwości. Koncept wiersza opiera się na konsekwentnym budowaniu analogii między ciałem Madam Ursly, które prezentowane jest czytelnikowi w akcie auto-wystawiania, a zbiorami przedmiotów osobliwych, do których wiersz czyni otwarte odniesienie. Owa ekspozycja ciała jednak, oprócz gestu ukazywania i odkrywania, stanowi paradoksalnie jednocześnie gest kamuflujący, po to, by zatrzeć granice między podmiotem, przedmiotem a abjektem, co jest potrzebne do podtrzymania owej analogii. Odbywa się to poprzez transformację znaczeń, jakie generuje ów ekshibicjonizm, zarówno poprzez odniesienia do funkcji biżuterii, jak i negocjacje wieloznacznej relacji własności narzuconej podmiotowi/przedmiotowi/ abjektowi, jakim staje się ciało Ursly.

Karolina Lebek

**Les secrets de la nature, le collectionnement et l'ornementation
dans le poème de Robert Herrick *Upon Madam Ursly. Epig.***

Résumé

L'article a pour objectif l'interprétation du poème, comptant six vers, de Robert Herrick *Upon Madam Ursly* dans le contexte du phénomène culturel plus large, qu'étaient au XVII^e siècle des collections de curiosités. Le concept du poème repose sur l'établissement de l'analogie entre le corps de Madame Ursly, qui est présenté au lecteur dans un acte d'auto-exhibition, et des collections de curiosités, auxquels le poème se réfère ouvertement. Pourtant cette exposition du corps, sauf le geste de montrer et de découvrir, constitue paradoxalement un geste de camouflage pour brouiller les frontières entre le sujet, l'objet et l'abject, ce qui est nécessaire pour soutenir l'analogie. Cela s'opère à travers une transformation des significations que génère cet exhibitionnisme, de mêmes grâce aux références à la fonction de la bijouterie que par les négociations de la relation ambiguë de propriété imposée au sujet/objet/abject, que devient le corps d'Ursly.