'PERSUASION BY SIMILITUDE': FINDING LIKENESS IN SHAKESPEARE'S *A LOVER'S COMPLAINT*

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A Lover's Complaint opens in the aftermath of an unnamed young woman's calamitous entanglement with an unscrupulous young man. Much of the poem deals with the abusive use of language which plays an important role in the young man's adeptness, amongst women, to 'Consents bewitch' (131). At the poem's key moment, the loss of the young woman's chastity is registered through an elaborate image involving her transformation from stone to water. The beautiful young man is already weeping, and the young woman eventually melts sympathetically into tears:

> But with the inundation of the eyes
> What rocky heart to water will not wear?
> (290–1)

The image of a marble- or flinty-hearted woman is familiar from Petrarchan poetry but here Shakespeare blends the vocabulary of courtly love with the language of spiritual devotion. The young woman envisages her earlier resistance before the young man's 'altar' (224) as a kind of irreligiosity which now gives way to soft-hearted grace.[1] Her question in the passage above however suggests uncertainty and, a few lines later, the significance – and peril – of this liquid softening becomes clear. She takes on the likeness of the tearful young man in order that she may (as she believes) 'Appear to him as he to me appears, / All melting' (299–300). Both are weeping now, and both seem unguarded. This article explores problems of desire and consent in *A Lover's Complaint* by considering the unpredictable processes of likening which are revealed through stones, water and other elemental things. According to a popular Renaissance proverb, *similis simili gaudet* ('like takes pleasure in like').[2] In this unusual and disturbing poem, however, Shakespeare's theories of resemblance reveal erotic force, uncertainty and dissonance.Early modern poets used a variety of literary techniques to sketch out resemblance. George Puttenham offers a detailed account of the 'figure of similitude' in chapter 19 of book 3 ('Of Ornament') in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589). Puttenham begins with general examples comparing one person or thing to another, arguing that the ability to identify and express likeness is an essential feature of good writ-ing: 'the Figure of Similitude is very necessary, by which we not only beautify our tale but also very much enforce and enlarge it. I say enforce because no one thing more prevaileth with all ordinary judgments than persuasion by similitude.'[3] Puttenham's theory is capacious enough to include a range of comparative techniques, including but not limited to what are now called 'simile' and

[1] These lines recall Ezekiel 36.26: 'I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.' See Tiffany Jo Werth, 'A heart of stone: the ungodly in early modern England', in *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, ed. Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi (New York, 2012), 181–203; p. 181.

[2] See Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld–'s discussion of simile in *Indecorous Thinking: Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics* (New York, 2018), p. 104.This article is deeply indebted to Rosenfeld's work in this area.

[3] *The Art of English Poesy by George Puttenham: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca and London, 2007), p. 326.

'metaphor'. Noting that the expression of resemblance makes writing more pleasing, he introduces a distinctive vocabulary of 'enforcing' to suggest that such figures are also useful tools for compelling readers' judgement. As the introduction to chapter 19 makes clear, carefully chosen words effect pro-found 'alteration in man' through the power of persuasion: 'what else is man but his mind?Which, whosoever have skill to compass and make yielding and flexible, what may not he com-mand the body to perform?'[4] The mind is 'assail-able' by words, and this in turn determines actions. Puttenham emphasizes that skilfully constructed figures assert authority over others, making them flex and yield. Resemblance is an important part of this work, and Puttenham deploys his own 'figure of similitude' to drive home the point that many words are better than few: 'one or two drops of water pierce not the flint stone, but many and often droppings do'.[5] His account of the careful arrange-ment of words overwhelming others' resistance is disquieting in the context of Puttenham's own life. Court records confirm that he was a sexual preda-tor and serial abuser, and his recent editors offer him as 'a limit case of Renaissance misogyny'.[6] The present discussion does not pursue a biographical angle, but neither does it regard Puttenham's char-acter as coincidental. He knew, as Shakespeare did, that 'figures of similitude' were more than tech-nical exercises, and that likening one thing or per-son to another could powerfully influence people's judgements and actions. Shakespeare's poem, like Puttenham's *Arte*, recognizes the operations of similitude as a means towards asserting power. Unlike the *Arte*, however, *A Lover's Complaint* is equivocal in its treatment of such figures. While this equivocation reveals the force of literary figures which express resemblance, it is also sensitive to the complex and sometimes ruinous feelings, including desire, which draw people into one another's likeness.

A Lover's Complaint has long been considered 'among the most bafflingly beautiful poems in English', and readers have found the language of its 329 rhyme royal lines (ababbcc) strange and elusive.[7] Together with 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', it tends to be regarded as an outlier in the Shakespearian canon. Part of the problem lies in long-standing doubts about authorship, and the conviction among some scholars that its quality is insufficiently Shakespearian. Many readers wish the poem away, or wish it was something other than it is.[8] A clear thematic and structural relationship is, however, well established between *A Lover's Complaint* and the preceding poems which together comprise the 1609 volume entitled *Shake-speares Sonnets*. The sonnets delve into love's agonies and complexities, whilst *A Lover's Complaint* deals with a disastrous and duplex erotic entanglement. The pairing of these two texts is aligned with Elizabethan tradition where sonnet sequences were conventionally followed by a narrative complaint in a woman's voice.[9] Recent critical responses tend to cluster around questions of this sort, attending to origin, form and structure rather than pursuing interpretive approaches. This reluctance surely stems, in part, from the difficulty of the poem's subject: the portrayal of an abusive sexual relationship, and the persistence of confused desire.[10] This article takes *A Lover's Complaint* seriously on its own terms, proposing that Shakespeare brought the formidable and equivocating capabilities of 'figures of

[4] Puttenham, *Art*, p. 281. [5] Puttenham, *Art*, p. 281.

[6] See Whigham and Rebhorn's introduction to Puttenham, *Art*, p. 8.

[7] Jonathan Post, *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Poems: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2017), p. 108.

[8] On the 'authorship question', see Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, A Lover's Complaint and John Davies of Hereford* (Cambridge, 2007), and Hugh Craig, 'George Chapman, John Davies of Hereford, William Shakespeare, and *A Lover's Complaint*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63 (2012), 147–74. Post helpfully summarizes this debate in *Introduction*, p. 106.

[9] Colin Burrow, 'Shakespeare the poet', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge, 2010), 91–104; p. 101.

[10] Stephen Whitworth has aptly described complaint as 'that mode that forever presences a traumatic and seductive past'. See '"Where excess begs all": Shakespeare, Freud, and the diacritics of melancholy', in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's A Lover's Complaint*, ed. Shirley Sharon-Zisser (Aldershot, 2006), 165–77; p. 165.

similitude' to a singularly challenging subject. As Colleen Rosenfeld has argued, '*simile* builds hesitation, negotiation, and even accommodation into its own syntax – in English, its *as* and its *so*'.[11] Far from folding one thing into another – such as a hard heart into a stone, or a softened heart into water – the hesitation in simile, and in other related 'figures of similitude', offered Shakespeare a way of expressing the consequences of emotional manipulation. As the young woman knows by the end of the poem, the awfulness of abuse exposes the abused to disturbed feeling. If the processes through which such similes emerge in *A Lover's Complaint* sometimes seem strained, this is part of the poem's enquiry into 'likening' – and, relatedly, its anatomization of what it means to be forcibly 'lovered' (320).[12]

A Lover's Complaint relays a series of overlapping stories in which stones and gemstones feature prominently, together with material detritus such as twisted metal, melted wax, salt crystals and silk threads. Despite the poem's thorough attention to 'objects manifold' (216), it has seldom caught the attention of readers interested in materialities. A lively strand of scholarship on early modern literature and culture has recently revealed diverse and often unexpected connections between people and things, not least seemingly inert substances. Scholarship on Renaissance aliveness has shown that the early modern world of elemental stuff such as stones, metal and water cannot be neatly separated out from human agency, affectivity and embodiment. Shakespeare's works often explore the relationship between people and material things, as Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi have shown, finding 'the lively presence of dirt, earth, wood, and stones imagined as states and substances embedded within and alongside "the human"'.[13] This article considers from a new angle the relationship between objects and affective personhood, focusing on resemblance rather than correspondence. It is argued here that the embedding of elemental matter within and alongside people in *A Lover's Complaint* addresses specifically gendered questions around control and consent. Working through patterns of likeness rather than sameness or signification, Shakespeare explores the chilling risks involved for women when they – or their lovers – resemble material stuff.

Part of the poem's oft-cited difficulty lies in its structural complexity. The young man's voice is heard only when it is spoken by the young woman, and she describes him perplexingly as 'maiden-tongued' (100). His voice resembles hers, and her voice resembles his. It is therefore unclear which lover's complaint we are reading, making even the poem's title feel uneasy. The young woman is speaking to a 'reverend man' (57) and their conversation is overheard and reported, in turn, by an anonymous narrator. Unlike most early modern complaint poems, however, this narrator does not return in the closing lines. The poem tells a story about deception which is left open in that the victim seems willing, at the end, to repeat the violation which has been perpetrated against her. *A Lover's Complaint* has a legal flavour, in keeping with its interwoven and sometimes competing testimonies, and deals centrally with evidence, witnesses and verdicts.[14] The recalcitrance of what the poet-lawyer Abraham Fraunce calls 'fayned similitudes' makes clear the difficulty of determining who, if anyone, is telling the truth.[15] It is a difficulty which works in this poem to

[11] Rosenfeld, *Indecorous Thinking*, p. 97.

[12] This thinking is indebted to Elizabeth Scott-Baumann and Hannah Crawforth's original reading of *A Lover's Complaint* in the present volume, which explores, through the work of Sara Ahmed, the ways in which 'the object of the complaint enforces his (usually his) will upon the complainant'.

[13] See the introduction to Feerick and Nardizzi, eds., *Indistinct Human*, 1–12; p. 4; and, relatedly, the essays in two important collections on early modern ideas of 'the human': Wendy Beth Hyman, ed., *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature* (London, 2016), and Kevin Curran, ed., *Renaissance Personhood: Materiality, Taxonomy, Process* (Edinburgh, 2020).

[14] For the poem's legal context, see Katharine A. Craik, 'Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint* and early modern criminal confession', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53 (2002), 437–59, and John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint' – An Anthology* (Oxford, 1991), p. 29.

[15] Abraham Fraunce, *The Lawiers Logike* (1588), sig. U1v; quoted in Rosenfeld, *Indecorous Thinking*, p. 102.

the young man's advantage, and to the young woman's detriment. Arguments *ex similitudine* are a notably weak form of proof since they depend, by their very nature, on approximation rather than precision. Shakespeare does not resolve this problem in *A Lover's Complaint*, which focuses determinedly on what people are like, rather than who or what they are. 'Figures of similitude' dwell on inexactness, qualification and provisionality rather than any fixed capacity to determine who or what is real. While this inexactness demonstrates the richness of likeness as a way of approaching early modern personhood, and expresses elegantly the dereliction of apparent affinity into remoteness, it also registers the doubts which make it so demanding to voice, or to believe, a lover's complaint.

I

A Lover's Complaint introduces the theme of erotic desolation through the language of gemstones (rubies, pearls, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, opals) familiar from epideictic poetry. Towards the start of the poem, but after her abandonment, the young woman casts an array of stony love-tokens into a river:

> A thousand favours from a maund she drew
> Of amber, crystal, and of beaded jet,
> Which one by one she in a river threw
> Upon whose weeping margin she was set;
> Like usury applying wet to wet,
> Or monarch's hands that lets not bounty fall
> Where want cries some, but where excess begs all.
> (36–42)

The young woman rescinds these mementos in a highly dramatic and stylized manner whilst 'breaking rings a-twain' (6) and tearing up letters and sonnets. There is something luxurious in the young woman's persona which the poem's narrator will later call 'suffering ecstasy' (69). Her acts of destruction against symbolic objects, and therefore against the young man, seem like performative acts of self-destruction as she sets about 'Storming her world with sorrow's wind and rain' (7). Margreta de Grazia has argued, in an essay on *King Lear*, that 'if having is tantamount to being, *not* having is tantamount to *non*-being – to being nothing'.[16] And yet the gemstones, or the young woman's act of destroying them, seem to function productively 'like usury' – a simile which suggests their lawless multiplication as they generate more weeping water, and more excess, which together intimate the course of devastation which will follow.

Gemstones are locked into an interpretive system which maps their appearance onto female virtues of beauty and restraint through the well-worn tradition of *blason*.[17] The significance of gems in *blason* generally works through uncomplicated logic, their colours and lustre matching women's bodily, emotional or moral complexions. According to this precisely calibrated affective register, 'pallid pearls' signify grief while 'rubies red as blood' encode either passion or the modesty of a blush (198). It is a register with which the young man is clearly familiar. To him, however, 'fair gems' (208) have a qualitative economic frame as well as a visual and affective one. Their beauty and lustre are, he claims, guarantors of their giver's 'nature, worth, and quality' (210). The young man is not referring only to his own credentials, for the stones which the young woman casts into the water are the same ones which he had received from women whom he had previously deceived:

> . . . they their passions likewise lent me
> Of grief and blushes, aptly understood
> In bloodless white and the encrimsoned mood –
> Effects of terror and dear modesty,
> Encamped in hearts, but fighting outwardly.
> (199–203)

The passion, grief and modesty encoded by the gemstones does not originally belong to either of the

[16] Margreta de Grazia, 'The ideology of superfluous things', in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge, 1996), 17–42; 21–2.

[17] Catherine Bates argues that these gems are keyed into 'a long history of lapidary symbolism and are to be treated as signifiers loaded with meaning'. See 'Feminine identifications in *A Lover's Complaint*', in *Masculinity, Gender and Identity in the English Renaissance Lyric* (Cambridge, 2007), 174–215; p. 185.

lovers, then, but to the 'many a several fair' (206) whom the young man has earlier courted and likewise abused. Still their meanings are not in doubt because they are, he insists, 'aptly understood'. Women and gemstones are precisely aligned, and the human is seamlessly folded into the natural world. In the young man's imagination, these are objects which 'surround . . . inhabit . . . even constitute' the discarded women they refer to.[18] In this respect, *A Lover's Complaint* engages with what Wendy Beth Hyman has described as the 'long and often troubling poetic tradition wherein the female addressee is featured as an object – specifically, an object made by poetry'.[19] The young man's account of his conquests, and the precious materials which are their expression and residue, draws from this masculinist tradition. In what follows, however, women look *like* objects but no longer feature *as* them.

The young man claims that the 'wounded fancies' of his former lovers prompted them to offer him further material stuff:

> And, lo, behold these talents of their hair,
> With twisted mettle amorously impleached,
> I have received from many a several fair,
> Their kind acceptance weepingly beseeched,
> With th'annexations of fair gems enriched,
> And deep-brained sonnets that did amplify
> Each stone's dear nature, worth, and quality.
> (204–10)

A troupe of already abandoned women offered 'talents' of their own hair, plaited into metal ornaments. Talents are coins, or plates of precious metal, suggesting again that the enrichment expressed by such gifts is literal as well as affective. In the young man's estimation, women's suffering subjecthood is twisted or plaited ('impleached') into these objects:

> The diamond? – why, 'twas beautiful and hard,
> Whereto his invised properties did tend;
> The deep-green em'rald, in whose fresh regard
> Weak sights their sickly radiance do amend;
> The heaven-hued sapphire and the opal blend
> With objects manifold; each several stone,
> With wit well blazoned, smiled or made some moan.
> (211–17)

The male-seeming diamond expresses 'his invised properties' of beauty and hardness, which sound like the young man's own. Shakespeare often evokes stones to suggest men's lack of human feeling.[20] Here, however, the young man self-regardingly affirms, through his stoniness, his own beautiful and remote desirability. Meanwhile, the fresh green hue of the emerald soothes 'weak sights', in accordance with contemporary medical belief, while the blueness of the sapphire suggests heaven.[21] These stones, too, 'smiled or made some moan' on behalf of the forsaken women who willingly gave them. To the young man, the women's agonized desire, however, seems readily transferrable to a new lover-in-waiting. Shakespeare here reflects on *blason*'s rigorous and cold codework, but also hints at the cost to women when the human fuses unproblematically with the natural world. As John Kerrigan writes of the young woman in *A Lover's Complaint*, '[a] bundle of suasive metaphors – made up of gemstones and "deep-brained sonnets" – is her undoing'.[22]

Puttenham regards *blason* as part of the '*Icon*, or Resemblance by Imagery', offering examples from his own work *Partheniades*, which compares Queen Elizabeth to a clutch of precious stones: her forehead is silver, her brows are ebony, her hair is gold, her lips are 'ruby rock', her breasts are alabaster. Puttenham explains that *blason* works in this way to 'resemble every part of her body to some natural thing of excellent perfection'.[23] As Nancy Vickers

[18] Feerick and Nardizzi, eds., *Indistinct Human*, p. 4.

[19] Wendy Beth Hyman, *Impossible Desire and the Limits of Knowledge in Renaissance Poetry* (Oxford, 2019), p. 28.

[20] For example, Cordelia's murderers are 'men of stones' (*King Lear*, 5.3.232) and Murellus addresses the commoners as stones or 'senseless things' (*Julius Caesar*, 1.1.35).

[21] For a discussion of *materia medica*, see Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery* (New Haven and London, 2009), esp. pp. 2 and 108.

[22] *The Sonnets; and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan (London, 1986), p. 18.

[23] Puttenham, *Art*, pp. 329–30. Lisa Gim discusses Puttenham's departure from conventional *blason*; see 'Blasoning "The princesse paragon": the workings of George Puttenham's false semblant in his *Partheniades* to Queen Elizabeth', *Modern Language Studies* 28 (1998), 75–92; p. 82.

has observed, *blason* tends, however, to disassemble women by breaking them up into constituent parts. An elaborate imaginative projection of the male speaker's desire, *blason* sets out to praise the uniqueness of the female beloved. But through an accumulation of similitudes, the effect is to suggest that – as the narrative attributed to the young man in *A Lover's Complaint* affirms – all women are the same.[24] The capriciousness of such comparisons is, famously, the subject of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130:

> 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;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks
>
> (1–6)

This sonnet draws attention to the artificiality, and indeed mendacity, involved in comparison, and sticks resolutely instead to what is real. 'Figures of similitude' conventionally register women's beauty by mapping their features onto natural properties. This sonnet insists, however, that the beloved is 'nothing like' coral, snow or roses, and indeed like nothing else. Similes cannot do her justice because she is not similar to anything. Sonnet 21 also suggests that comparisons are cheap, including any 'couplement of proud compare / . . . with earth, and sea's rich gems' (5–6). Such couplement only devalues the beloved's singular uniqueness. Shakespeare returns to the futility of comparison in *A Lover's Complaint*, which thoroughly explores, through the unscrupulous young man's (reported) words, the consequences of likening women to things. Now the 'aptness' of the comparison expressed by *blazon* looks like a strict sameness akin to coercion, while unwarranted likenesses are rhetorical ploys which contribute to a considered strategy of sexual predation.[25] *A Lover's Complaint* is still more sceptical than the *Sonnets* about the role of comparison in gendered relationship, particularly the traditions of love poetry in which men tag female beauty into a pre-existing set of correspondences. In other parts of this poem, however, 'figures of simili-tude' encompass less familiar, less predictable and therefore less readily dismissed patterns of likening.

The narrator observes of the young woman that 'Some beauty peeped through lattice of seared age' (14). Old before her time, her youth is nevertheless still discernible through her lattice-work wrinkles. This strange comparison grows stranger when the narrator describes how the young woman's 'seasoned woe had pelleted in tears' (18). A pellet is a gunstone, shot or projectile, a jarring image which the next stanza develops further:

> Sometimes her levelled eyes their carriage ride
> As they did batt'ry to the spheres intend;
> Sometime diverted their poor balls are tied
> To th'orbèd earth; sometimes they do extend
> Their view right on; anon their gazes lend
> To every place at once, and nowhere fixed,
> The mind and sight distractedly commixed.
>
> (22–8)

Rather than resembling rich gems, or stars, the young woman's rolling 'eyes their carriage ride' as though they are on wheels. Her face becomes a careering cannon poised on a gun-carriage which takes aim, randomly, at larger 'spheres' in the sky and at 'th'orbèd earth'.[26] This comparison is sufficiently discordant to render the young woman not quite human, developing a sense of her deathlike aspect which elaborates the narrator's early impression that her body is 'The carcass of beauty spent and done' (11).[27] The comparison is unexpected, but is nevertheless in keeping with

[24] See Nancy Vickers 's influential discussion of 'the limits – indeed the dangers – of that inherited, insufficient, descriptive rhetoric' in '"The blazon of sweet beauty's best": Shakespeare's *Lucrece*', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London, 1985), 95–115; p. 96.

[25] For an account of competitive similitude, see *Sonnets*, ed. Kerrigan, pp. 18–23. Kerrigan points out that 'Similarity depends on difference; for without difference there is identity, not similitude' (p. 23).

[26] This discussion is indebted to Kerrigan's perceptive notes to this passage in *Sonnets*, pp. 398–9.

[27] The young woman is described as 'a living ghost' by Rosalind Smith, Michelle O'Callaghan and Sarah C. E. Ross in 'Complaint', in *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry*, ed. Catherine Bates (Chichester, 2018), 339–52; p. 345.

Puttenham's account in *The Art of English Poesy* of certain 'figures of similitude' which are capable of finding 'resemblance in a kind of dissimilitude'.[28] This kind of likening involves drawing attention not only to what someone is like, but also to what they are ordinarily *not* like. Other examples arise in Shakespeare's plays when Othello imagines an immaculate world, free from the threat of sexual abandonment and infidelity, as 'one entire and perfect chrysolite' (*Othello*, 5.2.152),[29] and when Lartius describes the bloodied Coriolanus as a bright red 'carbuncle entire' (*Coriolanus* 1.5.26). It is the *in*exactness of the resemblance between a colossal green gemstone and a chaste world, or between a small glistening garnet and a military colossus, which is striking. Rather than the sameness and correspondence expressed by *blason*, these comparisons between people and material stuff keep the possibility of difference in play. Such surprising and dissonant 'figures of similitude' are well equipped, as we will see, to express the young woman's intractable desire which betokens the gravity and incommensurability of the young man's actions against her.

The presence of difference in similitude is particularly important in the stanza where we began. Here the young woman turns her 'reason into tears' (296):

> But with the inundation of the eyes
> What rocky heart to water will not wear?
> What breast so cold that is not warmèd here?
> O cleft effect!
>
> (290–3)

Stones were sometimes connected to constancy and stability through ideas of Stoic stoutheartedness. One of the young man's previous conquests, after all, was a nun who resolved to be 'immured' (251), or fastened into rock, in order to avoid further temptation. Here the young woman's rocky resistance dissolves into warm aliveness. And yet she is no Niobe for whom 'An objective, stony "it" becomes a weeping, stony "I"', and in whom subject and object slide smoothly together. In an essay on mineral emotions in Shakespeare, Lara Bovilsky argues that 'emotional distinction between stones and men is not an absolute'. For Bovilsky, this indistinctiveness creates a new 'mineral identity' which facilitates the expression of emotional extremity such as grief or despair.[30] While *A Lover's Complaint* uses stones and stoniness to express strong feeling, the phasing of stones and people into one another does not permit new ways of being or doing. The young woman enters into likeness with the tearful young man, but also recognizes their resemblance as a 'cleft effect' which involves difference as well as sameness. 'To cleave' means to split apart, but also to stick fast or adhere. The word is an apt description of those 'figures of similitude' which express, through resemblance, both togetherness and apartness. The technical work of literary figures also, however, betokens a wider dynamic of 'likening' which suggests the terrible risks involved for women in prospecting for similitude. The young man and the young woman had seemed to share a moment of tearful preparedness, but this seeming sameness is short lived. For as the young woman realizes, in her stark retrospective commentary, they were never really together or even proximate: 'our drops this diff'rence bore: / His poisoned me, and mine did him restore' (300–1).

II

Puttenham's description of *Omiosis*, or Resemblance, forms part of his account 'Of figures sententious, otherwise called rhetorical'. His theory of 'general Resemblance, or bare Similitude' is followed by

[28] Puttenham, *Art*, p. 328. Kerrigan notes in *Sonnets* that 'Shakespeare writes with a keen sense of the difference in similitude' (p. 23).

[29] The imagined chrysolite is surely connected to jealousy's 'green-eyed monster' (3.3.170).

[30] Lara Bovilsky, 'Shakespeare's mineral emotions', in *Renaissance Posthumanism*, ed. Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano (New York, 2016), 253–82; pp. 266 and 260. Jane Bennett outlines her related theory of 'the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations' in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, 2010), p. vii.

three specific examples which together make a poet 'an excellent persuader'. The first operates, as we have already seen, through visual imagery (*icon*), while the second offers moral lessons (*parabola*), and the third aligns past with present examples (*paradigma*). The first, resemblance through visual imagery, 'is not only performed by likening of lively creatures one to another, but also of any other natural thing bearing a proportion of similitude, as to liken yellow to gold, white to silver, red to the rose, soft to silk, hard to the stone'.[31] Resemblances which engage the reader's perceptions, particularly the senses of sight and touch, may be convincing enough to 'alter and affect the ear and also the mind'. The aim is to bring about, as Puttenham describes in his account of metaphor, 'an inversion of sense by transport'.[32] The sketching out of resemblance not only enchants the reader, but also inverts their judgement – and perhaps transports them altogether. Jenny Mann has recently argued that early modern literature and rhetoric had absorbed ancient Greek theories of the rhetorical sublime in which skilful orators sought to overwhelm listeners, overcoming resistance through height and magnitude of eloquence. As Mann points out, there is a strongly gendered aspect to this vocabulary of violent forcing and vanquishing.[33] The young man in *A Lover's Complaint* is an accomplished speaker who deploys many persuasive 'figures of similitude', including all three of Puttenham's strategies detailed above. As the young woman says, he has at his fingertips 'the dialect and different skill, / Catching all passions in his craft of will' (125–6). She recognizes that his arguments are moreover designed with an aggressive purpose to 'besiege' (177) or to 'maim' (312). The young man himself makes clear, speaking of his former lovers, 'Harm have I done to them' (194). The young woman has been manipulated by the young man's rhetoric, like many others before her, and her 'white stole of chastity' (297) has been seized without her consent. But while *A Lover's Complaint* deals with predatory abuse, it is not only the story of an offence perpetrated against a hapless victim. The poem ends with the victim wishing it would happen again, so that the young man's falseness might 'yet again betray the fore-betrayed, / And new pervert a reconcilèd maid' (328–9). How to interpret these concluding lines? It seems important to acknowledge their ambiguity, which resists straightforward judgement or condemnation. Attention to the dynamics of similitude reveals the depth of the young man's betrayal, but also the disturbing effects on the young woman of the calumny perpetrated against her.

This moral complexity arises, in part, from Shakespeare's attention to Puttenham's first 'figure of resemblance': the *icon* which compares people to any 'natural thing bearing a proportion of similitude'. When Puttenham discusses visual likeness, he borrows 'the painter's term, who yieldeth to the eye a visible representation'. Poets, too, can achieve 'Resemblance by Imagery or Portrait', creating a picture by likening a person to someone or something.[34] In *A Lover's Complaint*, it is the young woman's words (reported by the narrator) which picture the young man's beauty by comparing him to material stuff. Like the 'silken figures' (17) embroidered on her own handkerchief, his downy chin is 'unshorn velvet' (94). He is a soft, desirable thing whose 'browny locks . . . hang in crookèd curls' (85) like 'silken parcels' (87). She goes on to describe the young man's belongings as not simply accoutrements, but ways of conceiving and experiencing his aliveness:

> His real habitude gave life and grace
> To appertainings and to ornament,
> Accomplished in himself, not in his case.
> All aids, themselves made fairer by their place,
> Came for additions; yet their purposed trim
> Pieced not his grace, but were all graced by him.
> (114–19)

The young man's 'real habitude', or way of being, gives 'life and grace / To appertainings and to ornament'. Whilst he carries with him many lovely and expensive things designed to supplement his beauty, these do not confer grace upon his person.

[31] Puttenham, *Art*, p. 329. [32] Puttenham, *Art*, pp. 282, 238.
[33] Jenny Mann, *The Trials of Orpheus: Poetry, Science and the Early Modern Sublime* (Princeton, 2021); see ch. 4, 'Softening', pp. 128–56; p. 136.
[34] Puttenham, *Art*, p. 329.

Instead, it is the youth's lovely-seeming person which gives grace to his things, making these trimmings appear not only graceful but also as nobly alive as he is. Like a still-life *vanitas* painting, subject and object seem for a moment not only interchangeable but also mutually constitutive: 'The subject passes into the object, the object slides into the subject, in the activity by which each becomes itself.'[35] In the young woman's account, however, such processes of passing or sliding do not happen smoothly or seamlessly. There is no straightforward levelling of humans with the natural things which surround them as Shakespeare keeps dwelling on the kinds of difference created and maintained by expressions of resemblance.

The young woman reflects not only on the young man's likeness *to* objects, but on his likeness *as* an object. Just as the unthinking multitude in *Hamlet* long for a 'picture in little' (2.2.367) of the villainous Claudius, everyone wants a copy of this unscrupulous young man:

> Many there were that did his picture get
> To serve their eyes, and in it put their mind,
> Like fools that in th'imagination set
> The goodly objects which abroad they find
> Of lands and mansions, theirs in thought assigned
> (134–8)

This resemblance has a volatile effect on those who encounter it. The young man is irresistible, but so is his pictured likeness. People treasure the picture as a highly desirable thing, and this makes them believe that they possess the young man himself. Rather than harbouring his image in their minds, as one might expect, besotted viewers bestow their minds upon his image. Those who contemplate his likeness believe – erroneously – that the young man's person becomes 'theirs in thought assigned', as though his features and qualities are 'goodly objects' which can be purchased. Shakespeare offers a similar account of the caprices of devoted perception in Sonnet 113, where all 'quick objects' (7) take on the likeness of the absent beloved. Here the sense of sight is distorted by the mind's loosening grip on reality: 'My most true mind thus makes mine eye untrue' (Sonnet 113.14). The stakes are higher in *A Lover's Complaint*, where seeing likenesses of people in objects, or objects in people, involves a similar sense of alienation but also proves perversely impossible to resist.

Such vagaries of perception are central to *A Lover's Complaint*. The poem is set in a 'concave womb' (1) which functions like an eerie echo chamber. The narrative emerges through a series of reported speeches in which the same story is heard and then 'reworded' several times. The young woman ventriloquizes her assailant; and her voice is, in turn, re-worded by the poem's narrator. As Bruce R. Smith has written, 'The maiden's voice is "double" not only because it echoes across the vale but because the spectator-listener makes *her* voice *his* voice'.[36] A series of metaphors conveys the young man's ruthless strategy:

> O then advance of yours that phraseless hand,
> Whose white weighs down the airy scale of praise.
> Take all these similes to your own command,
> Hallowed with sighs that burning lungs did raise.
> What me, your minister for you, obeys
> (225–9)

Despite this cluster of resemblances (hand/language, comparing/weighing, breath/fire, lover/priest), the young woman's 'phraseless' hand seems beyond comparison, and beyond the usual literary formulae exemplified by *blason*. Her hand is whiter than anything registered by a familiar 'scale of praise' which might make reference, say, to alabaster. In a culminating gesture which heightens the significance in *A Lover's Complaint* of 'figures of similitude', the young man invites the young woman to '[t]ake all these similes to your own command'. Given the forcibleness of simile in the young man's hands, it seems a radical move.

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[35] See the introduction to de Grazia, Quilligan and Stallybrass, eds., *Subject and Object*, 1–13; p. 2.

[36] Bruce R. Smith, *The Key of Green: Passion and Perception in Renaissance Culture* (Chicago and London, 2009), ch. 5, 'Listening for green', pp. 168–207; p. 175.

When the young woman's (reported) voice takes over from the young man's, she does indeed command simile by painting her seducer into an elaborate *ekphrasis*:

> This said, his wat'ry eyes he did dismount,
> Whose sights till then were levelled on my face.
> Each cheek a river running from a fount
> With brinish current downward flowed apace.
> O, how the channel to the stream gave grace,
> Who glazed with crystal gate the glowing roses
> That flame through water which their hue encloses.
> (281–7)

This stanza returns to the image of tears as bullets: when the young man casts his eyes downwards, the 'dismount' resembles an act of removing guns from a carriage. The word 'levelled' confirms again that his gaze has taken aggressive aim. Now the young man resembles a fountain, and his tears are a stream. In Desdemona's Willow Song in *Othello*, an abandoned lover's 'salt tears fell from her and softened the stones' (4.3.44). In *A Lover's Complaint*, however, it is the treacherous abuser who weeps while his stony fabric remains unsoftened. A 'false fire' glows in his blushing cheeks like a precious stone emanating glowing light, or a wet ornament enclosed in glass.[37] Reflecting and refracting the poem's opening tableau, the young man is a 'false jewel' (154) who resembles the stony favours which the young woman casts into the river at the start of the poem, 'applying wet to wet' (40). Hyman points out in her discussion of Renaissance *carpe diem* poetry that, 'as these poems relegate their love objects to inert matter, they exile themselves from the successful consummation of desire'.[38] In *A Lover's Complaint*, however, neither the young man nor the young woman are relegated to inert matter but instead persistently likened to it. And in keeping with this poem's complexities, these acts of likening intimate rather than hindering sex whilst also prolonging the equivocation of desire.

The poem's ending portrays the young woman as an abused but still ardent lover, and it is this unfashionably ambiguous conclusion which has hardened the poem's reputation as 'the most abjected part of the Shakespeare canon'.[39] Complaint poetry usually leaves women in a state of repentant abjection, but in the closing stanzas of *A Lover's Complaint* the young woman describes her loss of chastity as more or less inevitable:

> Who, young and simple, would not be so lovered?
> Ay me, I fell, and yet do question make
> What I should do again for such a sake.
>
> O that infected moisture of his eye,
> O that false fire which in his cheek so glowed,
> O that forced thunder from his heart did fly,
> O that sad breath his spongy lungs bestowed,
> O all that borrowed motion seeming owed
> Would yet again betray the fore-betrayed,
> And new pervert a reconcilèd maid.
> (320–9)

The young woman now recognizes all of the young man's resemblances – false tears, blushes, words – as adjunct or not quite real: 'this man's untrue' (169). He has presented a simulacrum of himself full of borrowed 'motion' or emotion. Suspended between what is and what is not, he is a consummate performer who 'takes and leaves, / In either's aptness, as it best deceives' (305–6). *A Lover's Complaint* resembles Shakespeare's other poems, especially the *Sonnets*, in its attention to the ways in which people can fashion themselves, misleadingly, into a variety of unreal personae for their own ends. It is, however, different from the *Sonnets* in its insistence that the reader bear witness to the skilful planning of naked sexual abuse. Less easily still, however, Shakespeare requires that the reader look unflinchingly at one particularly problematic legacy of abuse: the persistence of desire. It is significant in this regard that the young woman expresses intractable yearning not for the young man, but instead for his treachery against her ('Would yet again betray the fore-betrayed'). The feeling looks perverse, even to the young woman herself. But the fact that her longing is not readily erased by her recognition of the young man's perfidy

[37] See Kerrigan's notes in *Sonnets*, pp. 420–1.
[38] Hyman, *Impossible Desire*, p. 28.
[39] Bates, 'Feminine identifications', p. 174.

underlines the efficacy of the abuse – and the sheer difficulty of answering or escaping from it.

While many readers have found the language of *A Lover's Complaint* artificial and ornate, this article has considered its stylistic technicity as an important aspect of its achievement. Shakespeare scrutinizes what Puttenham and other literary theorists regarded, with more or less relish, as the capacity of 'figures of similitude' to persuade, manipulate and overwhelm. Puttenham's rough and unruly nature suggests that he, in particular, knew that words could become agents of control against women, making their minds and bodies 'yielding and flexible'. In his *Apology for Poetry* (1579?), Philip Sidney is unimpressed by writers who labour with the blunt instruments which he calls '*similiter* cadences'. Resemblances are weak proofs that achieve nothing on their own terms, he argues, only nudging the listener in a direction they were already pursuing: 'the force of a similitude not being to prove anything to a contrary disputer, but only to explain to a willing hearer'.[40] Similes persuade only those who are already a 'soft audience' (278). *A Lover's Complaint* explores the forcible operations of simile by showcasing the young man's shifty fluency with *blason* which blends vulnerable women and natural objects seamlessly together. *Blason* fixes women into stone, and presses home their featureless indistinguishability. The poem's other 'figures of resemblance' move beyond such transparently coercive efforts of same-making, however, and explore instead the inexactness and hesitancy involved in comparison. Similes were never intended to offer resolution, as Sidney makes clear, for readers are directed 'by similitudes not to be satisfied'.[41] *A Lover's Complaint* explores how such equivocation can be deployed to unscrupulous ends, but also how and why these ends can be so difficult to identify, recognize and expose.

A Lover's Complaint pays particularly close attention to imprecise resemblances between people and natural or elemental objects. Recent criticism on Shakespeare's plays has focused on 'the coextensive nature of human and nonhuman living things' which look and act like one another, and which share the same environment.[42] In his comedies, as Mary Floyd-Wilson has argued, Shakespeare uses metal and stone to express the mysteries of desire: 'The same force that draws metals to stones can also activate extraordinary bonds between people.'[43] In particular, the lodestone (or magnet) makes visible the secret attraction of one entity to another. *A Lover's Complaint* does not, however, deal with pleasurably mutual attraction, where like hearkens inexorably to like, but instead with a disastrously unbalanced connection. Accordingly, *A Lover's Complaint* does not make humans into objects, but into likenesses of objects which keep registering their difference from one another. Shakespeare shows how a skilful abuser of language can captivate the imagination through creating seeming sameness. In its closing lines, however, the poem concentrates on desire's capacity to bend the will, and its disturb-ance of how and what we feel – and who or what we are. Catherine Bates is correct to argue that 'the poem presents a view of human motivation and desire that is profoundly at odds with all that might seem logical or reasonable, let alone ethical'.[44] *A Lover's Complaint* is nevertheless truthful and therefore ethical in its account of the messiness and trickery involved in encountering (and assuming) others' likenesses, but also in its clear-sighted picture of the disturbed feelings which register grievous injury. The poem's engagement with equivocating 'figures of similitude' is inseparable from its attention to the devastating end of a devastating encounter, and its wider exploration, through likening, of the ominous unknowability of the other.

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[40] Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester, 1973), p. 139.

[41] Sidney, *Apology*, p. 139.

[42] Feerick and Nardizzi, eds., *Indistinct Human*, p. 5.

[43] Mary Floyd-Wilson, 'The nature of attraction in *Twelfth* Night', in *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge, 2013), 73–90; pp. 73–4.

[44] Bates, 'Feminine identifications', p. 195. For a Lacanian reading, see Shirley Sharon-Zisser, '"True to bondage": the rhetorical forms of female masochism in A Lover's Complaint', in *Critical Essays*, ed. Sharon-Zisser, 179–90. Sharon-Zisser finds in the poem 'a poetic theorization of the psychic condition which psychoanalysis came to call female masochism' (p. 179).