



Poetry and Painting in the 17th Century

A supplement to works in the Willard-Newell Gallery

In October 2015, I asked students in English Renaissance Poetry (ENGL 313) to write texts linking short selections from poems in the course anthology with paintings in the Allen's Willard-Newell Gallery. I assigned the paintings; the students had to pick the poems. In fewer than 250 words, the students were to contextualize the lines and indicate how they saw a connection between these lines and the painting. Because of space limitation, only six of these are reproduced here (two responses to each of three paintings), but even in this selection, one can see a broad range of ideas about how paintings and poems can speak to each other. I have somewhat edited the students' responses for clarity and continuity.

—*Nicholas Jones, Professor of English, Oberlin College*

**Peter Paul Rubens,
The Finding of Erichthonius,
1632–33**

Excerpt from Ben Jonson's "How He Saw Her," in *A Celebration of Charis in Ten Lyric Pieces*, ca. 1622

The aging poet, in love with "Charis," asks Cupid to pierce her heart, but the love-god refuses, throwing his bow and arrow to the ground.

I, foolhardy, there up took
Both the arrow he had quit
And the bow; with thought to hit
This my object. But she threw
Such a lightning, as I drew,
At my face, that took my sight
And my motion from me quite;
So that there I stood a stone,
Mocked of all; and called of one
(Which with grief and wrath I heard)
Cupid's statue with a beard,
Or else one that played his ape,
In a Hercules-his [Hercules's] shape.

Rubens offers a glimmering realization of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Hephaestus, the lame god of the foundry, attempted to rape Athena. His sperm fell onto the earth, impregnating the earth goddess Gaia, who gave birth to the serpentine Erichthonius. The baby, a reminder of Hephaestus's shame, became the charge of three princesses. But Rubens's painting is only a fraction of the original work; two of these royals have been sliced out, leaving only an ankle and a sensuous



hip. As if to further obscure Rubens's mythological allusion, someone later painted a bouquet over Erichthonius, and eliminated the fountain and the two princesses. Conservators subsequently salvaged the serpent-child, and revealed the fountain and what was left of the princesses. Ben Jonson's "How He Saw Her" may be seen as an additional act of painting conservation, restoring the part of the myth that is absent from the painting. In the poem, Jonson is rejected by his beloved, and even by Cupid, seeing himself as ugly and inadequate. The poet is the very picture of the ugly god Hephaestus. And yet the dismissed paramour feels a strange pride in his shame, enough to write a poem about it. Shame is an emotion that Rubens, too, poignantly conveys through the unnatural Erichthonius, with his slimy legs and grasping limbs, a metonymy for the missing Hephaestus. Although he lacks Rubens's subtlety, Jonson successfully renders a fractioned work complete. England's first poet-laureate becomes a conservator without ever picking up a paintbrush.

—Mattea S. Koon (oc '17)

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Finding of Erichthonius*, 1632–33

Excerpt from John Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," 1629

Milton sets the Nativity in a northern winter in which a feminized nature has retreated from fertility ("doffed," or taken off her foliage) in homage to the birth of Jesus.

It was the winter wild,
While the Heav'n-born-child
 All meanly wrapped in the rude manger lies;
Nature in awe to him
Had doffed her gaudy trim
 With her great master so to sympathize:
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the sun, her lusty paramour.

Rubens illustrates a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which the daughters of King Cecrops discover the snake-legged baby in the basket with which they were entrusted. Rubens's vivid color and rich detail suggest the fertile world of classical myth, while Milton's poem paints a wintry, Christian nativity scene. Although the text and painting seem to depict completely opposite scenes, many elements of the Rubens are highly suggestive of the Nativity scene (a staple of Renaissance and Baroque painters, including Rubens). The deliberate placement of the baby, surrounded by adoring women, hints at the standard composition of a Nativity painting; the warm greens and blues of the landscape suggests that nature is also celebrating the wondrous baby, and Aglauros (the daughter in gold) could be seen as a Mary figure, her shimmering dress hinting at the royalty of the Queen of Heaven. The poem and paint-

ing allude to each other through fiercely contrasting interpretations of birth. Milton insists on winter and a nature shamed into austerity by the birth of her master. But Rubens clearly favors spring: the "rude manger" is replaced by an ornate basket, and Nature seems to be openly wantoning with the sun, "her lusty paramour"—that golden dress of Aglauros that outshines all other colors. In linking the two, we see the heightened beauty and imagination of both Rubens and Milton, each bringing this scene of wonder to life in a moment of discovery, albeit in fascinatingly divergent perspectives.

—*Shulamite Chu (OC '16)*

Michiel Sweerts, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1656

Excerpt from John Milton's "On Shakespeare," 1632

The young Milton pays homage to Shakespeare, asserting that the bard "lives" not in a tomb but through his works.

What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones,
The labor of an age in pilèd stones,
Or that his hallowed relics should be hid
Under a star-ypointing pyramid?
Dear son of Memory, great heir of Fame,
What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a livelong monument.

Milton's poem, printed in the Second Folio of Shakespeare's plays, asks how we can best commemorate Shakespeare's greatness, and concludes that his living presence is immortalized through his plays—that is, in the very volume for which Milton wrote the poem, and in our response to it. By evoking "wonder and astonishment" in viewers and readers of his plays, Shakespeare's memory remains alive, a living monument far greater than any physical memorial. Sweerts's self-portrait asserts a similar sense of greatness. Sweerts immortalizes himself through painting. The background of the painting and the figure's gaze and appearance all point to Sweerts's idealized depiction of himself. The landscape behind the artist evokes the rolling hills of Italy, unusually

ethereal for such a work. The artist portrays himself in the sumptuous garb of a gentleman, looking directly at the viewer as if to claim his place in history, a gaze that has penetrated into the present. He prominently displays his brush and palette, not only commemorating his profession and skill as a painter, but also emphasizing the medium through which he is commemorated. Like Shakespeare, Sweerts is survived by, and remembered in, his art.

—Elka Lee-Shapiro (OC '18)

Michiel Sweerts, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1656

Robert Herrick, “Poetry Perpetuates the Poet,” 1648

Herrick claims the “repullulation” (re-budding, or regeneration) that writing offers the poet. These six lines constitute the entirety of the poem.

Here I myself might likewise die,
And utterly forgotten lie,
But that eternal poetry
Repullulation gives me here
Unto the thirtieth thousand year,
When all now dead shall reappear.



Sweerts’s 1656 self-portrait serves a dual purpose: it is a calling card advertising the prestige of his newly formed artists’ academy (displaying the masterful techniques he picked up while honing his craft for a decade in Italy) and it is an immortalization of himself through his own creative art. In this tiny poem, Herrick imagines that “eternal poetry” could resurrect him at judgment day. Sweerts, too, knows very well that he “might likewise die,” but his portrait transcends mortality. Sweerts’s own “eternal poetry”—his self-portrait—serves to repullulate his form and aura each time a viewer stares into his piercing eyes or takes in the air of pride in his magnificent clothes and aristocratic gesture. Memory and memorialization were transient in the turbulence and vulnerability of the 1600s, where even

the most talented individual could easily fade into the fabric of time. What was an artist to do if he wished to ensure his legacy would live on? Sweerts lived—and continues to live—through his art, just as Herrick did through poetry.

—Julian Shaheen (OC '17)

Hendrick ter Brugghen, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, 1625



Excerpt from John Milton's Sonnet 19, ca. 1652

Milton lost his sight in the service of the English parliamentary government; this sonnet is thought to have been written soon after he went blind.

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide...

Milton's sonnet on his blindness emphasizes the importance of dedication and perseverance. The poem is Milton's reminder that light is a God-given privilege. To Milton, there is more to be seen than is visible, more daylight to be gained through hard work, and more redemption to be earned in selflessness. The work that God demands (Milton calls this "talent," following the Gospel parable) is an important element of the martyrdom that ter Brugghen depicts. St. Sebastian, a Roman who secretly converted soldiers to Christianity, sacrificed his life to realize his life's purpose. Tied to a tree and shot with arrows as punishment, St. Sebastian is granted mercy when Irene nurses him back to life—if only temporarily. He has lost nearly everything, yet the painting does not suggest lost hope. A powerful

yellow light cuts across Sebastian's corpse-like torso, in a way reviving it, just as Irene, with her kind face, revives him by removing blood-stained arrows from his body. At the edge of day, St. Sebastian will "see the light"; even in blindness, Milton finds hope in pursuing his "talent." Perhaps by continuing to write (and he will write the celebrated *Paradise Lost*), he will help readers find their own illumination.

—*Vida Weisblum (oc '17)*

Hendrick ter Brugghen, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, 1625

Excerpt from Edmund Waller's "Of the Last Verses in the Book," 1685

Waller contemplates old age and its potential for a new freedom for the soul, about to be liberated from the body.

The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through the chinks that time has made;
Stronger by weakness, wiser, men become,
As they draw near to their eternal home.
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,
That stand upon the threshold of the new.

Waller's introspective poem is the final entry in his volume, *Divine Poems*. Reflecting on mortality and age, Waller evokes feelings of both melancholy and hope, painting a portrait of the end of one's life, as, for example, a calm sea in the absence of youthful passion and vanity. Waller reasons that though the body may grow weaker as it nears death, the soul grows stronger. Presenting the human soul in these lines as a dark cottage, "battered and decayed," Waller conjures an image of light piercing through the cracks of the corporeal cottage over time, illuminating the soul with new wisdom and a vantage point previously unknown. In ter Brugghen's painting, the martyr St. Sebastian finds himself at a crossroads, on the brink between life in death, like the narrator in Waller's poem. Hunched over, bleeding, and pierced

with arrows, St. Sebastian closes in on death even while Irene works to save him. Streaks of light beam down on his battered body in a manner eerily figuring the cottage in "Of the Last Verses." Though this St. Sebastian is a well-muscled, marble-like figure, he is broken, utterly weak, and dependent only on the mercy of Irene. But like the figure in Waller's poem, the saint is also on a threshold; there seems a new strength to be found in his weakness, and new worlds to be seen in giving up the old.

—*Kyle Tribble (OC '17)*



Poems in this supplement are drawn from *Seventeenth-Century British Poetry*, ed. John P. Rumrich and Gregory Chaplin (New York: Norton, 2006).

Illustrations: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Finding of Erichthonius*, R.T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1944.96; Michiel Sweerts, *Self-Portrait*, R.T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1941.77; Hendrick ter Brugghen, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, R.T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1953.256.