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Female Images in European Baroque Poetry (Based on the Verses of Ivan Velychkovsky, Danylo Bratkovsky, Robert Herrick, and Andrew Marvell)

Abstract

The following paper explores the specificity of female images with regard to the peculiarities of their formation in European poetry of the Baroque period on the examples of Ivan Velychkovsky's works. The oeuvre of this striking representative of seventeenth-century Ukrainian literature is compared with the verses of the Polish-language author Danylo Bratkovsky as well as English Baroque epigrams by Robert Herrick and verses by Andrew Marvell. Comparison of poetic specimens belonging to different linguistic and cultural spaces is possible because, in spite of the different local mentality, all the above-mentioned poets are carriers of the common Baroque worldview formed on the basis of the Holy Scripture, Christian theology, and the heritage of Greek and Roman antiquity. In the course of our research, we observed the existence of common Baroque poetry traits (regardless of the place of genesis and confessional affiliation) in the perception of women and the formation of female images. All of the mentioned poets followed the bipolarity and Baroque antithesis of women's imagery. All of them, in one way or another, derive their judgments from the reception of the established biblical stereotypes. In view of the insufficient reflection on this issue in contemporary Ukrainian literary criticism and in order to arrive at a more comprehensive outline of female images in the seventeenth-century poetry, we use a method of comparing Ukrainian, Polish, and English samples of Baroque verses in terms of their features and traits, characteristic for the works of this period. This article proposes to create a generalised Baroque image of the woman, outlining her place in the society at that time, by comparing the works of the representatives of different local mentalities.

Keywords: women's images, Ivan Velychkovsky, Polish-language epigram, Danylo Bratkovsky, English Baroque, Robert Herrick, Andrew Marvell, Baroque antithesis, biblical reception.

Problem formulation. Throughout the development of mankind and in all ancient literatures, the perception of womanhood resembled the movement of a pendulum (this duality and contrast manifested itself especially with the spread of Christianity) between the source of harmony and chaos, mother and monster, saint and seducer, healer and witch. The literature of antiquity, according to the famous German historian Ernst Robert Curtius (1814–1896), is characterised by a deep archaic fear of femininity’s mystery, which is projected onto medieval and Baroque literature via biblical texts. In this regard, he confirms “the close connection between the archaic world of the soul and the literary topos”, and this, according to Curtius, “will become even clearer if we follow the footsteps of the goddess-Nature in her travels through time”.¹

Feminine discourse in antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, or the Baroque has been referred to by European historians and culture researchers of the previous century, such as Fernan Brodel (1902–1985), Jean Jacques Le Goff (1924–2014), Jean Leon Marie Delumeau (1923–2020). In any case, these sources are the basis for the studies of contemporary Ukrainian literary critics who occasionally turn to the image of women in old poetry or prose. Basically, it is about the misogynistic motives in medieval literature (Yurii Peleshenko), female figures in the literature of Kyiv Rus (Olena Shcherbak), the evolution of images in thirteenth-century Kyiv literature (Oksana Slipushko), the national identity of the Baroque character within the concept of universalism (Olga Turcyn), or the symbolism of the Virgin Mary in Baroque metatexts (Olena Matushek). Although the aforementioned studies are quite significant and cover a considerable range of problems with the formation of female images in the old Ukrainian (especially medieval) literature, there are still a number of unresolved issues relating to the topic of women’s images in Baroque poetry, which opens space for further studies in this direction.

¹ E.R. Kurtsius, *Yevropeska kultura i latynske serednovichchia*, per. z nim. A. Onyshko, Litopys, Lviv 2007, p. 123.

Theoretical and methodological principles of research. It should be noted that this work is predominantly based on the principles of comparative studies, the classics of which are such “creators of the basic comparative literary studies development vectors” as Olexandr Biletsky (1884–1961), Dmytro Chyzhevsky (1894–1977), Victor Zhyrmundsky (1971–1971), and, of course, Hans Robert Jauss (1921–1997). However, according to the theory of the latter, comparativism is not a closed system, and so it is capable of “integrating and transforming phenomenological, hermeneutical and receptive-aesthetic concepts and methodologies”.² Therefore, when analysing female images in Baroque works of different linguistic and cultural spaces, we employ not only the so-called model of readers’ expectation horizon developed by H.R. Jauss but also the hermeneutic method (H.-G. Gadamer, P. Ricoeur), a component of which is Christian exegesis focused on the interpretation of the Holy Scripture. After all, Baroque works which are firmly rooted in Christian philosophy can’t be understood separately from biblical texts.

The primary purpose of our article is to highlight female characters in the Baroque poetry of Ivan Velychkovsky, Danylo Bratkovsky, Andrew Marvell, and Robert Herrick and to outline their commonality in the use of contemporary stereotypes grounded in biblical texts. Our next task is to highlight the differences between women’s images of different authors in so far as they reflect purely national outlooks.

Analysis and discussion. The Holy Scripture’s imagery is known to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Baroque poets. Biblical subjects are directly or indirectly the basis of many literary works. However, it has long been believed that women are given a secondary, low-value role in the pages of the sacred history. This stereotype was formed, first, as a result of misinterpretation of biblical precepts over the centuries and, secondly, according to Olena Shcherbak,

² D.S. Nalyvaiko, *Literaturna komparatyvistyka vchora i sohodni. Zasady y funktsiyi*, [in:] *Suchasna literaturna komparatyvistyka: stratehii i metody*, red. D.S. Nalyvaiko, Kyievo-Mohylianska akademiia, Kyiv 2009.

“as a result of superficial knowledge of the biblical texts themselves by the readers”.³ Indeed, the image of sinful women seducing men pervades all the Baroque literature. Because the first feminine image of the Old Testament is Eve from Genesis, who “tempted herself to commit transgression” (1 Tim. 2:14) – that is, tasted the notorious forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge and tempted to sin a man, Adam – an unspeakable annoyance and reproach fill the lines of Ivan Velychkovsky dedicated to the one being the cause of the exile from paradise – the woman:

Прелщаючи уж Євву, шептал ей до уха –
абы люб тот был нѣмым, люб та была глуха!⁴

In this short, witty epigram, the poet presents the woman (Eve) as deaf so that she does not hear the whisper of the seductive serpent. Less categorical to a sinful woman and full of sad self-irony is a translation from an English poet writing in Latin, John Owen. His verses are framed as a complaint by Adam, banished from paradise:

Чему мя грѣха первым мнят быти авторем?
Не ям впрод згрѣшил, Єва; ям шедл ей торем.⁵

The poet is sadly ironic over Adam’s fate and therefore over the fate of all men (we can even include the poet himself in this group). Velychkovsky makes it clear that no matter how sinful the woman (Eve) was, everyone makes a choice whether to sin or not for him/herself. Therefore, the complaint of the epigram’s hero is futile, for his fall was a free imitation of the woman, so it is not an excuse for him.

In his vision of the woman as a source of chaos and disharmony, the English baroque poet Andrew Marvell (1621–1678) is in agreement with Ivan Velychkovsky. In his famous poem “The Garden”,

³ O. Shcherbak, *Semantyka obrazu zhinky u “Slovi o polku Ihorevim”*, “Slovo i chas”, nr 4, 2016, pp. 47–52.

⁴ I. Velychkovsky, *Poza tsyklamy*, <http://litopys.org.ua/velych/vel12.htm> [11.05. 2020] / idem, *Tvory*, Naukova dumka, Kyiv 1972.

⁵ Ibidem.

where the author idealises the “happy Eden loneliness of Adam”, Marvel sings of the first man’s celestial harmony before Eve appeared and led to the fall:

Such was that happy Garden-state,
While Man there walked without a Mate:
After a Place, so pure, and sweet,
What other Help could yet be meet!⁶

And this Baroque anthem of celibacy ends with the sad result that the creation of a woman to share paradise delights with someone has become a “Mortal share”⁷ for the man. That is, the woman literally led the ancestors of humanity to death (mortality). It should be noted, however, that another English poet (senior contemporary of Velychkovsky and Marvell), John Milton (1608–1674), in his *Paradise Lost* forms a rather original (different) image of Eve not as a weak sinful being and not as a devious seducer, but as a “beautiful and curious child, gullible and innocent”.⁸ Adam, in Milton’s work, is not a miserable victim of deception but a genuinely loving young man, ready to risk everything for the sake of love. Realizing that Eve has sinned, he cannot renounce her and doesn’t want paradise without his wife:

Certain my resolution is to die; How can I live without thee [...] again in these wilde woods forlorn? [...] I feel the link of nature draw me: flesh of flesh, bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe...⁹

And it cannot be said here that this (Milton’s) version of the female’s image contradicts the Scripture (or is an echo of knightly medieval poetry). On the one hand, according to the Bible, God

⁶ *English Literature: Early 17th Century (1603–60)*, <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/> [11.05.2020].

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ L.L. Martz, *From Renaissance to Baroque: Essays on Literature and Art*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia–London 1991, p. 277.

⁹ Ibidem.

created a woman for a man from his rib; that is, she is already secondary to him, as the apostle Paul stated when he forbade women to teach and rule over men: “Adam was first created, and then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:13). However, on the other hand, a “Woman is the glory of man” (1 Cor. 11:7), writes St. Paul and says to men: “Love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church” (Eph. 5:25). It is interesting that practically all Baroque poets (regardless of their linguistic and cultural background) formed their image of the female (usually negative) using the biblical history of the creation of the first woman. Ukrainian poet-priest Ivan Velychkovsky is rather offensive about the female mind, referring in his argument to the “material” that the woman is made of (a rib, which does not contain a brain):

Чему суть мудрѣйшіє мужеве, нѣж жоны?
Бо з ребра (безмозкого), не з голови оны.¹⁰

The topic of female “material” is successfully and quite wittily exploited by the Polish-language poet Danylo Bratkovsky, who in his epigram turns to folk humour about family relations. With compassion for men ruled by women (sometimes even smacked by “their ladies”), Bratkovsky explains that a wife is made of bone that is stronger than clay (“masculine material”): “Słabsze naczynie z gliny niżli z kości” – sadly sighs the author. And further he complains to God about the creation from the “bone”, saying that that bone can sometimes get stuck in one’s throat:

Zaś Białęgłowe z kości stworzył Panie,
Nie jednemu też kością w gardle stanie.¹¹

The English epigrammatist Robert Herrick, in his work “Women Useless”, reproaches the Creator for wasting his (man’s) rib. It would be better, says the poet, to sow a few teeth (as legendary Cadmus did)

¹⁰ I. Velychkovsky, op. cit.

¹¹ D. Bratkovsky, *World, in parts considered / Świat po części przejrany*, trans. from Polish, foreword, notes V.O. Shevchuk, Publishing House of Regional Printing House, Lutsk 2004, p. 463.

into the clay. Then many warriors (men) would grow from them, and women would not be needed:

What need we marry women, when
Without their use we may have men?

As Cadmus once a new way found,
By throwing teeth into the ground...¹²

Conclusions. In a patriarchal society (as was the Baroque one),

a man was looking for someone responsible for suffering, defeat, loss of earthly paradise. Such a creature was a woman who opened hell gates with her seductive mysterious smile.¹³

Many multilingual examples of misogynous Baroque poetry can be cited. But in the same literature there is an effective antidote to such a negative perception of female figures – the image of the Holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary. The image of the Virgin polarises and purifies the perception of the woman in all Baroque literature. I. Velychkovsky, like D. Bratkovsky, A. Marvell, and others, deliberately introduces into his epigrams this bipolarity (the sinner–the saint, the fallen Eve–the Virgin Mary). Moreover, according to the papers of Olena Matushek, the Baroque authors deliberately form this “semantic opposition” (Eve–Mary), which is synonymous with the opposition of “sin–salvation”. “Such mirroring is a perfectly symmetrical text, and these two images (Eve and Mary) clearly demonstrate the connection between ‘Old Testament sin and New Testament reincarnation of Eve (in Virgin Mary)’”,¹⁴ and this is the way how the renewed world returns to its original (paradise) state. Despite the whole range of negative characteristics of female images

¹² R. Herrick, *Poems*, <http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-herrick/poems/> [11.05. 2020].

¹³ Y. Peleshenko, *Mizohinnyi dyskurs v ukrainskomu serednovichnomu pysmenstvi*, “Slovo i chas”, nr 6, 2015, pp. 18–26.

¹⁴ O. Matushek, *Symbolism of the Theotokos in Metatext of Baroque Literature*, unpublished PhD thesis, Kharkiv State University, 1999.

in the works of European Baroque poets, and Ivan Velychkovsky in particular, the image of the Holy Mother, the defender of the world, balances all this. A wonderful illustration of this eternal polarity and unity can be seen in Velychkovsky's poetic collection *Mlyeko* [*Milk*], in the mystically organised verse (as an antithetic scheme):

Бїца Со мною жїзнь не страх смерти, Євва
Мною жїти не умєрти.¹⁵

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¹⁵ I. Velychkovs'kyy, *Epihramy*, http://litopys.org.ua/old17/old17_20.htm [11.05.2020].