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WHETTED TO BRILLIANCE

"Are they weapons or scalpels?" Marianne Moore asks midway through "Those Various Scalpels," concentrating four stanzas of detailed description into two words.\(^1\) Hair "like sculptured scimitars," eyes like "ice," and hand "a bundle of lances," the woman at the poem's center exemplifies Moore's image of female perfection: her appearance is congruent with her mind. In this poem, Moore reimagines female identity; her catalogue description presents a woman who is at once reserved and controlled, glittering and sharp, powerful and aggressive, beautiful and brilliant. Multiplying rather than limiting or opposing the woman's various attributes, Moore paints a "uniform / and at the same time, diverse" portrait. She refigures the traditional relationship between poet and lady, turning it from one of opposition to one of alliance, and dissolves distinctions between appearance and language, and dressing and writing. The woman's brilliance parallels the poem's polished symmetry.

Structured like a catalogue, the poem both resembles and revises Renaissance love lyrics in which the poet selects and praises specific parts of a lady. Nancy J. Vickers points out that the catalogues of the Renaissance lyric poets, as well as those of the tradition they emulate, are rarely complete; even in "an entire volume devoted to a single lady, the absence of a coherent, comprehensive portrait is significant" ("Diana Described" 96). I would add that even in poems where this picture is complete and the lady described literally from "top-to-toe," as in Sidney's "What Tongue Can Her Perfections Tell," she remains fragmented, her subjectivity limited by the opposition the

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1. All quotations of Moore's "Those Various Scalpels" are from the Egoist Press edition printed in 1921. I have chosen this version over the versions in Observations and The Complete Poems because the original pattern of the poem is more clearly evident. Though there are some differences between the version I use here and Moore's later revisions of the poem, the essence of my remarks on line and stanza breaks applies to all versions. All other references are to The Complete Poems.
poet sets up between himself and her. Since a catalogue can break down a description into its components or can build it up through elaboration and accretion, the catalogue structure does not itself fragment a portrait. It is the poet’s manipulation of the catalogue in combination with the use of other structural devices, such as rhyme, meter, syntax, line breaks, and stanzaic patterns, that determines whether the object in the poem will appear to be fragmented or whole, in opposition to or in alliance with the speaker.

Moore is, of course, not the only twentieth-century poet to use the catalogue poem as a model for praise. Ezra Pound in “Na Audiart,” William Carlos Williams in “Portrait of a Lady,” and H.D. in “Tribute to the Angels” also modernize the catalogue. Central to Moore’s poem as well as theirs is the difficulty the poet encounters in his or her attempt to portray the female form, but these four poems suggest that the problems differ for male and female poets. For the male poet, the project involves not just describing a woman, but defining himself in relation to her; this usually leads him to define himself in opposition to her. Both Pound’s and Williams’s catalogue poems focus on the aesthetic problems the poet encounters rather than on the status conventionally given to the object of the poem, the lady. Through metaphor, they fragment female identity by reinscribing the split between body and mind or spirit common in love lyrics. Though Pound calls upon the catalogue tradition in his preface to “Na Audiart,” the poem itself truncates the catalogue and focuses on one part of the woman’s body, reducing the perfect female form to the torso. Williams’s poem could be called “Portrait of a Lady’s Legs”; he covers thighs, knees, and ankles only. Though both poets are deeply concerned with the problems of using language and metaphor in the context of describing and representing a female form, their discussion does not focus on the connection between these problems and the problem of the reduction of the lady to an object.

The fragmented women of Pound’s and Williams’s catalogue poems bear a resemblance to these poets’ representations of the modern world. In “To Elsie,” Williams states that

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off.

The poem suggests that Elsie, too, is just such an isolate fleck, “expressing with broken / / brain the truth about us.”
Whetted to Brilliance

Underlying this and other images of the fragmented modern world is a fear that the self, too, is fragmented and that identity is unstable. In their catalogue poems, Pound and Williams seem to project what they fear is true for themselves on the women they describe. By portraying women as passive and fragmented objects, they can define themselves as active and unified subjects. The catalogue poem, with its accompanying traditions, becomes an ideal place for a male poet to allay his fears about his own identity as he struggles to master the problems he encounters in poetically representing a woman.

Both Moore and H.D. challenge this fragmentation in their catalogue poems. H.D. shifts the relationship between poet and lady from one of opposition to identification. In “Tribute to the Angels” she catalogues male representations of an ideal female form, “Our Lady,” acknowledging that

the painters did very well by her;
it is true, they never missed a line

of the suave turn of the head
or the subtle shade of lowered eye-lid. (565)

But she qualifies her approval by objecting to what she perceives as a partial and reductive description: “But none of these / suggest her as I saw her.” What H.D. sees goes beyond detailed physical descriptions and the traditional images of women’s moral and spiritual purity that accompany them:

she is no symbolic figure

of peace, charity, chastity, goodness,
faith, hope, reward. (570)

She is a woman, “one of us, with us” (572). H.D.’s poem connects the “Lady” to “us,” breaking down the distinction between the ideal and the real. Her identification with the Lady raises important questions: who dresses or describes the lady and in what or how? If the poet is a man, how does that change this dressing and undressing? Is what a woman sees when she looks at another woman different from what a man sees? H.D.’s answers involve refiguring female identity by re-imaging it.

Moore, too, sees the woman she describes as “one of us, with us.” Her solution to the problem of describing a female figure depends on developing the woman’s subjectivity in tandem with developing her own, rather than
in opposition to it. In “Those Various Scalpels,” Moore transforms physical beauty into a metaphor for intellectual brilliance and then dissolves the opposition between body and mind implicit in the metaphor by turning both into metonyms for the whole woman. In the process, Moore also refigures the relationship between artist and work, working towards direct contact with the woman in her poem and establishing a meeting place where she can speak openly to her. She sees a connection between the woman and herself and recognizes that their powers are congruent: a woman writing and a woman dressing herself share an activity and an aesthetic. The woman’s dress and the shape of Moore’s poem on the page are both visible manifestations of internal energies.

These relationships between poet and woman, mind and body, correspond to the relationships between external and internal, visible and invisible, that permeate Moore’s work. In her world, the internal is woven into the external, the “invisible” into the “visible,” spirit into form (CP 100). The energy of an object manifests itself in its surface pattern: “an interwoven somewhat; it will not come out” (CP 80). Everything has its own pattern, from the camellia flower which can be “catalogued by lines across the leaf” to “England with its baby rivers and little towns, each with its abbey or its cathedral” (CP 16, 46). Unlike Williams and other modernists, Moore does not visualize a world of “isolate flecks.” Even the smallest particulars are connected to the things around them by networks of larger patterns, often invisible, but always available to the one who can, “with X-ray like inquisitive intensity,” see beneath the surface, one who can “see the exterior and the fundamental structure” (CP 57). Surface and core, internal and external, exist not in opposition to but in relation to one another.

Before I examine in more detail the way that Moore’s “Those Various Scalpels” focuses these values, explicitly linking Moore’s perception of the world as a patterned whole to her analysis of and revision of figurative representations of women, I want to glance briefly at two other catalogue poems, Sir Philip Sidney’s “What Tongue Can Her Perfections Tell?” a paradigmatic Renaissance catalogue and William Carlos Williams’s “Portrait of a Lady,” a modern rewrite. Sidney’s poem opens with a brief question about poetic representation immediately followed by a minutely detailed description of the physical beauties of an unnamed lady:
Whetted to Brilliance

What tongue can her perfections tell
In whose each part all pens may dwell?
Her hair fine threads of finest gold,
In curled knots man's thought to hold,
But that her forehead says, "In me
A whiter beauty you may see."
Whiter indeed, more white than snow
Which on cold Winter's face doth grow:
That doth present those even brows
Whose equal line their angles bows;
Like to the Moon, when, after change,
Her horned head abroad doth range,
And arches be two heavenly lids,
Whose wink each bold attempt forbids.
For the black stars those spheres contain,
The matchless pair even praise doth stain... (165)

With professed modesty the speaker spins phrase after phrase from the same thread, moving from the lady's hair to her forehead, eyebrows, and eyes, penning his way from feature to feature with a single line. These first lines set up a linear progression which lead him from her eyes to the rest of her face; he then works his way slowly downward, describing neck, breasts, waist, navel, belly, thighs, knees, feet, and then back around to shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, and fingernails. The opening question sets up a power struggle between himself and his rival poets; his steadily advancing pen sets up a very different struggle between himself and the lady. Ostensibly a poem in praise of a woman, it becomes instead a place for the speaker to exhibit his virtuosity as a poet. The woman's body becomes a site for male competition. Though the lady initially seems to seduce the speaker, as the poem proceeds, the poet subtly takes control. His pen directs the sequence; as he advances, she withdraws.

The description is arranged in end-stopped, rhymed, iambic tetrameter couplets laid one on top of the other like bricks. Each part of the lady's body is attended to separately in rhetorically complete units which can be lifted out of the poem intact, allowing us to look at her thighs or her knees or her shoulders in isolation from the rest of her body. Despite the portrait's comprehensiveness, its scrupulous linearity and carefully composed units fragment the woman, turning her into a jointed doll. The poet's focus on the physical and his sudden gesture at the end of the poem towards the "fairer guest" that dwells within this beautiful "inn" further fragment her by

2. See Eve Sedgwick's Between Men and Nancy J. Vickers' "This Heraldry in Lucrece's Face" for a detailed analysis of male bonding and competition in literature.
emphasizing the split between flesh and spirit. Sidney strips this woman of what little power she had by putting her at the mercy of his speaker's pen, allowing her identity to form only in opposition to his own.

In "Portrait of a Lady," Williams foregrounds the poet's problems with figurative language. Caught between desire and fear, the poet / speaker avoids direct contact with the woman and focuses the poem on an analysis of metaphor. He enlists the help of other artists--Fragonard and Watteau--in his struggle to solve the problem of representing a female figure, and the woman's body becomes a site for male bonding rather than male competition. The overt struggle between lady and poet in Sidney's poem turns into a battle between metaphor and object, and the poet seems to forget that the object is a woman:

Your thighs are appletrees
whose blossoms touch the sky.
Which sky? The sky
where Watteau hung a lady's
slipper. Your knees
are a southern breeze--or
a gust of snow. Agh! what
sort of man was Fragonard?
--as if that answered
anything. Ah, yes--below
the knees, since the tune
drops that way, it is
one of those white summer days...(SP 35)

"Since the tune / drops that way," the poet turns with relief from her thighs and her knees to her ankles. Convention allows him to move away from rather than towards dangerous zones, and he ends by touching his lips to the sand rather than going deeper into her body:

the tall grass of your ankles
flickers upon the shore--
Which shore?--
the sand clings to my lips--
Which shore?
Agh, petals maybe. How
should I know?
Which shore? Which shore?
I said petals from an appletree.

The portrait of the lady recedes as the poet's ego intrudes more and more on his description. His questions interrupt the catalogue structure, displacing the lady and taking him to less dangerous ground. His desire to get close to her is
continually overpowered by his anxiety. She exists as a body and a problem—a problem because she is a body, but he can’t make her less of a problem by making her more than a body. The last line of the poem turns the enterprise of metaphor-making upside down. The poem ends not with the lady’s thighs, but with “petals from an appletree.” The poet has shifted focus from the first term of his metaphor to the second, almost entirely blotting out the lady. Had Williams ended “I said thighs,” he might have gotten closer to his lady and brought us back to familiar modernist ground: “direct treatment of the ‘thing’” (Pound 58). But Williams evades the “thing” in this poem. Though he “cling[s] firmly to the advance” in his grappling with figurative language, he backs away from what initiated the struggle (Imaginations 103). The subject of the poem is neither lady nor tree, but metaphor.

Williams’s catalogue poem deals more directly with aesthetic problems than Sidney’s. He is openly self-conscious about using figurative language, and his discomfort with the problem he has set himself is obvious. Though he opens his poem with two lines of regular iambic trimeter, he does not close the poem with a neat couplet as Sidney does; the problem remains unsolved. Despite Williams’s formal experiments, his catalogue poem reinscribes traditional oppositions between subject and object, poet and lady. The fragmented structure of his poem transforms the catalogue into an exploration of poetic language rather than into an exploration of the lady’s status as an object. In “Those Various Scalpels,” Moore combines structural revisions with thematic, reworking both the form of the catalogue and the portrait of the woman at its center. She offers a new image of female identity by turning the metaphor of body for mind into a metonymy, and dissolves the hierarchy of mind over body. Through physical description, Moore defines the figure of “Those Various Scalpels” as an autonomous subject; at the same time, she defines her own aesthetic. Moore’s arrangement of the catalogue in combination with other thematic, syntactic, and formal strategies sets up a series of correspondences between language and dress, poem and woman, poet and woman, poet and poem. Both the surface of the poem and the appearance of the woman are metonyms for the whole, and both embody Moore’s belief in a patterned world where all things are at once particulars and parts of larger wholes.

The title and opening lines provide a whispered introduction to the catalogue description at the center and
suggest that the poem takes place in a museum or art
gallery:

Those Various Scalpels

Those
various sounds consistently indistinct, like intermingled echoes
struck from thin glasses successively at random—the
inflection disguised: your hair, the tails of two fighting-cocks
head to head in stone—like sculptured scimitars re-
peating the curve of your ears in reverse order: your eyes,
flowers of ice

and
snow sown by tearful winds on the cordage of disabled ships: your
raised hand
an ambiguous signature: your cheeks those rosettes
of blood on the stone floors of French chateaux, with regard to
which the guides are so affirmative:
your other hand

a
bundle of lances all alike, partly hid by emeralds from Persia
and the fractional magnificence of Florentine
goldwork—a collection of half a dozen little objects made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragonfly blue: a lemon, a
pear
and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a
magnificent square
cathedral of uniform
and at the same time, diverse appearance—a species of vertical
vineyard rustling in the storm
of conventional opinion. Are they weapons or scalpels?
Whetted
to
brilliance by the hard majesty of that sophistication which is su-
perior to opportunity, these things are rich
instruments with which to experiment but surgery is not tentative:
why dissect destiny with instruments which
are more highly specialized than the tissues of destiny itself?

The figure appears to be based on a painting or sculpture. The speaker seems to be in a museum or gallery, examining and perhaps copying or taking notes on a work of art as she half listens to a murmur of voices around her. The whispered introduction, "Those Various Scalpels / Those / various sounds consistently indistinct," constitute the speaker's meditation on articulation, and refer simultaneously to three different systems of representation: speech, written language—poetic or critical, and visual art. They are the voices of the other people at the museum; like
the murmurs that merge with our own interior monologues and accompany almost all of our daily activities, they create a background of noise that both constructs and anatomizes, represents and dissects the world. “Those various scalpels" are also the artist’s own tools, the paint, brushes, and palette knife, that were used to create the figure. And finally, these sounds, these scalpels, are the poet’s own language. Sitting at her desk working, re-representing a figure she saw earlier, or has before her in a museum catalogue, she meditates on the language that she as a poet uses to describe and dissect the woman. 3

Whether “scalpels” and “sounds” are the artist’s, the critic’s, or the poet’s, Moore implies that any system of representation, particularly verbal representation, is unreliable, and, when it involves the female form, it is also problematical. Speech is “consistently indistinct, like intermingled echoes / struck from thin glasses successively at random--the inflection disguised.” Even the poem’s own language folds back on itself and enacts in its own slipperiness what it describes. The sentence is packed with contradictions. The hard c and k sounds counterpoint the sibilant whispers. “Consistently” bumps up against “indistinct,” “successive” against “random.” Both “consistently” and “successive” imply that language is stable and linear, even orderly: it exists in time and one word follows another according to accepted rules. But the phrase “consistently indistinct” indicates that the only thing we can count on in communication is that it will be blurred, and “successively at random” suggests that syntax is arbitrary and words cluster together haphazardly. Voices intermingle, echoing one another, but direct communication is impossible. The meditation itself is conducted in hissing, crackling whispers, prefacing the detailed description of the female figure at its center with a qualification, telling us before hand in language that is itself oblique that what follows can only be imperfectly and partially received.

At the end of this description, however, Moore equates language with weapons and scalpels. Her blunt question, “Are they weapons or scalpels?“ indicates that while she knows that language is often inadequate, it is also powerful. The selection of details and arrangement of words or images by artists and writers and critics gives them the power to shape not only a work of art but our lives. They

3. See Bonnie Costello’s Imaginary Possessions for documentation on the sources for Moore’s poems and a discussion of the ways that Moore uses an already represented world.
not only choose what to see, but decide what is seen by others. The writer carves up and presents the object; the critic carves up the work. Their words are sometimes weapons, used for protection or attack, and sometimes scalpels, used for dissection and interpretation. But even they, the shapers of language, are themselves shaped by language. The two meditations on language that frame the description of the female figure set up a paradox: though Moore’s description of the woman affirms that appearance matches identity, her self-reflexive examination of poetic language acknowledges that both appearance and identity are culturally mediated. Moore keeps this paradox in sight throughout the poem, questioning her own activity of representation even as she asserts it.

Like Sidney, Moore opens her catalogue with a description of the figure’s hair, and seems to follow his lead by moving from one facial feature to another:

...your hair, the tails of two fighting-cocks head to head in stone--like sculptured scimitars repeating the curve of your ears in reverse order: your eyes flowers of ice

and

snow sown by tearing winds on the cordage of disabled ships.

From the very first, the poem offers a figure poised for battle, her coiffure a helmet, her eyes glittering and cold. This figure is very different from Williams’s apple blossom lady and Sidney’s golden haired maiden. Snow here is unpleasant rather than pure as in Sidney’s poem or tantalizing as in Williams’s. Moore’s woman is dangerous; she does not invite the same sort of pen-caressing touch that the woman in Sidney’s poem does. Rather, she seems to repel the casual glance; Moore shifts quickly away from this uninviting face to the figure’s hand, and then returns:

...your eyes, flowers of ice

and

snow sown by tearing winds on the cordage of disabled ships: your raised hand

an ambiguous signature: your cheeks those rosettes
of blood on the stone floors of French chateaux, with regard to which the guides are so affirmative:

your other hand
a
bundle of lances all alike, partly hid by emeralds from Persia
and the fractional magnificence of Florentine
goldwork—a collection of half a dozen little objects made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragonfly blue: a lemon, a
pear
and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a
magnificent square
cathedral of uniform
and at the same time, diverse appearance—a species of vertical
vineyard rustling in the storm
of conventional opinion...

Fighting-cocks, sculptured scimitars, flowers of
ice and snow on the cordage of disabled ships, rosettes of
blood, a bundle of lances, a magnificent square cathedral—the images clash, refusing to fuse into a visually coherent
portrait. Moore consistently avoids classic images of female
beauty, using instead violent images that continually fissure
the picture she asks us to construct. The precision and care
with which she renders lines like “the tails of two fighting-
cocks head to head in stone—like sculptured scimitars re-
peating the curve of your ears in reverse order” or “flowers
of ice / and / snow sown by tearing winds on the cordage of
disabled ships” demand that we attempt to visualize what
they present, but the images lead us further and further
away from any recognizable female figure. Again and again
Moore takes us directly to the woman, to “your hair,” “your
ears, “your eyes,” and again and again she forces us away
from her body and focuses our imaginations on other
objects.

Moore sets up a visual tug-of-war between the
physical appearance of the woman and the physical
appearance of the objects she uses to describe her that de-
visualizes both sides. She insists that we see what can’t be
seen, and the woman’s body, which in Sidney’s and
Williams’s poems becomes a site for male competition or
bonding, disappears in Moore’s poem. What remains is
energy, energy tensed to violence by Moore’s insistence that
we visualize what seems at first irrelevant—ships and
cordage and cathedrals and vineyards and French chateaux.
Unable to apply these images literally to the female form,
we are forced to accept them as precise, visual equivalents
of the woman’s internal energy. In her description of the
figure’s cheeks, for example, Moore begins almost
conventionally: “your cheeks those rosettes / of blood on the
stone floors of French chateaux, with regard to which the
guides are so affirmative.” The line break after “rosettes” gives us a recognizable image just long enough to make the qualification in the next line more disorienting. Our struggle to resolve this phrase into a concrete image leads us to imagine the woman as violent and powerful, capable of initiating massacres.

The images cluster into separate units, each suggesting different but related qualities. The woman is simultaneously aggressive and defensive, stationary and in motion, hard and sharp, glittering and concealed. She cannot be pinned down. Chameleon-like, she takes on the attributes of the objects Moore uses to describe her. Though many of the images seem unrelated, certain qualities overlap. Sharpness persists obviously throughout, but other qualities also repeat. The “flowers of ice / / and / / snow sown by tearing winds on the cordage of disabled ships” of the figure’s eyes correspond to her cheeks: “those rosettes / of blood.” Both “rosettes” and “flowers of ice” have the same visual potential: the tight flower of splintered ice resembles the intricate symmetry of a rosette, suggesting constancy and control, perfection and reserve. And both of these images echo other images of sculpted precision, such as her jewelry, “the fractional magnificence of Florentine / goldwork—a collection of half a dozen little objects made fine.” Like her individual jewels, “tied with silver,” the poem’s images collect, giving the woman a “uniform / and at the same time, diverse appearance.”

Moore’s meticulous descriptions of minutiae draw us in, seducing us, while the violence of the images repels us. Our eyes glance off the figure’s polished surfaces, return, and are repelled again. Though Moore, like Sidney, begins her description with the figure’s head, she does not follow his top-to-toe sequence. Instead, she zig-zags from the eyes of the figure to her hand and then back again to her face, her cheeks, “those rosettes / of blood,” and then to her other hand and her fingers, “a bundle of lances all alike.” The movement of Moore’s description seems to be controlled—perhaps even consciously guided, as a painter will guide the eye through composition—by the figure herself, and Moore in turn guides us circuitously through her re-representation, constructing a web of relationships. By breaking Sidney’s rigid sequence, Moore offers a new organization, a network of many points interconnected. The knee bone is no longer simply connected to the thigh bone; it is also connected to shoulder, arm, and mouth.
Though her description is not methodical, Moore holds her portrait together by running a syntactic wire through the poem. While Sidney continually varies the sentence structure of his catalog and Williams continually interrupts his, Moore parallels the elements of her list: “your hair, the tails of two fighting cocks . . . your eyes, flowers of ice . . . your raised hand an ambiguous signature . . . your cheeks those rosettes of blood . . . your other hand a bundle of lances . . . your dress, a magnificent square cathedral . . . ” The complexity of the descriptive phrases buries the anaphora, but does not entirely conceal it. The parallel structure adds continuity to the portrait and makes each part of the woman’s body appear akin to the others.

Not only has Moore paralleled the elements of her list, but she has compounded these elements into a single long sentence that spans four of the five stanzas of the poem. Line breaks come, not at rhetorical pauses, but at mathematically calculated intervals. Of the six “your . . .” phrases, only one, the fifth, “your other hand,” begins a line, and its placement here could be described as accidental; the significance of its position at the beginning of a line is subordinate to the demands of the larger pattern of the poem. The enjambed lines pull us forward as we read and resist the pausing or lingering over individual parts that Sidney’s rhetorically complete units and end-stopped, rhymed couplets encourage. Each separate part of the figure in Moore’s poem shares a stanza, sentence, and line with another part of the body. Like the lines, which are parts of the stanza, and stanzas which are parts of the whole poem, each part of the lady is part of her whole self.

These mathematically determined line and stanza breaks create a symmetrical form, though the form for this poem, like all of Moore’s forms, is unique. The varying lengths of the lines and the radical enjambment conceal rather than stress the rhyme, and the poem creates a pattern that is more obviously visual than aural, as though Moore trusted things rather than words, pictures rather than speech. While the left edge of the poem looks as though it has been faceted like a gem, the right edge is jagged; long lines alternate with short, piercing the right margin.

4. Despite minor variations, the poem has a definite pattern. The first stanza has lines of 1, 18, 12, 26, and 18 syllables; the second, 1, 18, 13, 22, and 4; the third, 1, 18, 13, 17, and 17; the fourth, 1, 18, 7, 14, and 17; and the fifth, 1, 18, 13, 30, and 17. The first three stanzas rhyme aabb, the last two aabb. In the first stanza, “the” in the third line rhymes with “re-” in the fourth, but the length of the lines, as well as the constraints of page size, conceals this and other rhymes.
shape of the poem on the page resembles the whetted brilliance of Moore's image of female perfection, suggesting a link between this image and her poetic strategies. Alicia Ostriker has described this strategy as "a kind of formal shell like the armor on so many of Marianne Moore's beasts, a sign of the need for self-protection on the part of the vulnerable." She groups Moore with other female poets who use what she calls "an exoskeletal style: hard, steely, implacably ironic" (Ostriker 587).

The form of "Those Various Sculpels" does more than protect, however. Like the perfected surface of the woman at the poem's center, it makes a moral statement, visually articulating Moore's belief in the autonomy and particularity of individual objects, in the patterns that hold them together, and in the inseparability of the "visible" and the "invisible." Moore's symmetrical, "exoskeletal" forms allow the essential energy of her poems to surface, embodying in their patterns the relationship between internal and external basic to her vision. In "Those Various Sculpels," Moore combines her concern with the subjectivity of objects with her concern with the subjectivity of women, and writes that concern on the surface of her poem.

The poem puts the figure of the woman back together. Her internal energy is interwoven with her appearance, visually illustrating Moore's belief in the metonymic rather than metaphorical relationship between mind and body, essence and surface. It is not the woman's hair or cheeks or dress we see; it is her scimitar and rosettes and magnificent square cathedral. And while each of these elements suggests different and even contradictory qualities, they cluster together, forming an elastic net of relationships, and creating a woman who is at once multiple and unified.

Moore does not stop when she finishes describing the woman. She goes on to consider the implications of poetic representation, and in the process, turns the traditional oppositional relationship between poet and lady into an alliance. At the end of her catalogue, she asks abruptly, "Are they weapons or scalpels?" The self-reflexiveness of the question turns the poem back on itself. The ambiguity of it turns the poem outward. The absence of a clear antecedent for "they" creates a gap and leaves us poised, not sure whether to continue reading or to move back through the catalogue, looking for a referent. The obvious answer, that "they" refers to the things immediately preceding it, to the hair, ears, eyes, hands, and dress of the figure, raises another question: How can these things be
scalpels? Parts of the body and its dress could be weapons, but Moore’s question demands a choice between two equally viable alternatives, weapons or scalpels. Since the word “scalpels” echoes the opening lines of the poem, the “they” of the question could refer back to “those various scalpels / those / various sounds consistently indistinct,” to the murmur of voices that form a background to the scene of the poem, to Moore’s images as well as those of other artists. Reading the “they” of the question as referring to these lines rather than to the woman’s appearance and dress breaks the poem into three parts: a meditation on language, a description of a woman, and a self-reflexive questioning of the earlier meditation on language. The figure at the center of Moore’s poem becomes an illustration and, like the ladies in Sidney’s and Williams’s poems, she assumes a passive role, providing a site for the poet’s aesthetic battle.

But Moore’s question resists separation from the center of the poem. “Weapons” and “scalpels” attach themselves firmly to the “scimitars,” “lances,” “fighting-cocks,” and “tearing winds” of the preceding description, echoing and concentrating their violence and aggression. Rather than separating the woman’s hair, hands, eyes, and dress from weapons and scalpels and from the opening, the question links the woman’s appearance directly to “those various scalpels / those / various sounds.”

The colons Moore uses throughout the poem reinforce this connection, forging links between the figure and the external world, appearance and language, and the woman and Moore:

Those Various Scalpels

those
various sounds consistently indistinct, like intermingled echoes
struck from thin glasses successively at random—the
inflection disguised; your hair...

Colons conventionally indicate parallels; what follows the colon—the figure’s hair, ears, hands, etc.—should be grammatically equivalent to what comes before it—“those various scalpels” and “those various sounds.” However, the ambiguity of the relationship between “scalpels” and “sounds” and the list that follows suggests that these colons function visually rather than syntactically. They separate sentence elements rather than connect them, dividing “those various scalpels” over there from “your hair” over here, and “your hair” from “your eyes.” But the arrangement of the
different parts of the woman across line and stanza breaks connects these parts to one another, demanding that we read the colons as serving a conventional syntactic function. They strengthen the equivalences and connections between the different parts of the woman as well as between her body and the "scalpels" and "sounds" of the opening lines. If we read the colons syntactically and if we read the question "Are they weapons or scalpels" as referring to the figure's parts, then we assume a direct relationship between the first mention of the word "scalpel" and the second, as well as a direct relationship between the figure and the external world.

As I suggested earlier, "those various scalpels" and "those various sounds consistently indistinct" are metaphors for language, for the words and images used by writers to represent, anatomize, and dissect figures and objects. The opening lines call attention to the fact that a portrait is a selection and arrangement of details by a particular artist who chooses what to see and what to name. At the same time, these lines imply that this selection and arrangement of details is dictated by conventions of which we are often unaware. If we assume that the second scalpel is linked to the first and that Moore intends the colons to be read conventionally, hair, eyes, hands, and dress must be seen as equivalent to language as well as to the weapons and scalpels of the question. The poem sets up a syllogism: Language is a "weapon or scalpel." The woman's dress is also a "weapon or scalpel." Therefore, her appearance is a language. Moore uses the colons to separate the woman from the external world, allowing her to speak directly to the woman herself and to examine her appearance carefully; at the same time, she uses the colons to emphasize the connection between the woman and that world, acknowledging that this figure, like all figures, artistic or "natural," is a construct of language, Moore's own included.

The somewhat incongruous metaphor, appearance as a weapon or scalpel, has the same effect as the other metaphors in the poem. Like the hyper-accurate description of the figure's hair as "the tails of two fighting-cocks head to head in stone--like sculptured scimitars re- / peating the curve of your ears in reverse order," the phrase "weapons or scalpels" evokes qualities rather than literal pictures, concentrating the essence of fighting-cocks, scimitars, rosettes, flowers of ice, the cathedral, the lances, and the
objects made fine into two words. The next sentence of the poem refines this concentration:

...Whetted

to
brilliance by the hard majesty of that sophistication which is su-
perior to opportunity, these things are rich
instruments with which to experiment...

The first three words of this phrase are strung over three lines and a stanza break. Cut apart from one another, each word is distinct, and seems separately honed. The noun “brilliance” flashes, suggesting not just physical brightness or keenness, but intelligence. The woman’s appearance signals the presence of an active mind.

“Whetted to brilliance,” the woman threatens the observer with her intellect. Sharp as a scimitar, adamant as sculpted stone, cold as splintered ice, and concise as a rosette, her mind is an “instrument” she can use “to experiment”; at once weapon and scalpel, it creates the smoothly polished surface that protects it. Moore has risked giving her female figure full autonomy. She is an intellectual as well as a physical threat. Moore has not, however, simply exchanged intellectual for physical or used one as a metaphor for the other. The images that Moore used to describe the figure’s physical appearance now also describe the woman’s intellect, but they retain their physicality. “Brilliance” as a quality refers equally to mind and body; the phrase “Whetted to brilliance” applies both to the physical activity of refining appearance and the intellectual activity of honing the mind. The same question--“Are they weapons or scalpels?”--that links clothing to language also links body and mind. Dress is not just the language of the body, but the language of body and mind in concert. As the intersection between body and mind, it is a scalpel. Or a weapon. Or both. The woman probes with her own knife.

And Moore, too, probes with her own knife; as artist, she re-creates a perfected female figure according to her own vision. Her activity in this respect is similar to Sidney’s and Williams’s, and she is no less endangered by what she has created than they are. However, because her poem breaks down the opposition between the self as artist and the lady as subject that their poems reinforce and depend on, any threat this woman might pose for Moore is really danger from herself, a danger to which she continually exposes herself. She points her scalpel in as
well as out. Despite the fact that Moore appears to armor herself and her poems thoroughly, her belief that appearance and form are metonyms for the whole self makes any surface already pierced.

The poem sets up a relationship between appearance and language, mind and body. It also links Moore’s activity as a poet to the activity of the woman she describes. Moore does not explore the possibility that brilliance might be a weapon. She follows her question, “Are they weapons or scalpels?” with an analysis of intellect as a scalpel, a possibility she rejects, aware, perhaps, that the woman who attempts to use her mind to dissect will be hindered by her destiny, no matter how refined her intellect. Moore’s omission suggests that brilliance might better be used as a weapon, particularly as a means for defense. Turning her creativity and intelligence on her own body, cultivating it, a woman can protect herself by creating a perfect surface. Since the poem links appearance and language, turning the intelligence on the self becomes a metaphor for turning brilliance on language. The solution for a brilliant woman is to turn to artistic creation—perfecting and creating the self or perfecting and creating language—or writing poems.

Moore’s careful, questioning tone in her initial meditation on language and the way she eases into her description of the woman indicate that she is personally engaged with the woman she describes. Like H.D., Moore explores and questions her own activity because she recognizes that this woman is “one of us, with us.” The care with which she portrays her physical and intellectual qualities originates from deeper motives than the aesthetic. Moore’s engagement with this woman is similar to an engagement between women that Virginia Woolf reports with surprise and wonder towards the end of A Room of One’s Own: “Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together . . .” (87). She might have written the same of Moore and the woman in “Those Various Scalpels.” The poetic strategies which link the woman in Moore’s poem to language link her also to Moore’s language and through her language to Moore herself, merging poem, woman, and poet. Moore and this woman “share a laboratory”, their work is analogous.

Moore makes this explicit in her description of the woman’s hand: “Your raised hand / an ambiguous signature.” A signature is usually a mark of positive identification; though it can be forged, it is not ordinarily
described as ambiguous. A signature is more than a word; Moore signing her name, writing it in and with her own hand, is different from her writing the word “scalpel.” “Scalpel” has not written itself. A scalpel’s signature would be . . . what? A mark on the flesh? A gash, perhaps, or a scar. But even that is not the thing itself or a part of the thing that stands for the whole. The signature of this woman is not even written; it is a gesture, and is at once less definite than its written equivalent and more physical and immediate. Its physicality ties it to this woman as surely as an authentic signature is tied to its signer. Her gesture is her hand, just as her own handwriting is her hand. It is “ambiguous” in this poem not because we can’t be sure if it’s hers, but because we are not sure how to read it.

But the structure of the poem, its images, syntax, and context, suggest one way to read this signature: “Moore.” In “Those Various Scalpels” Moore has refigured the traditional relationships between mind and body, subject and object, poet and poem, poet and woman, transforming these traditional oppositions into alliances. The woman’s hand signs poem and self in a single motion, but it is Moore’s hand that has written the poem and dressed the woman, and Moore’s hand that ultimately signs her creation. By signing it, she signs herself. She writes her signature on the poem as the woman writes hers on her body. Both signatures—Moore’s writing and the woman’s clothing—are metonyms for the self, written at once by and on the self. Garments clothe the body and identify the self; a signature adds the final garment to the poem and identifies the poet.

WORKS CITED


