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Two Times of the Same Story: Comparable Themes in 17th Century Poetry and 21st Century Rap Music

In the study of literature, we look to poets to communicate to us by putting the “best words in their best order,” as stated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The rhythm of poetry transcends music, and even the simple rhythm of reading poetry aloud presents a musicality without needing the help of instruments. The same, I will argue, can be said about 21st Century rap artists; give them a beat and rappers will put words in their best order to communicate their messages. In keeping with Coleridge’s definition of poetry, rapper Jay-Z comments that “a poet’s mission is to make words do more than they normally do, to make them work on more than one level... a poet makes words work sonically—as sounds, as music” (Decoded 54). There are many ways that rap music is poetry in terms of the poetic techniques used to communicate a message, however, my mission in this paper will be to demonstrate the ways in which the messages themselves are similar. In this paper, I will argue that 17th century poetry is most easily comparable to 21st century rap music because of the stories they tell, which is a topic I could talk about extensively—both artists tell stories about pride for one’s home, the struggles involved in trying to seduce a woman, one’s power over nature, or the mere display of one’s intellect, among many other things. In this paper, I will examine three themes and give examples of their presence in both the 17th Century and the 21st Century. These are: paying homage to great poets that have gone before, the fleetingness of life, and the role women adopt to succeed in a man’s field. To reinforce these ideas, I will be drawing upon the genius of lyrical greats such as Kanye West, Ben Jonson, Drake, Robert Herrick, Nicki Minaj, and Lady Mary Wroth. The lives and lineages of these artists are obviously very different, and there is a deep racial aspect to the genesis of rap music and its popularization that we don’t have time to assess today. It is however, important to keep

in mind that though both artists are rebelling, the people of colour who dominate the rap scene in my work today come from heritages that are far less privileged than even the 17th century poets we are looking at. Their rebellion holds political and social implications, as well as intellectual ones. However, rather than focusing on the differences between these artists, today we will focus on the ways that the stories told by these artists are similar, and the ways that the stories we tell throughout human history haven't evolved that significantly in the last 400-odd years.

SLIDE: To start, it goes without saying that poetry would not be what it is without the work of William Shakespeare. His words have shaped language and become a part of our daily speech. In the rap world, there are also artists who have shaped the field into what it is today. One such rapper is Jay-Z, who mentored rapper Kanye West, and virtually shaped his career. In this first comparison, we will look at the ways that Ben Jonson and Kanye West praise their role models in their respective works "To the Memory of My Beloved Author, Master William Shakespeare, and What he Hath Left Us," and "Big Brother". To start, both Jonson and Kanye are known for being especially prideful in their own work and in their own artistic tastes, and both poets focus greatly on their own tastes and careers as they praise their literary mentors.

SLIDE: Both artists primarily praise their role models as great because of their relationships to other artists. In the Shakespeare elegy, Jonson, a lover of the values of Roman poetry, praises Shakespeare for his revival of these values, saying he has even surpassed these great writers and adapted their kinds of comedies and tragedies for the British stage when he writes: "Leave thee alone for the comparison/Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome/Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come./Tri'umph, my Britain, thou hast one to show/To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe." Therefore, as a lover of Roman poetry, it is a great sign of admiration that Jonson would say that Shakespeare had surpassed the writings of Greece and Rome. Similarly, the main source of Kanye's praise for Jay-Z lies in the chorus that says, "my big brother was Big's brother" making Jay-Z's main merit his relationship to slain 90's rapper Biggie Smalls.

Finally, both poems are suggestive of the idea of sibling rivalry and competition, as the pride of both Jonson and Kanye causes them to allude to their occasional superiority over the artists they are praising. 17th Century literary critic Graham Parry comments that “Jonson was so self-centered in his preoccupations...that he had difficulty in appreciating the very different literary developments of Shakespeare...” (28). Jonson has often been remarked by literary critics to be classist, and this is evident in the Shakespeare poem, as he mentions Shakespeare’s “small latin and less greek” and his “natural talent” as opposed to talent gained from a rich education in the classics and a hard work ethic. Because Jonson himself had an extensive classical education, and advocated for the value of education his whole life, this seems to be a critique of Shakespeare that Jonson is proud to make. Similarly, in Kanye’s song, he recounts a time that he gossiped about Jay-Z after he put out a song that featured Coldplay, a band previously featured on one of Kanye’s songs. Though West recognizes that there is an issue with the way he handled this situation by telling another rapper that he had a problem with this before Jay-Z, he doesn’t disregard the fact that he thought Jay-Z’s actions were in the wrong, and Kanye’s prideful bravado shines through. Kanye expresses shame about this experience, and demonstrates here that he too struggles to understand how to have a relationship with someone that is both his role model and his competition. These two works prove that praise and pride are enduring themes in poetry.

SLIDE: Next, Robert Herrick’s “best poetry is an attempt to defeat time or to convert its destructiveness into regeneration” (Parry 172). Herrick’s poetry, along with that of his contemporaries such as John Donne, Andrew Marvell, or William Shakespeare often make use of this kind of poetry, commonly referred to as the “carpe diem poem”. **SLIDE** Today, we will explore a poem entitled “Corinna’s Going a Maying”. This poem recounts the events of May Day, a pagan holiday which celebrated the coming of spring, and a day in which women were more likely to give up their virginites, as May Day was a time for the betrothal of lovers (127). The speaker in this poem is addressing young women as “Corinnas” (a reference to Ovid’s lover), and warns them not to waste their youth on responsibility, but to live in the

moment and “take the harmlesse follie of the time”. The speaker then goes on to emphasize the brevity of life, comparing it to a “vapour,” or a “drop of rain,” inferring to the women that the future is coming too quickly anyways, and not to waste their prime on living carefully. This poem is essentially about indulgence in life and in youth. The same kind of indulgence can be seen in the rap counterpart to this “carpe diem” poem. Drake raps extensively in his work about trying to make the most of his moments. In his 2016 song “Child’s Play” he asks an implied woman “married in our twenties, where’s the fun in that?” indicating that he wants to relish his time as a young and unattached man, again, mirroring Herrick’s sentiment that the future will hold enough time for marriage and obligations, and that youth is for fun. Today, we’re going to look at the 2011 song that had a huge cultural impact upon its release; “The Motto” by Drake featuring Lil Wayne. Not only did this song popularize the colloquial acronym “YOLO” (you only live once), but it also makes a statement about the kinds of reckless young decision making that Herrick seems to be advocating for in much of his poetry. 17th Century poetry scholar Graham Parry argues that in Herrick’s poem:

[T]he poet urges his mistress to take the plunge into the waters of life, as he concentrates the common experience of mankind into an impassioned appeal to outwit time and age, to enjoy youth and beauty by indulging in ‘harmless follie’ that is also instinctual wisdom. (173)

Drake is arguing for the same kind of indulgence in his song “The Motto,” when the speaker describes the way he is making decisions based on his youth and wealth. He first does this by summarizing what Herrick is trying to convince the women of in his poem, which is essentially to give up their virginities and sleep with him; in “The Motto,” Drake makes multiple references to sexual relations that he has with women as a means of expressing his carefree attitude, bragging “Spanish girls love me” or “still getting’ brain from a thang”.

The poems have slightly different conceptions of youth as commodity, though both artists acknowledge the wealth in youth. One of the benefits of being a rapper in the 21st century as opposed to being a poet in the 17th Century is that it is a much better paying job; part of the commodity of Drake’s

youth is all the wealth he has acquired as a young rapper, as he says in the Motto by saying he is “twenty-five sitting on twenty-five mill” (The Motto). In Robert Herrick’s poem, the wealth of his youth lies solely in the youth itself, and in the virginities of the women that he is trying to seduce, and the lustful energy that accompanies the youth of the time. Regardless of this difference, both poets aim to convince their audience that youth should not be wasted on the young, and that sometimes, reckless decisions are the wisest.

SLIDE: Finally, like 17th Century poetry, the rap community in the 21st Century is overrun with male artists. Just as poetry in the 17th Century was a gentleman’s hobby, modern day hip-hop is chiefly communicated in the male voice. In the 17th Century, possibly the most notable female poet was Lady Mary Wroth, who was the first woman to write in sonnet sequence, a traditionally male form. Today, we will be looking at the first poem in her sequence called “From Pamphilia to Amphilanthus” wherein she describes romantic love in dark and often violent images. A female rapper (also known as a Fem-Cee) that would be comparable to Lady Mary Wroth is Nicki Minaj. In rap music, female voices are typically heard singing backup or the hooks of songs, but rarely rapping. Nicki Minaj has changed all of this. Today we will be looking at Minaj’s verse from Kanye West’s “Monster,” which was listed by Complex magazine as the best rap verse of the 2010s. This verse is so well done that Kanye West even considered removing it from the track because he knew the verse would outshine his own work in the song (AllHipHop). Lady Mary Wroth also received praise from her male contemporaries, especially Ben Jonson, who dedicated his work *The Alchemist* to her, and wrote her epigrams and sonnets (Greenblatt 1150). Though both women were well-regarded by some men in their fields, this does not undermine the difficulty of being a woman in their respective “boy’s clubs”. As we will see, both women write using violent images, but for very different reasons.

SLIDE: First, we will look at the dark diction in each of the poems. In Lady Mary Wroth’s piece, she creates an aggressive tone with her vocabulary, using words and images like “still adding fire/To burning hearts,” “flaming more than all the rest,” and “martyred my poor heart”. The violent images in this

poem make a victim out of the speaker, and demonstrate her relationship to the male field as well as possibly referencing the trauma Wroth experienced in her marriage and the judgment she sustained for the relationship she pursued after the death of her husband (Greenblatt, 1150). It is through these painful experiences that Wroth can communicate the anguish of being a woman by painting this violent picture of her experiences with men. The anguish expressed by Wroth demonstrates the way that women were often made victims in marriage, and shamed for any notion of erotic love, making a curse out of love and a victim and martyr out of her heart. Nicki Minaj uses dark language too, as we can see in her verse from Kanye West's "Monster"; "bad bitch," "queen conquer," "eat your brains," "gold teeth and fangs," and "motherfucking monster". Nicki's voice however, makes her the monster or the curse, as opposed to the victim that Wroth plays. Both women are describing scenes of an attack, but Wroth is a victim, and Minaj is a monster.

So, what are the implications of this shift in point of view? I believe that the women each use aggression and violence in their poems for different purposes; Wroth uses these images to demonstrate the pain and passivity of being a woman, a wife, and a lover, whereas Minaj's aggressive persona is used to demonstrate that she can assert herself alongside the equally aggressive male voices in rap.

In both cases, the women are operating in a male form, Minaj by being a prominent female rapper, and Wroth by writing in the sonnet sequence. So, if they are operating in male forms, using aggressive and violent images, are they representing female poetry and rap? I would argue that yes, both are cases of female poetry, but in art, the feminine does not always take the form it is asked to take in society. Nicki Minaj has touched on this controversy in interviews, saying "When you're a girl, you have to be everything. You have to be dope at what you do but you have to be super sweet and you have to be sexy... I can't be all those things at once" (MTV). In the poems we've looked at today, it appears that the women's sometimes grotesque and violent words could be interpreted as cries to be respected as artists, regardless of whether they fulfill the societal ideal of what female verse should or should not

be. These women write aggressively, but if the poems were written by men, we might not even notice that these poems were anything but expression of deep emotion. Though almost 400 years have passed since Lady Mary Wroth penned her sonnet sequence, there still remain areas of art and culture that are unfortunately “boy’s clubs”. Nicki Minaj has proven herself to be a force to be reckoned with, and yet still experiences criticism and her lyrical style is questioned because of her gender. This criticism is archaic, and shows that there are still artistic fields that have work to do to better recognize female artists.

In conclusion, as a field that has increasingly become a part of mainstream culture in the past two decades, rap music is regarded as an art form, and as poetry that to quote Jay-Z “makes words do more than words normally do”. Though the medium of popular poetry has shifted from long-form poetry to spoken word, from the sonnet sequence to mixtapes, the voices of rap are telling the same stories told by 17th century poets, which are an expression of enduring human truths that continue to be contemplated by artists and art lovers. The examples that we’ve looked at today demonstrate that although the mediums of music and poetry have evolved, the messages they’ve attempted to communicate have stayed the same. Although the world has changed, we as artists, and lovers of art, maybe haven’t.

Thank you.

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