

ARTICLE

Desportes, Di Costanzo, and the Disproportionate Simile

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SUMMARY

Philippe Desportes was a master of Petrarchist imitation, drawing from a wide variety of Italian poets he read mainly in anthologies. Among these numerous potential sources, Desportes demonstrates a strong predilection for the poetry of Angelo Di Costanzo, which he read primarily in the *Fiori dei poeti illustri*, an anthology that showcased Neapolitan poets. Desportes is particularly attracted to Di Costanzo's poems that demonstrate over-the-top comparisons, or, to put it another way, disproportionate similes. By turning to a poet with whom he felt a personal affinity based on their shared aesthetic values, Desportes produced an innovative imitation that allowed for self-expression and *renovatio*.

KEYWORDS: imitation, Petrarchism, Desportes, Di Costanzo, Italian anthologies, Giolito, rhetoric, simile, hyperbole, Baroque

As Jean-Claude Carron has taught us, *imitatio* is a technique that proliferated in the Renaissance under a variety of guises. Ranging from a close appropriation that borders on translation to the subtlest of allusions that can be discerned by only a few *cognoscenti*, the most successful and intriguing forms of imitation were, somewhat paradoxically, innovative, and thus inextricably linked to (indeed, emblematic of) the phenomenon of *renovatio* that constituted the Renaissance. As Carron has highlighted, innovative imitation did not handcuff aspiring poets and condemn them to repeat the words of others; instead, it was a liberating experience that offered poets a vehicle for self-discovery, a means by which to become more themselves. The key to such an outcome, Carron has maintained (569), is to choose a model with which one senses a connection, a personal affinity that will allow for self-expression even while ostensibly echoing another text.

One intriguing example of such an affinity can be found between Philippe Desportes, a prolific poet of the late sixteenth century, and his favorite model, Angelo Di Costanzo, a relatively minor Italian poet of the Neapolitan school (Kastner 118). Unlike many Italian Renaissance poets, Di Costanzo did not produce a *canzoniere*, that is, a single-authored volume in which the poet's persona speaks of one beloved mistress. Instead, his poetic work became known to Desportes and others through a few of the many anthologies that flourished in Renaissance Italy from the mid-sixteenth century (Longhi 210). While this lack of homogeneity and sustained poetic voice could suggest that Desportes (or any other poet) might have been less inclined to find in such a volume the "personal affinity" of which Carron speaks, I would maintain that such is indeed the case here. Statistics confirm that echoes from Di Costanzo's poems pepper virtually all of Desportes's love poetry, including the *Amours de Diane*, the *Amours d'Hippolyte*, and most especially the *Amours de Cléonice* (Vianey, "Desportes"; Kastner). The purpose of this paper is not to add to the growing

list of recognized Di Costanzo sources that were used by Desportes, nor indeed to subtract some dubious models (of which there are many) from this same list. Rather, it is to examine some sample poems by Di Costanzo with an eye to discerning some of their most salient aesthetic principles in an effort to see how this aesthetic was translated (in the etymological sense of that word) into Desportes's own vast collections of love poetry. In turn, this will permit the reader to evaluate to what extent the French poet's personal affinity towards his model contributed to his overall poetic project.

Before undertaking that analysis, however, it would be useful to supply some context to Desportes's imitation of Di Costanzo in particular. Desportes was undoubtedly an inexhaustible reader of Petrarchan poetry. He was acquainted with the lyrics not only of the master Petrarch but also of a wide variety of far lesser eminences, the minor *petrarchisti* (Pizzorusso; Vianey, *Le Pétrarquisme*). These ranged from the late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento lyricists Benedetto Cariteo (1450–1514), Antonio Tebaldeo (1463–1537), Panfilo Sasso (1455–1527), and Jacopo Sannazaro (1458–1530) to numerous sixteenth-century poets whose work, like that of Di Costanzo, was published principally in lyric collections, known variously as the Giolito Anthologies, Italian Anthologies, or *Rime diverse*. Some of the latter poets had been known to the earlier Pléiade lyricists Du Bellay and Ronsard, who made extensive use of the first two Giolito Anthologies, that were printed between 1545 and 1549 (DellaNeva, *Unlikely Exemplars*). But, due to the accidents of timing, Desportes's reading activity could embrace a far wider range of anthologies, including the entire nine-volume Giolito series and its cousin publications which were printed after 1550. Among these numerous volumes, one stands out as an apparent favorite of Desportes, as he appears to have imitated numerous poems from that text: this is *I Fiori delle rime de' poeti illustri*, first published in 1558 and re-edited (with different pagination from the first edition) in 1569, 1579, 1586, and 1589.

The *Fiori*, though commonly accepted by bibliographers as the unnumbered volume eight of the Giolito series, is actually quite different from its predecessors. As its title (signifying flowers) suggests, this is no ordinary anthology, for this one aims to reprint the most important poems culled from previously printed volumes. It is, thus, a “retrospective” anthology that does not embrace the same principle of inclusiveness or “generosity” that the earlier anthology volumes exhibited (Clubb and Clubb). Whereas the editors of the first two Giolito volumes scoured the country for new and previously unpublished poetry from hundreds of both serious and amateur poets, Girolamo Ruscelli shaped the *Fiori* to be a more traditional “canon-ratifying” anthology, albeit one that proclaims the validity of contemporary or recently deceased poets as opposed to the likes of Petrarch and other long-gone lyricists. The work includes only 39 authors but provides an extremely large selection of their verses: 877 poems, nearly 93% of which are sonnets. What is conspicuously absent in this anthology, however, are the many dilettantes who were included in earlier Giolito volumes for extra-literary reasons of collegiality or social status, although it does include several poets who have, to put it charitably, not withstood the test of time. Finally, the *Fiori* poems are explicitly presented as useful, worthy models for aspiring writers, a claim that had not been made in the earlier anthologies. The seriousness of this claim is verified by the fact that the text includes a set of explicative annotations on many of these poems, presumably testifying to their richness and exemplarity.

A glance at the physical presentation of this book also confirms its difference from the earlier Giolito volumes. Volumes one and two of the set known as the *Rime diverse*, which we

know were owned by Ronsard and which no doubt were also read by Du Bellay, were rather carelessly printed, with several poems credited to the wrong author or published under the rubric of “*incerti autori*” (“poems of uncertain authorship”). Moreover, the lack of headers on every page rendered the work of even the most important poets virtually anonymous, for a reader could easily forget or not notice the name of the author of any given poem, particularly one found in the middle of a large selection of texts. Still, it would be clear to most readers of volume one, at least, that it is the famed Pietro Bembo who is considered the star of this collection, for his poems are placed first in the collection, and his name is printed in large letters in its table of contents. Ruscelli’s *Fiori*, in contrast, suggests a certain parity among its authors by presenting these poets strictly in alphabetical order by first names, beginning with Angelo Di Costanzo and ending with Vittoria Colonna. What is more, a header identifying the author of a given text is printed on every page. In this way, any reader would instantly know the name of the author of every single poem, whether that text was at the beginning or the middle or the end of the selection accorded each poet. There is here, then, a greater emphasis on the importance and authority of the *author* than was the case in the other Italian anthologies, and this is a fact that could counter the difficulties involved in finding a “personal affinity” for a given writer amid a cacophony of poetic voices.

Another way in which the *Fiori* differs from the first two Giolito volumes is in the choice of poets it offers. Ruscelli’s anthology gives considerable attention to a relatively new school of poets who came into fashion in the 1550s in Italy and who were featured in Giolito’s volume five, the *Rime di diversi illustri signori napoletani*, first published in 1552. As its title indicates, these are the poets of the Neapolitan school whose most illustrious stars were (in addition to Di Costanzo) Bernardo Rota, Domenico Venier, Luigi Tansillo, and Ferrante Carrafa. None of these poets had been available to Du Bellay and Ronsard through their reading of the first two Giolito volumes (with the single exception of one poem actually written by Tansillo but misattributed to two other poets in Giolito’s first volume). If Desportes wanted to follow in the footsteps of the Pléiade poets by drawing from the Italian anthologies, yet also wanted to distinguish himself from these predecessors by choosing different models who exhibited different stylistic tendencies, then his decision to turn to the *Fiori* was virtually inevitable.

For the Neapolitan poets were indeed a distinctive bunch, and it is their aesthetic tastes that dominate the *Fiori* as they did the fifth Giolito volume. Domenico Venier, for example, was known for his use (or abuse, depending on one’s perspective) of correlative verse, known in French poetry as “*vers rapportés*.” While the early Giolito anthologies contained several poems written in three-part correlative verse, the *Fiori* featured Venier’s six-part *tour de force* along with a few less ambitious examples of this form. Aside from these structural techniques, the Neapolitan poets were also known for their verbal conceits and extravagant witticisms. Whether such stylistic tendencies should be termed “mannerist,” “baroque,” or “*précieux*” is a debate best left to others (Burgess; Hatzfeld; Taddeo; de Mourgues; Ferroni and Quondam), but there is no debating that rhetorical excess was the mark of the Neapolitan poets whom Desportes read in the *Fiori*. In truth, these poets were highly reminiscent of the stylistic playfulness found in Desportes’s other favorite sources, most especially Sasso and Tebaldeo, who were essentially the poets against whom Bembo and his school developed their far more sedate and classicizing brand of Petrarchism (Kastner 118; Vianey, “*Une rencontre*” 98). The Cinquecento Neapolitan poets who are featured in the *Fiori* are thus revivalists of this extravagant style, and essentially retrograde in their aesthetic tastes.

Identifying the precise editions of poetry that found their way into Desportes's library (and, consequently, into his verses) has been debated, but it is safe to say that Desportes was indeed acquainted with the *Fiori* and not just the aforementioned fifth Giolito volume, since many of the poems he imitated appeared *only* in the *Fiori* and in no other printed anthology. While it is theoretically possible that Desportes might have owned the *princeps* edition of the *Fiori*, dating from 1558, or, perhaps, as Vianey suggested ("Une rencontre" 99), the far later 1579 edition of that anthology, it is most likely that he worked from the 1569 edition of the *Fiori*. This is because, as François Rouget ("Les livres italiens" 88 and "Philippe Desportes" 107) has speculated, Desportes may well have acquired this and other anthologies while passing through Venice around 1574, when, in his role as secretary, he accompanied Henri d'Anjou on his return from Poland.

It should be remembered that it is Di Costanzo's poetry that opens the *Fiori*. But, as Ruscelli explains in his preface, the *Fiori* is arranged in alphabetical order according to the first name of its poets, placing "Angelo" at the threshold of the text. No particular significance should thus be given by the informed reader (that is, one who has bothered to read the *Fiori's* preface) regarding the placement of Di Costanzo's poems in the prime initial position. Nonetheless, it is possible for a reader such as Desportes, who was steeped in the anthology tradition that had traditionally accorded its best poets this place of honor, to interpret (or, rather, misinterpret) Di Costanzo as the prime exemplum of the aesthetic or poetic message this book was intended to illustrate. Certainly, other poets, including the more famous Giovanni Guidiccioni and Francesco Molza (as well as the lesser-known Chiara Matraini) are represented by a greater number of poems (Balsamo, *Les rencontres* 239). Yet, it is indeed to Di Costanzo that Desportes most often turns when choosing a potential model from this anthology. According to the commentators and editors who have studied Desportes's models extensively, roughly a third of the sixty-six Di Costanzo poems printed in the *Fiori* serve as base texts for Desportes. Most of Desportes's Di Costanzo imitations, including all of the *Diane* and *Cléonice* poems, entered into his poetic collections in 1583, but a handful of the *Hippolyte* imitations of Di Costanzo date from the 1570s.

I should like now, then, to consider what specific stylistic features of Di Costanzo's *Fiori* poems found their way into Desportes's poetic collections. Di Costanzo's poetry is, by comparison to some of his Neapolitan compatriots, somewhat restrained. He does not engage in elaborate displays of verbal or structural artifice, as did Veniero, for example, with his use of correlative verse. Moreover, instead of gravitating towards oxymoron, which William J. Kennedy (21) has called "the normative elocutionary strategy of Petrarchan poetry," Di Costanzo's lyrics demonstrate a great affinity for what must be considered the lowliest of rhetorical devices, namely simile and metaphor. Both of these devices function in a similar fashion, suggesting an identification between two disparate things, with metaphor being, of course, the more dramatic and forceful and simile the more tenuous of the two forms of comparisons. But Di Costanzo had a real knack for bringing out the hidden drama behind the lowly simile by repeatedly exploiting what I will call the disproportionate comparison, in which the *comparant* and the *comparé* (or, in other terms, the tenor and the vehicle) are shockingly imbalanced and out of proportion. The result is an image that shares some of the features of hyperbole: namely an exaggerated, almost outrageous quality that "breaks the boundaries of good style" and is indeed quite memorable (Ettenhuber 199). I believe, however, that it is worth considering the disproportionate comparison as distinct from hyperbole, a more general trope that need not employ metaphor or simile in its expression of exaggeration.

The imbalanced simile is clearly a favorite device of Di Costanzo's; indeed, it is virtually his trademark, and a reader of the *Fiori*, such as Desportes, is unlikely to miss its frequency and intensity. It is here that we might speak of poetic affinity, for many of these poems attracted the attention of Desportes, who transports these over-the-top comparisons into the pages of his own poetic collections, such that hyperbole (or more precisely, the disproportionate simile) becomes "the pillar of the erotical compliments in [Desportes's] mock-Petrarchan style" (Hatzfeld, "The Style" 264). Indeed, if we consider Desportes as a reader of this anthology before he became its re-writer, one cannot help but be struck by the intense scrutiny that Desportes apparently bestowed on a few contiguous pages of this volume. These are specifically leaves 8v–9v and the facing pages 12v–13r of the 1569 edition, the former of which led to two imitations that were placed in the *Amours d'Hippolyte* in 1577, and the latter of which produced two imitations that made their way into the same collection in 1583, suggesting two separate instances of reading and subsequent rewriting. Drawn from cosmic, historic, mythological or biblical networks of imagery, all four of these Italian poems display remarkably similar aesthetic and rhetorical attributes that clearly attracted Desportes.

In the first example, it is the beloved who is the beneficiary of the imbalanced simile, for her eyes are like comets that portend the death of some great personage:

I Fiori, 8v

Questa luce, dal ciel di novo uscita
Ad illustrar' il secol nostro indegno,
Bench a' miei spirti sia dolce sostegno,
Pur giorno e notte à sospettar m'invita.
Che, qual ne l'apparir **stella crinita**
Suol dimostar' espresso, e chiaro segno,
Che mutar **Signoria** debba alcun regno,
O qualche **Re** possente uscir di vita.
Tal par, che co' suo raggi ella m'apporte
Più de l'usato chiaro inditio aperto
De l'eccidio de l'alma, e de la morte.
Cosi 'l timor d'un mal futuro incerto
Non lascia (**ô** sempre a me nemica sorte)
Godermi il lume suo presente, e certo.

Hippolyte 72 [70]

Quand je voy flamboyer **ceste heureuse planette**
De nostre âge imparfait l'admirable ornement:
Bien que mon cœur d'ailleurs n'attende allegement,
Si faut-il que de crainte à trembler je me mette.
Car ainsi comme on voit **la fatale Comete**,
Flambante en longs cheveux, n'apparoir nullement
Sans la mort **d'un monarque**, ou sans un changement,
Quand quelque **Seigneurie** est pres d'estre sujette;
De mesme hélas! je crains que ce divin flambeau
De ma foible raison presage le tombeau,
Ou qu'au moins je verray ma liberté retraindre.
J'ay peur qu'en pire estat on me face changer,
Mais (**ô** moy desolé!) j'en suis hors du danger,
J'ay tant et tant de maux que plus je ne doy craindre.

Certainly, meteorological and cosmic phenomena were often associated with eye imagery in the Petrarchan tradition (and beyond); so too is the implication that the encounter of eyes could be a fatal one for the lover (Donaldson-Evans). But there is something a bit more dramatic at work here. Specifically, the frightening cosmic reality of *this* comet is linked inextricably to the unsettling political implications of a king's death and the overthrowing of a reign. In other words, this is no ordinary comet, but a meaningful one that portends a specific imminent tragedy. In turn, then, the political "story" generated by these images is applied to the situation of the lover, giving to his personal anguish a certain *gravitas* and far greater importance than it should merit in the world at large.

An even better example of the unbalanced comparison – this one, based on historical imagery – is used just a bit later in the sequence of poems written by Di Costanzo:

I Fiori, 12v

In quella Patria, che con tanto affano
 Sommise, havendo la virtù per guida,
 Trovò pur' il gran Cesare, homicida,
 Nel quarto del suo Impero, infelice anno,
Ma Amor, de la mia vita empio Tiranno,
Non trova in me pensier mai, che l'occida,
 Nè, che liberi il core, ov'ei s'annida,
 Fatto Signor per frode, e per inganno.
 E veggio ben, che son duo lustru interi,
 C'havendo la ragion messa in essiglio,
 Lega, sforza, e minaccia i miei pensieri.
 I quai per tema del suo fiero artiglio,
 Non hanno ardir, come seguaci veri,
 Di farla ritornar; prender consiglio.

Hippolyte 56 [55]

Ayant trois ans entiers toute Rome asservie
 L'invincible Cesar, du beau sang de Cypris,
 Quelques vaillans Romains à servir mal apris
 Trencherent par le fer son Empire et sa vie.
Amour depuis trois ans ma franchise a ravie,
Regnant comme un tyran sans peur d'estre repris:
Et mes lasches pensers n'ont encore entrepris
D'executer un meurtre où l'honneur les convie.
 Quand le Triumvirat tramoit ses factions
 Rome ne veit jamais tant de proscriptions
 Tant de saccagemens, tant d'injustes supplices,
 Comme Amour, dedans moy fait de maux infinis;
 Ce n'est que sang, que pleurs, que meurtris, que bannis,
 Il vole, il chasse, il brûle, et fait mille injustices.

Both Di Costanzo and Desportes use the hackneyed comparison of Love as a tyrant, but the historical specificity of the simile here renders it a vehicle through which to formulate an elaborate conceit that is over-wrought. For the historical figure in question is precisely Julius Caesar, perhaps the archetypal tyrant, who met his fate at the hands of enemy assassins. The Love-as-tyrant analogy that Di Costanzo and Desportes both use thus allows them to create a second implied comparison that establishes a contrast with the historical Caesar's story: that of their feckless thoughts which, unlike Caesar's assassins, do not dare to overtake their dictator. Having borrowed the skeletal framework of these analogies from Di Costanzo, Desportes then elaborates upon the destructive consequences of this failure to act in a manner that distinguishes his more symmetrical poem from his model (Pizzorusso 285–86, n. 5). Using internal repetitions, Desportes enumerates Rome's submission to "*tant de proscriptions, tant de saccagemens, tant d'injustes supplices,*" which apparently pale in comparison to the "infinite" evils perpetuated by an unconquered Love: "*ce n'est que sang, que pleurs, que meurtris, que bannis*" – in short, "a thousand" injustices. Once again, the poet's personal situation is given a grandiose political dimension that is excessive, thanks to his penchant for hyperbole.

In what seems to be an example of the intense scrutiny Desportes gave to the *Fiori* when composing poems that first appeared in 1583, the Frenchman clearly turned his attention to a sonnet by Di Costanzo that appeared on the page that faces the Caesar poem in the 1569 edition of the anthology:

I Fiori, 12r

Che Perseo, un tempo, qual Mercurio alato,
 Gisse del ciel per l'alte ignote strade,
 Non si deve ammirar la nostra etade,
Che'l simil provo al mio amoroso stato.
 Perche **dal mio pensier sovente alzato**,
 A contemplar l'angelica beltade,
 M'appresso à quelle eterne alme contrade,
 Onde vien quanto à noi di sopra è dato.
 Indi, qual' ei la vergin d'Ethiopia
 Destinata per cibo al monstro fiero,

Hippolyte 41 [40]

Je ressemble en aimant au valeureux **Persée**
 Que sa belle entreprise a fait si glorieux,
 Ayant d'un vol nouveau pris la route des dieux,
 Et sur tous les mortels sa poursuite haussée.
 Emporté **tout ainsi de ma haute pensée**
 Je vole aventureux aux soleils de vos yeux,
 Et voy mille beautez qui m'élèvent aux cieux,
 Et me font oublier toute peine passée.
 Mais hélas! **Je n'ay pas le bouclier renommé**,
 Dont contre tous perils Vulcan l'avoit armé,

Scorgo in proda d'Amor l'anima propria.
Ma non ho com'hebbe ei, lo scudo altero,
 Nè d'altr'arme per torla, alcuna copia,
 Di man del dispietato, iniquo Arciero.

Par lequel sans danger il peût voir la Gorgonne:
 Au contraire à l'instant que je m'ose approcher
 De ma belle Meduse, inhumaine et felonne,
 Un traict de ses regards me transforme en rocher.

Here, Di Costanzo embarks on a mythological analogy, retelling the story of Perseus and Andromeda, whom he designates via the periphrasis “the virgin of Ethiopia,” who is in danger of being devoured by a great monster. In this retelling, Di Costanzo casts his poetic persona as Perseus, only without that handy protective shield or any other tool to save his soul (akin to the figure of Andromeda) from a monstrous, destructive Love. When Desportes retells the story, he too likens his persona to a glorious Perseus, but the figure of Andromeda disappears from this text. Instead of saving Andromeda, Desportes-Perseus here faces his beloved, whom he casts as the Gorgon Medusa, a figure that did not appear explicitly in Di Costanzo’s poem (Pizzorusso 296 n.3). As in the case of Di Costanzo’s poem, he carries no shield and thus is turned to stone. In a gesture that Jean Balsamo (*Les rencontres* 242) has argued is typical for Desportes, the French poet thus simplifies, streamlines, and indeed improves upon Di Costanzo’s analogies by focusing on Perseus’s adventure with Medusa. Nevertheless, the resulting inversions of both “stories” – Perseus/Andromeda and Perseus/Medusa – are similarly destructive. In either case, a horrifying myth, featuring a great hero and a monstrous adversary, is applied to the poet’s own love story, in yet another example of how the vehicle and tenor of metaphor are made disproportionate.

None of these foregoing examples, however, comes close to approaching the disproportionality present in another pair of sonnets penned by Di Costanzo and Desportes:

I Fiori, 9v

Non con tanta **ira** sparse il fiero **Erode**
 Il puro sangue de **i fanciulli Ebrei**,
 Con **quant'io uccido in fasce i pensier** miei.
Nè però uccide quel, che 'l cor mi rode,
 Il qual con nova inusitata, frode
 Corre à **salvarsi** al viso di colei.
 Ch'adoro in terra, e **del mio mal** con lei
 Quasi del proprio ben, **s'allegra**, e gode.
 Et à l'orecchie mie fingendo quella
 Voce, che per mio mal troppo mi piacque,
 Fa d'aspra Signoria l'anima ancella.
 Questo dir volse **l'una, e l'altra stella**,
 Che quel giorno crudel, **ch'egli in me nacque**,
 Apparve à gli occhi miei si vaga, e bella.

Hippolyte 79 [76]

Le tyran des Hebreux transporté de **furie**
 Ne fit jadis meurtir tant **d'enfans innocens**
Que je tue en maillot de pensers languissans,
 Et **ne touche** à celui qui menace ma vie.
 Car luy desja, rusé fuyant ceste furie
Se sauve à la beauté qui domine mes sens:
 Et là tout assuré **rit des maux** que je sens,
 Et m'abuse sans fin par quelque tromperie.
 Or' en ses chauds regards ce penser se formant,
 Or' en ses doux propos, mon esprit va charmant,
 L'emprisonne et l'estraint en des chaisnes pesantes:
 Helas c'est le malheur qui m'estoit destiné,
 Et que me presageoyent **deux estoiles** luisantes
 Que je vey flamboyer sur le point **qu'il fut né!**

This pair of sonnets merits an extensive analysis by virtue of the fact that this imitation was recognized by two different contemporary readers of Desportes (DellaNeva, “Reading Desportes”). These are an anonymous annotator who scribbled the sources he recognized in a 1593 Lyonnais imprint of Desportes’s works (now housed in the Bibliothèque municipale of Lyon), as well as the editor of the infamous *Rencontre des Muses de France et d'Italie*, which printed numerous poems by Desportes alongside their putative Italian source in 1604. Moreover, the famous poet Malherbe likewise made annotations in the margins of the 1600 edition of Desportes’s poetry that he owned, (now housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France), and these comments

are generally quite severe (Teissier). Not surprisingly, Malherbe was not very impressed by this particular imitation, for his annotation to this poem reads: “Imagination bestiale, prise d’Angelo Costanzo, mot à mot.” What struck Malherbe as particularly “bestial” was no doubt the very disproportionality that is the subject of our analysis, whereby, in this instance, the two poets take a sacred biblical story and apply it to themselves.

Desportes follows the overall movement of his source quite closely, but the highest concentration of echoes from the Di Costanzo poem can be found in his first quatrain. And this is for a good reason, since it is the first quatrain that offers the most startling – indeed, shocking – imagery of Di Costanzo’s sonnet. Both poems refer immediately to the biblical story of the Slaughter of the Innocents. This event, which comes on the tail of the nativity story in the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 2), occurred when King Herod, upon learning from the astrologers or Magi that a new King of the Jews was born in his land, ultimately ordered that all male infants be massacred so that he might be without rival. The tale is a horrific one that was often depicted in baroque paintings due to its intense drama. It combined elements of deceit, rage, egotism, poignancy, pathos, and a great deal of bloody violence. As such, it typifies baroque or mannerist taste, which leaned towards the extravagant, the easily envisioned, and the melodramatic.

Di Costanzo’s poem neatly evokes in its first two verses Herod’s pride and anger, the contrasting purity of the innocent Jewish infants, and the violent bloodbath that ensued. While these images are striking and sensational in their own right, the reader experiences an even greater shock upon realizing that this terrible event is to be compared to the lover’s actions in response to his personal torment. A point-by-point comparison is established, whereby the poet-lover plays the role of a man even angrier than Herod, who kills all his thoughts, save the one that most gnaws at his heart. To advance the analogy between the innocent children and the lover’s thoughts, Di Costanzo uses the expression “in fasce,” which suggests the image of swaddling clothes, a further echo of the nativity story (as related in the Gospel of Luke). The reader is even more shocked upon realizing that the one untouched thought that turns out to be the most troublesome is, of course, analogous to the figure of the infant Jesus, who, though the principal target of this massacre, was saved through the intervention of a dream that warned Joseph to take flight with his family into Egypt. The application of such a serious and powerful set of images, so essential to Christian salvation history, to the comparatively trivial situation of the poet-lover is certainly stunning. One might today imagine a love poet comparing his personal suffering at the hands of his beloved to the horrors of the Holocaust, or to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, to realize the full effects of this astonishing analogy.

Yet this element of surprise – no matter how distasteful – was precisely what attracted Desportes to this source text, and he does not fail to reproduce its effects in his own first quatrain. There, the reader finds the same reference to Herod, rendered even more intense through the periphrasis “le tyran des Hebreux.” Likewise, Desportes echoes Di Costanzo’s emphasis on Herod’s ire, his murderous actions, and, by contrast, the innocence of his victims, which he goes on to liken to his troublesome thoughts. Their tender age is again conveyed by the poet through the phrase “en maillot,” the equivalent of the Italian “in fasce.” And Desportes, like his Italian predecessor, completes his analogy in the fourth verse by referring to the one thought that got away, the one that will prove most dangerous to his well-being, the one that is, in short, the Christ-figure of his story.

The second quatrain of each poem goes on to explain more fully the escape of this one thought. Both Di Costanzo and Desportes describe this escape as the result of a clever fraud or ruse, and this is precisely how it is characterized, from the perspective of Herod, in the Gospel of Matthew. There, Herod is enraged to realize that the astrologers, whom he had commanded to return to him so that, ostensibly, he might in turn pay homage to this newborn king, had slipped away with no intention of telling the dangerous tyrant where they had found the infant Jesus, for they too had been warned of Herod's plan in a dream. It is when Herod realizes that he had been duped that he orders the murders of the infant males of Bethlehem. But the target of this wrath has by this time safely fled to Egypt. Similarly, in these poems, the thought that gets away flees towards another safe haven in both poems: for Di Costanzo, the refuge is found in the face of his lady, whom he refers to by the periphrasis "the one I adore on earth," while Desportes employs the metonymical expression "the beauty that dominates my senses."

But this particular thought that continues to torment the lover is not content merely to be safe but is described as taking pleasure from, indeed laughing at, the lover's pain. Its dastardly attitude and resourceful cunning are confirmed by the fact that, in the Di Costanzo poem, it mimics the voice of the beloved in the lover's ear. This ventriloquism renders the thought somewhat diabolic or, at the very least, siren-like, and Desportes clearly picks up on this suggestion through the use of the word "charmant" in the emphasized rhyme position, which certainly highlights its powers of enchantment. Once again, the full power of this imagery is felt only when the reader remembers that, at the base of this analogy, is the sacred story of the escape of the infant Jesus, which renders any suggestion of the diabolic practically blasphemous.

The final verses of each sonnet show that the result of this spell-binding power is that the poet-lover is enslaved or entrapped, an idea rendered by Di Costanzo through the religiously charged images of lordship and handmaiden ("signoria" and "ancella") but by Desportes through the more conventional topos of the prison and chains of love. Each sonnet ends with the assertion that such is the poet's destiny, foretold by two stars (that are in fact the beloved's eyes) from the first moment of their encounter. Once again, this imagery is also reminiscent of the initial story of Herod and the Innocents, for the whole tragedy was precipitated by the astrologers who interpreted the rising of a brilliant star as a sign of the birth of a new king. In this way, Di Costanzo's sonnet reveals itself to be a masterpiece of baroque or mannerist sensibilities and favorite techniques. The elaboration of a single conceit throughout the sonnet is a hallmark of this style, and Di Costanzo provides an exceptionally successful model for Desportes to follow. Given the closeness with which Desportes imitates Di Costanzo's unique imagery here, it is little wonder that many of his readers would have recognized the Italian source for this sonnet.

Undoubtedly, what contributes to the rigor of this simile, and to the others analyzed above, is the image of bloodshed and the threat of violence and destruction with which they are all connected. This attribute is, moreover, pervasive in the poetry of Desportes and has sometimes been explained by the violent time in which the French poet wrote, in the aftermath of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 and at the height of the religious wars in France. Certainly, Desportes's contemporary, Agrippa d'Aubigné, *did* draw inspiration from what he saw in battle during the Wars of Religion, describing, in *L'Hécatombe à Diane* (sonnet 14) the agonizing death of a soldier and comparing it to his own amorous torment (Graham, "Desportes"). Likewise, one might easily assume that Desportes's poem on the Massacre of the Innocents was inspired by the bloodbath in Paris that occurred a mere five years before his poem appeared in the *Amours*

d'Hippolyte. But this historical fact alone cannot account for his predilection for these outrageous images and imbalanced similes, for they can easily be traced to the pages of a book that predated this event. While one could argue that experiencing these events could lead a reader such as Desportes to find these images especially compelling, the events themselves certainly do not suffice to explain the poet's choice of style or theme. Rather, as is often the case when dealing with French Renaissance poets, historical reality and personal experience – in short, what has been *seen* by the poet – must take a back seat to what has been *read* by the poet. And so it is that the aesthetic principles of the *Fiori*, dominated by the presence of Neapolitan poets, but most especially by Angelo Di Costanzo, for whom Desportes displayed an immense personal affinity, were translated into the Frenchman's poetry, becoming emblematic of his peculiar brand of aesthetic sensibility.

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