

WHAT MAKES A WOMAN BEAUTIFUL?

Ernestus Vaenius's

Tractatus physiologicus de pulchritudine (Brussels, 1662):

Renaissance Physiognomics

and the *Song of Songs* Emblematized

Résumé. — Au croisement de l'emblématique, de la physiognomonie et de l'exégèse du *Cantique des Cantiques*, Ernestus Vaenius, fils du célèbre peintre Otto Vaenius (Otto van Veen), livre un commentaire original et fascinant de la description de la fiancée par Salomon. Visant une analyse complète de la beauté féminine, Vaenius intègre non seulement des notions présentes dans des collections emblématiques jouissant d'une grande popularité comme celles de son père Otto ou d'Herman Hugo, mais il inclut également des connaissances tirées de traités médicaux tels que le *De re anatomica* de Realdo Colombo. Conformément à la pratique emblématique de son père, des poètes latins comme Ovide et Lactance semblent fournir des clés utiles pour une nouvelle interprétation. Cependant, malgré l'engouement de Vaenius pour les hiéroglyphes égyptiens, ce sont l'approche mathématique de Vitruve et le traité influent *De humana physiognomia* de Jean-Baptiste de Porta qui restent au centre de l'interprétation de la beauté féminine par cet homme de la Renaissance. De plus, les poètes néo-latins contemporains ainsi que les *Dialogues sur les beautés des dames* d'Agnolo Firenzuola (1548) ont guidé Vaenius dans son effort de saisir pleinement et illustrer l'interprétation d'Origène de la description détaillée de la beauté de la fiancée dans le *Cantique des Cantiques*.

Abstract. — At the crossroads of emblematics, physiognomics and the exegesis of the *Song of Songs*, Ernestus Vaenius, son of the famous painter Otto Vaenius (Otto van Veen), engages in a mesmerizing new commentary on Solomon's description of the bride. Aiming at a comprehensive analysis of female beauty, Vaenius not only integrates insights offered in widely read emblematic collections such as those by his father Otto and Herman Hugo, but he also includes useful knowledge from medical treatises such as Realdo Colombo's *De re anatomica*. In line with his father's emblematical praxis, such Latin poets as Ovid and Lactantius seem to be useful keys for a new interpretation. Yet, whereas Vaenius himself demonstrates his fascination with Egyptian hieroglyphs, Vitruvius' mathematical approach and Giambattista della Porta's highly influential *De humana physiognomia* remain at the center of his "Renaissance" interpretation of female beauty. Moreover, contemporary Neo-Latin poets as well as Agnolo Firenzuola's *Delle bellezze delle donne* (1548) have guided Vaenius in his endeavor to fully grasp and illustrate Origen's interpretation of Solomon's verses describing all details of his bride's beauty.

"The soul that sees beauty may sometimes walk alone"¹. However true this dictum attributed to Goethe may be, centuries of art and literature testify to a relentless search of man – often in dialogue – to define and find beauty. In this common search for infinite beauty, it was female beauty in particular that has occupied the minds of painters, writers, musicians, philosophers and, yes, theologians. In this search, however, there has been both ecstasy and disappointment. For views differed. Whereas Henri de Toulouse Lautrec came to the conclusion that "The body of a beautiful woman is not made for love; it is too exquisite"², Carl Gustav Jung saw "a particularly beautiful woman as a source of terror, as a terrible disappointment"³. Yet, if it was the artist's eye, that was the most intrigued and inspired by women and their beauty, how about the artist's son?

1. Ernestus Vaenius

One of the eight children of the famous painter Otto Vaenius / Van Veen (1558-1629), himself the preceptor of Peter Paul Rubens⁴, was Ernestus Vaenius / Ernest van Veen (b. Antwerp, ca. 1595)⁵. At the age of 67, Ernestus Vaenius composed a curious physiological and mystical treatise on female beauty which he structured as a commentary on the *Song of Songs*, but also conceived as an examination of the female physiognomy and its correspondence to emotions, beauty, and to certain animal types. Just like his father, Ernestus was appointed mint master in Brussels in 1629, after his training as a lawyer. Not much is known of Ernestus Vaenius's professional

1. "Die Seele, die Schönheit sieht, kann manchmal alleine gehen".

2. "Le corps d'une belle femme n'est pas fait pour l'amour : il est trop exquis". It has been recorded that Toulouse Lautrec (1861-1901) once told this to his friend Paul Leclercq (1872-1956), a young writer who was one of the founders of the avant-garde magazine *La Revue Blanche* and whose portrait painting (1897) by Toulouse Lautrec is in the RMN-Grand Palais, Musée d'Orsay, in Paris; cf. A. THEROUX (2007), p. 513; H. DE TOULOUSE LAUTREC (1958).

3. As recorded in the interview "The Trouble with Women" by Frederick Sands with Carl Gustav Jung in *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 10 September 1961, p. 7.

4. The influence of Otto Vaenius (Otto / Otho van Veen) on Rubens, who for eight years has been studying under the Antwerp painters Tobias Verhaecht, Adam van Noort and Otto Vaenius, has been discussed by many scholars. Roger DE PILES (1699), p. 394, already pointed at Vaenius's cultivated mind and knowledge of literature. Vaenius himself, after studying with Dominicus Lampsonius in Liège in 1573 and spending five years in Rome (1576-1581), went to Leiden, where he became a friend of Justus Lipsius. In 1585 Vaenius became court painter to Governor Parma of the Spanish Netherlands; after Parma's death he settled in Antwerp. See M. MORFORD (1991), p. 186-187.

5. Biographical information on Ernestus Vaenius is given by F. J. P. VAN DEN BRANDEN and J. G. FREDERIKS (1888-1889), p. 805; J. C. J. KLEINTJENS (1924), col. 1296-1297; K. TER LAAN (1952), p. 549. The date of his decease, 1654, is disputed and most probably incorrect.

career, except that he followed in his father's footsteps also by producing emblematic collections. Ernestus, however, published both in Latin and Dutch. His 14-pages *Rosa eiusque varietas ac amoenitas, diversis paragraphis depicta*, containing 24 watercolor ovals depicting properties of the rose and issued in quarto by Jan II Mommaert in Brussels in 1637, was followed by another moralizing emblem book *Religiosus, sive, De praecipuis perfecti religiosi virtutibus liber, sub specie et visione quatuor animalium Ezechielis*, a 143-pages work printed in octavo dealing with the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Seven years later, these publications, all of which were issued by Jan Mommaert in Brussels, were complemented by a work in Dutch printed in octavo by Guiliam Scheybels in Brussels and counting 80 pages: the *Kroone der Vier Hoofd-deughden, toegheeyghent aen de H. Maghet ende Moeder Gods Maria* i.e. "The Crown of the Four Capital Virtues Attributed to Mary, the Holy Virgin and Mother of God" (J. LANDWEHR, n° 841). Vaenius's 60-pages treatise on female beauty, the *Tractatus Physiologicus de Pulchritudine*, only followed eighteen years later, in 1662.

2. The *Tractatus Physiologicus de Pulchritudine*

Obscure but fascinating as this so-called "physiological" treatise in octavo may be to some – the famous French bibliographer Jacques Charles Brunet was already struck by the title of this charming, wacky, and scarce work and was fascinated by the "beautiful engravings"⁶ illustrating the physiognomic clues of different parts of the female body – a proper interpretation asks for more. All the more so because Vaenius's treatise has mistakenly been labelled as "a medical treatise"⁷. So, what exactly is this eccentric treatise on female looks in which twenty-eight engravings, sixty pages of Latin verse and prose in a small octavo gave the Early Modern reader the answer to a question which has occupied men's minds for ages: what makes women beautiful?

2.1. Intertext?: Herman Hugo and Otto Vaenius

A first observation is that Vaenius, as he had indicated in the very subtitle of his work – *Juxta ea quae de Sponsa in Canticis Canticorum mystice pronunciantur* –, starts his canon of beauty by citing verses of the *Canticum Canticorum*, the *Song of Songs*. Having divided his text into 14 sections, Vaenius begins each of these sections with a quotation from the *Song of Songs*, followed by an explanation of how the quoted "mystic" words show that Solomon indeed knew what perfect female beauty was. Each section is

6. See J.-C. BRUNET (1860-1865), V, 1026: "orné de jolies gravures au trait".

7. Cf. S. IYENGAR (2005), p. 69.

furthermore enhanced with engravings illustrating the bodily parts described in the *Song of Songs*: the head, the eyes, the nose, the cheeks, the lips, the teeth, the hair, the skin color, the voice, the neck, the breasts, the stature, and the whole appearance. Each section, finally, is rounded off with some Latin verses, composed by Vaenius himself, in which he brings together all comments into a sort of concluding synthesis on how Solomon's verse, and especially his view on a specific detail of female beauty, should be interpreted.

The use of the *Song of Songs* as a starting point for a new literary creation, enriched with engravings or illustrations, was not entirely novel in the early modern scholarly community. In 1624, the *Pia Desideria* – the most popular religious emblem book of the seventeenth century – was published, a spiritual publication by the Jesuit writer and military chaplain Herman Hugo (1588-1629)⁸. In order to let his readers “communicate” with God, each illustration was accompanied by a quotation from the Bible – thirteen of which came from the *Song of Songs*. In addition, Hugo added comments in prose in which he quotes several Church Fathers and in which he adopted an allegorical reading of the *Song of Songs*. Moreover, Vaenius's father, Otto, was not only admired as an erudite painter and writer who was active in intellectually elite circles, he is also utmost esteemed as one of the most inventive and influential practitioners of emblematics. His *Emblemata Horatiana* (1607), *Amorum Emblemata* (1608), and *Amoris Divini Emblemata* (1615) inspired a host of imitations and adaptations⁹. For sure his son Ernestus was to some degree inspired by the last collection, in which his father had reworked the *Amorum Emblemata*, emblems on secular love, into a religious emblem book on divine love and in which Otto Vaenius had gathered quotations from the Bible, the Church Fathers – especially St. Augustine – and a few medieval authors, such as Bernardus of Clairvaux and Thomas a Kempis.

Still, Vaenius Jr. did not limit himself to simply adopting the extant exegesis of the *Song of Songs*. It goes without saying that Origen's Christian allegorical interpretation lurks at the background – the Song of Solomon reflects the love between Christ and his Church¹⁰. Influential medieval tropo-

8. Cf. G. R. DIMLER (2003), p. 351-379. A full text of the *Pia Desideria*, with introduction and commentary, is offered by the Utrecht Emblem Project; see <http://emblems.let.uu.nl/>.

9. Cf. M. SABBE (1935), p. 1-14 ; K. PORTEMAN (1996), p. 1-20; A. BUSCHHOFF (1999), p. 39-50; J. BLOEMENDAL (2002), p. 273-287; A. BUSCHHOFF (2004). A full text of Vaenius's emblematic works, with introduction and commentary, is offered by the Utrecht Emblem Project; see <http://emblems.let.uu.nl/>.

10. Cf. G. BOSTOCK (1987), p. 39-53; E. A. MATTER (1990).

logical readings – the Song reflects the bond between Christ and men's soul¹¹ – are likewise present. In one passage, Vaenius even hints at the identification of the bride with the Virgin Mary. As in his emblematic collection of 1637 on the rose, the *Mary-Eve dichotomy* – the lascivious Eve contrasts with Mary's eternal virginity and chastity¹² – guides Vaenius's moral intentions: true beauty – in the Christian tradition the rose had been identified with the Virgin Mary – is only achieved by women who keep away from Eve's path and follow instead the path of the Holy Virgin. Yet, Vaenius goes further. In the *Song of Songs* the bride's body has been described in a highly literary, poetical way, using hyperboles and metaphors alike:

the body of the beloved becomes, within the scope of the lover's gaze, numbingly plural – it disseminates into landscapes, into gardens, orchards, and wilderness at once natural and cultural/pastoral; into shrines, sacred mountains, tower walls, vineyards, and warrior's halls – while remaining a singular, individual, discrete other, a beloved who finally, and mysteriously, disappears¹³.

To Vaenius who quotes these known metaphors such as “Your hair is as a flock of goats, that descend from Mount Gilead” and “Your neck is like David's tower built for an armory”, female beauty transcends the bodily. Leaving aside all figurative and allegorical interpretation, Vaenius coins the bodily parts of women to be praised as those transcending the purely physical: they get absorbed in nature's beauty. Whereas Herman Hugo, for instance, quoted passages from the *Song of Songs* in his emblematic collection *Pia Desideria* so as to use them in an allegorical way, Vaenius for his part, when describing the female body, adopted verses from the *Song of Songs* in a literal way. Moreover, he illustrated his descriptions with well-chosen, albeit “basic” and rather “naïve” engravings which he (most probably) made himself. So, what was their function?

2.2. Della Porta, Ovid, Lactantius and Realdo Colombo

A first look at Vaenius's engravings included in his booklet on female beauty – engravings that seem to have been made fit for purpose – gives the impression that he places himself in a tradition that goes back to Giambattista della Porta's 1586 work on physiognomy¹⁴. Just like Della Porta (1535 [?] - 1615), Vaenius relied on the dual axis of humoral theory and animal analogies as means of determining mental states and traits. Yet, whereas emphasis in Della Porta's *De humana physiognomonia* is on fixed facial structures which reveal to us the mental and intellectual states of the

11. Cf. J. P. TANNER (1997), p. 23-46.

12. Cf. V. TUMANOV (2011), p. 507-521.

13. Cf. J. CHERYL EXUM (2005), p. 17-22; S. HOPKINS (2007), p. 14.

14. Cf. C. CAPUTO (1990), p. 69-91; I. MACLEAN (2011), p. 275-295.

person, Vaenius apparently had a different aim with his work. Going beyond explaining how to determine human characters from facial structures, he aspires to determine the very essence of female beauty and does so by explaining and depicting proportional structures. So Vaenius's physiognomic explanations are not only accompanied by delicate juxtaposed engravings – one for instance showing a black woman, others showing animal heads next to human female ones (see ill. 1 & 2) –, Vaenius also attempts a new decipherment of female beauty. In the first chapter, the quotation “Your head on you is like Carmel” is used as evidence that a woman's back of the head ought to be lofty: the more this part is elevated, the more beautiful it is, since this part contains a woman's conscience and mind. It is this part which envelops the particles of the divine spirit and which, so Vaenius invokes Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1, 84-86), was designed when “a creature of a more exalted kind was wanting”.

*Pronaque cum spectent animalia cetera terram,
os homini sublime dedit, caelumque uidere
iussit et erectos ad sidera tollere uultus.*

Thus, while the mute Creation downward bend
Their Sight, and to their Earthly Mother tend,
Man looks aloft; and with erected Eyes
Beholds his own hereditary Skies¹⁵.



Ill. 1. Face of a black woman (KU Leuven Libraries, Special Collections, Tabularium, R3A153 II, p. 41). © DigiLab KU Leuven.

15. Translation by John DRYDEN in S. GARTH (1717), p. 4.



III. 2. Animal head next to human female one (KU Leuven Libraries, Special Collections, Tabularium, R3A153 II, p. 8). © DigiLab KU Leuven.

As Lactantius had described in much more detail in his *De opificio Dei* (8, 2-3), man had been designed as “a heavenly creature”, upright so as to contemplate heaven and God. The woman’s head, so Vaenius concludes, should therefore be firm, in the form of a hammer or a camel (*figuram mallei vel Cameli habere debeat*)¹⁶, in which the anterior and the posterior part, the back part, protrude. And in case these arguments taken from philosophy, theology and physiognomics would not prove convincing enough, Vaenius inserts two juxtaposed engravings of a camel and a hammer, and a woman

16. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 3.

bearing the ideal head discussed in his comment (ill. 3). On top of this visual reinforcement of his point, Vaenius adds a long quotation from Realdo Colombo's *De re anatomica*, the only published text released shortly after the Italian professor of anatomy's death in 1559¹⁷. Here Vaenius could find additional proof that the more the brains – encapsulated in the highest part or, so to speak, the fortress of the body – have been given space in that specific protruding back part of the head, the more subtle, thoughtful, ingenious the thoughts would be¹⁸. Solomon's description of his beloved one's head in the *Song of Songs* is therefore to be taken in an entirely literal way. That Vaenius takes his conclusion seriously, appears from the Latin verses (in iambic senarii) which he composed to resume his arguments at the end of his chapter:

*Carmelus, alto vertice in Coelum minax,
Geminum, biceps ut Pindus, attollit jugum.
Talem, peritus capitis in sponsa probat
Salomon figuram: pulchra, ut et sapiens siet*¹⁹.

The Carmel, threatening with a high peak in the sky,
as the Pindus with two summits, lifts its double yoke.
Such a form is approved by Solomon, expert in the head,
for his bride: that she might be beautiful and wise alike.

2.3. *The eyes, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Neo-Latin poets*

In his second chapter, Vaenius discusses the eyes. Why did Solomon compare his bride's eyes to doves (see *Song of Songs* I, 14: "Your eyes are doves")? Their circular form, so Vaenius expounds, expresses perfection and divinity²⁰. It is the most perfect form which allows insight in what is divine, heavenly, eternal and indestructible – a symbolic meaning already attributed by the Egyptian hieroglyphs (here Vaenius quoted Piero Valeriano), the Persians, the Romans and the Greeks such as Euclides. Still, the well-read Vaenius wants to demonstrate his knowledge in Neo-Latin literature as well. First he quotes a verse from the Neo-Latin poet and philologist Joannes Baptista Pius (Giovanni Battista Pio; 1460-1540), former tutor of Isabelle d'Este in Mantua (1496-1487) and professor of rhetoric and poetry in Bologna and Rome²¹. Vaenius cites this line from Pius's *Elegidia* as he could read it in Ravisius TEXTOR's *Specimen epithetorum* (Paris, 1518, with many reprints):

17. Cf. A. CUNNINGHAM (1997), p. 148.

18. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 5-6.

19. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 12.

20. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 7: *ut si dicere videatur, inesse in oculis, quid divinum, coeleste, firmum et incorruptibile*.

21. Cf. C. CARLSMITH (2010), p. 39-42.

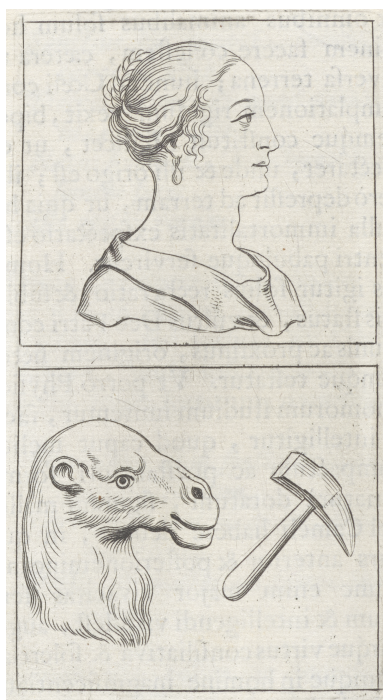
*Quam mihi coelestes illi videantur ocelli*²².

How do her eyes look heavenly to me!

Second Vaenius adduced a verse from Angelo Poliziano's 10th elegy, *In Lalagen*²³, to invigorate his point:

*Aspice sidereis ut blandum arridet ocellis*²⁴!

See how she smiles at me while I caress her with her eyes like stars!



Ill. 3. Camel, hammer, and woman (KU Leuven Libraries, Special Collections, Tabularium, R3A153 II, p. 4.) © DigiLab KU Leuven.

Anyhow, circular eyes are not doves. Man is not god, so human eyes only come close to the perfect form of the circle. Their eyes are oval. Here, one would expect Vaenius to jump to physiognomics once again, yet the Hel-

22. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 7.

23. Politian's *Liber epigrammatum Latinorum* was easily accessible to Vaenius in the complete edition *Angeli Politiani Opera quae quidem extitere hactenus, omnia* [...], Basel, Nicolaus Episcopus, 1564, p. 605-606. A modern edition, with English translation, is now available (P. E. KNOX [2019]).

24. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 7.

lenistic pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomica*, avidly read in the Renaissance and Early Modern period²⁵, do not discuss the form of the eyes. Nor did Della Porta enter into this matter – although he did devote the entire third book of his *De humana physiognomonia* to the eyes and the characteristics connected to them. Vaenius confines himself to conclude that artists and painters had a predilection for oblong and semicircular eyes since these, at least, approximated the ideal circle reflecting the universe, the sun, the moon. Eyes, for sure, are powerful in love and can destroy. Following Apuleius, Vaenius warns his readers: eyes can bite²⁶. His expected jump to physiognomics became a sudden jump into his own conclusion, styled in his own verses:

*Qualis in Idaliis acies est pulchra Columbīs,
Simplex, laeta, potens laedere amore, teres.
Talem coniugio gaudet legisse puellam
Rex Salomon; Christo sed mage sacra placent*²⁷.

As Venus's doves have a sharp eye,
honest, cheerful, able to wound with love, rounded off,
thus does King Solomon delight to depict a girl
for marriage; to Christ, however, sacred things please.

In his rhetorical description of feminine beauty Vaenius followed the *Song of Songs*. His canon of beauty is not the one prescribed by manuals in which the manner and order to portray beautiful women – emphasizing their specific shape, color and size of numerous features²⁸ – was explained in detail, going downwards from the head and ending with a dress code. Vaenius omits the eighteen different elements – nine for the head, nine for the rest of the body. He skips the forehead, the eyebrows, the chin, the arms, hands, waist, belly, legs or feet²⁹. Instead, Vaenius singles out useful and speaking hyperboles and interesting views of the *Song of Songs*. He devotes a separate chapter, viz. “Prosa III.”, to the nose as compared to the tower of looks toward Damascus. Here, a Pythagorean proportion is essential and a larger nose is preferable, whether or not the woman's nose is an aquiline nose, a

25. Cf. M. PORTER (2005).

26. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 11: *Porro hi oculi venusti oblectant, suaviantur, mordent et alliciunt, verba sunt Apulei: Tum illa ad me conversa limis et mordicantibus oculis*. The quotation is taken from Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 2, 10.

27. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 12.

28. It is striking that similar points of interest can be read in Peter Paul Rubens's theoretical notebook in which he deals with the beauty of woman, symmetry, proportions and in which Rubens refers to the same sources (cf. A. BALIS [2011], p. 3-4). A direct influence of Rubens, however, cannot be demonstrated for Della Porta too described all features mentioned in similar wordings. I cordially thank Dr. Teresa Esposito for this useful remark.

29. Cf. C. DA SOLLER (2010), p. 99.

hooknose or a Greek nose³⁰. In his chapter dealing with the temples which are like a piece of a pomegranate³¹, the lips which are like scarlet thread³², the teeth which are like a newly shorn flock³³, which have come up from the washing, a discussion of proportion and colors – purple mixed with white or scarlet red – is recurrent. According to the pseudo-Aristotelian view and the Galenic theory of humors, to have lips well colored and more thin than thick, shows a person to be good humored in all things, and more easily to be persuaded to good than evil. Adding to this that sinfulness is revealed by pale lips, Vaenius also juxtaposes four engravings illustrating his physiognomic belief that having bigger and widening lips denotes noble-mindedness (*magnanimitas*), as one can detect with lions and Molossian dogs³⁴. Physiognomic judgment, which relies on analyzing innate, unchangeable, and uncontrollable bodily signs, is now connected to psychological value and Christian morality: Salomon saw the intrinsic yet precarious relation between beauty and virtue³⁵.

2.4. *Colored skin: from Origen to Otto Vaenius*

In “Prosa IX” Vaenius offers a fascinating exposé discussing skin color at the occasion of the following verses of the *Song of Songs*:

I am dark, but lovely,
you daughters of Jerusalem,
like Kedar's tents,
like Solomon's curtains.
Don't stare at me because I am dark,
because the sun has scorched me³⁶.

The beloved one's skin, however, is not only colored because of hard labor on the countryside³⁷. A colored skin, so Vaenius continues, is almost inclining to red mixed with white, it is the characteristic of courageous and pow-

30. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 13-18.

31. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 25-27.

32. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 28-32.

33. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 33-35.

34. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 31.

35. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 28: *Videtur hoc usurpasse Rex Salomon inprimis propter colorem illum insignem rubeum sive coccineum, quo puritas complexionis, et impermixtionis turbati sanguinis denotatur.*

36. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 40-42.

37. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 40: *Laudari certe a nigro seu fusco colore potuisset sponsa, nisi videretur hanc causam ipsa praetexere excusationis, quia se decoloravit Sol. Ex quo porro voluit nos ipsa colligere quod semper intenta fuerit actionibus et laboribus, praesertim villicis sive rusticis, quo in genere plerumque ustos a Sole tinctosque agricolas conspiciamus, dum aestivo tempore messem caeterosque fructus coacervant, quando maxime fervet et vigorem Sol habet.*

erful people³⁸, whereas a pale skin – white being the color of decay and corruption – points at the opposite: a lack of virtue, a phlegmatic or weak person³⁹. Surprisingly and contrary to the physiognomic tradition where dark-colored Egyptians and Ethiopians, and especially women, are coined as cowards (cf. *Physiognomica*, 6, 812a), Vaenius invokes the ideal of the black Shulamite of the *Song of Songs*. Is it possible that Origen's influential commentary, pioneering the Christian allegorical interpretation of Solomon's song⁴⁰, might be a key to understand Vaenius's twist? For, indeed, the dark color of Solomon's bride, Origen had argued, testifies to her unworthy descent and her lack of divine inspiration. As such, she represents the souls of pagan people who have embraced the Christian faith⁴¹. Yet, Origen continued his argument, the bride's colored skin veils her internal beauty, her virtue. Spiritual illumination will make the Ethiopian woman, an incarnation of the pagan sinners who have shown repentance, white⁴². Still, in his work on the *Song of Songs* and female beauty Vaenius never mentions Origen nor does he even refer to him indirectly.

A proper key to Vaenius's positive appreciation of Solomon's dark-skinned princess has thus to be looked for elsewhere. For, also at the very end of his chapter on the appropriate skin color of beautiful women Vaenius repeats another verse from the *Song of Songs*: *Nolite me considerare quod fusca sim*, "Don't stare at me because I am dark". This verse, Vaenius concludes, may be sufficiently corroborated by a verse from Ovid's *Heroides* (15, 35-36):

*Placuit Cepheia Perseo
Andromede, patriae fusca colore suae.*

Cepheus's Andromeda was fair in Perseus's
eyes, though dusky with the hue of her native land⁴³.

Vaenius stays with his argument, and there is a reason for it. In 1608, his father Otto had himself included an emblem in his *Amorum Emblemata* in which he had sung the praise of the attractiveness of black people while borrowing its title from Vergil's *Eclogues* (2, 18): *Alba ligustra cadunt*,

38. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 40: *Nihilominus color ille fuscus si a natura insit, cum ex motu animi ad subrubeum aliquali mixtum albore tendat, fortes et animosos indicat.*

39. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 40-41: *Color vero vehementer albus virtuti est contrarius et ignaviae indicium, talesque phlegmatici omnes et frigidi, atque meticulosi.*

40. Cf. P. COX MILLER (1986), p. 244.

41. Cf. P. COX (1982), p. 129.

42. Cf. S. IYENGAR (2005), p. 46-49.

43. G. SHOWERMAN (1977), p. 183.

uaccinia nigra leguntur ("White privets fall, dark hyacinths are culled")⁴⁴. The accompanying text included other lines from Vergil, but also the lines of Sappho from the *Heroides* on the black Andromeda who charmed Perseus. Apparently, the black Andromeda not only charmed Perseus, she also charmed both Otto and Ernestus Vaenius⁴⁵. To the latter a useful key to Solomon's Song and a new interpretation of the skin color of his beloved bride, was to be found in classical Latin poetry, in Vergil and Ovid. Yet, as has been pointed out by S. IYENGAR (2005), p. 70, Vaenius does represent divine femininity. However, it requires the presence of a bridegroom for its existence: as Perseus, the "King of Kings" Solomon was now crowned the judge of the pageant. It was Solomon who was the final arbiter of beauty:

*Dum sub furenti sedula Sirio,
Phoebique sudat sponsa caloribus,
Formam nigredo fusca vastat,
Et speciem populatur omnem.
Excusat ergo, non ebur aut rosam
Inesse malis, nec teneros sinus.
Quid te molestas, virgo! Regi
Gratior est color iste luxu*⁴⁶.

While under the raging Dog-star
and Phoebus's heat the zealous bride sweats,
the tawny blackness ruins her beauty
and destroys her whole appearance.
Therefore she excuses that in this misfortune
she has no ivory or rose, nor a soft bosom.
Why do you trouble yourself, dear maid? To the King
your color is dearer than all his luxury⁴⁷.

All in all, it turns out that Vaenius's little booklet on female beauty in general and his chapter on skin color in particular open a window to our understanding of the social and literary culture of the period.

44. Otto van Veen, *Amorum Emblemata*, Antwerp 1608. Introductory notes by Stephen ORGEL, New York - London, Garland Publishing, 1979, p. 172-172. The first to advance this connection between Ernestus Vaenius and the emblematic collection of his father Otto, was E. McGRATH (1992), p. 12. Surprisingly, S. IYENGAR (2005), p. 69, makes the very same connection without any reference to E. McGRATH (1992).

45. Otto Vaenius's emblem "*Alba ligustra cadunt*" had further influence, among others on Peter Paul Rubens. See E. McGRATH (2018), p. 291-316. On Otto Vaenius's use of Vergil's second eclogue, see also A. BUSCHHOFF (2004), p. 98.

46. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 42.

47. The translation of these verses offered by S. IYENGAR (2005), p. 69-70, is erroneous and reflects, in my opinion, a misunderstanding of Vaenius's message, which can be partly traced back to errors in her transcription of the Latin text (so, for instance, *coloribus* instead of *caloribus*).

2.5. Breasts: Agnolo Firenzuola



Ill. 4. Women and breasts (KU Leuven Libraries, Special Collections, Tabularium, R3A153 II, p. 50). © DigiLab KU Leuven.

Sensual Solomon's verse "Your two breasts are like two fawns that are twins of a roe" (4, 5) may be, Vaenius's engraving (ill. 4) accompanying this 12th chapter is telling once again: it reminds of a Renaissance convention. We see how an empathic horizontal line is cutting the body just under the neck and the face⁴⁸. By drawing a comparison to frisky young deer that caper and jump around, Vaenius in his interpretation of this verse hints at the playful character of the young girl's breasts⁴⁹. This mobility and jumpiness is iterated in another image where Solomon incites his beloved one: "Let your breasts be like clusters of the vine"⁵⁰. Only excellent wine, so Vaenius explains, has the characteristic that, when poured, it jumps up in the glass⁵¹. Here, Vaenius connects to the Renaissance view on the ideal breast. As Agnolo Firenzuola had described in his *Delle bellezze delle donne* (1548), breasts were beautiful if they were lively, "heaving as though ill at ease at

48. Cf. A. HOLLANDER (1988), p. 98.

49. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 50-51: *Istud a Rege Salomone sumptum et dictum apparet, quod hinnuli seu juniores cervi atque capreoli uti ludibunde saltant, in seque saltitando incurrunt ac invicem impetunt. Ita vitali spiritu ubera plerumque in adolescentulis puellis turgeant, sintque quasi duo capreae gemelli ludentes et salientes ob sanguinis eo immissi seu spirituum subsultantium suavitatem.*

50. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 51: *Eandem ob causam videtur alibi dixisse: Quam pulchrae sunt mammae tuae. Et iterum: Pulchriora sunt ubera tua vino.*

51. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 51: *Nam praestans ac generosum vinum, cum in vitrum infunditur, in altum salire opposito vitro, ad aerem conspicitur.*

being constantly oppressed and confined by the garments, showing they want to escape from their prison"⁵². Fashionable breasts moved up and were connected to Venus. Vaenius, however, directs his reader to a more elevated interpretation: the innocent playfulness is not vile and should not to be connected to the earthly Venus alone. In a Neoplatonic way it has to be connected to divine beauty, to the *heavenly* Venus. For as wine jumps up to the sky as if reaching out for the heaven, lovers are in the service of Cupid, the sprout of high Olympus⁵³.

2.6. Divine beauty, the Vitruvian man and St. Augustine

This reaching out for the heavens and for divine beauty is a recurrent theme in Vaenius's comments on Solomon's verses. Time and again, this topic occurs together with the classical conception treating beauty as a matter of instantiating definite proportions or relations among parts. Sometimes Vaenius expressed these in mathematical ratios such as the "golden section" or the perfect circle. Needless to say, this recalls the so-called *Vitruvian Man*⁵⁴, but Vaenius, when discussing the stature of women invokes the Solomonic image of a palm tree – "This, your stature, is like a palm tree"⁵⁵. A beautiful woman should have the mathematical proportions of a palm tree⁵⁶, for sure, but, according to Vaenius, the very essence in the comparison with the palm tree lies within its royal ornament: the crown. The head and brains are the crown of a truly beautiful woman⁵⁷. Once more, Vaenius takes up this theme in a recapitulating last chapter in which he brings together all views, all chapters, all items discussed in the *Tractatus Physiologicus de Pulchritudine*. In fact, he comments on Solomon's verse "You are all beautiful, my love. There is no spot in you"⁵⁸ and concentrates on the beauty of the whole body. Starting from Cicero's view that "as in the body a certain symmetrical shape of the limbs combined with a certain charm of coloring is described as beauty" (*Tusculan Disputations*, 4, 31)⁵⁹,

52. Cf. A. FIRENZUOLA (1992), p. 77.

53. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 52 (verses by Vaenius): *In botros crescunt [sc. papillae] tumidos; amorum / Tempora crede. Innocens lusus solet esse amantum, / Quos pharetratus tetigit Cupido, / Ille, non spurcae Veneris, sed alti Germen Olympi.*

54. Cf. Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 3, 1, 2-3.

55. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 53, quoting *Canticum Canticorum* 7:7: *Statura tua assimilata est Palmae.*

56. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 53-55.

57. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 55: *Qua quidem structura et forma quid magnificentius, cum et regium decus imitata palma, in vertice similitudinem coronae exprimat, ubi et medulla inest, quasi cerebri.*

58. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 57, quoting *Canticum Canticorum* 4:7: *Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te.*

59. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 58: *Est enim secundum Ciceronem pulchritudo corporis, quaedam optima figura membrorum inter se cum coloris suavitate.* Translation taken

Vaenius concludes with St. Augustine's *City of God* (15, 22, 20-21): that this is a rare, but beautiful gift from God⁶⁰. Still, according to Vaenius, Cicero's *coloris suavitas* aimed at a certain temper of color, a pleasing mixing of colors such as it can be found in contemporary painting. Here the artistic ideals, so Vaenius explains, are: a soft, chubby, weak flesh – between roughness and softness –; a body not too short, not too tall in shape; a white color tending to redness and not too much blackness; a soft face; flat-lying hair; medium to large eyes tending to roundness; a medium sized, measured body with a well-shaped neck; only slightly and fitly drooping shoulders; not too heavy calves or fleshy knees; a happy and cheerful face⁶¹. Yes, so Vaenius agrees, this list of physical ideals is one thing, “to find all these separate in one body, is more to be wished for than that it is customary”⁶². For that reason, Vaenius concludes, it may suffice to have excerpted and chosen just a few images from the Scriptures. Otherwise delight, because of an inappropriate or unsuitable length, would arouse displeasure.

It must have been a great relief to Vaenius's 17th-century – male and female – readers that Solomon's brilliant bride in whom there was “no spot” – “emblemized”, “physiologized”, “physiognomized” in Vaenius's various literal and Neoplatonic Christian interpretations – was now within reach.

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from Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, with an English translation by J. E. KING, Cambridge, Mass. - London, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 360.

60. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 58: *Quod quia in perpauis hominum undique omni ex parte reperitur, jure scripsit Divus Augustinus: Pulchritudinem corporis, bonum Dei donum esse.*

61. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 59.

62. E. VAENIUS (1662), p. 59: *Quae singula in eodem reperire corpore, optabile magis quam ordinarium.*

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