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PETRARCH AND THE LOVE LYRIC

Although Petrarch, a contemporary of Dante and Boccaccio, lived and died in the Middle Ages, he did everything in his power to distinguish himself and his scholarship from the period he dismissed as the “Dark Ages.” Petrarch dedicated himself to the recovery of classical learning in a spirit commonly associated with a later period, in which humanist scholars zealously pursued the rebirth of antiquity. Yet Petrarch’s status as a precursor of the Renaissance is primarily due to an aspect of his work that neither he nor his contemporaries regarded as a lasting contribution: his 366 lyric poems in the vernacular, mostly dedicated to his frustrated desire for an elusive woman named Laura. Petrarch’s experience of love and sense of his own fragmented and fluid self set the standard for the lyric expression of subjective and erotic experience in the Renaissance. His efforts to scrutinize himself intently and at times unflatteringly and to capture his own elusive inner workings in verse inspired a poetic tradition that has influenced lyric sequences from Shakespeare’s sonnets to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* to contemporary pop lyrics.

Francis Petrarch was born in Arezzo on July 20, 1304, three years after his father and Dante Alighieri were exiled from Florence. In 1314, Petrarch’s father moved his family to Avignon, the new seat of the papacy (1309–77), where he became prosperous in the legal profession. Petrarch himself initially trained as a law student, but chose instead to pursue the study of

classical culture and literature. He soon came to the attention of the powerful Colonna family, whose patronage launched his career as a diplomat-scholar and allowed him to travel widely and move in the intimate circles of European princes and scholars. He refused the offices of bishop and papal secretary, preferring instead to ground his growing prestige in his humanistic scholarship. Imaginative conversation with the ancients, like imitation of their poetry, brought him into contact with the past: his research into classical history and arts profoundly influenced his sense of himself and his own cultural moment. He died in 1374 near Padua, his head resting on a volume of his beloved Virgil.

Petrarch’s most famous work, the *Rime Sparse* (Scattered Rhymes) or *Rerum Fragmenta Vulgarium* (Fragments in the Vernacular), is a collection of 366 songs and sonnets (based on the calendar year associated with the liturgy) of extraordinary technical virtuosity and variety. Written in Italian and woven into a highly introspective narrative, the lyric collection takes the poet himself as its object of study. The poems painstakingly record how his thoughts and identity are scattered and transformed by the experience of love for a beautiful, unattainable woman named Laura. Even some of his friends suspected that Laura was merely the theme and emblem of his lyric poetry and not a historical woman; she appears to have been both. On the flyleaf of his magnificent copy of Virgil, Petrarch inscribed a note on her life:

Laura, illustrious through her own virtues, and long famed through my verses, first appeared to my eyes in my youth, in the year of our Lord 1327, on the sixth day of April, in the church of St. Clare in Avignon, at matins; and in the same city, also on the sixth day of April, at the same first hour, but in the year 1348, the light of her life was withdrawn from the light of day, while I, as it chanced, was in Verona, unaware of my fate. * * * Her chaste and lovely form was laid to rest at vesper time, on the same day on which she died in the burial place of the Brothers Minor. I am persuaded that her soul returned to the heaven from which it came, as Seneca says of Africanus. I have thought to write this, in bitter memory, yet with a certain bitter sweetness, here in this place that is often before my eyes, so that I may be admonished, by the sight of these words and by the consideration of the swift flight of time, that there is nothing in this life in which I should find pleasure; and that it is time, now that the strongest tie is broken, to flee from Babylon; and this, by the prevenient grace of God, should be easy for me, if I meditate deeply and manfully on the futile cares, the empty hopes, and the unforeseen events of my past years.

(Translated by E. H. Wilkins)

Petrarch's note illuminates the powerful role that Laura plays in his personal struggles between spiritual aspirations and earthly attachments. Thoughts of Laura return him to the problem of his own will, torn between spiritual and sensual desires, always delaying worldly renunciation. Even when he expresses disgust with earthly rewards and pleasures, it is conditional: he will choose the right course of action, Petrarch writes, *if* he meditates "deeply and manfully" on the disappointments and failures of his past and

denies memory's seductively bitter-sweet pleasures.

In the *Rime Sparse*, Laura's ambiguous position between divine guide and earthly temptress contrasts sharply with the role that Beatrice played in Dante's spiritual pilgrimage, the *Divine Comedy*. Whereas Dante's love finally leads him to paradise, it is never clear to Petrarch whether he is pursuing heavenly or earthly delights and whether he will safely reach any destination or "port" (in the nautical image of sonnet 189). When Dante looks into Beatrice's eyes on Mount Purgatory, he sees a reflection of the heavens; when Petrarch gazes into Laura's eyes, he sees himself. Not even his use of the liturgical year (especially the anniversaries of Christ's death and resurrection) to structure his account of their relationship guarantees that a spiritual conversion will follow Petrarch's self-analysis or "confession" of his life. In a contrary and skeptical mood at the end of one of his most philosophical poems (song 264), Petrarch asserts, "I see the better, but choose the worse."

The lyric collection's first sonnet, in which Petrarch solicits compassion as well as pardon from his readers, establishes the *Rime Sparse's* close relationship to confessional narrative. Its themes of conversion, memory, and forgetfulness (of God and oneself) evoke the model of **St. Augustine** and raise the question of whether Petrarch will follow suit: will he ultimately transcend his attachment to a woman's physical beauty, his love of language and poetic figures, and his narcissistic preoccupation with himself? In dramatic opposition to the transcendent model of Augustine is **Ovid** of the *Metamorphoses*, the classical counter-epic that artfully uses fragmentation, fluid change, and scattering to describe the effects of power—divine, political, or erotic—on bodies and on minds. Petrarch refers to a variety of Ovidian figures in the *Rime Sparse*, including

Narcissus and Echo, Actaeon and Diana, Medusa, and Pygmalion. His chief Ovidian model, however, is the story of Apollo, the god who “invents” the genre of lyric during his amorous chase of the nymph Daphne. While running, Apollo describes her various beauties—eyes, figure, and hair—and imaginatively embellishes what he sees. When Daphne eludes him through her transformation into the laurel, Apollo claims her as his tree, if not his lover, and declares that the laurel will be the sign of triumph in letters and warfare. The prominence of this tale in the *Rime Sparse* suggests that if Laura had not lived, Petrarch would have had to invent her. Her name interweaves key attributes of Petrarch’s poetic imagination: *lauro* and *alloro* (“laurel”), *oro* (“gold,” for her tresses and value), *l’aura* (“breeze” and “inspiration,” which etymologically relates to “breath”), *laus* or *lauda* (“praise”). Such wordplay suggests the selective, even obsessive character of Petrarch’s poetic style. Like Apollo, Petrarch also “translates” his beloved’s elusive body into the more tangible figures of rhetoric.

Petrarch’s great legacy to Renaissance European literature is the *Rime Sparse*’s language of self-description, which starts from the conventional hyperbole, antithesis, and oxymoron (rhetorical exaggeration and opposition) that characterized troubadour songs, provençal lyric, and classical love elegy: *I freeze and burn, love is bitter and sweet, my sighs are tempests and my tears are floods, I am in ecstasy and agony, I am possessed by memories of her and I am in exile from myself*. Petrarch transformed such rhetorical figures or tropes of love into a powerful language of introspection and self-fashioning that swept through European literature. Although it soon became so popular that writers endlessly repeated and even trivialized it, Petrarchism had serious dimensions that helped articulate growing questions about the self: is it determined by

God or flexible and in the shaping hands of humankind? Do culture, history, and force of will compose and transform it?

Petrarchism offered rich formal possibilities as well: although Petrarch often wrote in other meters, the *sonnet* became in his hands an extraordinarily supple metrical form. A *Petrarchan sonnet*, as the form is now known, is a fourteen-line poem with a break after line eight. The *octet* is usually broken into two stanzas of four lines each, with a rhyme scheme of *a-b-b-a*, and the *sestet* is made up of two three-line stanzas, rhyming *c-d-c*. The sonnet proved remarkably flexible, allowing poets to express themselves in a compact and striking manner. The *sestet* and the *octet* may contrast formally or semantically, as may the stanzas within a section of the sonnet, while its rhyme can reinforce or contradict meaning. The possibilities are virtually endless, as Petrarch’s many imitators were to demonstrate.

Across sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, writers such as Garcilaso in Spain, Du Bellay in France, and Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare in England all turned to Petrarch as a beacon of Italian humanism who offered a powerful intellectual and formal toolkit for introspection. Through their own poems, they made Petrarchism into an international language, adapting it to various national traditions and rehearsing it in countless iterations. Garcilaso’s “When I stand and contemplate my state” (sonnet 1) evokes Dante as well as Petrarch to give us an anguished self who both longs for and rues the end of erotic longing that will come with death. Garcilaso elaborates on nostalgia as a central theme of Petrarchism: memory brings joy and pain (“O sweet mementoes to my sorrow found,” sonnet 10), while the poet urges the beloved to seize the day (*carpe diem*, in the Latin phrase) before it, too, is past (“For as long as the lily and the rose,” sonnet 23).

The poetic sequence was itself a much-imitated model, allowing the poet to chart the minute transformations of the desiring self over time. The beloved does not fare as well: the eloquent expression of the male poet-lover's complex *interior* life in these sequences depends, as Petrarchan successors noticed, on a correspondingly detailed description of the beloved's *exterior*. In the Petrarchan inventory of the beloved's adorable parts, from eyes to hair, cheeks, and hand, the poet converts her living body to ornaments, metal, and minerals, such as gold, topaz, and pearls. Although any one of her beauties is capable of scattering the poet's thoughts, the beloved herself has little independent coherence: as one critic puts it, "some of Laura's parts are greater than her whole person." While male Renaissance writers turned to Petrarch to investigate their own interiority, groundbreaking female poets such as **Louise Labé** and **Veronica Franco** chose instead to give voice to the object of male longing, whether by challenging the Petrarchan "scattering" of the female presence, or by voicing an urgent female desire. Labé's poems, especially "Kiss Me Again" (sonnet 18), are striking for their immediacy, as though in response to the infinite deferral of Petrarchan introspection. The poet insists on the here and now with a force that dispels Petrarch's doubts and hesitations, yet her lyric "I" speaks a Petrarchan language in a Petrarchan form. Beyond the expression of desire, the defiant lyric personae that these female poets assume affords them a poetic voice, arguing for their very right to be heard as artists. In Labé's sonnet 10, love and poetic admiration are intertwined, as the poet expresses her desire for a beloved who is himself crowned with laurel. Franco's "A Challenge to a Lover Who Has Offended Her" dares the lover to a fight here and now, in a "love match" that makes the Petrarchan oxymoron

of love as war urgent and concrete. Yet the poem is Franco's first blow, reminding the reader that the contest is not only physical but poetic.

By Shakespeare's time, the Petrarchan idiom had become a trite convention ripe for parody ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," sonnet 130), yet it remained the most powerful language available for describing desire, the ephemeral nature of love, and the fragility of the self when confronted with an impossible object. Shakespeare explicitly harnesses the conventionality of the form to create a highly skeptical poetic voice, which recognizes the tradition and yet questions it. He reflects on the limits of poetic invention, noting the paradox in always finding a novel way to describe fidelity: "O know, sweet love, I always write of you" ("Why is my verse so barren of new pride," sonnet 76). Thematically, Shakespeare occupies an oblique position in relation to Petrarchism, for his sequence includes *two* distinct love objects, one homoerotic: the beautiful, often inattentive aristocratic youth of sonnets 1–126, and the "dark lady" of 127–52. Sonnet 135, "Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will" reveals a love triangle in which the poet must share his beloved's affection. Yet the brilliant saturation of the poem with puns on "will"—the poet's name, but also wishes, desire, the future, a testament—signals the power of the poetic voice to transcend the immediacy of the betrayal. We can recognize the symptoms in everything from a Renaissance sonnet to a twentieth-century Motown lyric ("Tracks of My Tears," Smokey Robinson and the Miracles): the lover who dies and is reborn a thousand times a day, who is mentally scattered and physically immobile, and who is never more alone than in a crowd, suffers from Petrarchan love. Petrarch did not invent the idea of a divided, tormented lover, but his authoritative self-portrait defined an infinitely rich poetic tradition of erotic longing.