

LAURA ANSWERS BACK

Lord Byron, Christina Rossetti and the *Canzoniere* in Nineteenth-Century England



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This essay partly gives a brief survey of the status of the Canzoniere in nineteenth-century England when the collection was finally translated in full into English, and partly traces the significance of Laura in English literature after eighteenth-century biographies had transformed her from a vague Platonic ideal into a real, existing woman. The essay therefore traces the complex interrelationship between biography, translation, fiction and poetry and the ongoing dialogue with Petrarch in such highly self-conscious writers as Byron, Foscolo, Collins and Christina Rossetti.

For centuries Petrarch's note about Laura's death in his Virgil manuscript has been the object of much scholarly interest. The manuscript, now in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, would appear to have been very easily accessible in the nineteenth century when a young English visitor devoted her very special interest to it.¹ The visitor was none other than Mrs Anna Jameson (1794-1860) who by the mid nineteenth century had become one of the most popular female art critics in England. In a chapter on Petrarch and Laura in her book *The Loves of the Poets* of 1829, she describes her visit to the Ambrosiana:

Gushing up like the waters of an intermittent fountain, there was a sudden flow of feeling and memory came over my heart: – I stood for some moments silently contemplating the name of LAURA, in the pale, half-effaced characters traced by the hand of her lover, that name with which his genius and his love have filled the earth. Confused thoughts of the mingling of vanity and glory, – of the 'poco polvere che nulla sente', and the immortality of deified beauty were crowded in my mind. When all were gone, I turned back, and gave the guide a

¹ Petrarch's Virgil manuscript also came top of the list when, in 1863, the young poet A.C. Swinburne advised his sister Alice on what to see in Milan: "But at Milan you will have enough to do. 1st, the Ambrosian Library, where there is a Virgil illuminated or painted in small by Simone Menni (?) for Petrarca;" Swinburne 1959, *Letters*, vol. I, 91.

small gratuity to be allowed to do homage to the name of Laura, by pressing my lips upon it.²

Jameson's vignette illustrates a number of rather important aspects of the nineteenth-century reception of Petrarch and Laura. She obviously kisses both Petrarch's favourite manuscript and his handwriting the moment she is alone in the room, but first of all it is "the name of LAURA" – the only word which orthographically is singled out in the upper case – which is the object of her religious devotion; the word "name" is repeated three times. Apart from giving a brief survey of the status of Petrarch and his *Canzoniere* in nineteenth-century England, I would like to discuss some of the connotations which "the name of Laura" had to Jameson's audience. I shall conclude by a brief discussion of Christina Rossetti's sonnet cycle "Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets" of 1881. This densely composed macro sonnet consists of 14 sonnets, each introduced by one quotation from Dante and one from Petrarch. The poetic voice is that of an anonymous woman, one of the many objects of male praise in poetry, but one who has so far been denied a poetic voice of her own. Christina Rossetti challenges a number of Petrarchan topoi in her sonnet cycle, and she thus offers a highly sophisticated late Victorian comment on Petrarch. The scholarship uncovering and discussing Petrarch's influence on English Renaissance literature is vast and well documented,³ but the later afterlife of the bard in England remains so far relatively unknown.

The crucial role of the *Canzoniere* in the development of the sixteenth-century English sonnet can hardly be questioned. The Elizabethan use of antitheses and paradoxes can to a large extent be traced back to Petrarch, and the whole concept of love pervading the Elizabethan sonnets also finds its origin in the *Canzoniere*. For Renaissance England, Petrarch was a name and a concept of love rather than a book. It is thought provoking, however, that the full *Canzoniere* was not translated into English until the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to George Watson, only about 50 of the poems had been translated by 1625, and most of these belonged to the "In Vita" (nos 1-263). He concludes that this lacking interest in the poems "In Morte" must be seen as an indication that the Elizabethans were not all that interested in the more spiritual aspects of Petrarch, but points out that by 1600 the French had already translated most of the *Canzoniere*.⁴ It is quite likely that a courtly culture like the Elizabethan, so centered on the adoration of an unobtainable Virgin Queen, used the first part of the *Can-*

² Jameson 1829, vol. I, 98-99.

³ See Minta 1980, Roche Jr. 1989, Spiller 1992 and Dubrow 1995.

⁴ Watson 1967, 2-3.

zoniere as its main source of inspiration and ignored the rest. Not until the Romantics and the Victorians did the “In Morte” section and everything it represents get a firm hold on the English.

If briefly we return to the scene in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, we can see how for the sentimental Anna Jameson “seeing is believing”. Not until the moment when Jameson sees the poet’s note on his beloved’s death, does Laura become a real person; accordingly, the two chapters on Laura in *The Loves of the Poets* are primarily anecdotal and biographical. From the last decades of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century the biographical interest in Petrarch increases steadily. Petrarch may have been both a name and a concept of love for the Elizabethans, but for the Romantics the name was inseparably connected to a life and a lifelong unhappy romance. This biographical interest in both Petrarch and Laura was undoubtedly one of the reasons why the *Canzoniere* was eventually translated in full in the nineteenth century. The narrative had to be brought to a conclusion. The genres of biography, anthology and translation meet and merge in many nineteenth-century publications about the three great Italian poets Dante, Petrarch and Michelangelo.⁵ The many biographies often serve as anthologies with extensive textual quotations, collected either from previous translations or from newly commissioned translations. Thus Thomas Campbell’s life of Petrarch of 1841 very clearly expressed the need for a full translation of the *Canzoniere*, and this biography contributed significantly to the production during the 1850s of no less than two complete translations.

This biographical interest in Petrarch and Laura was, however, spurred on by a French book. Apart from being the uncle of the notorious Marquis, Jacques François de Sade was the author of a three-volume work of 1764 about Petrarch, in which he documented that the elusive Laura was a real married woman, the mother of no fewer than eleven children, and even a distant (though documented) relative of his own family. Eleven years later de Sade’s book appeared in an English translation in Susannah Dobson’s *Life of Petrarch* of 1775, a book that for the next 75 years remained the standard biography of Petrarch in England, appearing in no fewer than 6 editions between 1775 and 1805.⁶ The demythologization of Laura was met with strong objections from certain readers; thus Alexander Fraser Tytler spent about thirty years of his life protesting against de Sade’s profanation of Laura in a string of publications in which he produced documents challenging de Sade’s theories, starting with his *Essay on the Life and Character of Petrarch* of 1784. The wider implications of de Sade’s theory were, in-

⁵ See my chapter on the reception of Michelangelo’s poetry in nineteenth-century England, Østermark-Johansen 1998, 21-63.

⁶ See Corrigan 1969, 5.

deed, deeply disturbing; if Laura was related to him, she must also be related to the notorious Marquis who at the end of the eighteenth century was producing his controversial writings, and this was altogether a highly problematic family connexion to consider.

A Victorian reader who leapt at the idea of Laura's ancestry was the young poet Algernon Charles Swinburne who in the early 1860s was introduced to the Marquis de Sade's texts by his friend Richard Monckton Milnes. Monckton Milnes had one of England's largest libraries of erotica and an exquisite collection of de Sade's writings, and throughout the 1860s the correspondence between Swinburne and Monckton Milnes echoes with Sadean references, a great many of them in French. In a letter of 10 February 1863 Swinburne simply had to express his excitement at his discovery of Laura's family connexions:

See the Biogr[aphie] Univ[erselle] 'Laure, née de Noves, amie de Pétrarque, épousa Hugues de Sade' who begat Pierre de Sade who begat Louis de Sade who begat Jacque de Sade (Admiral) who begat Jean de Sade (Grand Constable) who begat Olivier de Sade who begat Bertrand de Sade who begat François de Sade who begat Claude-Marie-Xavier de Sade who begat Donatien-Alphonse-François, marquis de Sade, who begat Justine and Juliette! My memory overleaps some scores of obscurer names; but I hope you now see the point of the admirable couplet put into the mouth of the chaste heroine of Vaucluse.⁷

What "the admirable couplet put into the mouth of the chaste heroine of Vaucluse" refers to remains unknown, but there is little doubt that Swinburne was reveling in his discovery, connecting physical with emotional pain. This became so much the more explicit a few years later in another letter to Monckton Milnes in which lines from the *Canzoniere* were placed in the unexpected context of schoolboy flagellation. Swinburne had as a boy been subjected to considerable flogging at Eton, something which had damaged him for life, and for a large part of his adulthood he appears to have gained great sexual excitement by flagellation. In 1867 he had met an old school friend with contacts to boys at Eton and they were exchanging notes on flagellation:

He has culled for me some newly-budded 'blossoms of the block,' as one may call the narratives of swished youth, which are neither fruitless nor unfragrant. 'I think,' he says 'I can procure a genuine birch which has been used.'

'Dolce sentier – colle mi piacesti

⁷ Swinburne 1959, *Letters* 1959, vol. I, 77.

Ov' ancor per usanza [Amor] mi mena!'

As sang the lover of Madame Laure de Sade. The work of her great descendant (*not* by the side of Petrarca) is not, you see, thrown away on children of Eton. May it be truly blessed to them, and 'bring forth fruits meet for' damnation!⁸

The *dolce-amaro* of Petrarchism had clearly found new contexts and new audiences. Swinburne's friend, the young Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) likewise accepted de Sade's theory in her brief entry on Petrarch in the *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* of about 1860: "The question remains – Who was Laura? and is answered by the Abbé de Sade: She was the daughter of Audebert de Noves, syndic of Avignon, and the wife of Hugh, son of Paul de Sade; and was, in fact, my own ancestress, as family documents prove."⁹ Christina Rossetti's text does not employ inverted commas to indicate quotations, and here she is undoubtedly quoting de Sade, but as it stands, the text makes Laura a Rossetti ancestress, thus introducing Christina's subsequent exploration of her own identity as a successor of Laura. Even such an experienced Victorian scholar as Jan Marsh has recently been misled by Christina Rossetti's remark into raising the following question about Christina's family relationship with Laura:

In describing her supposed ancestress as one whose "habitual reserve and exceptional piety inspired poem after poem", for example, was Christina inscribing her own attributes onto Laura, or had she in part modelled herself on this glamorous forebear? What were the family documents she believed proved the descent? Why have they not survived, and why is no other mention made of this claim? If, as it seems, there was little solid foundation for the belief, why did Christina choose to assert it in this public manner? The Victorian fondness for claiming noble ancestry and lost titles had its basis in social insecurity, and Rossetti family aspirations had always been high: was this Christina's way of establishing significance in the world?¹⁰

The questions raised by Jan Marsh all have their root in her view of Christina Rossetti as an ambitious female poet, highly aware of her Italian ancestry and of being part of a long literary tradition. The question remains, of course, whether Christina's omission of the inverted commas was deliberate or not. In her entry on Leopardi in the same dictionary she does employ in-

⁸ Swinburne quotes lines 6-8 of *Canzoniere* 302 ("Valle, che de' lamenti miei se' piena"), leaving out two half lines. Swinburne 1959, *Letters*, vol. I, 258.

⁹ Christina Rossetti, "Petrarca, Francesco" in *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* (1857-63) in Kent & Stanwood 1998, 167.

¹⁰ Marsh 1995, 212.

verted commas to indicate quotations, but her omission of them in the entry on Petrarch may well be a slip, possibly even a Freudian one. If so, it would constitute a subtle parallel to her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti's (1828-82) almost pathological recreation of himself as a nineteenth-century Dante, partly through his translations of the *Vita Nuova* which appeared in 1861 and 1874, partly through the long series of scenes from the life of Dante which he painted throughout his career, and partly through his mythologization of significant events in his own life with a constant reference to Dante.¹¹ Thus, already as a young man, he reversed the order of his two first names, placing the Italian poet before the Arch Angel in order to indicate his own professional ambitions. As the children of the exiled poet Gabriele Rossetti (1783-1854), who established the study of Italian at King's College in London, and who throughout his life translated and wrote scholarly commentaries on Dante, Christina and Dante Gabriel were central figures in the transmission of Italian literature to an English audience.

It was, however, another exiled Italian poet, Ugo Foscolo (1778-1827) who promoted Petrarch to the Romantics. Foscolo's epistolary novel *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* of 1798 is a complex synthesis of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, Richardson's *Pamela*, Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Part of the plot is set in the Euganean Hills, the site of Petrarch's retirement in old age and of his death. The protagonist, a young unhappy lover whose beloved is betrothed to someone else, commits suicide in the hills; the hero and the heroine read Petrarch together and a long range of Petrarchan echoes pervades Foscolo's language. Already in 1814 the novel was translated into English,¹² and it appeared in two further editions in 1815 and 1818. Foscolo fled to England in 1817 and remained there until his death. He soon became the literary adviser for Byron's publisher, John Murray, supervising new editions and translations of Italian literature, and in 1821 he published his four essays on Petrarch: "An Essay on the Love of Petrarch", "An Essay on the Poetry of Petrarch", "An Essay on the Character of Petrarch" and "A Parallel between Dante and Petrarch". Foscolo intertwined biography and literary analysis to a highly sympathetic, albeit still very sentimental, portrait of Petrarch, and was perhaps, as suggested by Beatrice Corrigan,¹³ quite uniquely suited for the role of popularizing Petrarch to a Romantic audience, given that such Petrarchan issues as memory, solitude, fame, elegiac meditations on tombs and patriotic melancholy were all crucial elements in Foscolo's own poetry and fundamental aspects of his own views on life.

¹¹ See Fraser 1992, 112-15, 143-47.

¹² See Foscolo 1814.

¹³ Corrigan 1969, 14.

The year before Foscolo's arrival to England his closest soul mate among the English Romantic poets had left the country. In 1816 Lord Byron (1788-1824) went into exile, never to return to England again. Unlike Foscolo, he sympathized with neither Petrarch nor the sonnet form, but the many years he spent in Italy, his own status as *cavalier servente* to Teresa Guiccioli and his extreme vanity and extraordinary degree of poetic self consciousness put him, possibly against his will, into a lifelong and complex dialogue with Petrarch. The earliest references to Petrarch in Byron express his deep contempt for the poet's unmanly attitude to love in general and to Laura in particular as in this diary entry for 1813:

Redde some Italian and wrote two Sonnets on *** I never wrote but one sonnet before, and that was not in earnest, and many years ago, as an exercise – and I will never write another. They are the most puling, petrifying, stupidly platonic compositions. I detest the Petrarch so much, that I would not be the man even to have obtained his Laura, which the metaphysical, whining dotard never could.¹⁴

Byron, indeed, wrote very few sonnets; unlike the epic, which in many respects he revived in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the brief, concentrated form of the sonnet was not congenial to him. In the introductory stanza to Canto Five of his great epic *Don Juan* of 1821 he placed Petrarch in the company of Ovid as an authority on the dangers of love. He dismissed him as “the Platonic pimp of all posterity”,¹⁵ but already in stanza eight of Canto Three he had, in fact, summed up the secret behind Petrarch's success:

There's doubtless something in domestic doings,
Which forms, in fact, true love's antithesis;
Romances paint at full length people's wooings,
But only give a bust of marriages;
For no one cares for matrimonial cooings,
There's nothing wrong in a connubial kiss:
Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife,
He would have written sonnets all his life?¹⁶

Petrarch emerges from *Don Juan* as “the father of romance” and hence not in an entirely negative light. Four years previously, in his poem *Beppo*, a Venetian romance, Byron had deliberately chosen to name the female protagonist Laura. With its often prosaic and highly witty language, with roots

¹⁴ Byron 1974-81, vol. III, 240, diary entry for 17/18 December 1813,

¹⁵ Byron, *Don Juan*, V, 1 (1821), vol. V, 241.

¹⁶ Byron, *Don Juan*, III, 8 (1821), vol. V, 163.

back into the eighteenth century, *Beppo* is, in several respects, the precursor of *Don Juan*. At the beginning of his text the poet discusses with himself whether to write in verse or in prose: "I've half a mind to tumble down to prose/ But verse is more in fashion – so here goes!" And what could be more natural, once you have chosen to write about an Italian ménage-à-trois, than to call the heroine Laura? Cheekily, Byron provides a metric cause for his choice of name in stanza 21:

But to my story. -'Twas some years ago,
It may be thirty, forty, more or less
The carnival was at its height, and so
Were all kinds of buffoonery and dress;
A certain lady went to see the show,
Her real name I know not, nor can guess,
And so we'll call her Laura, if you please,
Because it slips into my verse with ease.¹⁷

Any other bi-syllabic name would, of course, have fitted the metre equally well, but now that Byron has chosen to write in verse, he also highly self consciously chooses to enter into a dialogue with Petrarch's Laura as a symbol of the art of poetry, albeit in a highly prosaic form. Donald Reiman and Doucet Fischer point out Byron's complex play with poetry versus prose, ideal versus reality, a game that in no way is inferior to Petrarch's own:

Half of Beppo's mind is a prose mind; the other, poetical, half lies precisely in the elevation of this prosiness to the level of poetic virtue. This restoration of the prose world to its poetic inheritance requires, as we have seen, that the norms of imagination be sought in the real world and not vice versa. This is why Byron chooses to name his heroine Laura: not simply because it slips into his verse with ease (stanza 21), but also because Laura is a legendary name. It means, via Petrarch, both an ideal love and the idea of poetry. But poetic legend has transcendentalized Laura and lauro, thereby concealing the plain truth. Petrarch's, or any poet's laurel, or any lover's Laura, must be seen in their prose reality if their poetic values are to be understood at all.¹⁸

There is absolutely nothing elevated about Byron's heroine; she is 'of a certain age' and spends her time drinking chocolate, doing up her hair and enjoying the Venetian Carnival. Her husband, Beppo, is away and in the

¹⁷ Byron, *Beppo. A Venetian Story* (1817), 21, vol. IV, 135-36.

¹⁸ Reiman & Fischer 1986, vol. VII, 256.

meantime she enjoys herself with a *cavalier servente*, a delicate Tuscan Count who writes verse and is fidelity epitomized:

His heart was one of those which most enamour us,
Wax to receive and marble to retain,
He was a lover of the good old school,
Who still become more constant as they cool.¹⁹

As the prototype of the Petrarchan lover he suffers for a long time, but all ends happily when Beppo returns and they agree to continue their ménage-à-trois over a cup of coffee. Laura's déroute from an abstract female and poetic ideal to becoming a member of the de Sade family, the mother of eleven children and now to Byron's middle-aged coffee-drinking Venetian is considerable. As by the irony of fate, only a few months later Byron found himself as the *cavalier servente* to the married Countess Teresa Guiccioli on a pilgrimage to Petrarch's grave and house in Arquà. La Guiccioli recited Petrarch to him on that particular occasion, apparently without causing loud protests from her suitor. According to Lady Blessington, Byron confessed to the following little incident:

Well, I do remember his having told me of his visit to Arquà [September 1819] when he brought the lady of his love, the fair Contessa Guiccioli, to see the abode and tomb of Petrarch. "She who knows his sonnets by heart," said Byron, "and who recites them as only an Italian mouth can pronounce the poetry of her country, was delighted with this little journey among the Euganean hills, and rendered it very delightful to me. Petrarch is the poetical idol of the women of Italy," continued he, "and no wonder, since if he serves not their cause in representing the passion of love as so engrossing and despotic a one, as it sometimes is, he at least professes that such was its empire over him."²⁰

It was most likely also la Guiccioli who made Byron reread his friend Ugo Foscolo's novel *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* in 1820 with several marginal comments. Apart from being comments to Foscolo, they are also quite important comments on Petrarch whose poetry and very concept of love served as significant intertextual references throughout Foscolo's novel, as already mentioned. Byron has singled out a range of passages in the book and added marginal comments in Italian. Among the most significant ones is the climactic moment when the hero – for the first and only time in the book – kisses the heroine, an event described in a highly Petrarchan language by Foscolo. The words have been underlined by Byron:

¹⁹ Byron, *Beppo. A Venetian Story* (1817) vol. IV, 140.

²⁰ Lovell Jr. 1954, 370.

ho baciato Teresa; i fiori e le piante esalavano in quel momento un odore soave; le aure erano tutte armonia; i rivi risuonavano da lontano; e tutte le cose s'abbellivano allo splendore della luna che era tutta piena della luce infinita della divinità.

(Yes, I have kissed Teresa. In that instance the flowers and plants gave out a sweet fragrance. The air was all in harmony. The streams echoed in the distance, and all things were beautified by the splendour of the moon, full as it was of the infinite light that comes from the Divinity.)²¹

To this passage Byron adds the prosaic remark:

Sarebbe stato più naturale esser pensato più del bacio, e meno dei "fiori" delle "aure" dei "rivi" della "luna" & & &. L'Amor vero non desidera un orchestra di tanti stromenti – né un coro così numeroso – un duetto semplice lo basta.--²²

(It would have been far more natural to have thought more about the kiss and less about the flowers, the air, the streams, the moon etc., etc., etc. True love does not require an orchestra of so many instruments – nor such a numerous choir – a simple duet will do.--)²³

The title page of the book has, however, another interesting note, the only one in the volume written in English, dated on 14 July (!) 1820, on the very same day as the Pope annulled Teresa Guiccioli's marriage, hence paving the way for a legitimization of her relationship with Byron. In the note Byron states that he first read Foscolo's novel in England in 1813,²⁴ at a time when he was in an emotionally turbulent phase of his life. He then reflects on the parallel to his present situation (1820) and continues the note with a quotation from Horace:

It is an odd coincidence – "Coelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt" – most men bewail not having attained the object of their desires – I have had oftener to deplore the obtaining of mine – for I cannot love moderately, nor quiet my heart with mere fruitions.²⁵

²¹ Foscolo trans. Nichols, 2002, 57.

²² Reiman & Fischer 1986, vol. VIII, 1112.

²³ My translation.

²⁴ If he read the book in an English translation, the year would have to be 1814, but it is, of course quite likely that even then he was reading the novel in Italian.

²⁵ Reiman & Fischer 1986, vol. VIII, 1108.

Byron even added his signature to the note, and inevitably the question of the actual date of composition and the intended audience arises. Like Petrarch, Byron was fully aware of the significance of a complex interweaving of life, literature and myth. The volume became part of Teresa Guiccioli's private collection after Byron's death, is now at Harvard University and has undoubtedly gained as wide an audience as Byron could ever have dreamed of.

Of course Byron was right that only very rarely did marital bliss lead to the greatest poetry; two of the major Victorian narrative poems about marital love, Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, both composed in the 1850s, make for immensely dull reading. In Patmore, the young lover lends his beloved his own copy of the *Canzoniere* in one of the very early phases of his courtship. The heroine, Honoria, is on her way to London and is seen off at the platform by the hero, Felix. Just before the train departs she discovers that she has forgotten something to read on the train, but fortunately Victorian heroes always have the right book at hand:

She had forgot to bring a book.
I lent one; blamed the print for old;
And did not tell her that she took
A Petrarch worth its weight in gold.
I hoped she'd lose it; for my love
Was grown so dainty, high, and nice,
It prized no luxury above
The sense of fruitless sacrifice.²⁶

Lending one's Petrarch is, of course, a major sacrifice, but nothing compared to losing sight of Honoria for a full month. The book, is, however, not lost, but turns up later on Honoria's bookshelf, on the very same evening as her father consents to their marriage. It has now served its purpose; the rest of Patmore's poem celebrates the perfect wife as a self-effacing but immensely influential female ideal which some fifty years later provoked the title "Killing the Angel in the House" in one of Virginia Woolf's feminist essays.

It sounds as if Felix's copy of the *Canzoniere* was an old one. By 1854 he could also have given his beloved a brand new copy of the very first complete translation, a book which the very same year had appeared under the somewhat curious title *Indian Leisure. Petrarch, On the Character of Othello, Agamemnon, the Henriad, Anthology* by Captain Robert Guthrie

²⁶ Patmore I, 2 (1854), 85.

Macgregor of the retired Bengal List. After the call for a complete translation of the *Canzoniere* in Campbell's 1841 life of Petrarch, rumours were spreading that such a translation was on its way, and in his preface Macgregor makes it clear that he had hurried his own translation in order to make it the first of its kind. Readers who had enjoyed the long betrothal and the emotionally highly charged courtship of Patmore's poem would have felt at ease on reading Macgregor's translations of Petrarch. He provided the individual poems with small, rather melodramatic, summaries that made Petrarch's text appear as a long coherent verse narrative.²⁷ Sestina I thus carried the title "He lays bare his misery, accuses Laura as the cause, prays that she would be kinder, but despairs of pity." Already in Sonnet II tension is at its highest: "Strong against so many former wiles of love, he could not defend himself against this last assault." Five years later yet another complete English translation appeared in Bohn's Library, an anthology of old translations going back to Chaucer and Wyatt with Macgregor's translations to fill out the gaps where no previous translations existed.

The popularity of the name of Laura in mid Victorian novels was considerably on the increase,²⁸ and it is hard to know whether this popularity could be attributed to the translations or to the many mid-nineteenth century biographies of Petrarch. Whereas in late eighteenth-century novels Laura had been a relatively popular name for servant girls, Laura clearly changes social status in the course of the nineteenth century to reaching proper heroic and protagonistic status in novels by Meredith, Thackeray, Trollope, Moore, Yonge and Collins. If one may draw some sweeping conclusions on the basis of the dozen Victorian heroines mentioned by Greenfield, nearly all Victorian Lauras were married, most of them died in the course of the novels, several suffered from a somewhat melancholic disposition, a few even went mad or were accused of being so, and this melancholy was often related to the fact that they were women torn by their love for two different men.

One such example of Petrarchan influence and the Victorian reinvention of Laura can be found in Wilkie Collins's highly popular sensation novel *The Woman in White* of 1860, in which the heroine, Laura Fairlie, a blonde, innocent creature, is first married off to the wicked Sir Percival, then declared dead and locked up in a lunatic asylum half way through the novel, only eventually to be resurrected and reunited with the main narrator, an artist of the good Victorian name of Walter Hartright. The novel thus has

²⁷ These summaries may well be abbreviated versions of some of the sixteenth-century commentaries on the *Canzoniere*. Thus in Castelvetro 1582 we find similar rubrics of anything between 2 and 15 lines, giving "plot summaries" of the individual poems. I am grateful to Professor Eric Jacobsen for pointing this out to me.

²⁸ See Greenfield 1993.

both an “In Vita” and an “In Morte” part, Laura is blonde, angelic and indescribable unlike her dark, independent half sister Marian (modeled on Mary Anne Evans, alias George Eliot). Where Marian is the detective, a woman of action and the main female narrator, Laura, as one of the only characters in the novel, is denied her own narrative. She is an ideal, a name, an object dealt with by others, and one inspiring the narrative of all the other characters.

Another twenty years were to pass before Christina Rossetti decided to give such a woman a voice in her macro sonnet “Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets” of 1881. In the sonnets a female poetic I describes an unhappy love affair, thus in many ways reversing a series of Petrarchan topoi. In her preface to the sonnets Rossetti points out how Beatrice, Laura and all the ladies praised by the troubadours have only been passed down to posterity through the poetry of their male admirers, with the result that they appear full of grace, but totally lacking in depth and personality. She concludes that “Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend.”²⁹ And the lady is allowed to speak in her own poems, in a cycle given the title “Monna Innominata”; she is “Madonna”, elevated in both a religious and a profane sense, but she is also without a name. In her choice of quotations from Petrarch, Rossetti carefully avoids any reference to Laura/lauro/l’aura as a clear indication of her awareness of the name as a poetic construct, a device in an intellectual playing with sound, myth and puns. Her own poetic I is, however, in many respects a counterpart matching the Petrarchan I in complexity and self-consciousness.

Christina Rossetti is at one and the same time an admiring and a critical reader of Petrarch. There can be no doubt that she had read her Petrarch: her own suitor, Charles Bagot Cayley (1823-83) produced the third complete translation of the *Canzoniere* in 1879, and he and Christina had been discussing his translations in the course of 1878. Like Macgregor, Cayley attempted to link the poems in his translation through a series of headlines in order to create a coherent narrative. “Laura Pitiless”, “A Struggle”, “No Progress”, “Disappointed”, “Hope Deferred”, “Freed in Vain”, “Baffled Again”, “The Worst of It” are all examples of such headlines which Cayley provided for the poems in the “In Vita”. The “In Morte” section carries no such headlines, however; the narrative had come to an end. The interrelationship between Christina’s “Monna Innominata” and Cayley’s translation of the *Canzoniere* is an intriguing one; how much is imitation, how much is

²⁹ Christina Rossetti, “Preface” to “Monna Innominata” 1986, vol. II, 86.

commentary, how much is parody, and how much is criticism of the *Canzoniere*?

In her complex use of Petrarch, Christina goes against the conventional view of him as the ladies' poet, as a poet with a predominantly female audience. Byron had suggested this, and it is a pervasive feature of many nineteenth-century essays on Petrarch that he was the delight of the woman reader, a gold mine of compliments to female beauty. Christina Rossetti, of course, soon discovered the lack of substance in these compliments and sees neither Beatrice nor Laura as women of great depth and attraction: "Beatrice, immortalized by *l'altissimo poeta ... cotanto amante*; Laura, celebrated by a great, tho' an inferior bard, – have alike paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charms, but (at least, to my apprehension) scant of attractiveness."³⁰ It may well be that much attention has been given to both Beatrice and Laura over the years, but they have also, in Christina's view, been punished by such a one-dimensional representation. She therefore turns her own speaking subject, her monna innominata, into a complex poetic voice who, like the Petrarchan poet, reflects herself in her relationship to the beloved, a "you" who becomes as vague and airy as the women in Dante and Petrarch.

Rossetti maintains the idea of unhappy love as the poetically most fertile one and sees, like Petrarch, the song as an essential outlet for unrequited love. Her fourteen sonnets take up a whole series of Petrarchan themes: the first meeting, the memory of it, longing, the unification of the lovers in the world beyond, the song as the medium for the transformation of eros to agape, the separation and the potential merging of earthly and heavenly love, etc. Her language is far from Petrarchan: no concetti, no antitheses, a simple language deliberately kept in a vocabulary with few words of a Romance origin. Thus there is no attempt to sound Italian and foreign, but instead a rigorously controlled simplicity with repetitions full of subtle variations. From beginning to end we hear a sad, resigned voice, apparently without Petrarch's sense of self-dramatization. The blurred line between fact and fiction is, however, a pervasive theme – how much of this love affair is the product of mere dreaming and imagination, one inevitably asks, as for instance in sonnet 2, which revolves around the conventional first meeting of the lovers:

2. "Era già l'ora che volge il desio" – DANTE
"Ricorro al tempo ch'io vi vidi prima" – PETRARCA

I wish I could remember that first day,

³⁰ Ibid., vol. II, 86.

First hour, first moment of your meeting me,
If bright or dim the season, it might be
Summer or Winter for aught I can say;
So unrecorded did it slip away,
So blind was I to see and to foresee,
So dull to mark the budding of my tree
That would not blossom yet for many a May.
If only I could recollect it, such
A day of days! I let it come and go
As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow;
It seemed to mean so little, meant so much;
If only now I could recall that touch,
First touch of hand in hand – Did one but know!

The one significant moment which conventionally is celebrated as so important is here dissolved into great uncertainty, and the connexion between past and present is erased. All sensuousness is removed from this sonnet – here is no seeing or feeling, and only verbs in the past tense or in the subjunctive. The last sonnet is almost elegiac, but without the slightest trace of sentimentality, in its refrain “Youth gone and beauty gone”, and solitude, longing and death await around the corner. Questions are now asked which are only answered by silence. The sonnet concludes with a poetic silence which even questions the song as an outlet for unfulfilled love. After the last line in this last sonnet “the rest is silence”. There is no hope for a continuation of either poetry or love after Christina Rossetti’s final full stop:

14. “E la Sua Volontade è nostra pace.” – DANTE
“Sol con questi pensier, con altre chiome” – PETRARCA

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there
Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;
Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?
I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,
To shame a cheek at best but little fair, –
Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn, –
I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,
Except such common flowers as blow with corn.
Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?
The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
The silence of a heart which sang its songs
While youth and beauty made a summer morn,
Silence of love that cannot sing again.

This poetic silence leaves us with a silence quite different from the one which Christina Rossetti rebelled against in her preface; she manages to transform the woman from a silent object in Petrarch to a profound speaking subject. This feminist device presupposes, however, that the subject remains anonymous. By 1881 “the name of Laura”, which Anna Jameson had so reverently kissed earlier in the century, had become so heavily charged by all the attention following de Sade’s biography that it could only exist as a distant point of reference from which such an ambitious and self-conscious female poet as Christina Rossetti could depart and inevitably distance herself. If during the nineteenth century Petrarch’s Laura had become a real person through archival research, biographies and studies of supposed portraits of her, she returned with Christina Rossetti to the world of poetry where she rightly belongs.

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