

“Resplendent with Charms, Scant of Attractiveness”: Woman’s Power in Petrarch and Christina Rossetti

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Literature is engaged in a constant intertextuality with other literature. In a way, anything written—from the great works to the long-forgotten ones—is an answer to what has already been written. Christina Rossetti’s 1881 *Monna Innominata*—a fourteen-poem sequence of sonnets, explicitly mirroring the fourteen lines in one sonnet—employs a more intense intertextuality: she literally answers her illustrious antecedents. In her sequence, she quotes poems by Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarch and responds to them directly. She uses the same language, the same poetic structures, and the same references as her predecessors. More significantly, Rossetti chooses sonnets as her medium, the very form that the men whom she answers essentially invented, the form that Petrarch himself refined and perfected (Durling, Sadlon). The conventions of Petrarch’s poetry, from style to subject matter, have become so influential that they have lived on through the centuries as Petrarchanism. In Petrarch’s *Rime sparse*, as in the centuries of imitative poetry it spawned, woman is the passive object; furthermore, these poems ultimately prove to be more about the speaker than the beloved that they claim to so glorify. In Rossetti’s sonnet sequence, woman operates as the subject of the poem itself and as an agent of action. In this way, Rossetti reconfigures a centuries-old Petrarchanism through her reimagining of his own works in his own form, ultimately decentering the sonnet’s voice from the poet to the beloved.

Petrarchanism itself has held its share of adherents and challengers. One critic describes the poetic practice particularly well:

To praise, serve, and suffer for a mistress who is adored in language stolen from the church; to catalogue endlessly the physical, physiological, and moral effects of this devotion . . . and to do it all with melodious fluency and the rhetorical flamboyance of the ‘conceit.’ (Waswo 1)

Waswo’s description of Petrarchanism is an apt one; he, like Petrarch, emphasizes the worshipful devotion, the epic emotive power, of love, rather than its honesty, sincerity, or realism. Countless poets after Petrarch continue the tradition, writing of their own beloveds as perfect madonnas, ideal in every way. Laura—Petrarch’s poetic object of choice and the single woman to whom he wrote hundreds of poems—was almost definitely Laure de Noves, wife of a rich and powerful man. She once lived, once possessed real feelings and real intellect (Durling, Sadlon). She, like any other person, had faults, problems, and personal tragedies that tempered and sweetened her triumphs. However, the poetic Laura is forced into two-dimensional virtuousness and faultlessness; now, simply because of Petrarch’s reputation as a great poet, she will be forever remembered and never truly known. She is one of the *monna innominata*: one of Rossetti’s unnamed women.

The very premise of Rossetti’s sonnet sequence—a fourteen-poem “Sonnet of Sonnets,” answering for Petrarch’s Laura and Dante’s Beatrice—points to a new era. These two women, says Rossetti in her preface to the *Monna Innominata*, have “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” (86). In the tradition of Petrarchanism, when to praise a woman is to endow her with ultimate and everlasting perfection, this idea of the poetic beloved being “scant of attractiveness” would be unlikely. Rossetti begins her revision of the poetic beloved even before the poems start: in her opening, she introduces “Laura, celebrated by a great . . . bard,” understood to be Petrarch—though she states Laura’s

name and merely implies Petrarch's (86). She thereby implicitly records Laura—generally only considered significant because of her relationship to the great poet—as the more significant historical figure. She further says of these women 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” (86). Here, she clearly shows her preference for the portrait rendered “more tender . . . [and] less dignified”: the portrait drawn by a lady with the ability to describe herself. Rossetti never questions Petrarch's motives; indeed, she recognizes him to be a “devoted friend” and ardent follower of his beloved. Yet still, Rossetti argues, Petrarch's fondest words about the beautiful Laura are not what she would have written for herself, and so she remains silenced.

The medium of expression for both Petrarch and Rossetti—the sonnet—proves perhaps the most intriguing insight of all. Petrarch perfected and more fully utilized the sonnet form than any before him (Durling 11); in writing all of his sonnets to one woman, he created a lasting convention carried on by hundreds of memorable descendents. By writing a series of sonnets, Rossetti places herself into the tradition—an intimidating place to be. As she answers Dante and Petrarch, her poems cannot help but continually engage Wyatt, Surrey, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, Wordsworth, Browning, and the countless others that make up the tradition.

As an example, in Petrarch's “Soleasi Nel Mio Cor,” the 294th poem in his *Rime sparse*, he uses very few lines to describe the actual woman in question:

She ruled in beauty o'er this heart of mine,
A noble lady in a humble home,
And now her time for heavenly bliss has come,
Tis I am mortal proved, and she divine. (1-4)

The four lines in which he discusses his beloved are certainly flattering, but it is important to note what we actually know of this woman: we know she “[rules] in beauty,” as “a noble lady”; she now resides in “heavenly bliss,” where she is “divine.” These

characteristics are mere archetypes of women, serving primarily as a contrast with the way Petrarch describes himself: “mortal.” The rest of the poem does not give depth to the two-dimensional view of Laura, since it describes only the speaker; he grieves that “ears are deaf / Save mine alone” (9-10) and laments that “naught remains to me save mournful breath” (11). Another translation just as quickly moves away from Laura into these lines: “My soul, despoiled and deprived of all its wealth . . . ought to break a stone with pity” (472). This prose rendering reaches a climax in the statement, “nothing is left to me but sighing” in a fate of suffering (472). Regardless of the translation, this example of Petrarch's *Rime sparse*, which is itself highly representative of the rest of his body of work and of the work produced by Petrarchanism as a literary movement, concerns itself far more with the poet than with the beloved, using the beloved as no more than a trigger for the speaker's own emotional turmoil.

While as Petrarch's poem is about him and not his muse, Rossetti's poems tend to be the opposite. The first line of Petrarch's sonnet says that Laura “ruled in beauty o'er this heart of mine”; this line has a clear comparison in a line from Rossetti's eighth poem in her sonnet sequence, “She vanquish'd him by wisdom of her wit” (10). The full sonnet is as follows:

‘I, if I perish, perish’—Esther spake:
And bride of life or death she made her fair
In all the lustre of her perfum'd hair
And smiles that kindle longing but to slake.
She put on pomp of loveliness, to take
Her husband through his eyes at unaware;
She spread abroad her beauty for a snare,
Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake.
She trapp'd him with one mesh of silken hair,
She vanquish'd him by wisdom of her wit,
And built her people's house that it should stand:—
If I might take my life so in my hand,
And for my love to Love put up my prayer,

And for love's sake by Love be granted it!

The poem, a creative rendering of Esther's saving of her people, is in itself a proto-feminist treatise, given its treatment of a situation involving a historical woman: "If I perish, perish"—Esther spake" (1). Esther, with a literal voice as well as a strong metaphorical one from the very first line of this poem, takes her destiny into her own hands: "She put on pomp of loveliness, to take / Her husband through his eyes at unaware" (5-6). This poem bears a number of similarities to Petrarch's, as in each poem a woman rules over a man with her beauty. Petrarch describes beauty as the one attribute of a woman that could own him and rule over him: such a way of ruling does not prove any true power, but rather a certain cloying sway over the senses and nothing more. The power belonging to Rossetti's woman lies not only in her beauty but also in the "wisdom of her wit" (10). Rossetti's heroine "spread abroad her beauty for a snare, / Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake" (7-8); essentially, she—powerful and self-aware, though morally ambiguous in her manner of attaining power—is able to look upon her beauty as more than good fortune: it is her weapon. The convention holds that the beloved must be silent, passive, powerless. Esther is none of these: her "mesh of silken hair" (9), instead of harmlessly beguiling the man, "trap[s] . . . vanquish[es]" him: a trap set with her intellect, using beauty as a tool rather than a defining characteristic. Esther's attractiveness is not her definition and it is not passive: her wit and wisdom govern her beauty, not the other way around.

In a Petrarchan sonnet, the first eight lines, known as the octave, stand as a separate entity from the remaining six, the sestet. This eighth sonnet, then, is even more significant in its triumphantly feminine tone, as it represents the summation of the poetic movement of the octave. The ninth poem of the fourteen, then, is the "volta," or the turn—the line (or in this case, the poem) that turns into the sestet and into the concluding idea.

Thinking of you, and all that was, and all
That might have been and now can never be,

I feel your honoured excellence, and see
Myself unworthy of the happier call:
For woe is me who walk so apt to fall,
So apt to shrink afraid, so apt to flee,
Apt to lie down and die (ah, woe is me!)
Faithless and hopeless turning to the wall.
And yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite
Because not loveless; love may toil all night
But take at morning; wrestle till the break
Of day, but then wield power with God and man:—
So take I heart of grace as best I can,
Ready to spend and be spent for your sake. (91)

Coming from the triumph and power of Esther, Rossetti's ninth sonnet proves far more somber. This tone is set up by the poem's beginning: the Petrarchan epigraph in this poem is translated "the spirit most on fire with ardent virtues" (462). These words prove strangely at odds with Rossetti's poem, especially the first few lines: Rossetti's miserable dwelling upon "all / That might have been and now can never be," (1-2) her double exclamation of, "woe is me," (5, 7) her apprehension of herself as "apt to lie down and die" (7) all speak against a spirit on fire. While these lamentations lighten somewhat during the rest of the poem, the uncertainty and insecurity remain: the speaker is "[faithless and hopeless turning to the wall. / And yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite," writes Rossetti in the eighth and ninth lines—the last line of the octave and the first of the sestet—effectively conveying a sense of confusion within the poem. Rossetti's use of enjambment, as in the phrases "all / That might have been" (1-2) and the later "break / Of day" (11-12) seem to indicate a spirit of brokenness, a faltering of the courage that is so clear in the previous poem. Joseph Phelan cites this poem as evidence that Rossetti "cannot become an 'Esther' . . . she finds herself forced, in the concluding 'sestet' of poems, to resign herself to a fruitless, unrequited love" (122). Furthermore, she seems to indicate a certain poignant disappointment in this role,

especially after the triumph that Esther represents. In many sonnets, the “volta” answers a question that has been asked, provides a solution to a posed problem, or simply comes to terms with what has been discussed in the octave. In Rossetti’s “volta” poem, however, she reverses the upswing that the sequence has been taking as she draws it downward into desolation—even as she renounces the customs and established conventions of romantic love by finding herself “unworthy of the happier call” (4) of love. Even the final image of hope, ending with the courage-rallying “So take I heart of grace as best I can, / Ready to spend and be spent for your sake” (13-14), is a hope that must come from being “spent” as a person, a line that conjures up death and depression, as in the Miltonic spending of light. Ultimately, in the larger poem’s sestet, beginning with this ninth poem as a representation of a sonnet’s ninth line, Rossetti begins the final stretch toward hopelessness.

This determination continues in sonnet ten’s “Time flies, hope flags, life plies a wearied wing” (1) and through sonnet twelve’s act of releasing the beloved “to that nobler grace, / That readier with than mine, that sweeter face” (4-5) of another lover, ending in the question of sonnet fourteen: “Youth and beauty gone, what doth remain?” (9) and its tragic answer, the final line of the final sonnet: “Silence of love that cannot sing again” (14). Indeed, this portrait of the female lover is as Rossetti predicts in her introduction: more tender, less dignified, than those drawn by the devoted friends of the past. The Petrarchan figure of the beloved—“resplendent with charms, but . . . scant of attractiveness”—receives a radical conversion from the unnamed woman into a subject: flawed and damaged, but real; making up in depth and power what she lacks in exalted perfection. Ultimately, it is this disparity in the construction of the poetic beloved that leads to the most profound and meaningful intertextuality: the conversation between Petrarch and Rossetti, spanning centuries and cultures and generations of poets, that examines the relationships between man and woman, writer and reader, lover and beloved.

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