

## Sixteenth-Century Women Petrarchists and the Legacy of Laura

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*Ei cantò Laura, ed hor Laura gli afferra / di man la cetra . . .*  
—Desiderio Cavalcabò

A widespread assumption among feminist critics in their readings of early modern poetry by women has been that Petrarchism, as a poetic idiom, was inherently “male.” Female poets might appropriate this idiom—and indeed they did, in quite surprisingly large numbers, especially in Italy—but in doing so they are assumed to have been working against the grain of the tradition, and thus to have been disadvantaged with respect to their male peers. Petrarchism conventionally posited a male speaking subject and a female object of desire, and, to this extent, women poets attempting to usurp the role of poetic subject might be considered a priori to be excluded. More than this, however, it has been argued that the *mode* in which the female love-object was represented within Petrarchan lyric further marginalized aspiring women poets. Petrarch’s Laura and her numerous Renaissance descendants are typically presented in a guise that denies them subjectivity and agency. They rarely speak and rarely act—other than, crucially, to deny satisfaction to their despairing suitors. True, their physical beauty is hyperbolically extolled and endowed with an extraordinary freight of philosophical and spiritual significance, but even as physical objects they are curiously elusive, vaporizing upon close inspection into “scattered” fragments—a blaze of inevitably golden hair, coral lips, a light foot, a “fair and cruel” hand—whose serial citation and stereotypical character work to deny corporeal integrity to the human figure described. Simply, they do not add up. The focus of intense sexual yearning and tortuous intellectual construction on the part of their male lovers, they are themselves portrayed in a way that seems to deny them both sexual and intellectual substance, to the extent that many read-

ers, past and present, have been tempted to interpret them as self-referential figurations of poetic beauty more than anything approaching the human. Petrarch's Laura is the ultimate case here: eliding as she constantly does into mythological archetypes like Daphne, and dissolving at points into the evanescent *senhal* of a passing breeze ("l'aura"), her portrayal seems as far from a "flesh and blood" woman as any depiction of a female love-object could be.<sup>1</sup>

As critics have remarked, such an uncompromisingly gendered discourse appears to offer little space to a woman seeking to interpose herself as poetic subject. Apart from anything, as has often been noted, women as figured within the Petrarchan tradition seem almost constitutionally incapable of speech. Words are occasionally attributed, it is true, to Petrarch's Laura, but such direct speech on her part occurs most characteristically in her posthumous ghost-visits to her grieving lover: one of the work's ironies, indeed, is that the dead Laura is attributed more "life," in the sense of both agency and affect, than the living woman had been. For the most part, Laura's speech is represented indirectly, and in an aestheticized and reifying manner that has the effect of draining it of any putative semantic function.<sup>2</sup> Although we may register in passing that Laura's words are wise and well judged ("accorte" [109.10, 183.2]; "accorte e sagge" [105.61]), many of Petrarch's mentions of her speech stress the beauty of her words rather than their rational content, as in sonnet 200, where her "sweet words" [dolci parole] are listed among the beauties of her "lovely angelic mouth" along with the "pearls and roses" of her teeth and lips (200.10–11).<sup>3</sup> Only with difficulty could a female poet find a place within a lyric universe of this kind, even without taking into account the widespread contemporary social prejudice that associated public articulacy in women with sexual indecorum.<sup>4</sup> Critics have noted that among the mythological self-projections of a female Petrarchist like Gaspara Stampa one finds archetypes of "voicelessness" such as Echo and Philomel, the one condemned to an existence of pure sound, shorn of any connection with subjective expression, the other shockingly deprived of the power of speech following an act of sexual violation.<sup>5</sup> Such self-identifications, it has been suggested, evoke in some sense women poets' position with regard to the lyric tradition: marginalized, silenced, deprived of subjectivity, admitted to discourse only as desirable objects. Although this silencing is not perceived as absolute in empirical terms—it hardly could be, given the evidence that women could and did "speak" in this sense—its weight is sufficient for women's relation to the male-authored Petrarchan tradition to be conceived of as almost inherently oppositional. To lever themselves a viable subject position in Petrarchan discourse, women poets are perceived as having been

compelled by definition to work against the grain of that discourse, resisting its silencing logic by reinventing its forms from within.

The aim of this essay is to reopen the question of women poets' relationship with the Petrarchan tradition by revisiting that tradition in a more historically contextualized manner than has been the case in much past criticism. This investigation will take as its starting point the figure of Laura, both as she is represented by Petrarch and in terms of the responses she elicited among Renaissance readers and commentators. The logic of this approach should be evident from what has been argued in the preceding paragraphs. Current readings of poetry by women within the Petrarchan tradition tend to start from the assumption that women were writing as "outsiders." A further assumption is that this outsider status stemmed not only from the banal fact that the tradition had been historically preponderantly male-authored, along with the broader literary culture within which it had been nurtured; rather, Petrarchism is presented as intrinsically inhospitable to women's voices by virtue of its "depersonalizing" representation of its female protagonist. As Nancy Vickers has phrased it in a seminal essay, "bodies fetishized by a poetic voice logically do not have a voice of their own; the world of making words, of making texts, is not theirs."<sup>6</sup> Within Vickers's reading, Laura represents such a fetishized textual body par excellence, fragmented, reified, "scattered" in such a way as to preclude any assumption of psychological integrity. A clear connection is thus made between Petrarch's objectifying representation of Laura and the silencing pressures encountered by would-be female Petrarchists. Before we can properly reexamine the second of these phenomena, it seems appropriate to begin with the first.

An initial point to make here is that, stated very simply, the evidence we have of Renaissance readings of Petrarch suggests that Laura was a far less "unreal" figure to sixteenth-century readers than she is today. As is well known, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Italy saw an increasing tendency for readings of Petrarch to emphasize the narrative content of his verse. As well as a collection of supremely beautiful lyrics, the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* was regarded as a compelling narrative of love, loss, and religious conversion, the ideal autobiography of a poet who was revered as a model for ethical almost as much as for stylistic emulation. This narrative orientation is attested in the increasingly elaborate commentaries that accompanied editions of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* from the fifteenth century onward, as well as in works such as Niccolò Franco's *Il Petrarchista* (1539), which parodies the biographical cult of Petrarch that sent literary tourists scurrying through Vaucluse in search of Petrarchan

souvenirs. Inevitably, Laura was a beneficiary of this biographical trend within the reception of Petrarch: a love-story worthy of the name required a heroine, and the demands of verisimilitude required that she have a reasonably well-attested historical status. Writing during Petrarch's own lifetime, Boccaccio could incline to the opinion that Laura was not a real woman but rather an allegorical representation of poetry, echoing doubts earlier raised by Petrarch's friend and patron Giacomo Colonna.<sup>7</sup> Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century commentators, however, tended to favor more literal readings, and a consensus developed according Laura a presumption of historical "reality," despite the lack of any secure documentary evidence substantiating her existence. Editions appeared prefaced by parallel lives of Petrarch and "Madonna Laura," the latter enlivened by inventively researched disputes regarding her natal rank, surname, birthplace, and marital status.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, a growing tradition of pictorial representations served further to flesh out Laura's shadowy outlines, some seeking to recreate the mythical portrait of her by Simone Martini described in sonnets 77–78.<sup>9</sup> By the 1540s, when the conventions for her depiction had begun to crystallize into a recognizable "vulgate image," Laura's claims to an independent historical existence were practically assured.

More important, perhaps, than simply the bare facts of Laura's emergence to narrative salience in this period is that the story contemporary readers construed Petrarch's poetry as telling about her was one far more calculated to appeal to their culture than it is to ours. Prior to her tragic death, Laura's "story" in her lifetime consists, in bald terms, of having denied gratification to her devoted lover over a period of twenty-one years, despite some hints, especially in the poetry *in morte* and in the *Trionfi*, that she may in some part have reciprocated his feelings. This is hardly a love-narrative calculated to set modern hearts racing; rather, in Laura's actions—or lack of them—we are likely, at best, to see negation and denial. Needless to say, Renaissance attitudes were profoundly different on this point. In a culture that privileged chastity in women above all virtues, self-denial of the kind and scale epitomized by Laura was perceived as properly heroic, the female equivalent within women's privileged moral arena of sexual virtue of a soldier's heroics on the field of battle. Reading back from Laura's sexual continence, other laudable attributes could securely be attributed to her, some betokening a degree of "virility": strength of will, rationality, a Christian faith sufficiently muscular to wrestle down the devil of the senses. We perhaps, as modern readers, tend to overlook references in Petrarch to Laura's moral and intellectual virtues: her "senno" and "valore" ("wisdom" and "worth" [156.9]), her

“conoscenza” (“knowledge” [299]), her “chiaro ingegno” and “alta virtute” (“brilliant mind” and “lofty virtue” [240.9–10]). Admittedly, these qualities of character and mind are less prominent in Petrarch’s poetry than Laura’s dazzling physical beauty, but it may also be that we ignore them because they are not what we are looking for. Accustomed to seeing her as essentially insubstantial—a scattering of bright hair on a passing breeze—we are disinclined to give weight to imagery that plants her more firmly on the earth, as a “torre in alto valor fondata et salda” [a tower of high worth, soundly rooted and secure] or “d’onestade intero albergo” [an unbreachable stronghold of virtue] (146.3–4).

Besides these explicit allusions to Laura’s moral virtues, a further point worth recalling is that her exceptional physical beauty itself possesses moral implications. As is well known, Renaissance Neoplatonism perceived in human beauty a glimmer of divine beauty and goodness; this was ultimately the cause of lovers’ attraction to physical beauty and, within limits, morally sanctified that attraction. An individual’s physical beauty, although acknowledged as material and prone to decay, might nonetheless be read as a manifestation of his or her spiritual purity. Renaissance apologists for women’s spiritual and moral worth, including female writers such as Moderata Fonte (1555–1592) and Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653), could unself-consciously cite as evidence of women’s innate nobility the outward physical loveliness that had compelled the wonderment of male poets since antiquity. Marinella, in particular, places great weight on Neoplatonic arguments in her *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne* (1600), using Petrarch and his sixteenth-century imitators as her principal evidence.<sup>10</sup> Petrarch’s lyrics in praise of Laura are adduced to bear witness not only to women’s physical beauty but also to their spiritual nobility and the role they play in the spiritual ennoblement of men. Laura is even credited by Marinella with being in some sense the true author of Petrarch’s poetry, in that without the inspiration provided by her transcendent spiritual beauty, he might, by his own confession, have remained a member of the “vulgar horde” [uom del vulgo], a “croaking court gossip” [roco mormorador di corti].<sup>11</sup>

If it seems incongruous to us today to see Petrarch’s praise idiom for Laura intersecting with the Renaissance discourse of women’s “nobility and excellence,” it should be noted that such contaminations are not entirely remote from the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* itself. Of particular interest in this regard is a group of sonnets falling toward the end of Part I of the collection (260–63), which form part of a sequence inserted at a late stage in Petrarch’s final revision of the text (1373–74).<sup>12</sup> The intention

of these poems in context is very clearly to voice a valedictory crescendo of tributes to Laura's human virtue *in vita*, in a way that creates a parallel with the divine virtue of the Virgin at the end of Part II. The distinctiveness of these poems as a group has rarely been highlighted by critics; indeed, they have received little critical attention, partly, one suspects, precisely because they are so discrepant in their emphases from our expectations of Petrarch's praise style.<sup>13</sup> The sequence begins with a sonnet (260) in praise of Laura's beauty, comparing her to a series of classical heroines, beginning with Helen of Troy, and moving on to Lucretia, Polyxena, Hypsipyle, and Argia. The range and type of classical references drawn on here is unusual within the scope of the *Rerum vulgariū fragmenta*, bringing us closer to the world of the *Trionfi* and of Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (1361–62).<sup>14</sup> The dynamic of exemplarity evoked in sonnet 260 is developed more explicitly in the following poem 261, where the emphasis broadens from Laura's physical beauty to embrace her inner qualities, and she is held up as a model for emulation on the part of any woman who aspires to moral and spiritual excellence:

Qual donna attende a gloriosa fama  
di senno, di valor, di cortesia,  
miri fiso negli occhi a quella mia  
nemica, che mia donna il mondo chiama.

Come s'acquista honor, come Dio s'ama,  
come è giunta honestà con leggiadria,  
ivi s'impara, et qual è dritta via  
di gir al ciel, che lei aspetta et brama.

Ivi 'l parlar che nullo stile aguaglia,  
e 'l bel tacere, et quei cari costumi,  
che 'ngegno human non pò spiegar in carte. (1–11)

[Any woman who aspires to glorious repute for wisdom, worth, and courtesy should gaze into the eyes of my enemy, whom the world likes to call my lady. There she will learn how honor is acquired, how to love God, and how to combine beauty with virtue, as well as the straight path to ascend to heaven, to which this lady ardently aspires. There too she may learn how to speak in a manner no pen can imitate, and to be beautifully silent, and those charming ways that no words can match.]

Of particular interest in this description, given the modern critical emphasis on Laura's "voicelessness," is that she is here proposed as a model of correct

speech practice (261.9–10), conventionally figured as combining matchless eloquence with an ability to observe silence when required. It is perhaps no coincidence that the following sonnet, 262, contains one of Laura's most sustained direct utterances in the *in vita* portion of the collection. The narrative scenario of the poem is not made explicit, but Laura appears to be portrayed here in conversation with an unnamed older woman, perhaps her mother, who has ventured the view that a woman's chastity should be more precious to her than anything except life itself.<sup>15</sup> Laura corrects her to the effect that chastity should rather be *dearer* than life for a woman, citing the example of the Roman Lucretia, already adduced in sonnet 260. This judgment is praised in the closing tercet of the poem for its exceptional wisdom, and hailed as superior to anything said on the subject by "all the philosophers who have ever existed" [quanti philosophi fur mai] (262.12).

If poems 260–62 progressively construct Laura as a model of female worth, combining beauty with wisdom, judgment and eloquence, this process reaches its climax in the closing sonnet of the sequence, 263 "Arbor vittoriosa triumphale." Here Laura—initially addressed in her customary allegorical guise as the laurel—is praised as loftily intent on the pursuit of fame and honor and despising of all baser values.

Arbor vittoriosa triumphale,  
 honor d'imperadori et di poeti,  
 quanti m'ài fatto di dogliosi et lieti  
 in questa breve mia vita mortale!  
 vera donna, et a cui di nulla cale,  
 se non d'onor, che sovr'ogni altra mieti,  
 nè d'Amor visco temi, o lacci o reti,  
 nè 'ngano altrui contr'al tuo senno vale.

Gentileza di sangue, et l'altre care  
 cose tra noi, perle et robini et oro,  
 quasi vil soma egualmente dispregi.

L'alta beltà ch'al mondo non à pare  
 noia t'è, se non quanto il bel thesoro  
 di castità par ch'ella adorni et fregi.

[Victorious and triumphal tree, the honor of poets and emperors,  
 how many days of misery and joy you have caused me in this brief  
 mortal life! True lady, caring for nothing save honor, which you  
 reap above all other women; you have no cause to fear the traps  
 and nooses and nets of Love, and no deception can prevail against

your wisdom. Nobility of blood, and the other things that are prized here on earth, pearls and rubies and gold, you despise as a worthless burden, and that lofty beauty which has no equal on earth is no more than an annoyance to you, except in that it can add a further luster and adornment to the fair treasure of your chastity.]

Once again, Laura is presented as a model of a specifically gendered, *feminine* virtue: we are told that she reaps her just tribute of honor “more than any other *woman*” [sovr’ogni *altra*] (my emphasis). A feature common to this whole sequence of poems, in fact, is that the figure of Laura is etched against a background of heroic female exemplarity distinctive within the collection as a whole. The Laura we encounter here is not the evanescent “Ovidian” figure to which we are accustomed in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*: rather, in this sequence of poems Laura is reframed within a humanistic exemplary context that the Latin Petrarch and Boccaccio had been instrumental in developing—a Laura possessed of a distinctly “Renaissance” appetite for honor, her literary roots sinking not in the shadowy undergrowth of the *Metamorphoses* but in the brighter uplands of classical epic and history.

While, as noted above, these poems have not attracted particularly keen attention from modern critics, predictably, they proved more appealing to sixteenth-century tastes. Poem 260, with its set-piece comparison between Laura’s beauty and that of Helen and other classical heroines, inspired densely intertextual and self-conscious responses from two of Petrarch’s greatest sixteenth-century Italian imitators, Pietro Bembo (“Se stata foste voi nel colle Ideo”) and Giovanni della Casa (“La bella greca, onde ’l pastor Ideo”). Both exploit the neoclassical expressive possibilities rather tentatively explored by Petrarch to praise a contemporary beauty, Elisabetta Quirini, in a manner that confirms the perceived “modernity” of the praise-mode developed in these late sonnets. The last sonnet of the sequence, 263, also appears to have featured saliently within sixteenth-century readings of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, partly by virtue of its eminently quotable *incipit*, “Arbor vittoriosa triumphale,” which we find echoed in a number of poems of the period, most famously, perhaps, in Galeazzo di Tarsia’s sonnet 28 (“Arbor vittoriosa, il cui bel nome”), addressed to Vittoria Colonna the younger, niece of the poet of that name.<sup>16</sup> The lines in sonnet 263 celebrating Laura’s lofty contempt for worldly values were also much imitated in the sixteenth century, as in a sonnet of Bembo’s that praises a lady—perhaps the elder Vittoria Colonna—who “thirsts not for pearls or purple but solely



for honor and virtue.<sup>17</sup> More unexpectedly, perhaps, we find echoes of the same lines in a sonnet in Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* (1600), in which one of her speakers, Corinna, declares her intention to eschew worldly pleasures—including the lure of marriage—to devote herself to the pursuit of literary glory.<sup>18</sup> Fonte also twice quotes in her dialogue the opening line of “Arbor vittoriosa triumphale,” once in the context of a discussion of suitable emblems to be carried into battle by a putative modern army of Amazons, intent on asserting by force the rights that society has long denied their sex.<sup>19</sup> While it would be rash to conclude from this that the “triumphal” Laura of 263 had evolved by this point into a fully fledged icon of feminist militancy, Fonte's allusions to this poem, taken together, do confirm what we previously saw in Lucrezia Marinella: that Petrarch's praises of Laura—of both her Neoplatonically inspiring beauty and her adamant moral strength—proved eminently susceptible to creative redeployment within the Renaissance *querelle des femmes*.

To summarize what has been argued to this point, Petrarch's Laura appears to have been a more morally and psychologically substantial presence to Renaissance readers than she tends to be for critics today. The diligence of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century editors had provided her with the documentary base necessary to certify her as “real,” while to a reader steeped in the rhetoric of female moral exemplarity cultivated in Renaissance “defenses of women,” she could appear not merely as an ineffable icon of beauty but as a paragon of moral rectitude, worthy of standing alongside famous “historical” figures such as the Roman Lucretia. Nor did Petrarch's references to Laura's keen intellect and fluency of speech go unnoticed among sixteenth-century readers. In a 1548 edition of Petrarch, dedicated to Lucrezia d'Este, Antonio Brucioli develops a parallel between his dedicatee and Laura that emphasizes their beauty, grace, and exemplary manners, and also their “lofty intelligence” [alto intendimento].<sup>20</sup> A curious volume published shortly afterwards in Venice goes further, reinventing Laura as a poet and attributing to her a series of moralizing “responses” *per le rime* to each of the 366 poems of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, which cumulatively seek to correct Petrarch's “errors” and urge him to turn his mind to redemption.<sup>21</sup> While this exercise was never repeated by other poets, the author of this volume was not alone in imputing literary accomplishments to Laura. Agostino della Chiesa, for example, includes an entry on “Laura Sada” in his compendious *Teatro delle donne letterate* (1620), noting that Petrarch's beloved was “very well read in literature” and “fluently and very skillfully composed in Provençal.”<sup>22</sup>

What is the significance of the preceding argument for women's

relationship to Petrarch in this period, both as readers and as writers and imitators? If, as feminist critics like Vickers have argued, Laura's perceived "silencing" and depersonalization in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* had the effect of preemptively excluding women from full "ownership" of the Petrarchan tradition, does the contention that this silencing was historically less absolute than has been assumed suggest the same of the consequential exclusion? In the second part of this essay, I will reconstruct some possible ways in which the figure of Laura may have served female poets as an enabling fiction in their efforts to construct a female subject-position within the dominant Petrarchist discourse. This investigation complements recent critical work exploring female poets' "negotiations" with male-authored literary tradition, and particularly their creative appropriation of the "female" voices they found embedded within that tradition.<sup>23</sup> Within an Italian context, studies of this kind have tended to concentrate on more obvious prototypes for the "vocal woman," such as the rhetorically agile heroines of Ovid's *Heroides*, who supplied a model, if obviously a highly mediated one, for the expression of female desire.<sup>24</sup> It will be suggested in what follows that, while less obviously promising, the reticent and exemplary Laura may have proved equally productive as a template for female poets in fashioning their poetic *personae*.<sup>25</sup>

The examples that have been chosen here are intentionally drawn from what may be seen as the breakthrough moment within the narrative of women's emergence as protagonists within the Italian lyric tradition, in the fourth decade of the sixteenth century. Mentions of female poets are found in increasing numbers in the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth, suggesting that the practice of women writing lyric poetry was reasonably widespread among the elites of the time. It was not until the 1530s, however, that women first began to achieve a national reputation as poets, enthusiastically promoted by leading male literary figures, for reasons I have examined elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Two key figures in this development are the Brescian-born Veronica Gambara (1485–1550), at this time dowager Countess of Correggio, and Vittoria Colonna (1492–1547) of the great Roman baronial family, the widow of the Marquis of Pescara. Both Gambara and Colonna were correspondents of the Venetian poet and literary theorist Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), at this time the leading cultural authority in Italy, and Bembo's inclusion of exchanges with both poets in the second edition of his *Rime* of 1535—one of the defining texts of Italian Petrarchism—may be seen to mark symbolically women's point of "arrival" within the elite lyric tradition. Three years

later, the appearance of the first (pirated) printed edition of Colonna's verse proved an immediate success with the expanding vernacular reading public, stimulating publishers, especially following Colonna's death in 1547, to seek out writings by new women authors. By 1559, when Lodovico Domenichi published the first anthology of women's verse, incorporating the work of some fifty "noble and highly accomplished ladies," female poets had become an accepted and respected—if still frequently patronized—presence on the Italian literary scene.

Given Gambara's and Colonna's crucial pioneering role in establishing and legitimizing the nascent tradition of women's poetry, it seems appropriate for the present investigation to center on examples of their work. The first we might look at is a sonnet exchange between Gambara and Bembo, first published in the latter's *Rime* of 1535, in a gesture whose historical significance was noted above. The exchange dates from around 1530 and was initiated by Gambara, whose sonnet (no. 36 in Bullock's modern edition) expresses her admiration of Bembo and her delight in his spiritual guidance. Bembo replies *per le rime* (sonnet 123), graciously accepting her homage and assuring her of his reciprocal affection. The text of the two poems is as follows:

*Gambara*

A l'ardente desio ch'ognor m'accende  
di seguir nel camin ch'al Ciel conduce  
sol voi mancava, o mia serena luce,  
per discacciar la nebbia che m'offende.

Or poiché 'l vostro raggio in me risplende,  
per quella strada c'a ben far ne induce,  
vengo dietro di voi, fidato duce,  
che 'l mio voler più oltra non si stende.

Bassi pensier in me non han più loco;  
ogni vil voglia è spenta, e sol d'onore  
e di rara virtù l'alma si pasce,

dolce mio caro ed onorato foco  
poscia che dal gentil vostro calore  
eterna fama e vera gloria nasce.

[In the ardent desire that has always fired me to follow the path that leads to heaven, you alone were lacking, my dear serene light, to dispel the obscuring mists; but now that your ray is shining in me, trusted leader, I can follow you along the way of righteousness,

for this is now entirely my object. All base desires have ceased in me, and my soul now feeds solely on honor and rare virtue, o my dear, sweet, and honored fire, since from your gentle heat eternal fame and true glory are born.]

*Bembo*

Quel dolce suon, per cui chiaro s'intende,  
quanto raggio del ciel in voi riluce,  
nel laccio, in ch'io già fui, mi riconduce  
dopo tant'anni, e preso a voi mi rende.

Sento la bella man, che 'l nodo prende,  
e strigne sì, che 'l fin de la mia luce  
mi s'avvicina; e, chi di fuor traluce,  
nè rifugge da lei, nè si difende:

ch'ogni pena per voi gli sembra gioco,  
e 'l morir vita; ond'io ringrazio Amore,  
che m'ebbe poco men fin da le fasce,

e 'l vostro ingegno, a cui lodar son roco,  
e l'antico desio, che nel mio core,  
qual fior di primavera, apre e rinasce.

[That sweet sound, which clearly shows how bright a heavenly ray shines within you, now leads me back, after so many years, into the noose in which I was once caught, and renders me to you as a captive. I feel your lovely hand taking the knot and so tightening it that the end of my light seems nigh, but my soul neither flees from you nor offers any defense, for every pain it suffers for you seems rather a joy, and death becomes life. And so I thank Love, who has been my lord since my earliest days, and your fine mind, which I praise without cease, and that former desire that within my heart unfolds and is reborn like a flower in spring.]<sup>27</sup>

As may be seen, although his relationship with Gambara was clearly one of friendship, rather than love, Bembo's sonnet deploys the language of courtship to convey his affection. The "sweet sound" of Gambara's verse is represented as having rekindled his past love for her (the two were family friends, intermittently corresponding since 1504); on reading her poem, he feels her "lovely hand" tightening the knot that once bound him to her. Gambara is cast here in the role of a love-object, and one clearly modeled on

Laura: Bembo's reference to the "bella man, che 'l nodo prende / e stringe" is a knowing echo of the *incipit* of Petrarch's sonnet 199 ("O bella man, che mi destringi 'l core"). What is new here, however, is that Bembo's "bella mano" may be read, in context, as a metonymic allusion to Gambara's seductive verses, which the first quatrain tells us have drawn Bembo back into the "laccio" of her love. Like Dante's Paolo and Francesca, Bembo and Gambara have been brought together by a literary go-between. In this case, however, the "galeotto"—Gambara's sonnet—is far from being a neutral transmitter; on the contrary, as the product of the lady's own "fair hand," it is itself a fetishized object of desire.<sup>28</sup>

It would be too easy to regard this exchange between Bembo and one of the most distinguished of sixteenth-century women Petrarchists as a rather dispiriting enactment of the patriarchal dispensation governing women's accession to authorship. A female poet writes to a male mentor humbly expressing her gratitude for his guidance and hailing him unequivocally as her "leader" [fidato duce]. He replies by flatteringly alluding to her physical charms and declaring himself smitten by love on reading her verses. Read like this, Bembo's repositioning of Gambara as love-object seems straightforwardly trivializing and reductive: a highly effective manner, within the conventions of polite discourse, to put an aspiring woman writer in her place. Closer scrutiny of the two sonnets' Petrarchan subtexts, however, reveals the gender exchange here to be more complex than is apparent at first sight. It is noteworthy that much of the language and imagery Gambara's sonnet uses to describe Bembo's role as spiritual guide derives from poems of Petrarch's that represent Laura in this role. Her most prominent Petrarchan borrowings here are the rhymed lines in the quatrains, "di seguir nel camin ch'al Ciel conduce" (36.2) and "per quella strada c'a ben far ne induce" (36.6). Both closely echo lines in the opening stanza of Petrarch's *canzone* 72, "Gentil mia donna io veggo," one of his most confident and lyrical evocations of Laura's salvific role:

Gentil mia donna, i' veggio  
 nel mover de' vostr'occhi un dolce lume  
*che mi mostra la via ch'al ciel conduce;*  
 et per lungo costume,  
 dentro là dove sol con Amor seggio,  
 quasi visibilmente il cor traluce.  
*Questa è la vista ch'a ben far m'induce,*  
 et che mi scorge al glorioso fine;  
 questa sola dal vulgo m'allontana. . . . (my emphasis)

[My noble lady, I see a sweet light in your eyes as they move that shows me the path that leads to heaven, and, there within, where, through long habit, I sit alone with Love, your heart almost visibly shines through. This is the vision that induces me to righteousness and leads me to that glorious end; this vision alone distances me from the vulgar herd. . . .]

Other, more fleeting allusions reinforce those just identified in ways that interestingly modify the gender relation established in the sonnet. Gambarà's allusion to Bembo as her *dux* ("fidato duce" [36.7]) may sound to us specifically masculine in gender, but it echoes Petrarch's description of Laura as his "fida e cara duce" in line 2 of his sonnet 357. Similarly, her image of his "ray" shining in her ("poiché il vostro raggio in me risplende" [36.5]), while it may seem to cast her as feminine moon to his Apollonian male sun, is closely modeled on a passage in Petrarch extolling the mysterious virtues of Laura's eyes: "il vostro veder in me risplende / come raggio di sol" (95.9–10). Gambarà in her sonnet, then, implicitly casts Bembo in the role as Laura to her Petrarch, in a manner that subliminally valorizes the "masculine" dimension of that role. His poem returns the compliment, elegantly re-citing her chosen Petrarchan subtexts in such a way as to suggest that she is as fully equipped as he to take the role of spiritual leader. As his opening lines make clear, the "sweetness" he perceives in her verses is an expression of their author's spiritual and intellectual beauty. Gambarà is cast here as possessor of her own direct "ray" from heaven ("quanto raggio del ciel in voi riluce"), rather than as a recipient of the borrowed light from his own, as she had modestly presented herself. We are taken back here from Gambarà's gender-reversed recasting of Petrarch to the model we find in the original, with a spiritually empowered female figure acting as moral and spiritual *duce* to a wavering male. Underlining this process of reversion *ad fontes*, Bembo's equivocal rhyme "luce" and "traluce" (123.6–7) recalls one of Gambarà's major subtexts (Petrarch's sonnet 357), while "traluce" is also found in the other (Petrarch's *canzone* 72).

In terms of gender positioning, then, this exchange is less clear-cut than a casual reading might suggest. As was noted, Bembo compliments Gambarà by implicitly comparing her to Laura, but his point of reference here is specifically to a Laura conceived of as spiritual *duce*. In comparing Gambarà to Laura, moreover, in this role, he is doing no more than returning a compliment of hers, which had implicitly cast *him* as Laura to her Petrarch. This elegant gender skirmishing is all the more interesting when

one considers the nature of the poetic transaction being conducted here. Although Gambara casts her appreciation of Bembo in spiritual terms (he was a cleric and future cardinal, as well as a distinguished *letterato*), the discipleship she offers is also clearly poetic. Her sonnet announces herself explicitly as a follower of Bembo, by this time a figure of near-legendary status, while at the same time, more implicitly, declaring herself an imitator of the still-greater authority of Petrarch. Read with an eye to its metaliterary significance, the exchange between Gambara and Bembo may appear at first sight to confirm the subaltern level on which women were admitted to Petrarchan discourse (as disciples, not masters), while at the same time registering the price of admission (a commitment to limit themselves to echoing the male voice). Yet things are more complex than they seem. By the allusions in her sonnet to Laura's role as Petrarch's spiritual guide, Gambara hints at possibilities of reciprocity that her humility of tone might seem to exclude, discreetly reminding us that (as Lucrezia Marinella would state more explicitly seventy years later) Petrarch's achievement, however marvelous, was dependent on the inspiration of his female co-protagonist. Bembo's reply implicitly acknowledges Gambara's allusions to Laura's salvific role for Petrarch, recognizing in his correspondent a new Laura, the divinity of whose intellect, manifested in her verses, can stir him to a spiritual love. Taken together, Gambara's poem and Bembo's reply effectively discover within Petrarchan discourse the possibility of a constructive and reciprocal interchange between the sexes of the kind that is embodied in their sonnet exchange itself. More than woman as supplicant and outsider, seeking access to a discourse that excludes her, what we seem to be witnessing here is something more like a reciprocal negotiation between a male and female poet to establish a space within Petrarchan love discourse that a female subject might plausibly occupy.<sup>29</sup>

If Gambara's sonnet to Bembo suggests one way in which a woman poet exploited the internal resources of Petrarchism to engineer a new female subject-position within the tradition, another interesting illustration of the same process is offered by a sonnet of Vittoria Colonna's, "Scrivo sol per sfogar l'interna doglia."<sup>30</sup> Like Gambara's sonnet, this poem played an important symbolic role in the history of women's accession to Petrarchist discourse. Although Colonna did not leave a definitive authorial redaction of her poetry that would enable us confidently to pronounce on the "correct" ordering of her *canzoniere*, there are fairly clear indications that this sonnet was intended to be prefatory to her *rime amorose*; certainly, this is the position it occupied in numerous sixteenth-century printed editions of her verse.<sup>31</sup>

As was conventional with such proemial poems, “Scrive sol” functions to define Colonna’s poetics, priming her readers’ expectations for the poetry to come. Other than in the authorial modesty that it exhibits, however, it is far from a conventional *captatio benevolentiae*. The poem defines Colonna’s verse, addressed to her dead husband, as strictly consolatory and “private” in character. All pretensions to stylistic embellishment are disclaimed, as is the aspiration to immortalize her beloved, whose heroic achievements would be worthy of a far more elevated style than her own. Her only claim to legitimacy in her writing is the intensity and sincerity of her passion; if her poetry succeeds, it will not be as an exercise in formal polish but as a pure distillation of sorrow and pain.

Scrive sol per sfogar l’interna doglia  
ch’al cor mandar le luci al mondo sole,  
e non per giunger lume al mio bel Sole  
al chiaro spirto e al l’onorata spoglia.

Giusta cagion a lamentar m’invoglia;  
ch’io scemi la sua gloria assai mi dole;  
per altra tromba e più sagge parole  
convien ch’a morte il gran nome si toglia.

La pura fé, l’ardor, l’intensa pena  
mi scusi appo ciascun, ch’l grave pianto  
è tal che tempo né ragion l’affrena.

Amaro lacrimar, non dolce canto,  
foschi sospir e non voce serena,  
di stil no ma di duol mi danno vanto. (A1:1)

[I write only to relieve the inner pain that was caused to my heart by those shining eyes, unique in this world, and not to add luster to my lovely Sun, to his bright spirit and revered mortal remains. A just cause leads me to lament, and it sorely pains me that I may detract from his glory; his great name deserves to be rescued from death by a loftier trumpet and wiser words. May my pure faith, my ardor, my intense suffering serve as my excuse among all who read, for my oppressive grief is such that neither time nor reason can restrain it. Bitter weeping, not sweet song, dark sighs, not a serene voice: the merits of my verse are not those of style but of sorrow.]

Despite the starkness of the poetics she adumbrates here, it would have been patent for Colonna’s first readers that the claimed “artlessness” of her poetry



disguised a generous measure of art. In particular, it is difficult not to be struck by the quantity and quality of Colonna's imitation of Petrarch in this poem. While the doleful and "styleless" monotony she promises her readers may seem at the opposite pole from the *varietas* Petrarch proclaims in his equivalent initial metapoetic statement ("dal vario stile in ch'io piango e ragiono" [*Rvf.* 1.5]), the actual stylistic texture of Colonna's poem would immediately have assured readers of her allegiance to the master. Like other lyrics of the time, the sonnet encompasses an intricate tissue of allusions to individual Petrarchan poems, which are marshalled here, however, with an unusual degree of critical acumen and self-consciousness. As we might expect, the majority of Colonna's Petrarchan echoes in this poem are drawn from the poetry *in morte di Madonna Laura*, the most striking being her close imitation in line 5 ("Giusto cagion a lamentar m'invoglia") of the equivalent line in Petrarch's sonnet 276 ("Giusto duol certo a lamentar mi mena"). Of the poems *in vita*, one quite emphatically alluded to is 187 ("Giunto Alessandro a la famosa tomba"), which laments Petrarch's failure to do justice to the "pure white dove" of whom he sings. Beyond its obvious thematic resonance with Colonna's poem, pointed up by verbal reminiscences (compare "ch'io scemi la sua gloria assai mi dole" [A1:1.6] with "ma forse scema sue lode parlando" [*Rvf.* 187.14]; "altra tromba" [A1:1.7] with "sì chiara tromba" [*Rvf.* 187.3]), a deeper connection is apparent at the level of metaliterary reflection. Sonnet 187, with conscious hyperbole, had praised Laura as a worthy subject for Homer or Virgil, implicitly valorizing Petrarch's lyric style while seeming to protest its inadequacy. Imitating this poem in a radically changed context, Colonna draws ironically on Petrarch's comparison between epic and lyric to call attention to the novelty of the task she faces as a woman poet within a male-authored tradition. While Petrarch's comparison of Laura to Achilles or Aeneas is wilfully incongruous, Colonna's subject—her war-hero husband—is "literally" epic. In these circumstances, the praise-style evolved by Petrarch for his "dove," although its consummate artistry is acknowledged here by Colonna, can of necessity afford only a partial model for her verse.

If this echo of Petrarch's sonnet 187 already illustrates Colonna's poised self-consciousness about the distinctiveness of her position as a female poet, so too do her allusions to a further *in vita* poem, sonnet 156 ("I vidi in terra angelici costumi"). Probably the clearest verbal echo here is the closing phrase of line 2 ("al mondo sole"), referring to her husband's eyes, which is found in the same position in sonnet 156, qualifying Laura's beauties.<sup>32</sup> The rhyme-schemes of the two poems are also similar, with two shared rhymes

(-ole and -oglia), and an identical set of rhyme-words (*sole/Sole* and *parole/dole*) being used in the former case.<sup>33</sup> A third rhyme (-anto in the tercets), is close, though not identical, to Petrarch's rhyme -ento in the same position, a similarity underlined by the near-identity of the final word of the two poems (*vanto* and *vento*). This filigree of formal reminiscences acquires significance when we consider the thematic consonance between the imitative text and that echoed. The sequence of poems of which 156 forms a part (155–58) is unusual in the context of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* in referring to a specific narrative situation involving Laura but unrelated to the poet's relationship with her. The four sonnets portray Laura weeping, for reasons unexplained, but plausibly as the consequence of bereavement (the sequence is modeled on an episode in the *Vita Nuova* in which Beatrice mourns the death of her father). The pathos and beauty of the scene are equally stressed, and we are told that it arouses in the poet a mixture of sorrow and desire. Specifically, he is struck by a double beauty in Laura's grief, deriving from the sight of her tears and the sound of her laments:

Quel dolce pianto mi depinse Amore,  
 anzi scolpiò, et que' detti soavi  
 mi scrisse entro un diamante in mezzo 'l core. (155.9–11)

[That sweet weeping Love painted—no, sculpted—in my heart,  
 and those soft words he wrote there within a diamond.]

Nè sì pietose et sì dolci parole  
 s'udiron mai, nè lagrime sì belle  
 di sì belli occhi uscir vide mai 'l sole. (158.12–14)

[Nor were such piteous nor such sweet words ever heard before,  
 nor had the sun ever seen such lovely tears falling from such lovely  
 eyes.]

Of the four poems, the first and last, 155 and 158, give equal weighting to the visual and auditory dimensions of the scene, while 156 gives greater weight to the auditory, 157 to the visual. The poem *Colonna* echoes most closely (156) is thus that which gives most emphasis to Laura's grieving speech, those "words," as he tells us at the close of the quatrains, that "could move mountains, and stop rivers in their path" [*farian gire i monti e stare i fiumi*] (156.8). This tribute to the eloquence of Laura's mourning words is reinforced by Petrarch's lyrical description in the tercets of the "sweet harmony"

of the scene, which charges the air with such sweetness that not a single leaf can stir. Although the nominal source of this harmony is the conjunction of Laura's personified moral qualities—"love, wisdom, worth, pity, and sorrow"—it is hard not to read it in context, more literally, as a continuing paean to the effects of her words.

In a poem conceived of as a preface to the work of a female poet whose subject will be her grief for a dead love, this allusion of Colonna's to Petrarch's sequence of sonnets describing Laura's grieving cannot fail to give pause for thought. In few other points in the entire *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* is Laura's speech given such emphasis; here, too, more than the mere sweetness of the sound of her words, what is stressed is their pathos and Orphic rhetorical power.<sup>34</sup> If, as I have been arguing here, Laura, as she was read in the sixteenth century, was a feminine presence capable of "authorizing" the female voice within Petrarchan discourse, it is in a poem like "Scrivo sol per sfogar l'interna doglia" that we can see this dynamic most clearly. For the most part, Colonna's imitations of Petrarch in this sonnet serve to legitimize her poetry by assimilating her voice to his; she will mourn her dead husband with the eloquence that Petrarch mourned his dead love. This is, of course, broadly the strategy of Petrarchan imitation in this period in general: in imitating the ultimate vernacular classic, poets sought vicariously to appropriate some of Petrarch's unsurpassable literary authority. In echoing a sequence of Petrarchan poems foregrounding Laura as mourner, however, Colonna is doing something rather different and more gender-specific, effectively casting herself in the guise of the eloquently sorrowing Laura, and so bringing to life the affecting tableau that Petrarch had painted of her grief. Petrarch had spoken in 157 ("Quel sempre acerbo et honorato giorno") of Laura's "dolce amaro lamentar" [sweet bitter lamenting], of her "voci ardenti e belle" [ardent and beautiful words] (157.6, 13). Despite her explicit disclaimers of any aesthetic aspirations—she insists that her own "lagrimar" will be unmitigatedly bitter (A1:1.12)—Colonna subliminally invites us to hear in her grieving some of Laura's own sweetness and ardor. Through an imitative practice of signal deftness and ingenuity, Colonna has here conjured from the resources of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* a figure not found in it literally: the figure of the female poet, created as an amalgam of the actual voice of Petrarch and the fictively evoked voice of Laura. In one stroke, Colonna provides her unconventional authorial persona with an authoritative sanction, and seduces her readers by investing this persona with some of the grieving Laura's wistful allure.

What general conclusions may we draw from the preceding analysis with regard to women's relation to the Petrarchan tradition? The main thrust of my argument has been that Petrarchism as a discourse was not in practice as resistant to appropriation by women poets as some modern feminist criticism would suggest. This is not, of course, to suggest that sixteenth-century Petrarchism was an ideal "equal opportunities" environment; nor is it to deny the value of the often extremely penetrating insights of feminist critics such as Nancy Vickers. Yet it is reductive to regard the feminine presence in Petrarch *solely* in terms of depersonalization, silencing, and denial. Such a unilateral reading impedes our understanding of the complexity of Renaissance responses to this text, including, crucially, those of Petrarch's female imitators, whose subtly transformative reworkings of his praises of Laura suggest that she may have proved a more imaginatively enabling figure than a cursory reading might predict.

My argument about the way in which Italian women poets identified with the figure of Laura has been exemplified using the two great first-generation figures of female Petrarchism, Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gambara. Although we could extend this analysis to later sixteenth-century women poets, a further important factor has to be considered in their case: besides practicing the kind of inventive literary necromancy represented by Colonna's and Gambara's invocations of Laura, these later poets were also in a position to legitimize their writing more directly, by appealing to the authority, precisely, of these two distinguished female predecessors, already well on their way to canonical status at the time of their deaths in 1547 and 1550. It is only recently that critics have begun to look seriously at early modern Italian women poets' imitation of female literary models, but the importance of Colonna, in particular, in this role is already emerging very strongly.<sup>35</sup> This is an important point to bear in mind when speaking of women's relationship to the lyric tradition in this period, which is still too often seen exclusively in terms of discipleship, docile or otherwise, to male "founding fathers" such as Petrarch and Bembo. By the mid-cinquecento, it is inaccurate to say that the vernacular lyric tradition remained entirely masculine in its purview. Those women poets who came to maturity in the 1540s, when the "canonization" of Colonna and Gambara was already in progress, could call on female precedents less nebulous than an imaginatively ventriloquized Laura to authorize their voices.



## Notes

The epigraph quotation by Desiderio Cavalcabò is from Laura Terracina, *Quinte rime* (Venice, 1552), sig. 37v: “He sang of Laura, and now Laura seizes the lyre from his hand.” All translations in this essay are my own. My warmest thanks are due to the following for their help with and comments on this paper: Abigail Brundin, Massimo Danzi, Valeria Finucci, Peter Hainsworth, Victoria Kirkham, Maureen Quilligan, and James Simpson.

- 1 The *locus classicus* for the view summarized here is Nancy Vickers’s influential article, “Diana Described,” discussed below. For a particularly stark instance, see Sara M. Adler’s statement in “Veronica Franco’s Petrarchan *Terze Rime*: Subverting the Master’s Plan,” *Italica* 65 (1994): 213–33, that “Petrarchism was the language of the male establishment and thus a language in many ways alien to women” (214). Critical discussions of this tendency within studies of Petrarchism, both citing further examples, may be found in Gordon Braden, “Gaspara Stampa and the Gender of Petrarchism,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38 (1996): 116–18; and Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counter-Discourses* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 10 and n. 25, 46.
- 2 For discussion of Petrarch’s representations of Laura’s speech, see Sara Sturm-Maddox, *Petrarch’s Laurels* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 45–53; also, for a different perspective, Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire*, 41–45.
- 3 All references to Petrarch’s lyrics in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (hereafter *Rvf*) are to poem and line numbers, cited from vol. 1 of Francesco Petrarca, *Opere italiane*, ed. Marco Santagata (Milano: Mondadori, 1996).
- 4 Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women’s Love Lyric in Europe, 1540–1620* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 20–28.
- 5 Ann Rosalind Jones, “New Songs for the Swallow: Ovid’s Philomela in Tullia d’Aragona and Gaspara Stampa,” in *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 263–77.
- 6 Nancy J. Vickers, “Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme” (1982), in *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 244.
- 7 See Angelo Solerti, ed., *Le vite di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio scritte fino al secolo decimosesto* (Milano: Francesco Vallardi, 1904), 262; William J. Kennedy, *Authorizing Petrarch* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 13.
- 8 For examples of sixteenth-century biographies of Laura, see Solerti, *Le vite di Dante*, 367–77 (Alessandro Vellutello [1525]); 426–29 (Giovanni Andrea Gesualdo [1533]); 487–88 (Luca Antonio Ridolfi [1558]), including an account of the “discovery” of Laura’s tomb). For discussion, see Kennedy, *Authorizing Petrarch*, 48–51, 52–53, 212–13; Laura Paolino, “Il fratello di Madonna Laura: Spigolature di biografia petrarchesca dal commento di Francesco Patrizi ai *RVE*,” *Studi petrarcheschi* 13 (2000): 243–306. One commentator, Sylvano da Venafro (1533), remarks that such researches into Laura’s life were partly driven by the interest of women readers, whom he portrays as naturally curious to know more of her than Petrarch had supplied (Solerti, *Le vite di Dante*, 387).

- 9 J. B. Trapp, "Petrarch's Laura," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 64 (2001): 55–191, at 98–102; Victoria Kirkham, "Poetic Ideals of Love and Beauty," in *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's "Ginevra de' Benci" and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, ed. David Alan Brown (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2001), 56–57.
- 10 Lucrezia Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. and trans. Anne Dunhill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 57–68.
- 11 Marinella, *Nobility and Excellence of Women*, 67, quoting (tendentiously!) Petrarch's *canzone* 360. See also on this point Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, trans. and ed. Virginia Cox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 216–17.
- 12 Santagata, ed., *Rvf.*, cxc. The dates of composition of the individual poems are difficult to determine, although Santagata considers it likely that the last, 263, may have been written very late in Petrarch's life, perhaps around the time of its insertion in the last redaction (1035).
- 13 Exceptions are Marco Santagata, *I frammenti dell'anima: Storia e racconto nel "Canzoniere" di Petrarca* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 301–3; and Sara Sturm Maddox, "Arbor vittoriosa triumphale: Allegory and Spectacle in the *Rime* and the *Trionfi*," in *Petrarch's "Triumphs": Allegory and Spectacle*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: Dovehouse), 129–30.
- 14 All the figures named in the sonnet are included in *De claris mulieribus*; see *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), respectively, chap. 16 (Hypsipyle), 70–74; 29 (Argia), 116–20; 33 (Polyxena), 132–33; and 37 (Helen), 142–50. Helen, Argia, and Hypsipyle are also mentioned in the *Triumphus Cupidinis*. Recent studies emphasize Petrarch's role, with Boccaccio, in initiating humanistic discourse on the "nobility of women": see Stephen Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's "De mulieribus claris"* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 42–47; Elsa Filosa, "Petrarca, Boccaccio e le *mulieres clarae*: dalla *Familiare* 21:8 al *De mulieribus claris*," *Annali d'italianistica* 22 (2004): 381–95.
- 15 For Renaissance commentators' debates on the interpretation of sonnet 262, see Paolino, "Il fratello di Madonna Laura," 277–78. Some attributed the reported speech in the poem to the poet rather than to Laura.
- 16 For another (anon.) example, see *Rime per Laura Brenzone Schioppo (dal Codice Marciano it. Cl. IX 163)*, ed. Massimo Castoldi (Bologna: Commissione per i Testi di Lingua, 1994), 8.
- 17 Bembo, *Prose e Rime*, no. 138, ed. Carlo Dionisotti, 2nd ed. (Torino: Union Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1966), 619–20.
- 18 Fonte, *Worth of Women*, 49–50.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 175 and 231.
- 20 *Sonetti, Canzoni, et Triomphi di M. Francesco Petrarca, con breve dichiarazione & annotatione di Antonio Brucioli* (Venice, 1548), sig. a8v.
- 21 The text, sometimes attributed to Stefano Colonna, was published in 1552. For discussion, see Guido Arbizzoni, "Una riscrittura cinquecentesca del Petrarca: *I sonetti, le canzoni et i trionfi di M. Laura*," in *Scritture di scritture: Testi, generi, modelli* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1987), 539–47; also Thomas P. Roche, *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 90–96, who places it within the context of other Counter-Reformation "spiritualized" reworkings of Petrarch.

- 22 Francesco Agostino della Chiesa, *Theatro delle donne letterate* (Mondovi, 1620), 205. Besides Petrarch's allusions in the *Rvf.* to the sweetness of her "canto" (literally "singing," but often used to signify poetic composition), a factor in the development of this perception of Laura as a *letterata* may have been the pictorial tradition of images of her listening to and judging Petrarch's verse (Trapp, "Petrarch's Laura," 72–75). While such images may have intended to foreground her allegorical significance, this did not preclude more literal readings.
- 23 For the term *negotiation* in this context, see Jones, *Currency of Eros*, 2–4, 34–35.
- 24 See, for example, Patricia Phillippy, "'Altera Dido': The Model of Ovid's *Heroides* in the Poems of Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco," *Italica* 69.1 (1992): 1–18; Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 204–7, 218–21.
- 25 This has been recognized within an English context in recent studies of Mary Sidney's translation of Petrarch's *Triumph of Death*, which emphasize Sidney's presentation of Laura as a paradigm of feminine "wise speache." See, for example, Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 109; Ilona Bell, *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101–8.
- 26 Virginia Cox, "Women Writers and the Canon in Sixteenth-Century Italy: The Case of Vittoria Colonna," in *Strong Voices, Weak History? Early Women Writers and Canons in England, France, and Italy*, ed. Pamela J. Benson and Victoria Kirkham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 14–31, at 16–17.
- 27 Veronica Gambarà, *Le rime*, sonnet 36, ed. Alan Bullock (Firenze: Olschki, 1995), 95–96; Bembo, *Prose e Rime*, sonnet 123, 607–8. For discussion, see Lino Pertile, "Un 'roco' sonetto per Veronica: Come nasce il CXXIII delle *Rime* di Pietro Bembo," *Italique* 1 (1998): 11–24.
- 28 For a later example of the same topos, see the sonnet by Pietro Angelio to his literary love, the Florentine poet Fiammetta Soderini, in *Poesie toscane dell'illustriss[imo] Sign[or] Mario Colonna, et di M[esser] Pietro Angelio* (Florence, 1589), fol. 126v: "Ritornate felici e dotte charte / a quella bianca man / che 'n voi dipinse / Gli alti concetti, e 'n brevi note strinse / Quant'ha d'ingegno in Helicon, e d'arte" [Happy and learned pages, return to that white hand that limned you with those lofty concepts, distilling in a few brief lines all the wit and art that Helicon can supply].
- 29 Bembo's awareness of the gender implications of the exchange is interestingly hinted at in an early draft of the opening lines of the sonnet (see Pertile, "Un 'roco' sonetto per Veronica," 15), which speaks of Gambarà's "sweet style" revealing "quanto *in Donna* virtù del Ciel riluce" [how brightly heaven-sent talent may shine forth in a woman] (my emphasis).
- 30 Vittoria Colonna, *Rime*, ed. Alan Bullock (Roma: Laterza, 1982), sonnet A1:1, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by poem and line numbers.
- 31 For the positioning of this sonnet in sixteenth-century printed editions and manuscripts of Colonna's poetry, see Colonna, *Rime*, ed. Bullock, 465, 475.
- 32 The only other occurrence of the phrase in the *Rvf.* is in a sonnet in the same sequence (158.10).
- 33 Although the rhyme *-ole* (like *-oglià*) is common in Petrarch, as are equivocal rhymes

- punning on different meanings of *sole*, 156 is one of only two poems in the *Rvf.* containing this particular set of rhyme-words, the other being 276 (“Occhi miei, oscurato è il nostro sole”), the poem in which Petrarch announces Laura’s death.
- 34 The line quoted above in the text (156.8), attributing to Laura’s words the ability to move mountains and halt rivers, implicitly compares her eloquence to that of Orpheus and Amphion (see Santagata, ed., *Rvf.*: 730, which also, however, notes a possible allusion to Ovid’s *Medea*).
- 35 See Giovanna Rabitti, “Vittoria Colonna as Role Model for Cinquecento Women Poets,” in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, 2000), 478–97; Isabella Morra, *Rime*, ed. Maria Antonietta Grignani (Roma: Salerno, 2000), 26–27; Cox, “Women Writers and the Canon in Sixteenth-Century Italy: The Case of Vittoria Colonna.”



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