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Ad modum floris: Petrarch's Narcissus between the Rerum vulgarium fragmenta and Triumph

Narcisus vero umbram suam dicitur amavisse quia excellenciam suam cunctis rebus pretulit. Unde deceptus deficiendo cum iam nullius haberetur momenti, mutatus est in florem id est in rem inutilem, quia cito evanuit ad modum floris.

But of Narcissus it is said that he loved his own shadow because he put his own excellency above everything else. For this reason, dejected at his own decline—since he was no longer held in any regard—he was transformed into a flower, that is to say into something useless, since he passed away, quickly as a flower.

Arnolphe d'Orléans¹

Introduction

¹I would like to thank Elena Lombardi for her comments on an earlier version of this article, and the two anonymous readers at *MLR* for their feedback and suggestions.

‘Arnulphi Aurelianensis Allegoriae super Ovidii Metamorphosin’, in Fausto Ghisalberti, *Arnolfo d'Orléans: Un cultore di Ovidio nel secolo XII* (Memorie del R. Istituto Lomardo di scienze e lettere. Classe di lettere, scienze, morali e storiche, vol. 24, ser. 3, vol. 15, fasc. 4) Milan: 1932, 209 (Lib. III, 5–6), cited in Louise Vinge, *The Narcissus Theme in Western Literature up to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Robert Dewsnap and others (Lund: Gleerup, 1967), pp. 73–74, from which the translation, here modified, is taken.

Parallels between the poet-lover of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (henceforth *Rvf*) and the figure of Narcissus – the young boy who unwittingly falls in love with his own reflection and continues to desire it even after he discovers its non-reality – have been well-delineated. Giuseppe Mazzotta, in his study of Petrarch's *Rvf* has argued that the poetic 'I' resembles Narcissus both in the 'I's fixation on an image (the one of Laura, in which the poet also sees himself) and in the desire for an unattainable object that the 'I' never relinquishes even though it is unreachable. The result for the Petrarchan lover is alienation and spiritual death.² Benjamin Boysen, still with a focus on the image, has maintained that Narcissus's predicament is primarily one of auto-eroticism or non-differentiation from the love object, a predicament discernible in the equivocal status of the mirror in Petrarch's poetry and in a broader set of medieval texts that dialogue with the Narcissus myth.³ Lynn Enterline and Pier Giorgio Conti have connected Petrarch's fascination with Narcissus, together with the Ovidian figure of Pygmalion, to the problem of idolatry and poetic self-reflexivity.⁴ In Enterline's reading: the 'figura' of the beloved is a simulacrum; the poet creates himself through that 'figura'; there is nothing more substantial to be found.⁵ Looking beyond the *Rvf*

² See Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 31.

³ See Benjamin Boysen, 'Crucified in the Mirror of Love: On Petrarch's Ambivalent Conception of Love in *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*', *Orbis Litterarum*, 58 (2003), 163–88.

⁴ See Lynn Enterline, 'Embodied Voices: Petrarch (Reading Himself) Reading Ovid', in *Desire in the Renaissance: Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. by Valeria Finucci and Regina Schwartz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 120–45, and Pier Giorgio Conti, 'Narciso e/o Pigmalione: tra passione e discorso nel *Canzoniere* petrarchesco', *Cenobio*, 41 (April–June 1992), 153–62.

⁵ Enterline, pp. 123–26.

to Petrarch's *Secretum*, Gur Zak has asserted Narcissus's significance for understanding Petrarch's self-presentation in the Latin dialogue. His analysis allows the reader to interpret the poet's frequent recourse to Ovidian metamorphosis, for expressing the vagaries of desire, as a resistance to embracing the paradigm of Christian conversion. In Zak's reading, the Augustine of the *Confessions*, on whom Petrarch models the fictionalized Augustinus of the *Secretum*, can be viewed as an anti-Narcissus insofar as he moves from an enthrallment with false images to revealed truth.⁶ In Petrarch's *Secretum*, Augustinus repeatedly tries to teach the character of Franciscus to make the same move, but to no avail. Like Franciscus, the lyric 'I' of Petrarch's *Rvf* proves unwilling to relinquish the pursuit of a phantasm, be it Laura or poetic glory.

My own analysis of the Narcissus theme – or better trope, given the twist Petrarch and other medieval poets give the myth in their creative rewritings – is indebted to these studies. It also aims to offer a new perspective in two main ways. Firstly, I read the presentations of Narcissus in Petrarch's two vernacular works – the *Rvf* and the *Triumphus* – together rather than discreetly, and, secondly, I analyse the significance of Petrarch's emphasis, in his poetic representations of Narcissus, on the end of the Ovidian myth which narrates Narcissus's transmutation into a flower.⁷ This mythological element constitutes the metamorphosis proper

⁶ Gur Zak, 'A Humanist in Exile: Ovid's Myth of Narcissus and the Experience of the Self in Petrarch's *Secretum*', in *Metamorphosis: The changing face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Alison Keith and Stephen Rupp (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007), pp. 179–98. See also Patricia Berrahou Phillippy, *Love's Remedies: Recantation and Renaissance Lyric Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995), p. 72.

⁷ Petrarch's *Triumphus Cupidinis* and *Rvf* 45 are briefly discussed in Vinge, pp. 110–11, and in Julie Van Peteghem, *Italian Readers of Ovid from the Origins to Petrarch: Responding to*

in Ovid's tale yet it is distinctive in the *Metamorphoses* for not happening through bodily change but rather by substitution insofar as Narcissus's body merely 'vanish[es] completely'.⁸ Significantly, this concluding part of the myth was rarely represented in medieval lyric and Romance poems in old French, Occitan, and Italian that rework the Ovidian tale.⁹ By contrast, the image of the flower was glossed at some length in allegorical treatments of Ovid that moralized his tale, including the text by Arnolphe d'Orléans quoted above, and in the anonymous old French text, *Ovide moralisé* (early 14th century), which offers suggestive parallels with the Narcissus of Petrarch's *Triumpho* in particular.¹⁰

a Versatile Muse (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 246–50, but there is no sustained comparative reading.

⁸ See Nicholas Ealy, *Narcissism and Selfhood in Medieval French Literature: Wounds of Desire* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), p. 77.

⁹ See Sylvia Huot, 'From *Roman de la Rose* to *Roman de la Poire*: The Ovidian Tradition and the Poetics of Courtly Literature', *Medievalia et humanistica*, n.s., 13 (1985), 96–111 (p. 101), and Miranda Griffin, *Transforming Tales: Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 70. An exception is the *Roman d'Alexandre* (12th Century), which includes an account of Narcissus's metamorphosis into a flower (lines 7452–62). See Vinge, pp. 57–58.

¹⁰ Other allegorical readings in texts contemporary to Petrarch include Giovanni del Virgilio's *Allegoriae librorum Ovidii Metamorphoseos* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium*. In Del Virgilio, the flower which Narcissus becomes is connected to the transient nature of earthly fame whereas in Boccaccio's reading, Echo is allegorized as fame and Narcissus, in spurning her, stands for those who do not care for fame and so (like the wilting flower) eventually fall into oblivion. For a description and likely dating of the *Allegoriae librorum Ovidii Metamorphoseos*, see Fausto Ghisalberti, *Giovanni del Virgilio espositore*

By reading Petrarch's Narcissus in relation to these two traditions, and to the flower that seals the lover's metamorphosis, another dimension of the myth emerges that resonates with the poet's discourse of desire in his vernacular works. It is related to the evanescence of beauty and to the poet's tenacity to temporal things notwithstanding his awareness of the error he makes in desiring something so ephemeral. I contend that the flower motif, which recurs across Petrarch's *Rvf* and *Triumph*, assumes a supplementary status as a result, insofar as the flower is surplus to use and, in its irreducible eroticism, corresponds to a dual lyric impulse – one attentive to error and troubled by it, yet also resistant to moralization or change.¹¹ I connect this lyric surplus, on the one hand, to the abundance ('copia') that paradoxically makes Narcissus poor and lacking in love since he is at once desirer and desired and so unable to enjoy what he already possesses, and, on the other, to the flower's significance as a beautiful but use-less object enjoyed for its own sake.¹²

delle 'Metamorfosi' (Florence: Olschki, 1933), which includes the Latin text of the *Allegoriae* in the Appendix, pp. 43–107. For the entry on Narcissus, see Ghisalberti, *Giovanni del Virgilio*, 53 (*Lib.* III. 6). He analyzes Del Virgilio's other Ovidian text, the *expositio* on the *Metamorphoses*, which also included an entry on Narcissus (on pp. 9–39).

¹¹ This idea of the flower's surplus is indebted to Michael Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 135: 'The flower is cut off not only from means and ends and from its biological functions but also from all meaning- and sense-making activity', and Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. by Kate Briggs and ed. by Claude Coste (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 87: 'But flowers? Probably the essence of luxury, of the supplement: what exceeds or falls short of being a useful fruit'.

¹² See *Metamorphoses* III, 466: 'quod cupio mecum est: inopem me copia fecit' [What I desire, I have; the very abundance of my riches beggars me]. All citations and translations of

Distinctively Lyric: The Narcissus of 'Rvf 45' and 'Triumphus Cupidinis II' in the wake of Ovid

Narcissus is named in only two places in Petrarch's vernacular works, in *Rvf* 45 and in the second part of the *Triumphus Cupidinis*. Relative to the space Petrarch dedicates in his poetry to the plight of the twinned Ovidian figure of Echo, the nymph who is reduced to mere, echoing voice when she cannot bring Narcissus to recognize her desire, his references to Narcissus are sparse and rather compressed. Nonetheless, embedded as they are in texts that dramatize Love's power to entrap and beguile, they are certainly linked. Read in tandem, they indicate the way in which elements of the myth pervade the poet's characterization of both the subject and the object of desire, and how Petrarch absorbs and refashions the Narcissus represented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and in a range of medieval texts that dialogue with the myth.¹³

the *Metamorphoses* are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. and trans. by G.P. Goold, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Cf. Huot, *Dreams of Lovers and Lies of Poets: Poetry, Knowledge, and Desire in the 'Roman de la Rose'* (London: Legenda, 2010), p. 51: 'In an erotic context, as Narcissus shows, nothing could be more of a let-down than to find oneself in a state of *souffisance*' [i.e. *copia*], since erotic desire thrives on lack, a state that causes suffering but leaves open the possibility that another can be found who would 'meet that lack in a wonderfully pleasurable way'.

¹³ On the variety of sources through which Petrarch would have known Ovid – not only the *Metamorphoses* but also the elegiac works (*Remedia amoris*; *Ars amatoria*; *Amores*), and the *Fasti*, see Luca Marcozzi, 'Petarca lettore di Ovidio', in *Testimoni del vero: Su alcuni libri in biblioteche d'autore*, ed. by Emilio Russo (Rome: Bulzoni, 2000), 57–105 (pp. 58–70), and Van Peteghem, p. 226, both engaging with Pierre de Nolhac, *Pétrarque et l'humanisme*, 2nd

I begin with Ovid's account in the *Metamorphoses*, which Petrarch knew well.¹⁴ In Book III, the reader encounters Narcissus, a beautiful youth who is destined to enjoy a long life only 'if he ne'er know himself' ('si se non noverit', *Metamorphoses* III, 348) and who, in coming to know himself, never reaches adulthood. In Ovid's account Narcissus is characterized as possessing extreme pride and disdain for all those who seek to love him, including Echo, whom Juno has condemned only to repeat the words of others and whom Narcissus cruelly mocks and sends to her tragic fate. Meanwhile, another spurned youth prays that Narcissus may suffer the same fate as those who love without possessing the thing they love, and Nemesis grants his wish. Tired from hunting and wearied by the heat, Narcissus comes across an enticing pool from which he drinks. While drinking, he becomes enraptured by his own image reflected in the water and instigates a thirst that he can never quench. Remaining there immobile and transfixed by his own shadow, which he takes to be the body of another ('spem sine corpore amat, corpus putat esse, quod umbra est', *Metamorphoses* III, 417), Narcissus can neither embrace what he desires nor relinquish his yearning for it. His desire grows exponentially, and this fixation causes him to suffer the most intense of amorous delusions ('tantus tenet error amantem', *Metamorphoses* III, 447). Eventually he wastes away at the water's edge, with Echo left to lament his death. The reader learns that in Hades, Narcissus's shade continues to gaze on his image in the Stygian pool while above ground his body disappears and is replaced by a flower with white petals and a

edn, 2 vols (Paris: Champion, 1907), I, pp. 176–80.

¹⁴ On Petrarch's reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Marcozzi, 'Petrarca lettore di Ovidio', esp. pp. 60–66. He notes that while only one manuscript survives which includes notes by Petrarch accompanying an incomplete text of the *Metamorphoses* [I–VI], British Library, Harley 3754, it is likely that this manuscript originally includes all 12 books of the *Metamorphoses*.

yellow centre ('nusquam corpus erat; croceum pro corpore florem | inveniunt foliis medium cingentibus albis', *Metamorphoses*, III, 509–10).

In Ovid's text it is stated that Narcissus 'burns with love of his own self' ('uror amore mei', he exclaims (*Metamorphoses* III, 464)). Nonetheless, in medieval French and Occitan literature that drew on Ovid's account, the Narcissus myth was typically evoked less as a representation of the self's relation to itself, and more to figure the self's relation to the other. From this perspective, as Sarah Kay and others have shown, Narcissus's problem is not so much the one of self-love as of impossible desire.¹⁵ In other words, Narcissus's desire is frustrated less because he loves an image of himself and more because the thing he loves is unattainable, being all too present and yet forever out of reach.¹⁶ To consider just two

¹⁵ See Simon Gaunt, 'Discourse Desired: Desires, Subjectivity, and *Mouvance* in *Can vei la lauzeta mover*', in *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid through Chaucer*, ed. by James J. Paxon and Cynthia Gravlee (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1998), pp. 89–110 (esp. p. 94); and Sarah Kay, 'Love in a Mirror: An Aspect of the Imagery of Bernart de Ventadorn', *Medium Aevum*, 52 (Jan. 1, 1983), 272–85 (esp. p. 273).

¹⁶ Cf. 'se cupit inprudens et, qui probat, ipse probatur, | dumque petit, petitur, pariterque accendit et ardet [Unwittingly he desires himself; he praises and is himself what he praises; and while he seeks, is sought; and equally he kindles love and burns with love, *Metamorphoses* III, 425–26]. On this aspect, also as connected to courtly desire, see Sylvia Huot, 'Troubadour Lyric and Old French Narrative', in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, ed. by Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 263–78 (p. 277); Gerald Seaman, 'The French Myth of Narcissus: Some Medieval Refashionings, in *Disputatio, volume 3: Translation, Transformation and Transubstantiation in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by Carol Poster and Richard Utz (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), pp. 19–33; and Jane Gilbert, "'I Am Not He": Narcissus and Ironic Performativity in

examples, in the *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris, Narcissus is depicted as being deceived by his own shadow into desiring what he takes to be the image of a beautiful boy,¹⁷ and in the Occitan poet Bernart de Ventadorn's *canço*, *Can vei la lauzeta mover*, the poet-lover gazes like Narcissus into the mirror – here standing for his Lady's eyes – and 'loses himself in the fountain'.¹⁸ In both cases, what is emphasized is that which Giorgio Agamben

Medieval French Literature', *The Modern Language Review*, 100. 4 (Oct., 2005), 940–53 (p. 945).

¹⁷ See *Roman de la Rose*, 1484–86: 'car ses ombres l'avoit traï, qu'il cuida voiar la figure | d'un enfant bel a desmesure' [for his reflection had so deceived him that he imagined it to be the face of a wonderfully handsome youth]. The old French is cited from Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun *Il romanzo della rosa*, ed. by Silvia de Laude (Turin: Einaudi, 2014); translations are from Guillaume De Lorris and Jean De Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Both 'ombres' and 'figure' resonate with Petrarch's characterization of Laura's image in his poetry, repeatedly rendered with the terms, 'ombra' or 'figura'.

¹⁸ See Gaunt, 'Discourse Desired', p. 129. The lines from Bernart's poem read: 'Anc non agui de me poder| ni no fui meus de l'or' en sai| que.m laisset en sos olhs vezer |en un miralh que mout me plait.| Miralhs, plus me mirei en te, | m'an mort li sospir de preon | c'aissi.m perdei com perdet se | lo bels Narcisus en la fon', cited in *Ibid.*, pp. 91–93. Regarding the verb *se mirer*, which is in Bernart's poem and in the *Roman de la Rose*, 20387–88, Kay, pp. 274–75, notes that this could be reflexive ('to see oneself reflected, as in a mirror') but may also be neutral and emphatic ('to look into, as into a mirror'). When Amant looks into the fountain in the *Rose*, he does not see himself, but the two halves of the garden reflected by crystals lying at the bottom of the pool.

has called 'l'innamorarsi per ombra', which he argues constitutes the crux of the Narcissus myth as it appears in the majority of medieval poetic texts:

As allegories of love, both the story of Narcissus and that of Pygmalion allude in an exemplary way to the phantasmatic character of a process essentially directed to the obsessive desire for an image, according to a psychological scheme for which every genuine act of falling in love is always a 'love by means of shadows' or 'through a figure,' every profound erotic intention always turns idolatrously to an *yimage*.¹⁹

Agamben's account recalls a central tenet espoused in Andreas Capellanus's *De amore*: the idea of a love that is generated through the eyes and nourished through an 'excessive meditation ('immoderata cogitatio') upon the 'beauty' ('figura') of the beloved, a paradigm rigorously adhered to by the Sicilian poets, with their sophisticated disquisitions on love within the framework of Aristotelian, natural philosophy.²⁰ Julie Van Peteghem, in her study *Italian Readers of Ovid from the Origins to Petrarch*, identifies the earliest reference to Narcissus in Italian poetry in a 13th-century canzone, 'Poi le piace ch'avanzi suo valore', by the Sicilian poet, Rinaldo d'Aquino, which brings in a comparison to the youth precisely in relation to the moment of the 'I's falling in love with a beautiful image.²¹ In later examples

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 82.

²⁰ The Latin text is cited from Andreas Capellanus, *On Love*, ed. and trans. by P.G. Walsh (London: Duckworth, 1982), p. 32. The translation is from Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. by John J. Parry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 28.

²¹ The final lines (31–36) of the *canzone* read: 'altresí finamente | come Narciso in sua spera vedere | per sé s'innamorao | quando in l'aigua isguardao, | cosí poss'io ben dire | che eo son preso de la piú avenente'. Cited from *Poeti della corte di Federico II*, ed. by Donato Pirovano

among the Siculo-Tuscan poets, it is the shadowy nature of the image that is underscored, recalling Ovid's use of the term 'umbra' to refer to Narcissus (*Metamorphoses* III, 417). Chiaro Davanzati, in the lyric *Come Narcisi in suo specchio mirando*, writes that Narcissus 's'innamorao per ombra a la fontana',²² and an anonymous sonnet, *Guardando la fontana il buo·Narciso*, similarly expresses the intangible nature of the reflection that causes both Narcissus and the poet to lose themselves at the 'dolze fontana | dov'è la spèra di tutte bellezze'.²³

Turning to Petrarch it is evident that, following Ovid, he interprets Narcissus's predicament as excessive and exclusive love of self, which makes the fulfilment of his desire impossible. However, in also emphasizing the *vanitas* associated with the boy-turned-flower, Petrarch inserts his Narcissus into a wider lyric as well as allegorical framework that evokes the insubstantiality of the shadow ('ombra') and the lover's captivation by a beautiful, if deluding, image, represented by the flower ('fior') which Petrarch deploys within this context. Sonnet 45 of the *Rvf* and the *Triumphus Cupidinis* are emblematic in this regard, although Narcissus's significance for Petrarch's lyric poetry extends beyond the two texts in which he is explicitly named.

The first element to underscore is that Petrarch's references to Narcissus in his vernacular poetry are profoundly intertextual. As Rosanna Bettarini and Marco Santagata

(Rome: Salerno, 2020).

²² Cited from Carlo Muscetta and Paolo Rivalta, Carlo and Paolo Rivalta, eds. *Poesia del Duecento e Trecento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1956). The 'Narcisi' of the incipit is considered a provenzalism. For a discussion of this poem see Van Peteghem, pp. 84–85. See also Boysen, p. 168, on the significance of the 'ombra' for Petrarch.

²³ Cited from *I poeti della scuola siciliana: Poeti siculo-toscani*, ed. by Roberto Antonelli, Costanzo Di Girolamo, and Rosario Coluccia, 3 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 2008).

have outlined, the poet's presentation of him in *Rvf* 45 appears to combine details of the myth found in the *Metamorphoses* with those of Narcissus's presentation in two *canzos* by Bernart de Ventadorn, including *Can vei la lauzeta mover* mentioned above.²⁴ What is striking in Petrarch's poem is that it is not the lover who is identified with Narcissus, but his beloved Laura:

Il mio adversario in cui veder solete
gli occhi vostri ch'Amore e 'l ciel honora
colle non sue bellezze v'innamora
più che 'n guisa mortal soavi et liete.

Per consiglio di lui, donna, m'avete
scacciato dal mio dolce albergo fora:
misero exilio, avegna ch'i' non fôra
d'abitar degno ove voi sola siete.

Ma s'io v'era con saldi chiovi fisso,
non devea specchio farvi per mio danno,
a voi stessa piacendo, aspra et superba.

Certo, se vi rimembra di Narcisso,

²⁴ See the commentaries respectively in Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere: Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. ed. by Rosanna Bettarini, 2 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), I, p. 233; and Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. by Marco Santagata, rev. edn (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), p. 239, from which quotations of Petrarch's *Rvf* are cited.

questo et quel corso ad un termine vanno,
benché di sì bel fior sia indegna l'erba.

Laura's fixed gaze into the mirror, like the one of Narcissus, is presented as a sign of her proud and haughty nature. Foreclosing her relationship to the poetic 'I' who desires her, this fixation on Laura's part leads to a dangerous self-enchancement since the poet claims that she finds so much pleasure in her own reflection that there is no space left for anyone else, least of all him. In parallel with Bernart de Ventadorn's *Can vei la lauzeta mover* and another *canso* he composed, *Lancan vei la folha*, the mirror of Narcissus is presented as a rival to the lover's affections. In *Rvf* 45, Petrarch calls it his 'adversario', echoing Bernart's 'guerrer' (*Lancan vei*, line 43), as he aligns Laura with Amor against the poetic 'I' so that he is excluded from their privileged circle.²⁵ Just as Bernart had compared the mirror of Narcissus to the fatal effect of his Lady's eyes, so Petrarch sees Laura's mirror as harming him, a motif developed in the following sonnet, *Rvf* 46.²⁶ Here Laura's eyes are termed 'micidiali specchi' (l. 7) which harm the lover rather than Laura directly. They prove so damaging to him

²⁵ For a discussion of the intertextual reference, see Bettarini's note in Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, p. 233. The key stanza from Bernart's poem reads 'Als no·n sai che dire | mas mout fatz gran folor | car am ni dezire | del mon la belazor. | Be deuri' aucire | qui anc fetz mirador, | can be m'o cossire, | no·n ai guerrer peyor. | Ja·l jorn qu'ela·s mire | ni pens de sa valor, | no serai jauzire | de leis ni de s'amor', cited from Bernart de Ventadorn, *Songs: Complete Texts, Translations, Notes and Glossary*, ed. and trans. by Stephen G. Nichols (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962).

²⁶ See *Can vei la lauzeta*, lines 22–23, cited in Gaunt, 'Discourse Desired', pp. 91–92.

because she has tired herself out through ‘vagheggiar’ her own beautiful face. She has even silenced Love who once advanced the poet’s suit.²⁷

These ‘micidiali specchi’ are surely also related to the ‘miroërs perilleus’ of Narcissus’s fountain as depicted in Guillaume’s *Rose* (*Roman de la Rose*, 1569). There the mirror-fountain depicted in the garden of Deduit acts as a trap to lovers and sends them mad through insatiable desire, which is without measure and practically object-less (‘ci n’a mestier sens ne mesure | ci est d’amer volenté pure’, *Roman de la Rose*, 1583–84). Moreover, there is a further intertextual link between Guillaume’s *Rose* and *Rvf* 45 in the moment that the poet addresses Laura and implores her to remember Narcissus, echoing the narrator of the *Rose*’s misogynistic warning to Ladies not to spurn their lovers unless they wish to suffer Narcissus’s fate as their own:²⁸

Dames, cest essample aprenez,
qui vers vos amis mesprenez;
car se vos les lessiez morir,
Dex le vos savra bien merir.

(*Roman de la Rose*, ll. 1505-08)

You ladies who behave to your lovers, learn from this example, for if you leave them to die, God will repay you.²⁹

²⁷ In *Rvf* 46, as Perry observes, the poetic ‘I’ is itself associated with Narcissus since Petrarch places the ‘I’ within range of the ‘the waters of hell’ over which Narcissus’s soul bends in Hades. See Kathleen Anne Perry, *Another Reality: Metamorphosis and the Imagination in the Poetry of Ovid, Petrarch, and Ronsard* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 94.

²⁸ The connection is also made in *Vinge*, p. 112.

²⁹ *Lorris and de Meun, Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Horgan, p. 24.

In *Rvf* 45, the poet similarly urges Laura to take his sonnet as a warning and in line 13 ('questo e quel corso ad un termine vanno'), the word 'termine' gives a sense of finality and inevitability to the self-destructive drive to which the poet states she is bound and ought to resist.

More significantly for the present analysis, the last two lines of sonnet 45 emphasize the end point of the Ovidian myth that is not depicted in the medieval lyric and romance poems cited above: the appearance of a beautiful flower in lieu of Narcissus's (beautiful) body. In Petrarch's sonnet there is an implicit identification of Laura with this flower, except that the one in which Laura's desire is said to terminate is imagined as even more perfect and beautiful than the one in the myth. As a result, the patch of grass where it grows is deemed unworthy to hold it. Petrarch's sonnet consequently evokes and resists the teleology of the Ovidian myth since the poet bares the limits of the identification between Laura and Narcissus. The effect, as Mazzotta notes, is one of 'dislocation' and it is likely a deliberate strategy on the part of the lyric poet insofar as the introduction of the flower preserves the distance on which desire thrives as non-coincidence and uncertainty: 'Narcissus is a flower; Laura is in the utopian domain of the imaginary; the poet is in exile'.³⁰ Moreover, through the gender reversal that sees Laura identified with Narcissus instead of the Petrarchan subject, the poetic 'I' is left to suffer the fate of Echo, spurned and perpetually wandering.³¹

From this perspective, it is no doubt significant that the two figures of Narcissus and Echo appear together among Love's captives in the *Triumphus Cupidinis*, the first of Petrarch's vernacular *Triumphs*. Here Petrarch draws on the double myth as it is depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, casting Echo as a foil to Narcissus:

³⁰ See Mazzotta, p. 66, and, for another reading of the poem, Van Peteghem, pp. 246–48.

³¹ On the significance of Echo, see Mazzotta p. 79; pp. 179–80.

ivi 'l vano amador che la sua propia
bellezza desiando fu distrutto,
povero sol per troppo averne copia,
che divenne un bel fior senz'alcun frutto;
e quella che, lui amando, ignuda voce
fecesi e 'l corpo un duro sasso asciutto.

(*Triumphus Cupidinis* II, 145–50)³²

Like *Rvf* 45, this passage from the *Triumphus Cupidinis* includes several details that are also found in Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Narcissus's captivation by his own beauty, the resulting futility of the passion which leads to his demise, although interestingly without the reference to the fateful gaze of the youth or his captivation by the water's surface, and Echo's unending love for him even as her ill-fated passion turns her body to stone and leaves her as mere, echoing, voice ('vox manet; ossa ferunt lapidist traxisse figuram', *Metamorphoses* III, 399). Line 147 of Petrarch's poem, 'povero sol per troppo averne copia' is a quasi-translation of Ovid's Latin phrase 'inopem me copia fecit' meaning 'the very abundance of my riches beggars me' (*Metamorphoses* III, 466) and, as I explore further below, the idea of excess producing lack can be considered a cipher of Petrarch's desire in his lyric poetry.³³ Petrarch's gerund 'desiando' (*Triumphus Cupidinis* II, 146) is also significant and conveys that part of the Ovidian myth that verges on masochism: even when Narcissus learns that he loves a mere 'shadow', he cannot give up desiring it: 'Still may it be mine to gaze on what I may not

³² Citations from the *Triumphus* are from Francesco Petrarca, *Trionfi; Rime estravaganti; Codice degli abbozzi*, ed. by Vinicio Pacca and Laura Paolino (Milan: Mondadori, 1996).

³³ See Pacca's note in Petrarca, *Trionfi*, p. 123.

touch, and by that gaze feed my unhappy passion' (*Metamorphoses* III, 478–80).³⁴ Indeed, the syntax of the lines from the *Triumphus Cupidinis* quoted above allows for that desire to seemingly outlast even Narcissus's death and transmutation into a flower, recalling how Ovid depicts the metamorphosis, with Narcissus's shade still gazing at his reflection in the waters of the Styx. As Philippa Berrahou Phillippy has stated of this final stage of the myth: 'As the fulfilment of his course, Narcissus' death closes the temporal circle of the narrative, while his transformation [into a flower] projects that enclosure itself ad infinitum as a perennial reiteration of the story and its meaning'.³⁵ This idea of endless repetition, which prevents death being the definitive ending it would appear to be, resonates with Petrarch's love story as it is told in the *Rvf* and the *Triumphus*. The poetry is irrevocably marked by Laura's death (first registered in *Rvf* 268) yet there is very little change in the nature of desire between one phase of love and the next.³⁶

So, what more can be said of the flower that Petrarch retains in both his retellings of the Narcissus myth? On one level, its presence may simply suggest Petrarch's greater fidelity to the Ovidian text compared to other poets' reworkings of it. It is likely that the troubadours' knowledge of Ovid was mediated rather than direct, and Guillaume de Lorris, although he knew Ovid's text closely, deliberately refashioned Narcissus's ending in the *Rose*.³⁷ The idea

³⁴ See Hardie's reading of the myth in Phillip Hardie, *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 143–72 (esp. pp. 159–60).

³⁵ Phillippy, p. 72.

³⁶ See, for example, *Rvf* 271 and 300; *Triumphus Cupidinis* III, 112–17; and *Triumphus Mortis* II, 127–38. On Laura's death, see at least Peter Hainsworth, *Petrarch the Poet: An Introduction to the 'Rerum vulgarium fragmenta'* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 51–77.

³⁷ On the troubadours and Ovid, see Leslie Cahoon, 'The Anxieties of Influence: Ovid's Reception by the Early Troubadours', *Mediaevalia*, 13 (1987), 119–55, and Van Peteghem,

that Petrarch is following Ovid more to the letter is persuasive, but I propose that the flower may hold a particular meaning for Petrarch, which leads him to include it in both *Rvf* and *Triumphus*.

A Model Flower?: Reading Petrarch's Narcissus with the 'Ovide Moralisé'

In this domain, it is not only Ovid, or the lyric rewritings of Ovid, that are illuminating intertextually but also the moralizing treatment that Ovid's work received between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. Luca Marcozzi has shown that, in the *Rvf*, Petrarch tended to distance himself from the medieval moralizing tradition that had heavily Christianized the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses*, instead recuperating the myths from the *Metamorphoses* mainly outside of the exegetical framework imposed on them, which in Van Peteghem's account bring Petrarch into close engagement with the Ovid of the lyric and romance traditions.³⁸

Petrarch's allusion to Narcissus in *Rvf* 45 strongly supports this view, but the Narcissus of the *Triumphus Cupidinis* also complicates it somewhat by reintroducing a moralizing thread, which permeates the *Rvf* as well. As Marcozzi argues, Petrarch's treatment of Ovidian

pp. 73–107. Guillaume de Lorris's rewritings include having the spurned Echo be the one to pray for revenge on Narcissus and inserting a plaque in place of the flower where Narcissus died. See Gilbert, pp. 948–49, and Huot, 'From *Roman de la Rose* to *Roman de la Poire*', pp. 102–03.

³⁸ See Marcozzi, 'Petarcarca lettore di Ovidio', pp. 73–102, where he notes that while Petrarch was a 'precocious and attentive reader' of the moralizing tradition, he only followed it in his writings 'a few times'; and Van Peteghem, p. 225, and p. 236: 'while Petrarch had several Ovidian commentaries in his possession or on his radar and his treatment of Ovidian material in the *Canzoniere* contains traces of such readings, he does not present consistent and comprehensive moral interpretations of Ovid's myths'.

mythology is complex and multifaceted, innovative in its author's approach to recontextualising material from the *Metamorphoses* and drawing to varying degrees on ideas from Roman elegy, the Latin mythographers, and the medieval moralizing tradition (in reference to the latter, always resisting applying any single meaning to specific myths).³⁹ In particular, in his lyric praxis, Petrarch's highly concentrated use of myth unfolds a multitude of 'possibilità di rappresentazione simbolica' and a 'narratività latente', even when a particular myth is referenced only by name or single episode.⁴⁰ Petrarch's synthetic treatment of Narcissus in the *Rvf* and *Triumph* is a case in point and is a striking example of how Petrarch employs his Ovidian material as a model 'della contraddizione continua, della oscillazione [...] fra la lirica e l'etica, fra l'amore carnale e la palinodia dello stesso'. It suggests his familiarity with the medieval Christianization of the pagan myths even as he forges his own response to the source text within a broader ethics of love and desire that absorbs Augustinian elements in particular.⁴¹

Prime among the moralizing readings of Ovid in the Middle Ages that actively sought to Christianize the myths is the early fourteenth-century anonymous work, the *Ovide moralisé*. It offers several striking parallels with the Narcissus of *Triumphus Cupidinis* II in particular. While it is not a prerequisite for reading the works together, a potential link between Petrarch and the *Ovide moralisé* can be found through the figure of Pierre Bersuire (the Benedictine Petrus Berchorius), a friend and correspondent of Petrarch's who was active in the 1340s in Avignon at a time when the poet was living and working in the city.⁴² Bersuire composed the Latin *Ovidius moralizatus* (originally book 15 of his *Reductionum morale*,

³⁹ See the detailed account in Luca Marcozzi, *La biblioteca di Febo: Mitologia e Allegoria in Petrarch* (Florence: Cesati, 2002), pp. 205–60.

⁴⁰ See Marcozzi, *La biblioteca di Febo*, pp. 209–10.

⁴¹ See Marcozzi, 'Petarca lettore di Ovidio', p. 79 and *La biblioteca di Febo*, p. 223.

aimed at preachers), which in its second redaction (1342) drew closely on the Old French *Ovide moralisé* as well as other contemporary sources.⁴³ Like the *Ovide moralisé*, the *Ovidius moralizatus* offered a Christianized allegorical interpretation of Ovid's work. It is possible that Petrarch could have read both works.⁴⁴

Many details in the *Ovide moralisé* are suggestive for thinking about Petrarch's poetry and the way in which he interpolates elements of the Narcissus trope into the *Rvf* and *Triumph*. First among them is the image of the flower, which Narcissus is said to "become" ('devint'/'divenne') in both the *Ovide moralisé* and Petrarch's *Triumphus Cupidinis* II. The author of the *Ovide moralisé* glosses the moment such:

Et trop s'ama, si le traï
Le mireoirs de la fontaine,
Ou sa biautez faintive et vaine.
Mira tant que la mort en vint.
Narcisus florete devint.

⁴² On Petrarch and Bersuire see Van Peteghem, pp. 25–26, and Aldo S. Bernardo, *Petrarch, Scipio and the 'Africa': The Birth of Humanism's Dream* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), pp. 135–37.

⁴³ On the *Ovidius moralizatus* and its relationship to the *Ovide moralisé*, see Cornelis de Boer, *Ovide moralisé: poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, 5 vols (Amsterdam: J. Müller, 1915–1938), I, pp. 9–11, and for its relation to Petrarch see Perry, p. 88. On the *Ovidius moralizatus*, see also Kathryn L. McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine: Metamorphoses Commentaries, 1100–1618* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 106–13; and Van Peteghem, pp. 25–26.

⁴⁴ See Van Peteghem, p. 25.

Florete quel? Tele dont dist
Li Psalmistres c'au main florist,
Au soir est cheoite et fletrie.

(*Ovide moralisé*, III, 1882–89)

He loved himself too much, thus was he deceived by the mirror of the well, in which he gazed at his delusive and transient beauty so that it became his death. Narcissus became a flower. What kind of flower? Such of which the Psalmist says that it blooms in the morning and by the evening is faded and dead.⁴⁵

There is a suggestive link between this flower of which the Psalmist speaks and Petrarch's 'bel fior senz'algun frutto' (*Triumphus Cupidinis* II, 148). The flower's association with the deceptive ephemerality of beauty fits with a biblical tradition of associating flowers with vanity and transience, including the fragility of the human being and the evanescence of worldly things. For example, Job 14.2 reads: 'Who cometh forth like a flower, and is destroyed, and fleeth as a shadow, and never continueth in the same state' and Psalm 90 (89), 6 similarly conveys the sense of fragility of human life through an image of growth and decay: 'In the morning man shall grow up like grass; in the morning he shall flourish and pass away; in the evening he shall fall, grow dry and wither'.⁴⁶ Similar ideas are developed in

⁴⁵ The old French is cited from Boer, ed., *Ovide moralisé*. The translation (modified slightly) is cited from Vinge, pp. 95–96.

⁴⁶ The Latin reads 'quasi flos egreditur et conteritur et fugit vel ut umbra et numquam in eodem statu permanet' and 'Mane quasi herba per transiens mane floruit et abiit ad vesperam conteretur atque siccabitur'. Cited from 'The Latin Vulgate Bible': <https://vulgate.org/>; English translation comes from Douay-Rheims Bible.

Petrarch's Latin works, the *Secretum* and *De remediis utriusque fortuna*, where the poet seeks to convey a lesson about the world's delusions and beauty's ephemerality. In the second book of the *Secretum*, Augustinus warns Franciscus of the 'snares' ('laqueos') the world holds, and of the empty hopes ('inanes spes') that surround it, including the glory of eloquence and excessive pride in his own voice. The problem, Augustinus says, is that Franciscus is deluded by the lure of the surface and the trap of the senses, just as Narcissus was, but he does not see it and refuses to change:

Neque te Narcissi terruit fabella, nec quid esses introrsus virilis consideratio corporee feditatis admonuit? Exterioris cutis contentus aspectu, oculos mentis ultra non porrigis. Atqui huius quoque caducum fore precipitemque flosculum, etsi alia, que innumerabilia sunt, argumenta cessarent, ipse tibi etatis irrequietus cursus, per singulos aliquid decerpens dies, luce clarius ostendere debuisset.

Weren't you alarmed by the story of Narcissus, and hasn't the mature consideration of your inner self warned you of the repulsiveness of the body? You are satisfied with the superficial appearance of the skin, and don't look beyond it in your mind's eye. And yet even if there were no other arguments—and there are plenty—the relentless onward rush of your life, which snatches something from you every day, should have made it clearer than daylight to you that your physical bloom is fleeting and in decline.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ The Latin is cited from Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum [Il mio segreto]*. In *Prose*, ed. Guido Martellotti (Milan: Ricciardi, 1955), pp. 21–215 (p. 76), and the English from Francesco Petrarca, *My Secret Book*, ed. and trans. by Nicholas Mann (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 75.

A similar emphasis on the transience of mortal things, with their false promise of a more substantial good, is also present in the first dialogue of Petrarch's *De remediis*, 'De etate florida et spe vita longioris' [Of the flowering age and the hope of a long life]. In this dialogue, *Gaudium* [Joy] repeatedly celebrates being in the 'flower of her age', with all that state carries of fullness and hope, whereas *Ratio* [Reason] declares with equal conviction the futility of such hope: 'Inane gaudium et breve! Flos iste, dum loquimur, arescit' [Empty and short-lived joy! That flower is withering even as we speak] and denounces the vanity of all things which are subject to the violent effects of time: 'O vanitas! nichil est stabile: nunc maxime raperis' [Oh vanity! Nothing is stable: at this very moment, you are snatched away].

⁴⁸ It is probably no coincidence, then, that when Petrarch depicts time's destructive effects in the *Triumphus Temporis* (the fifth Triumph), the flower symbol – this time a rose – resurfaces along with the image of a Narcissus-like 'I' gazing at himself in a mirror/pool:

i' vidi il ghiaccio, e lì stesso la rosa,
quasi in un punto il gran freddo e 'l gran caldo,
che pur udendo par mirabil cosa.

[...]

Segui' già le speranze e 'l van desio;
or ò dinanzi agli occhi un chiaro specchio,
ov'io veggio me stesso e 'l fallir mio.

(*Triumphus Temporis*, 49–51; 55–57)

⁴⁸ The Latin is cited from Francesco Petrarca, *Les remèdes aux deux fortunes = De remediis utriusque fortune: 1354–1366*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Carraud, 2 vols (Grenoble: Millon, 2002). Translations are mine.

The copresence of ice and rose likely figures the conjoining of winter and spring effected by Time's rapid movement.⁴⁹ It also appears to symbolize the conjunction of beauty and death. The 'I' presented in the following lines is both like and unlike Narcissus: seeing clearly 'now' having 'once' been deluded, he is no longer enthralled to false images yet does not move beyond the perception of the self and its error. The epithet 'van desio' is familiar to readers of Petrarch's *Rvf* since it is a self-citation from the opening sonnet of the lyric collection, which laments the vanity of earthly desire while acknowledging the pleasures to which the worldly 'I' is nonetheless enchained.⁵⁰ The 'chiaro specchio' of the *Triumphus Temporis* echoes the 'conoscer chiaramente' which the 'I' is said to achieve in *Rvf* 1, both in relation to desire's delusions and its own error, and in the *Triumphus Temporis* likely represents the poet's conscience. Whereas in *Rvf* 1, the poet laments the fact that what pleases the world is a 'breve sogno', in the *Triumphus Temporis* it is the fragility and insubstantiality of life that are underscored:

Che più d'un giorno è la vita mortale,
 nubil 'e breve e freddo e pien di noia,
 che pò bella parer, ma nulla vale?

(*Triumphus Temporis*, 61–63)

Several elements of this extract from the *Triumphus Temporis*, as well as the earlier passage from *Triumphus Cupidinis* II which names Narcissus, echo the retelling of the

⁴⁹ See the commentary to these lines by Pacca, in Petrarca, *Trionfi*, p. 484.

⁵⁰ See Christian Moevs, 'Subjectivity and Conversion in Dante and Petrarch', in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 226–59 (p. 233).

Narcissus myth in the *Ovide moralisé*. First and foremost, there is a strong emphasis on the *vanitas* of Narcissus's beauty and the insubstantiality of the image he loves. When Narcissus wastes away at the water's edge, he effectively turns into the reflection he desires, which is only a shadow.⁵¹ The *Ovide moralisé* author stresses Narcissus's transformation into this deathly image ('Ore est destainte et desfloree | Et la colour en est perdue', *Ovide moralisé*, 1798–99) and transfers the sense of loss and decline into the flower that Narcissus becomes through loving himself too much ('trop s'ama', *Ovide moralisé*, 1882). In a similar way to this Narcissus, who is failed by his ephemeral beauty ('Pour sa biauté, qui tost faille, *Ovide moralisé* 1860), the Petrarchan lover who fixates on the beautiful image of Laura and the world's pleasures finds that it fails him since 'cosa bella mortal passa, et non dura' (*Rvf* 248, 8). In turn, what is vain and empty is Narcissus's hope that his love will be returned (his 'esperance fole et vaine', *Ovide Moralisé*, 1595) which again resonates in the proemial sonnet of *Petrarch's Rvf*, which laments the poet's oscillation 'fra le vane speranze e 'l van dolore' (*Rvf* 1, 6) and looks back over the poet's 'primo giovenile errore' (14).

Fruitless Flowers: The Poetry of Beauty and Desire

An overwhelming sense of *vanitas* is also evident in the poems of the *Rvf* that lament the sterility of Petrarch's love, which he presents as directed towards the wrong object. It is an element that brings me to consider the flower of *Triumphus Cupidinis* II in its relationship to the 'fruitless flower' mentioned there, as well as to the Ovidian 'copia' or 'surplus' which paradoxically produces lack. In Petrarch, the adjective 'vano', as stated earlier, primarily means 'empty' and 'insubstantial' but when the poet employs it to characterize the lover-Narcissus it also refers to a desire that is fruitless. In *Triumphus Cupidinis* II, Narcissus is consequently a 'vano amator', the provençalism 'amador' hinting at the broader lyric context

⁵¹ See Hardie, p. 157.

outlined above.⁵² The flower which he becomes is not only ‘bel[lo]’ but also ‘senza alcun frutto’ (*Triumphus Cupidinis* II, 148). The association of flower and fruitlessness is not necessarily logical given that narcissi do not produce fruit in the way that the blossoms of a fruit tree would. Yet the claim fits with a long-standing reading of the myth that perceived in Narcissus an ‘anti-Eros, whom the God of Love had to destroy as his enemy and the greatest danger to the continuation of life that depended on hetero-sexual union’.⁵³ In nature, the narcissus flower is in fact hermaphroditic, containing both male and female parts – a quality that may also fit with the auto-erotic dimension of the myth – and this means that the flower has the means to reproduce, at least in theory.⁵⁴ Louise Vinge may consequently overstate the case when she says there is no justification in botany for the ‘fruitless flower’, however her

⁵² See Marco Ariani’s commentary in Francesco Petrarca, *Triumphs*, ed. by Marco Ariani (Milan: Mursia, 1988), p. 127.

⁵³ See Frederick Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 42, cited in Seaman, p. 20. As has been noted, in several medieval examples a heterosexual paradigm is reaffirmed through the rewriting of the myth: for example, the modelling of Echo and Narcissus as two courtly lovers, Dané and Narcissus, in the Norman-French *Lai de Narcisse*; the introduction of the lady’s eyes in Bernart’s poem; Amant in Guillaume’s *Rose* not seeing himself but the rose bud (although it has phallic traits so complicates everything again). On these points, see also Kenneth J. Knoespel, *Narcissus and the Invention of Personal History* (New York: Garland, 1985), pp. 107–08.

⁵⁴ On queer desire in the Narcissus myth, see Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 168–204.

analysis of the medieval examples in which this association is made is helpful for tracing its significance.⁵⁵

For example, John of Salisbury in his explication of the Narcissus myth in the *Policraticus* (1159) unites the flower with an idea of fruitlessness. In his gloss of Narcissus's demise, he presents *vanitas*, sterility, and death as inextricable from one other:

Sic Narcisus in fabulis, dum uana sua imagine capitur, abit in florem et, dum seipsum imprudentur aspicit, flos sine fructu pueriliter euanescit. (*Policraticus* VIII, V, 722a)

So Narcissus in fable, captivated by the mere reflection of himself, was changed into a flower as he foolishly gazed upon himself and vanished as does a child, a flower without fruit.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Vinge, p. 73.

⁵⁶ Cited in Vinge, p. 72. The Latin text is in John of Salisbury, *Ioannis Saresberiensis Episcopi Carnotensis Policratici... libri VIII*, ed. by Clement Charles Julian Webb, 2 vols (Oxford: e typographeo Clarendoniano, 1909), II, p. 247; the translation comes from John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: The Statesman's Book*, abridged and edited, with an introduction, by Murray F. Markland (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979), p. 120. For an account of Petrarch's knowledge of *Policraticus* See Frédérique Lachaud, 'Filiation and Context: The Medieval Afterlife of the *Policraticus*', in *A Companion to John of Salisbury*, ed. by Christoph Grellard and Frédérique Lachaud (Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 377–438 (p. 415). See also Umberto Bosco, 'Petarca e l'umanesimo filologico (postille al Nolhac e al Sabbadini)', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 120. 359 (Oct. 1, 1942), 65–119 (pp. 100–01).

The relationship of the Latin *fructus* (and Petrarch's vernacular equivalent, 'frutto') to the verb *frui*, meaning 'to enjoy', is surely significant, where the anticipated flourishing of desire into pleasure is shown to mask an underlying sterility and resulting disillusionment. This linguistic connection is made in an epigram by Ausonius which Marco Ariani has cited as another possible intertext for Petrarch's *Triumphus Cupidinis* II, 148: 'Si cuperes alium, posses, Narcisse, potiri. | nunc tibi amoris adest copia, fructus abest' [Wert thou to desire another, Narcissus, then might thou win him. Of love thou hast abundance, 'tis the enjoyment fails, Epigram XCIX].⁵⁷ The parallel drawn here hints at the impossibility for Narcissus to consummate his love and points to the paradox of an excess which produces lack (Petrarch's 'povero sol per troppo averne copia'), of a more-than-plenty that leaves the subject wanting.

These two strands – the first relating to a desire whose excess prevents it from coming to fruition, and the second underscoring the fruitlessness of desiring a vain image, which is deceptive and insubstantial – frequently coincide in the *Rvf*. They suggest that the spectre of Narcissus haunts the collection at large even where no direct reference is made to the myth. The first strand weaves itself into those texts in which the poet's desire paradoxically diminishes itself through its excessive craze and ardour, earning the epithet 'folle desio' which resonates with the characterization of Narcissus's desire as 'fol'amor' in the *Ovide moralisé*. Love is characterized as 'folle' also in several medieval Italian lyrics, such as Guido delle Colonne's *Amor che lungiamente*, and Guittone d'Arezzo's *Ora parrà s'eo saverò contare*, which rework a well-established troubadour trope.⁵⁸ *Rvf* 6 is a memorable example in Petrarch's collection. The poet describes how his 'folle desio' is 'sì traviato' (line

⁵⁷ Text and translation come from Ausonius's *Ad Narcissum qui sui ipsius Amore captus erat* [To Narcissus seized with love for himself], from 'Epigrams on Various Matters', in Decimus Magnus Ausonius, *Ausonius*, trans. by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), I, 210. Cited in Ariani's note in Petrarca, *Triumpho*, p. 128.

1) in pursuing Laura that it turns against itself with what Teodolinda Barolini has termed a ‘furious slowness’.⁵⁹ It is an idea that is revisited in *Rvf* 48, where Petrarch depicts a desire out of kilter with itself, that spurs itself on to its own exhaustion and failure: ‘così ’l desio che seco non s’accorda | ne lo sfrenato objecto vien perdendo, | et per troppo spronar la fuga è tarda’ (ll.12–14).⁶⁰ Surplus in these cases indeed turns to lack and can even lead to madness.

More troublingly, the Petrarchan subject – like Narcissus – continues to return to what harms it, bringing together the theme of self-deception with a tenacity to desire and error. The Ovidian myth recounts how the more Narcissus drinks from the fountain the thirstier he

⁵⁸ Guido delle Colonne’s *Amor che lungiamente* includes the lines ‘Amor fa disviare li più saggi: | e chi più ama men’ ha in sé misura, | più folle è quello che più s’innamora’ (53–55), while in Guittone’s *Ora parrà ch’eo saverò contare*, we read ‘ché ’n tutte parte, ove dstringe Amore | regge follere – in loco di sapere’ (10–11). See Teodolinda Barolini, ‘Dante and Cavalcanti (On Making Distinctions in Matters of Love): *Inferno* V in its Lyric and Autobiographical Context’, in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 70–101 (p. 76).

⁵⁹ See Teodolinda Barolini, ‘Petrarch as the Metaphysical Poet Who Is Not Dante: Metaphysical Markers at the Beginning of the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Rvf* 1–21)’, in *Petrarch and Dante: Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, ed. by Zygmunt G Barański and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 195–225 (p. 211).

⁶⁰ On this dynamic, see Elena Lombardi, ‘I desire therefore I am: Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* between the medieval and modern notion of desire’, in *Early Modern Medievalisms: The Interplay between Scholarly Reflection and Artistic Production*, ed. by Alicia Montoya, Sophia Georgina van Romburgh and W. van Anrooij (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 19–43 (pp. 34–35).

becomes and how even when Narcissus recognizes the futility of what he desires, he cannot turn away from it ('dumque sitim sedare cupit, sitis altera crevit, | dumque bibit, visae correptus imagine formae', *Metamorphoses* III, 415–16).⁶¹ In Petrarch's poetry, this strand is reworked in a variety of ways, including in *Rvf* 141 through the image of a butterfly which recalls the moth that Guittone D'Arezzo had directly compared to Narcissus in the sonnet, 'Gioncell'a fonte, parpaglione a foco'. There Guittone denounces that which is 'soverchio' for causing strife and harm and emphasizes the destructive nature of a desire that is uncontrollable and irrational:

Gioncell'a fonte, parpaglione a foco
per ispeso tornare si consuma:
favilla de desdegno a poco a poco
soave core di forore alluma.⁶²

⁶¹ Dante draws on the insatiability of Narcissus's thirst in figuring the torment of the falsifier, Sinon, in the tenth bolgia of hell's eighth circle, when his fellow sinner Master Adam insults him saying 'tu hai l'arsura e 'l capo che ti duole, | e per leccar lo specchio di Narcisso | non vorresti a 'nvitar molte parole' (*Inferno* XXX, 127–29), cited from Dante Alighieri, *La 'Commedia' secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67). See Kevin Brownlee, 'Dante and Narcissus (*Purg.* XXX, 76–99)', *Dante Studies*, 96 (1978), 201–06, and Caroline Stark, 'Dante's Narcissus', *The Classical Outlook*, 86.4, (Summer 2009), 132–38, on how Dante's engagement with the same Ovidian myth in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* ultimately serves to present the pilgrim-Dante as an anti-Narcissus who moves from an enthrallment with false images to revealed truth.

⁶² For an overview of how poets in the early Italian tradition engage with the Narcissus theme and myth (beginning from Occitan models), see Van Peteghem, pp. 78–88. Guittone's poem

In Petrarch's *Rvf* 141, the lover is similarly like a 'farfalla' which, blinded by its desire for the light, flies into people's eyes harming both them and itself: 'sì sempre io corro al fatal mio sole' (l. 5). The poem culminates in the idea of a blind capitulation to love, bringing into play that uneasy Petrarchan matrix of a desire which is under the sway of the will but perceived by the subject to be beyond its power to restrain, 'e cieca al suo morir l'alma consente' (l. 14).

In all these cases, what the fountain and its seductive image offer Narcissus is a false pleasure: the 'faulse douceur' that is said to lead to sterile death in the *Ovide moralisé* and to a lasting image of the deceptiveness of beauty, represented by the flower in its paradoxical fragility and resistance to bearing fruit.⁶³ Returning to the passage from Arnolphe d'Orléans I quoted at the beginning of this article, it is in this sense that Narcissus's flower is a 'useless thing' (*res inutilis*) which fades away leaving nothing more substantial in its place.⁶⁴ This too is an idea that resonates strongly in Petrarch's poetry. For example, in *Rvf* 56, Petrarch unites the destructive force of the shadow with a desire cut off in its prime, before it can reach fruition, 'Qual ombra è sì crudel che 'l seme adugge, | ch'al disiato frutto era sì presso?' (ll. 5–6). A little later in the sequence, in *Rvf* 142, the poet reflects on the waywardness of his desire for Laura and its futility, recognizing that he ought to follow a different path that promises growth and fulfilment: 'ora la vita breve e 'l loco e 'l tempo | mostranmi altro

is cited from Guittone d'Arezzo, *Le Rime di Guittone d'Arezzo*, ed. by Francesco Egidi (Rome: Laterza, 1940).

⁶³ See *Ovide moralisé*, line 1932.

⁶⁴ In this way, for Arnolphe, Narcissus represents arrogance, concerned solely with its own greatness, yet which is an insubstantial thing (a shadow) that leads to ruin (the flower's death). For a fuller reading see Knoespel, pp. 33–38, and Vinge, pp. 73–74.

sentier di gire al Cielo | et di far frutto, non pur fior' et frondi' (ll. 34–36).⁶⁵ In this poem, the flowers and leaves that do not bear fruit are a negative image of the laurel which is associated with Laura through another Ovidian myth, that of Apollo and Daphne, and are specifically contrasted to the redeeming wood of the cross: the laurel's branches promise delight but are ultimately aligned with the snares of the world.⁶⁶ From this perspective, the Tree of the cross is an anti-laurel, one that could counter the empty, if beautiful, proliferation of Laura's image in the *Rvf*, and lead the poet to salvation.

One must say *could* counter, since even at the end of *Rvf* 142 the poet is still looking for a definitive sign from heaven that would convince him to forsake his love of Laura and the world's sensual delights. As such, the poem looks forward to *Rvf* 264 and 366. *Rvf* 264, placed on the threshold between Parts I and II of Petrarch's collection transitions from an urgent desire for conversion to a state of impasse that reiterates passion's hold over the lover. Similarly *Rvf* 366, the so-called 'canzone alla Vergine', while even more fervent in its hope for change, projects the lover's definitive moment of salvation into an indeterminate future. Its final, optative clause is more open than closed when the lover prays to Mary asking her to petition Christ on his behalf to receive his soul in peace: 'Raccomandami al tuo figliuol, verace | homo et verace Dio, | ch'accolga 'l mïo spirto ultimo in pace' (*Rvf* 366, 135–37). Indeed, looking at Petrarch's collection as a whole, more than the moral sense of the vanity of earthly things and their deceptive pleasures, the poet insists on the lover's continuing attachment to them despite everything.

In *Triumphus Cupidinis* II, as noted above, Petrarch casts Narcissus's flower as both fruitless and superfluous, highlighting the problems and dangers of *vanitas*. Nonetheless, in the many poems of the *Rvf* which celebrate beauty, and cherish it notwithstanding (or even

⁶⁵ The flower and fruit are recurring motifs also in *Rvf* 6, 56, 71, and 104.

⁶⁶ See Petrarca 2014, 692 (*Rvf* 142, 32–39). See also *Rvf* 99, 5–6.

because of) its perilous deceptiveness, pleasure comes precisely from the possibility of enjoying earthly things, such as the flower, beyond use or necessity for as long as that pleasure may last (and poetry is given a crucial role in prolonging it).⁶⁷ For all the moralizing potential the flower has, its status in Petrarch's lyric poems is rather more ambivalent, tied as it is both to pleasure and to *eros*. Relating this back to the medieval context, the Augustinian distinction between objects of use ('uti') and those of enjoyment ('frui') sheds further light on Petrarch's 'fruitless flower'. As noted earlier, 'frui' is a verb that shares its etymological roots with 'fructus' meaning fruit and is reserved in Augustine's scheme for the ultimate good, which is God, whereas all lesser goods should be 'used' to reach him.⁶⁸ A flower enjoyed for its own sake, when its beauty is unREFERRED to the creator, is thus a symbol of inordinate desire and a lack of use and purposefulness. Even so, and perhaps especially for this reason, Petrarch continues to desire it. One could think of the 'fiori' of *Rvf* 114, 5–6, which the poet-lover goes gathering at Love's behest, or of 'Qualunque herba o fior' mentioned in *Rvf* 125, 69, each species coveted for its proximity to where Laura's body once lay or where her feet trod; or otherwise of the 'pioggia di fior' seen cascading around the beloved in a vision described in *Rvf* 126, 40–52, each blossom minutely mapped in the pattern of its falling and in relation to the contours of Laura's body. All these poems are set in the poet's idyll of Vaucluse, in Southern France, and it is significant that in one of Petrarch's *Epystole metriche*, addressed to his friend and confidant Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro seeking to convince him to join the poet in that place, one of the enticements Petrarch lists in a long array of examples of the beauty and splendour of Vaucluse is the young Narcissus gazing with great marvel at his reflection in the fountain and bending with desire towards the waters.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ See Marder, p. 135.

⁶⁸ See Marder, pp. 65–66.

In such cases, flowers and desire are indistinguishable and to be captivated, as Narcissus was once captivated by the water's surface, is to be drawn by a pleasure unparalleled, which in *Rvf* 214 is said to subtract freedom and yet is highly coveted:

Era un tenero fior nato in quel bosco
il giorno avanti, et la radice in parte
ch'appressar nol poteva anima sciolta:
ché v'eran di lacciuo' forme sì nove,
et tal piacer precipitava al corso,
che perder libertate ivi era in pregio.

(lines 7–12)

As the remainder of *sestina* 214 confirms, this amorous path can offer no satisfaction for desire, only an intensification of it. Yet, for Petrarch, desire thrives on this uncertainty, and even the awareness of its hopelessness cannot doom it.

Coda: To become a flower

As a final reflection on Narcissus's significance for interpreting Petrarch's discourse of desire, I would like to consider one further way we might understand Arnolphe's phrase 'in the way or manner of the flower' (*ad modum floris*) in relation to the *Rvf* and *Triumphs*: namely, what it could mean to become a flower or have one replace you as a subject.

⁶⁹ See Epistle III: Francesco Petrarca, *Epistole metriche*, ed. by Enrico Bianchi, in *Francesco Petrarca, Rime, Trionfi e poesie latine*, ed. by F. Neri and others (Milan: Ricciardi, 1951), pp. 706–805 (p. 722).

As noted earlier, the flower which Narcissus becomes is associated in Petrarch's poetry with both lover and beloved in different contexts. This variation is an example of the instability of Petrarch's identifications with Ovidian characters, both male and female, which Van Peteghem has underscored, and of the way in which particular Ovidian myths are deployed fluidly in relation to the Petrarchan lover and his beloved, Laura.⁷⁰ For this reason, readers of the *Rvf* and the *Triumph* are invited to consider where the flower motif sits relative to the more prominent image of the laurel into which both the poet's beloved, and occasionally even the poet, are transformed in parallel with the myth of Apollo and Daphne. That myth, as told in *Metamorphoses* I, 452–567, recounts how Apollo's desire to possess Daphne is frustrated, when she is transformed into a laurel by her father Peneus, yet that unfulfilled desire becomes the wellspring of poetry. In turn, this reflection raises the important question of what these linked examples of vegetal metamorphosis, modelled on Ovid, can reveal about the mortality of the beloved, the precarity of the 'I', and the identity of the love poet.

In the *Rvf*, vegetal metamorphosis is the most conspicuous kind of Ovidian metamorphosis on which Petrarch draws, alongside less frequent examples of animal metamorphosis or metamorphoses into other elements of the natural world such as stones or water.⁷¹ Through many of these metamorphoses, but especially through the poet's frequent recourse to the myth of Apollo and Daphne, the transformation from human into plant form, be it tree or flower, does nothing to diminish the force of *eros*, only intensifying desire through frustration and non-possession. Like the Ovidian Apollo, the Petrarchan lover

⁷⁰ See Van Peteghem, p. 250.

⁷¹ For a study of metamorphosis in Petrarch's *Rvf*, see Sara Sturm-Maddox, *Petrarch's Metamorphoses: Text and Subtext in the 'Rime Sparse'* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985).

continues to desire Laura even after she has become a laurel tree, and the sensuality of the erotic body is carried into the materiality of the vegetal being, as is apparent in the poet's attention to the new-made flower in *Rvf* 45. *Rvf* 228 is another striking example, with its reference to the way the laurel tree, which stands for the beloved, is beautified when fed by the poet's sweet tears, the laurel's marvellous scent reaching all the way to heaven. The tree-Laura is depicted as being as alluring as the lady in her womanly state (see *Rvf* 181 for a further example of this) and it is also shown to preserve her passions and desires when, in *Rvf* 318, we learn that its branches remain unmoved by the force of the lover's sighing ('i miei sospiri ardenti, | che de' bei rami mai non mossen fronda', 10-11). Conversely, in *Rvf* 45, the flower-Laura is said to be even more beautiful than Narcissus was. In all these examples, where one might expect a Freudian sublimation of desire, which is how the myth of Apollo and Daphne has sometimes been read, insofar as the object of desire moves from the bodily realm (where possession is thwarted) to the artistic and poetic one (where possession can still be attempted), there is instead an extension and intensification of desire into the text.⁷²

The question remains what it is about desire that is discernible in flower metamorphosis specifically, and what it implies of the fate of lover and beloved. Considering Laura first, the substitution of her body by a flower in *Rvf* 45 is primarily emblematic of her perennial elusiveness, the idea that the thing the poet most desires to possess, namely her corporeal form, is always elsewhere, always only available through traces or fragments, or via one of Laura's many *senhals* (*l'aura*, *lauro*, *l'aurora*, *l'oro*). Like the flower of *Rvf* 45,

⁷² Here I follow instead Leo Bersani's concept of sublimation in Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 43–45, which is a critique and rewriting of Freud. See also Manuele Gagnolati and Francesca Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric: Reading Petrarch in Dialogue. With an Epilogue by Antonella Anedda Angioy* (Berlin: ICI Press, 2020), pp. 38–39.

these entities with which Laura fuses link her to the natural world yet not in any stable or locatable way. Also like the flower with which she is associated in sonnet 45, Laura's life is fragile and the poet depicts her, in line with Ovid's fated 'flower-youth', Narcissus, as cut down in the prime of her life.⁷³ As such, Laura-as-flower both complements and complicates the more persistent association of Laura-as-laurel tree, in the more pervasive presence of the Ovidian myth of Apollo and Daphne. Unlike the evergreen laurel, which resists time's destruction and promises eternal life for the beloved in poetry, the flower associated with Narcissus bares Laura's mortality.⁷⁴ Conversely, like a flower that dies and is reborn again each springtime, the moment of her death and the promise (or fantasy) of her return, are repeated cyclically in part II of Petrarch's collection. Here, the memory of Laura's beauty endures but there is a painful awareness of her transience.⁷⁵

From this perspective, the significance of Laura living, and dying, 'in the way or manner of the flower' takes on especial poignancy.⁷⁶ Conversely, given the instability of the

⁷³ See *Rvf* 278, 1–4: 'Ne l'età più bella et più fiorita, | quando aver suol Amor in noi più forza, | lasciando in terra la terrena scorza, | è l'aura mia vital da me partita'. On Ovid's 'flower-youths', see Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Arbres filles et garçons fleurs: métamorphoses érotiques dans les mythes grecs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2017).

⁷⁴ In stanza 3 of *Rvf* 323, even the laurel tree succumbs.

⁷⁵ See, for example, *Rvf* 268, 38–39, 'disciolta di quel velo | che qui fece ombra al fior degli anni suoi', and *Triumphus Mortis* I, 121–23, 'E fra tanti sospiri e tanti lutti | tacita e sola lieta si sedea, | del suo ben viver già cogliendo i frutti'.

⁷⁶ See *Rvf* 323, the so-called 'canzone delle visioni', which represents Laura's death through a series of terrible visions. In the last stanza Petrarch retells the Eurydice myth and describes the moment of Laura's death in reference to how a cut flower wilts, 'come fior colto langue' (l. 70).

poet's own identifications with Narcissus and Echo across the *Rvf* and *Triumph*, the flower's uncertain status is also meaningful for grasping the Petrarchan lover's fate. *Rvf* 23, the so-called 'canzone delle metamorfosi' is a key text here and I would like to develop the intuition of Robert M. Durling and Ross Lerer that the absence of any specific reference to Narcissus in the poem belies his presence at a sub-textual level. In this canzone, in which the poet describes the metamorphoses he undergoes as a result of Love's and Laura's power over him, it is Echo, and not Narcissus, who is pivotal to the fifth metamorphosis, wherein the 'I' is transformed into flint and voice: 'ch' ancor poi ripregando, i nervi et l'ossa | mi volse in dura selce; et così scossa | voce rimasi de l' antiche some, | chiamando Morte, et lei sola per nome' (137–40). Yet, in Durling's words, 'she [Echo] after all wasted away because of her love of Narcissus, and the implicit connection (Petrarch = Echo then Laura = Narcissus; if Laura's image is Narcissus's image, Petrarch = Narcissus) is both established and evaded'.⁷⁷ While never turned into a flower in *Rvf* 23, the lover is transformed into a laurel tree, in a striking gender reversal that sees the 'I' identified not with Apollo, but with Daphne, in that other myth of failed possession. Although in *Rvf* 23, the laurel tree appears to represent the steadfastness of the poet's love and his vocation as a love poet since through all his erotic suffering 'per fredda stagion foglia non perde' (line 40), the poet's metamorphosis into a laurel is portrayed as happening to a subject that is arguably more flower-like than arboreal in the vulnerable state in which it finds itself.

Ross Lerner has shown that Petrarch's depiction of the 'I's initial immunity, and subsequent susceptibility, to passion's effects follows quite closely Ovid's presentation of Narcissus in Book III of the *Metamorphoses*. Specifically, the lyric 'I' is presented in stanzas

⁷⁷ See Robert M. Durling, 'Introduction', in Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: the 'Rime sparse' and Other Lyrics*, ed. by Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 1–33 (pp. 31–32).

one and two of *Rvf* 23 as stone-like and closed to affect, ‘rigidly polic[ing] the boundaries of his heart and body’.⁷⁸ As Claire Nouvet has demonstrated in her reading of Ovid’s myth, these are the peculiar traits of Narcissus’s pride, a pride which cannot be the result of an exalted self-image since the youth has ‘never seen himself’, and stem instead from ‘a desire not to be touched’.⁷⁹ Similarly, Petrarch characterizes his initial immunity to passion in these terms:

Io dico che dal dì che ’l primo assalto
mi diede Amor, molt’anni eran passati,
[...]
lagrima ancor non mi bagnava il petto
né rompea il sonno, et quel che in me non era
mi pareva un miracolo in altrui.

(*Rvf* 23, 21–22, 27–29)

Thus the poet depicts how he has initially spurned Love’s advances, just as Narcissus did, yet as Lerner states the ‘masculinist fantasy of a self-protective, rigidified self’ is not tenable for either figure.⁸⁰ In Petrarch’s case, moreover, the (fantasy of) stability is only partly desired,

⁷⁸ See Ross Lerner, ‘Doubly Resounded: Narcissus and Echo in Petrarch, Donne, and Wroth’, *Modern Philology*, 118.2 (November 2020), 159–80 (pp. 162–65).

⁷⁹ See Claire Nouvet, ‘An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus’, *Yale French Studies*, 79 (1991), 103–34 (pp. 112–13), and *Metamorphoses* III, 353–55, ‘multi illum iuvenes, multae cupiere puellae; | sed fuit in tenera tam dura superbia forma, | nulli illum iuvenes, nullae tetigere puellae’ [Many youths and many maidens sought his love; but in that slender form was pride so cold that no youth, no maiden touched his heart].

⁸⁰ See Lerner, p. 161.

since as the remainder of *Rvf* 23 suggests, the ‘I’'s pleasure derives from letting itself be taken by Love and from succumbing to desire in all its perilous ambivalence.⁸¹ The poetic subject’s transformation into the laurel in this poem, through which he identifies with Daphne and not Apollo, represents an opening to passion, which is profoundly unsettling yet also expansive. The susceptibility leading to this change aligns him with Narcissus and when, at the end of the poem, the ‘I’ declares that the condition of being a tree is one of utmost (if ambivalent) pleasure, the poet returns to the ‘shadow’ that Narcissus desires, and which he is: ‘né per nova figura il primo alloro | seppi lassar, ché pur la sua dolce ombra | ogni men bel piacer del cor mi sgombra’ (*Rvf* 23, 167–69). Tree and shadow, vegetal being and reflected image, intertwine in these concluding lines of the canzone. In Marguerite Waller’s words: ‘The shadow of the laurel is his shadow and he is, in some sense, its shadow [...], but his awareness of that fact prevents reification of himself in the image of some seemingly more substantial counter’.⁸²

It is this resistance to reification that I wish to underscore. It suggests that Petrarch may claim to resemble Narcissus not only in his fixation on an image, and in his tenacity to that image despite every knowledge he gains of its insubstantiality, but also in the flower-like fragility he possesses through the very act of desiring. Oscillating between the passive pleasure of ceding himself entirely to Love’s force, and the wish to gain back self-control, the Petrarchan ‘I’ is anything but consistent or stable and it is in this sense that the metamorphoses described in *Rvf* 23 can be seen to epitomize the desiring experience.

Furthermore, if the poet’s transformation into the laurel suggests that, on some level, he becomes the object he loves, then his metamorphosis into a tree is even more closely tied to

⁸¹ See the fuller reading given in Gragnolati and Southerden, *Possibilities of Lyric*, pp. 45–63.

⁸² Marguerite Waller, *Petrarch’s Poetics and Literary History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 104.

Laura's projected transformation into a flower in *Rvf* 45 and to the idea expressed in *Triumphus Cupidinis* III, 162, and echoed in *Rvf* 51, that 'L'amante ne l'amato si transforme'.⁸³ It is hard to imagine a moment when Petrarch would be closer to Narcissus than this: simultaneously both lover and beloved, caught in the error which Love has wrought, desiring no other state.⁸⁴

Conclusion

In summary, although Narcissus is named only twice in Petrarch's vernacular works, the paradigm of desire he represents is rather more pervasive. If Narcissus's error is employed as a warning against coveting earthly beauty in its deceptive ephemerality, just as often it suggests that the Petrarchan 'I' continues to desire that shadowed reality, captivated by its promise of pleasure and fatefully open to passion's effects. If, following John Freccero, we regard the *Rvf* as essentially a study in idolatry, then the Narcissus myth will remain suggestive primarily for the closed circle of desire it implies and the dangers of the reified image it evokes.⁸⁵ Equally significant, though, is the way in which the flower that Narcissus becomes, in all its fragility and transience, hints at the presence of a more susceptible and precarious subject, which complicates and enriches the view of an indomitable and autonomous 'I' in Petrarch's lyric poetry. The lyric subject which desires 'ad modum floris'

⁸³ See also *Rvf* 51, 5–6, 'Et s'io non posso trasformarmi in lei | più ch'i' mi sia (non ch'a mercé mi vaglia)' and Conti, p. 156.

⁸⁴ Recalling the following lines of the *Ovide moralisé*: 'Il est seuz amez et amis. | Amours en grant errour l'a mis' [He is to himself both lover and beloved. | Love has placed him in great error] (1619–20).

⁸⁵ See John Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics', *Diacritics*, 5.1 (Spring, 1975), 34–40 (p. 38).

is one that cannot or does not want to preserve the rigidity of a self that is closed off to love and, in desiring the beautiful mirage that Laura is, abandons any hope of consistency.⁸⁶

Competing interests: The author(s) declare none.

⁸⁶ See the opening stanza of *Rvf 73* for a dramatization of this unfolding.